

**“Sorry we apologize so much”:  
Linguistic Factors Affecting Japanese and U.S.  
American Styles of Apology**

Naomi Sugimoto

*Ferris University*

**Abstract**

In an attempt to account for cultural differences in Japanese and U.S. American apology styles, this paper turns to several possible linguistic factors which may contribute to the widely held perception that Japanese are more apologetic than are U.S. Americans. The possible factors include: (a) the elusive *sumimasen* in Japanese, (b) cultural perceptions of language, (c) different degrees of tolerance toward repetition of the same words, (d) interference in L2 conversation, and (e) accounts in U.S. American apology.

Many observers of Japan-U.S. communication point out that Japanese are more “apologetic” than are U.S. Americans (Kato & Rozman, 1988; Kitagawa, 1990; Naotsuka, 1990). One study found that this may result from the fact that Japanese are often held accountable for offenses committed by a far greater number of others who belong to their group while U.S. Americans typically apologize for wrongdoing of only themselves and a few others such as spouse, young children, and pets (Sugimoto, in press).

Beyond these differences in social expectations, however, there seem to be several language-related factors which greatly contribute to the commonly held view that Japanese apologize more often and profusely than do their U.S. American counterparts. This paper discusses five of such linguistic factors that affect Japanese and U.S. American perceptions and styles of apology: (a) elusive *sumimasen* in Japanese, (b) cultural perceptions of language, (c) different degrees of tolerance to

repetition, (d) interference in L2 conversation, and (e) accounts in U.S. American apology.

### **The Elusive *Sumimasen***

The following example most typically illustrates different reactions of Japanese and U.S. Americans to the same situation: Suppose a U.S. American drops his or her pen and someone sitting close by picks it up for him or her. The U.S. American owner of the pen is most likely to thank the other. The pen owner is unlikely to apologize unless the pen accidentally hit (or otherwise inconvenienced) the other. In the same situation, a Japanese owner of the pen, many observers of Japan-U.S. communication argue, would “apologize” than to express gratitude. The basis of their argument is that Japanese are most likely to say *sumimasen* rather than *arigato* and that the former is usually associated with apology and the latter, thanks. Yet it seems premature to advance such a thesis without first considering possible cultural differences in connotations of apology and thanks in the two cultures.

Japanese and U.S. Americans seem to share the same principles for apology and thanks: an expression of gratitude is given for a favor or voluntary act of kindness by the other, while an apology is due when an offense or inconvenience is (often involuntarily) endured (or at least experienced) by the other.

Then, why do Japanese and U.S. Americans react to the same situation differently? That is because the ways in which these principles are applied to actual situations are different. In the U.S., it is appropriate to acknowledge the act of picking up the pen as the other’s voluntary act of kindness as people are considered as autonomous actors: the other had freedom to either pick up the pen or not, but he or she was nice enough to act kindly. Then, it is acceptable and most polite to positively attribute it to the other by thanking him or her by using phrases including “thanks” that are most typically used to express gratitude. Apologetic expressions such as those including “sorry” are clearly distinguished from those with “thanks” in the English language and therefore least likely to be employed in these situations.

In Japan, by contrast, people typically see (or at least, act as if they see) the same situation as they inconvenienced the other by putting him or her in a position of having no choice but to pick up the pen. In this view, the act of picking up the pen is imposition caused by the pen owner’s careless act rather than the autonomous other’s voluntary favor. In Japan, it is perfectly acceptable, if not desirable, for the owner of the pen to negatively attribute the imposition to himself or herself as it nicely fits the “polite fiction” in the culture, “I’m your inferior” (Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1993).

Just like English, the Japanese language has phrases distinctively associated with apology such as *gomennasai* and *moushiwake nai* as well as those identified with thanks such as *arigato*. In situations like above, however, Japanese are most

likely to use the expression *sumimasen*. The expression is not the most typical fixed expression for either apology or thanks, but can be used for both and Japanese often take advantage of this elusiveness to maneuver through tricky norms of communication in their culture. Yet, at the same time, it is this elusiveness which complicates the issue of principles and applications of apology and thanks in various situations in Japan.

Japanese most typically use *sumimasen* when saying *arigato* (i.e., attributing the kind act positively to the other) would risk sounding arrogant or less appreciative, even when the other's act was apparently voluntary<sup>1</sup>: saying *arigato* sounds as if the speaker considers himself/herself as deserving of the favor because it lacks the "lowering" function of apology. As such, *arigato* is reserved for situations involving those very close to the speaker. Even its politer form, *arigato gozaimasu* is used in only a few situations which distinctively call for expressions of gratitude to those not very close to the speaker. To Japanese, *sumimasen* is a convenient linguistic tool to avoid risky use of *arigato* as described above.

*Sumimasen* can be used in these situations because the phrase literally means "it never ends" with "it" referring to the *on* or indebtedness felt by the speaker to the other. This indebtedness can be either positive (incurred by a favor done by the other) or negative (incurred by an offense endured by the other), both of which can be dealt with by *sumimasen*. Without such a common expression in English, the former is acknowledged by thanks and the latter by apology in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in casual conversation, Japanese go so far to try to get by with just *domo*, an intensifier just like "much" in English or *mucho* in Spanish. Since both *sumimasen* and *arigato* are intensified by *domo*, saying *domo* alone enables the speaker to strategically leave it ambiguous and let the listener interpret it anyway he or she considers appropriate for the context. By doing so, the speaker can avoid the risk of committing a linguistic gaffe.

*Sumimasen* (and the subsequent use of *domo* alone) is very convenient yet it also contributes to the perception, even by Japanese themselves, that they "apologize when they should thank the other." That is because, in the lay notion, *sumimasen* is associated with apology far more strongly than with thanks. Going back to the illustration in the beginning, even Japanese would rarely use most typical apology expressions, *gomennasai* or *moushiwake nai* but opt for the elusive *sumimasen*, because it is the safest way to respond to the situation. But if confronted to identify the function of the expression, they would name apology as that is what *sumimasen* is (though loosely) associated with, and they perhaps conclude, after acknowledging that the situations might be equally dealt with by thanks, that they tend to "apologize" when they "should express gratitude."

### **Cultural Perceptions of Language**

Not only the frequency, but also the style of apology seems to contribute to the perception that Japanese are more apologetic than are U.S. Americans. Japanese tend to castigate themselves, emphasize negative aspects of the situation, and promise to repair damage and/or not to repeat the same offense (Sugimoto, 1997), all of which create the image of profuse apologies.

These differences all stem from fundamental differences in cultural perceptions of language: U.S. Americans believe that a message is reasonably capable of reflecting (or at least, is supposed to reflect) reality. As such, excessive self-humiliation is taken as a sign of the speaker's extremely low self-esteem, and could even embarrass the apology recipient. Thus, self-castigation in apology is not encouraged in U.S. American culture (Sugimoto, in press). U.S. Americans often try to point out bright sides of the situation in their apologies. When doing so, they may be genuinely trying to make the other feel better as they believe emphasizing negative aspects of the situation would only depress and further aggravate the "apologizee." Further, U.S. Americans do not casually offer remediation (either direct reparation or indirect compensation) of damage, unless they are fully committed to such actions. Much the same can be said about their hesitation in promising not to repeat the same offense in future. Not following through promised actions is looked down upon, and could further offend the recipient of the apology in the U.S.: they will be better off not making such promises when apologizing.

Japanese, however, believe that a message can, but may not and need not always, reflect reality. Thus, self-castigation in apology is not taken as a sign of weak ego or damaged self-esteem. Rather, it is taken as a sign of the apologizer's character or his or her care and concern for the other. As such, adequate self-humiliation invokes positive feelings, rather than embarrassment in the apology recipient.

Likewise, Japanese freely emphasize and even exaggerate negative consequences of the offense without the fear that the other would feel worse. Rather, such behavior is taken as a sign of the apologizer's ability to see the situation from the other's point of view (and beyond, in the case where the apologizer produces an exhaustive list of all that could possibly go wrong because of the original offense), a virtue highly regarded in Japan. Pointing out positive aspects, by contrast, could worsen the situation as it is typically perceived as an attempt to escape responsibility.

Such perceptions of language, however, do not necessarily undermine the power of language in Japanese communication. Quite contrary, a message alone can be appreciated without being followed through by corresponding actions in Japan. That is part of the reason that Japanese can casually offer to repair the damage as well as promise not to repeat the same offense. Not keeping one's words is equally looked down upon, but not every single reference to future actions is taken as a

“promise” to be fulfilled in Japan. These offers are often taken as a sign of the speaker’s care and concern for the other and appreciated by the recipient as “just the thought (of making these offers) is more than enough (to make up for the situation).”

### **Tolerance to Repetition**

In addition to the above “profuse” message features, Japanese apology sounds longer and more formal. Japanese apology is longer not only because it includes various features mentioned above and others, but also due to repetition of the same words and phrases within the same utterance (Sugimoto, 1997). Compared to the English language which strongly discourages repetition of the same words, Japanese is more receptive of such repetitions: onomatopoeic expressions in Japanese mostly consist of the same syllable repeated twice or more; adjectives and adverbs in the Japanese language can be intensified by simple repetition instead of using special modifiers.

Moreover, Japanese apologizers often resort to commonly used formulaic expressions while their U.S. American counterparts strive for originality in wording (Sugimoto, in press). This practice inevitably makes Japanese apologies sound more formal. But this is often done because it is “safe” to rely on time-proven formulaic expressions in a culture like Japan where strict norms exist for appropriate word usage.

### **Interference in L2 Conversation**

The unique features of Japanese apology discussed above only get magnified when Japanese are to apologize in English. Most of the past observations of Japan-U.S. communication in which many found Japanese to be more apologetic, must have taken place where the two parties are conversing in English, and thus, the perception of apologetic Japanese may result from Japanese styles of apology “in English” rather than Japanese offering apologies in their mother tongue. As such, the issue of interference and other factors in L2 apology needs to be addressed here.

Apology being a less salient notion in the U.S., not much instruction is offered to L2 learners as to how to properly apologize in English (Coulmas, 1981; Fraser, 1981). Even if some advice is offered, it generally lists a few formulaic expressions such as “I’m sorry” and the learner’s repertoire of English apology remains rather limited.

However, situations requiring apology are inevitably stressful and sometimes nerve-wrecking for L2 speakers to handle. Naturally their ability to produce appropriate apology messages in English decreases: they would often simply repeat the few formulas already known to them or resort to patterns familiar in Japanese apology including repetition and other “profuse” message features, all of which sharply stand out in English conversation.

To make the matter worse, Japanese may say “I’m sorry,” every time they face the situation where they typically say *sumimasen* in Japanese because of the Japanese lay perception of *sumimasen* as apology as well as “sorry” being taught as the apology phrase in English. Thus, a Japanese person apologizing in English would sound even more profuse than the same individual apologizing in Japanese.

### Use of Accounts

So far, this paper has discussed why Japanese may seem more apologetic than U.S. Americans. This section turns to a pattern in U.S. American apology which may create an impression to Japanese that U.S. Americans “never apologize.”

Compared to Japanese, U.S. Americans tend to include accounts in their apology. The Greek root for the word “apology,” *apologia* means “defense” (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986) and thus it seems only natural that U.S. American apology includes accounts. Moreover, U.S. Americans try to assure that the same offense will not take place again by emphasizing unusual circumstances which led to the offense.

Accounts, even the ones U.S. Americans would consider as “explanations,” however, are considered as “anti-apology-markers” in Japan.<sup>3</sup> That is, while “I’m sorry” is an apology, “I’m sorry, but” is back talk to Japanese. Then, every time U.S. Americans apologize and account for the situation, the message will not be perceived as apology by Japanese, which will lead them to believe that “Americans never apologize,” or “Americans don’t know how to apologize.”

### Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, these cultural differences in perceptions and practice of linguistic activities greatly affect Japanese and U.S. American styles of apology. First, elusiveness of conventional phrases in Japanese contributes to the impression that Japanese apologize when they are expected to thank the other. Second, different perceptions of language result in different practice of self-castigation, negative/ positive emphasis, and offers of repair and promise for future in Japanese and U.S. American apologies. Third, different tolerance to repetition in each language and the subsequent frequent repetition make Japanese sound more “apologetic.” Fourth, these features of Japanese apology only get intensified when Japanese try to apologize in English. Finally, the U.S. American use of accounts in apology may affect the perception of Japanese that, “Americans do not apologize,” due to culturally different connotations of accounts included in apology.

### Notes

1. *Sumimasen* is also used for a perfunctory apology, just like its English counterpart, “excuse me.”

2. While there is no expressions like *sumimasen* used for both apology and thanks in the English language, the phrase, “I’m sorry” in English can be used to offer apology as well as to express sympathy. This type of elusiveness of “sorry” statements impeded previous research on apology in English. The researchers often confuse the sympathetic use of “I’m sorry” with its apologetic use for several language-specific reasons in English: (a) the expression is very strongly identified with apology in the language; (b) in some messages such as “I’m sorry I have to go,” it is very difficult to distinguish apology and sympathy from each other without contextual information; and (c) there are not many alternate expressions used exclusively to express sympathy in the English language. In fact, the boundary between the apologetic and sympathetic use of “sorry” is so fuzzy in the English language that even researchers who are native-speakers of English often fail to distinguish one from the other (for this type of confusion, see Owen, 1983).
3. Sugimoto (1997) found generational differences in Japanese liking of accounts in apology with the younger generation more receptive of accounts.

## References

- Coulmas, F.  
1981 ‘Poison to your soul’: Thanks and apologies contrastively viewed. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational routines*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Fraser, B.  
1981 On apologizing. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational routines*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Kato, K., & Rozman, M.  
1988 *Kotobade saguru America* [The American mentality]. Tokyo: Japan Times.
- Kitagawa, K.  
1990 *How to 101: Otonano aisatsu* [How to 101: Greetings for adults]. Tokyo: Nippon Jitsugyo Shuppan.
- Naotsuka, R.  
1990 *Obeijin ga chinmoku surutoki: Ibunka no communication*. [When Westerners become silent: Intercultural communication]. Tokyo: Taishukan.
- Owen, M.  
1983 *Apologies and remedial interchanges: A study of language use in social interaction*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton.
- Sakamoto, N., & Naotsuka, R.

1993 *Polite fictions: Why Japanese and Americans seem rude to each other.*  
Tokyo: Kinseido.

Sugimoto, N.

1997). A Japan-U. S. comparison of apology styles. *Communication Research*,  
24 (4), 349-269.

Sugimoto, N.

in press Norms of apology depicted in U.S. American and Japanese literature on  
manners and etiquette. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

Wagatsuma, H. & Rosett, A. (1986). The implications of apology: Law and culture in  
Japan and the United States. *Law and Society Review* 20 (4), 461-98.