

A Study of Speech Acts in Apologies in Beginner-Level Japanese Textbooks

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Abstract

Apologies play a crucial role in intercultural communication. Understanding the nuances and cultural expectations surrounding apologies in a target language is essential for effective communication. This study investigates the use of apologies in the beginner-level Japanese textbook, *Minna no Nihongo*. This research aims to provide insights into the teaching and learning of apologies in Japanese by analyzing the frequency and contexts of apology expressions in dialogues within the textbook. This research aims to provide insights into the teaching and learning of apologies in Japanese.

The findings reveal that the most frequently used apology expression is "sumimasen" accounting for 66.67% of all apologies. This indicates its versatility and widespread use in everyday situations, such as asking for directions, causing inconvenience, or expressing regret. Additionally, the study identified other apology expressions like "shitsurei shimasu" "shitsurei itashimasu", "gomen kudasai", and "doumo sumimasen deshita". The order of presentation of these expressions in the textbook reflects a pedagogical approach that considers the learners' proficiency level and the complexity of the language.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of "sumimasen" as the most common apology expression of apology in *Minna no Nihongo*. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the teaching and learning of apologies in Japanese and offer insights for developing effective language teaching materials.

Keywords: Apologies, Intercultural communication, Japanese Textbook, *Minna no Nihongo*, Pedagogical approach

1. Introduction

A speech act is a linguistic utterance that serves not only as a communicative vehicle but also as a performative action. When a speaker or writer employs language, they simultaneously convey information and engage in a specific act. This act can have a direct influence on the context or interpersonal dynamics.

An illocutionary act is a speech act explicitly intended to perform a specific action, such as making a request, giving a command, or offering a promise. These acts are characterized by their direct impact on the situation or relationship between individuals, as elucidated by Austin (1962).

Searle (1969), a prominent figure in the philosophy of language, significantly expanded upon Austin's (1962) seminal work on speech acts. Drawing from Austin's foundational insights, Searle proposed a more comprehensive framework for understanding the conditions necessary for successful speech act performance. According to Searle, four primary conditions must be satisfied: (1) Propositional content: The utterance must possess a well-formed grammatical structure, including a subject, a verb, and potential auxiliary elements such as tense, mood, or modality, to convey a meaningful proposition. (2) Preparatory conditions: Before the speech act, certain conditions must be in place. These include relevant contextual factors, shared knowledge between speaker and hearer, and appropriate social roles or relationships. (3) Sincerity condition: The speaker must genuinely intend to perform the speech act and must believe the proposition expressed to be true. (4) Essential conditions: The speaker must be attempting to achieve a specific illocutionary goal or purpose through the speech act.

The speech act of apologizing is often studied as a speech act set, as apologies involve more than simply uttering the word "sorry." An act of apologizing may include acknowledging the offense, expressing regret, taking responsibility, and offering reparations. Apologies serve as a linguistic tool to mend relationships, demonstrate accountability, and compensate for mistakes, which is crucial in maintaining social harmony (Bragman & Kasper, 1991).

Holmes (1990) proposed three conditions necessary for a speech act of apology: (1) the speaker has done something wrong, (2) the speaker recognizes that their action has caused harm to another, and (3) the speaker accepts responsibility for their actions.

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) analyzed apology speech act sets from eight languages and found five common components: (1) the use of an apology formula, (2) acceptance of responsibility or blame, (3) an explanation, (4) an offer of reparation, and (5) a promise of non-recurrence. While the first two components are present in all apology speech act sets, the remaining components may vary depending on the situation.

Considering that apologies involve both constative elements (e.g., acknowledging the offense) and performative elements (e.g., offering an apology), apology speech acts can be categorized into three levels based on speech act theory:

1. Locutionary Act: The utterance of the word "sorry," which directly conveys the speaker's intention to apologize.
2. Illocutionary Act: The speaker's underlying intention, such as seeking forgiveness, repairing the relationship, or reducing conflict.
3. Perlocutionary Act: The effect achieved by the apology, such as making the hearer feel better, granting forgiveness, or reducing anger.

This study investigates the role of apologies in Japanese language learning, specifically focusing on the adequacy of beginner-level textbooks in preparing learners for real-world intercultural communication. Given that the Japanese language is deeply embedded in cultural nuances, particularly regarding politeness and apologies, this research aims to analyze the frequency, forms, and functions of apology expressions within the context of beginner-level textbooks.

The research aims to analyze the pragmatic features employed in apology expressions within beginner-level dialogues found in elementary Japanese textbooks. Specifically, it will investigate the most frequently observed pragmatic features and examine their correlation with politeness levels, social contexts, age, and gender. Additionally, the study will assess whether Japanese textbooks adequately explain the meanings and appropriate usage of apology expressions in the provided dialogues

Employing a pragmatic framework, this study will examine the utterances following apology expressions to understand their underlying meanings and communicative functions. By analyzing the data, the research will identify potential gaps in the textbooks regarding intercultural communicative competence and propose pedagogical approaches to enhance learners' ability to use apologies appropriately in various social contexts.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to second language acquisition and intercultural communication by providing insights into the teaching and learning of apologies in Japanese.

1.2 Research Objective

This research aims to study the use of pragmatic apology expressions in dialogues found in beginner-level Japanese textbooks. Also, it analyzes the structural patterns and meanings of these expressions, as well as the contexts of their use, social roles, and practical applications in various situations. The findings will be used to develop more suitable teaching materials for learners.

2. Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach to analyze apology discourse in elementary textbooks. The objective is to develop classroom materials and activities for Japanese language learners. Thereby, enhancing their comprehension of Japanese communicative strategies.

2.1 Data Collection

The research focuses on analyzing Japanese elementary textbooks titled 'Minna no Nihongo'. The data was collected from dialogue sections, grammatical explanations, grammar exercises, and conversation practice sections.

Following Blum-kulka et al. (1989) cross-linguistic analysis of apology discourse, this study adopts the framework to select apology discourse. Their research identified five core components of apology: (1) the employment of apology strategies, (2) acknowledgment of responsibility, (3) provision of an explanation, (4) offer of redress, and (5) assurance of non-repetition. Since components 1 and 2 are universal features of apology discourse, this study will focus on these two elements for data selection.

2.2 Data Analysis

This analysis method breaks down the process of examining apology utterances in Japanese textbooks into five steps:

1. Selection: Start by choosing a specific dialogue containing an apology.
2. Contextual Understanding: Analyze the surrounding circumstances to understand the nuances of the apology.
3. Lexical Analysis: Examine the specific words used for apologizing and their levels of politeness.
4. Strategic Analysis: Identify the different strategies employed in the apology, such as expressing responsibility or offering a solution.
5. Underlying Reasons: Explore why these particular apology utterances were chosen for inclusion in the textbook.

3. Results

Research Findings: An analysis of discourse in the beginner-level Japanese textbook, *Minna no Nihongo*, revealed the following utterances.

Table 1: Apology Expressions found in *Minna no Nihongo*

Apology Expression	Frequency	Percentage
Gomen Kudasai	1	6.67%
Shitsurei Shimasu	2	13.33%
Sumimasen	10	66.67%
Doumo Sumimasen deshita	1	6.67%
Shitsurei itashimasu	1	6.67%

The analysis found that "sumimasen" is the most frequently used apology term in the *Minna no Nihongo* textbook. It's employed in many situations, such as when speaking with strangers, friends, and authority figures. This aligns with real-world usage, where "sumimasen" is a versatile apology that can be used in many contexts.

The phrases "Shitsurei shimasu" and "Shitsurei itashimasu," both of which translate to "excuse me," were observed a total of three times in the analyzed material. "Shitsurei itashimasu," the more formal and humble variant, was introduced towards the conclusion of the elementary-level textbook, while "Shitsurei shimasu" appeared in earlier sections.

The textbook introduces a range of apology expressions, with "Gomen kudasai" being the first, typically used as a basic apology when entering a room. The more formal "Doumo sumimasen deshita" conveys deeper regret or simultaneous expressions of apology and gratitude. "Sumimasen" emerges as the most versatile term, applicable in various contexts, while "Shitsurei shimasu" and "Shitsurei itashimasu" are reserved for situations involving interruptions or departures. The analysis underscores the centrality of "sumimasen" in Japanese apologetic language and highlights the nuanced use of different expressions depending on the situation.

4. Discussion

The research found that the most frequently used apology term in the discourse of apologies was 'sumimasen'. It appeared most often in the Minna no Nihongo textbook, accounting for 66.67% of all apology terms. This reflects its versatility and popularity as the most widely used apology in everyday life.

'Sumimasen' is employed in various situations such as asking for directions, causing disturbances, and apologizing for inconveniencing others. This aligns with real-world usage. Other apology terms found include 'shitsurei shimasu,' 'shitsurei itashimasu,' 'gomen kudasai,' and 'doumo sumimasen deshita.' 'Shitsurei shimasu' and 'shitsurei itashimasu' are often used in formal situations or when seeking permission to leave a place.

Considering the presentation order, 'gomen kudasai' is the first apology introduced in the textbook. This suggests that 'gomen kudasai' is the fundamental apology that beginner learners using the Minna no Nihongo textbook should learn first.

Since the Minna no Nihongo textbook prioritizes the order of grammatical difficulty, 'shitsurei itashimasu,' a more polite apology, is introduced later in the textbook.

The suggestions for Pedagogical Approaches to Apology Expressions in Japanese Language Instruction. The acquisition of apology expressions is a fundamental aspect of effective communication and cultural proficiency in Japanese. To enhance the teaching and learning of these linguistic elements, the following pedagogical strategies are recommended:

From the result of this study, an activity for teaching apology in Japanese Classes are following:

1. Introduce and explain the most commonly used apologies, such as "sumimasen" and "gomennasai." Delineate the nuances between these expressions and their appropriate contexts of application. Prioritize accurate pronunciation and confident usage through consistent practice. Also, Expand vocabulary by introducing related terms such as "shitsurei shimasu," "gomen kudasai," and other expressions of regret.
2. Present a diverse range of scenarios requiring apologies, including physical encounters, tardiness, and disturbances. Develop dialogues that exemplify the use of apologies in various situations to facilitate visualization and comprehension. Employ multimedia resources like images, videos, and games to foster engaging and interactive learning experiences.
3. Simulated Practice and Collaborative Activities: Organize group activities that simulate real-world scenarios where apologies are necessary, such as role-playing encounters on public transportation or academic tardiness. Provide opportunities for students to engage in authentic language use by facilitating peer-to-peer conversations and offering constructive feedback on apology expressions.
4. Cultural Nuance and Comparative Analysis: Connect the learning of apology expressions to Japanese cultural values and norms. Compare and contrast the cultural nuances of apologies in Japanese with those of other languages to foster a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural differences.

5. **Comprehensive Assessment:** Employ a variety of assessment methods, including formal tests and informal observations, to evaluate students' knowledge and application of apology expressions. Provide targeted feedback to guide students' language development and address any areas of weakness.

By implementing these pedagogical approaches, educators can effectively guide students in acquiring the linguistic and cultural skills necessary for proficient apology expressions in Japanese.

Examples of classroom activities for helping learners understand deeply in pedagogy in Japanese are the following:

1. **Role-play games:** Divide students into groups to role-play different situations that require apologies, such as bumping into someone on the subway or being late for class.
2. **Projects:** Assign students to work on projects related to the language of apologies, such as creating short videos."
3. **Analyze apologies in media:** Have students analyze apologies in Japanese movies, TV shows, or anime. Discuss the language used, the context, and the effectiveness of the apology.
4. **Debate the effectiveness of different apologies:** Present students with different apology scenarios and have them debate which apology is most effective or appropriate in each situation.
5. **Cultural Comparisons:** Have students compare and contrast apologies in Japanese and their native language. This can help them understand cultural nuances and potential misunderstandings.

To enhance information dissemination for students in Suansunandha Rajabhat University's Japanese Classroom, Cloud-based learning and an online resource was developed to facilitate self-study on apologizing in Japanese through channels. (Kunnu et al, 2022)

5. Conclusion

Based on these findings, pedagogical approaches are proposed to enhance the teaching and learning of apology expressions in Japanese language instruction. These strategies emphasize the importance of contextualized learning, cultural awareness, and practical application. By incorporating diverse activities such as role-playing, multimedia integration, and cultural comparisons, educators can create engaging and effective learning experiences.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the teaching and learning of apology expressions in Japanese. By adopting the recommended pedagogical approaches, educators can empower learners to acquire the linguistic and cultural competence necessary for successful communication in Japanese.

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