



# EFL Arab students' apology strategies in relation to formality and informality of the context



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Arab EFL students' awareness and performance of apologies in formal and informal social contexts were explored.
- The most frequent apology strategy was apology with Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID).
- Apologies without IFID were respectively the second most common strategies.
- Generally, the Arab EFL students performed well in apologizing based on the type of each social context.
- The students used more than one strategy to perform apology especially in a formal context.

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## 1. Introduction

Apology is considered as a post-event speech act that takes place as a reaction to an offense committed by someone [6]. It is “a speech act addressed to V's face-needs and intended to remedy an offence for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and V (where A is the apologist, and V is the victim or person offended)” [16]. Apology is the most complex and thus most difficult classifiable speech act because performing it may implement other speech acts such as request, command, offer, and so on [6]. Furthermore, there is an implicit meaning behind the linguistic utterances of apology that depends on the sociopragmatic function to be understood. This meaning can be interpreted differently according to the social context it occurs [28] as cited in [22]. The ultimate purpose behind acting apology is to maintain harmony and avoid conflict in the relationship with other people in everyday communication [26].

### 1.1. The statement of the problem

There is a wealth of literature on apology in Western languages [7,9,11,12,15,16,19,29]. However, few studies have been conducted in the Arabic context [5,18,22] in which little attention has been paid to establish a link between the act of apology and the estimation of the subject to the degree of offense and the social context (formal and informal). In their academic environment, Arab EFL students encounter a problem in using the speech act of apology especially when communicating in the target language either at formal or informal levels. In addition to that, the estimation of the subjects to the social context and the degree of offence is not taken into consideration when studying the speech act of apology in the Arabic context. This calls for a study to fill this gap in literature to understand the expression of apology among Arab EFL students. Based on the formal/informal social contexts, this study addressed the following questions:

- 1 To what extent are the Arab EFL students sociopragmatically aware of the type and degree of offense being committed in each social context (formal/informal)?
- 2 What are the strategies used by Arab EFL students to apologize in the formal and informal social contexts?

### 1.2. Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical foundation of the study, based on which the data were analyzed.

#### 1.2.1. Speech act theory

To analyze the data collected in this study the speech act theory

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[2, 23] was employed. Speech acts represent the use of language by the subjects to perform apology. The speech act theory was first introduced in 1962 when the linguist John Langshaw Austin presented his well-known work "How to do Things with Words?" In this work, he changed the direction of the analysis of speech from merely linguistic features (i.e. statements, assertions and propositions) to functional aspects. At that time, attention was drawn to the concept that speech utterances not only imply the meaning but also perform an action that is implicitly found in the utterances. Accordingly, Austin made a distinction between various types of speech acts, such as asking, commanding, stating, promising and so on. He proposed three types of acts within each speech act; (a) locutionary (the act of saying something), (b) illocutionary act (an act performed in saying something), and (c) perlocutionary (an effect placed on the hearer/addressee's by saying something).

Following Austin's perspective, Searle 1976 introduced his classification of speech acts which he called illocutionary acts as consisting mainly of five types: (a) representatives (or assertives), (b) directives, (c) commissives, (d) expressives, and (e) declarations as shown in (Table 1).

There are some other subcategories for each of the five main types of illocutionary acts. For example, the representatives can include statements, assertions, remarks, explanations, etc. The directives can include requests orders, commands, askings, etc. The commissives can include promises, vows, threats, and pledges, etc. The expressives can conclude congratulations, felicitations, welcomes, etc. The last category which is declarations can include marrying, christening, etc. What can distinguish these types from each other is the psychological state of the speaker or the 'sincerity condition' as called by Searle. For example, in directives the psychological state or the intent of the speaker is expressed by the speaker desire or want to make the hearer perform an action. When the speaker says 'It is hot in here', he/she desires that the listener performs opening the window or switching on the air-conditioner.

### 1.2.2. Direct speech act vs. indirect speech act

As explained in the previous section, any speech act has a locution which consists of the actual words uttered in the speech act. This locution has a force called illocution which carries the meaning of action or the desire the speaker wants to communicate to the hearer by saying these words. If the meaning can be inferred directly from the utterances in the speech act, the speech act is direct [6]. For example, when one says, 'I apologize for troubling you' or 'Sorry to bother you', the speaker intent is to apologize explicitly and in a direct way.

However, if the meaning of an apology is communicated in an indirect way that requires deriving the meaning from the actual words used in the speech act, then the speech act is indirect. For example, when one says, 'It's my fault', the speaker's intent, in this case, is understood or inferred indirectly as a form of indirect apology.

### 1.2.3. Apology as a speech act

Apology has been defined by many researchers in the literature.

Goffman [14] looked at apology as a "remedial exchange" that aims to serve the offender in two ways, approving being guilty and dissociating him/herself from the consequences of his/her offending behavior. The working definition of apology in this study is that it is a speech act which is addressed to the offended person's face wants upon committing an offense. The purpose of this apology act is to repair the offense the offender is responsible for in order to "bring the relationship back into balance" [17].

Apology as a complex speech act is not easy to classify. Its classification depends on the used strategies of apology. In other words, when the offender apologizes by showing regret, the speech act of apology that results is expressive as it reflects the psychological state of the speaker. When the offender asks the offended person to forgive him, s/he actually asks him to do an action. In this case, apology can be classified as directive. When the offender claims no responsibility towards the offense, s/he in fact states his opinion which is a kind of representative. Accordingly, in this paper this kind of act is referred to as "Speech acts of Apology" rather than "speech act of apology".

## 2. Previous studies

Five studies are reviewed as the related literature on the speech act of apology; the first two are in the eastern context and the other three are more specific to the eastern Arabic context.

A study explored the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers in private institutes and senior high schools were able to perform apology strategies as one specific speech act and evaluated this speech act in the course books they were teaching [21]. The subjects were 60 male and female EFL teachers. A DCT was employed to collect data. The results showed significant differences between the apology strategies used by the English language teachers in public schools and language institutes. Correspondingly, there was a significant difference between the course books used by the groups in terms of apology strategies used in different social contexts.

Based on a corpus of natural data collected through an ethnographic method of observation, another study was conducted to investigate apologies in Persian [24]. Their aim was to see whether Persian apologies are as formulaic as those in English. The results explored that Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs hereafter) in forms of request for forgiveness and offer of apology were dominant, followed by using acknowledgment of responsibility through expressing self-deficiency. The researchers attributed the selection of apologies to culture-specific differences.

Ghanbaran et al. [13] carried out a study that aimed to investigate the use of intensifiers in Persian apologies and compliments in relation to the subjects' views of appropriateness and gender. Fifty subjects (25 males and 25 females) from the University of Isfahan in Iran were involved in this study [6]. taxonomy of apology was used to analyze the data. The subjects were to complete a twelve-situation DCT before responding to an interview. The results showed that Persian speakers extensively used intensifiers when performing apologies and that they made a lot of effort to select an apology strategy that would maintain the addressee's face. Gender-

**Table 1**  
Searle's Sincerity Conditions and illocutionary acts.

Sincerity condition (psychological state)	Illocutionary acts
Belief	Statements, assertions, remarks, explanations, postulations, declarations, deductions, and arguments, etc.
Desire or Want	Requests, orders, commands, askings, prayers, pleadings, beggings and entreaties, etc.
Intention	Promises, vows, threats, and pledges, etc.
Pleasure	Congratulations, felicitations, welcomes, etc.
Declaratives	Marrying, christening

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