

# A Corpus-Based Study of Responses to Apologies in US English

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Responding to apologies can be difficult, and while there is etiquette advice available on how to respond to apologies as well as studies on the concept of forgiveness in response to apologies, there are few studies on particular strategies and expressions interlocutors use to respond to apologies. In this paper, we begin by looking at previous research on responding to apologies and then at issues related to gathering data in order to study speech acts. In our study, we analyzed 320 apologies from a corpus made up of dialogue from 72 episodes from the US situation comedy *Modern Family*. We divided the responses to these apologies into nine categories: no response, minimizing the offense, focusing on the offense, response to the justification/explanation/question, asking for clarification, reciprocating the apology, vocalization, expression of disbelief, and other. We discussed how the responses in different categories are used and analyzed the circumstances in which they are used.

## 1. Introduction

Apologies are important to the maintenance of human relationships, but sometimes it is difficult to know how to respond to them. A letter to etiquette columnist Miss Manners (Judith Martin) expresses the problem:

What is the correct response to “I’m sorry”? “That’s OK” implies, “Oh, no need to apologize; I didn’t mind” and implicitly tells the apologizer that the behavior wasn’t inappropriate. What does one say when one wants to convey “Thank you for acknowledging that you were at fault and I was harmed”? (Martin, 1997)

As the writer points out, it is sometimes difficult to know how to respond to apologies, especially if the offense is serious and the interlocutor is not ready to forgive.

In this paper we will look at research on responses to apologies and compare methods of data collection for the student of speech acts. We will report on a corpus-based study on how English-speaking Americans respond to apologies, using a typology that we developed.

### 1.1 Apologies

First, we will look briefly at the definition and purpose of apologies. Tronsborg (1995, p. 373) wrote, “an apology is called for when social norms have been violated.... When a person has performed an act (action or utterance), or failed to do so, which has offended another person, and for which he/she can be held responsible, the offender needs to apologize. The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to ‘set things right.’”

Apologies are vital to maintaining relationships, but how the interlocutor responds to the apology also plays a part in maintaining the relationship. Just as it

is useful to understand the strategies involved in making an apology (Kitao & Kitao, 2013), it is useful to understand how interlocutors respond to apologies.

## 1.2 Apology Response Strategies

While there is etiquette advice about how to respond to apologies (e.g., How to accept an apology, n.d., How to accept an apology from a co-worker, n.d.) and information for non-native English speakers about how to respond to apologies in English (e.g., Apologizing and responding to apologies, 2008), there is relatively little research on how English speakers actually respond to apologies, and in particular the types of responses and expressions interlocutors use in responding to apologies (Adrefiza & Jones, 2013).

There have been some studies on the effects of an apology by an offender on the person receiving the apology (interlocutor). For example, Darby and Schelenker (1982) found that an apology caused the offender to be viewed more positively – less blameworthy, more likable, a better person. Because of this, Bennett and Dewberry (1994) found that the interlocutor often felt an obligation to forgive an offender who offered an apology and thus contribute to the maintenance of the relationship. In fact, across cultures, apologies are rarely rejected (Bennett and Earwaker, 2001). Holmes (1995) developed a typology of responses to apologies that included four categories. They are, with examples from Adrefiza and Jones (2013):

1. Acceptance (e.g., absolution, thanking, advice/suggestion, request, expressing empathy, expressing emotion)
2. Acknowledgement (e.g., absolution plus [“That’s OK, but...”], warning/threatening, evaluating)
3. Evasion (e.g., deflecting, requesting)
4. Rejection (e.g., blaming, asking for compensation)

Holmes (1995) used a corpus of New Zealand English and found that acceptance was the most common strategy in responses, with almost 40% of women and almost 30% of men in her corpus using

it. The next most common strategy was evasion, with about 25% of the sample. Rejection was used in about 20% of the cases by men and about 10% by women. Acknowledgement and no response was used in a little over 10% of the cases.

Adrefiza and Jones (2013) used an oral Discourse Completion Test (DCT), in which they gave participants situations and asked how they would respond to the apology, to gather responses to apologies from Australian English speakers and compared them to responses to apologies from speakers of Bahasa Indonesia. They found that a plurality in both languages used acceptance strategies (36.1% in Australian English and 33.8% in Bahasa Indonesia), though rejections (21.1% in Australian English and 27.2% in Bahasa Indonesia) were more common than the researchers expected. It may be that participants felt more free to reject apologies in hypothetical situations than they would have in actual relationships, where rejecting an apology may have affected the relationship.

## 1.3 Issues Related to Gathering Data

The issue of methodology of gathering data to study speech acts, including apologies and their responses, is important. Demeter (2012) has said that even though gathering natural data is considered the best method, in the real world, most researchers rarely use that technique. Even collecting naturally occurring data has its difficulties. It may not be possible to control variables, or even identify them, and it is also difficult to collect a large number of examples of a particular speech act. Therefore, researchers have generally favored the ability to gather large amounts of data and/or to control variables over naturalness of the data. Each method of gathering data has its own advantages and disadvantages, so it is not possible to determine which one is “best” (Demeter, 2007).

*1.3.1. Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs).* The majority of researchers have used DCTs to study speech acts. DCTs are questionnaires in which participants are given a situation and asked to write or speak aloud the words that they would use in that situation. Using DCTs, researchers can manipulate

variables easily, for example, using offenses of different levels of seriousness, and can gather large amounts of data easily. On the other hand, researchers are gathering responses that participants believe they would use rather than observing the response they would actually use, and they are written rather than spoken. However, research by Beebe and Cummings (1985) suggests that for refusals, the results of DCTs represent semantic formulas that correspond with what other subjects actually did say in a similar situation. However, real life interactions tended to involve more elaboration, particularly in face-threatening situations or in other complex situations.

In addition, DCTs do not allow for interaction in responses, so there are aspects of the speech acts that they will not reveal.

An oral DCT, in which the participant listens to the stimulus (in the case of apology responses, an apology) and responds orally, solves some of the problems of a written DCT. It allows participants to respond orally rather than in writing and has some of the characteristics of real interaction (e.g., hesitations and repetitions) (Holmes, 1995), though it still does not allow the participant to respond to further apology strategies after the initial one (e.g., if the interlocutor offers an additional justification), and it does not involve some subtypes of apologies, such as ones when more than one person participates in the apology. Also, the responses are still hypothetical and would not have an effect on an actual relationship.

*1.3.2. Naturally occurring data.* A researcher who gathers naturally occurring data is looking at how the speech act in question is used in real life, but, as mentioned above, there are issues related to gathering enough examples of a particular speech act to make generalizations, and it is impossible to manipulate the variables related to the speech act (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). In addition, in some cases, doing audio or video recordings of naturally occurring data raises privacy issues, so keeping a record may depend on the memory of the person gathering data, if the exchange is written down after the fact (Yuan, 2001).

*1.3.3 Role plays.* Researchers have also used role

plays to gather data, though they are less common. Gathering data using role plays is more difficult than using DCTs, but they do provide more context and allow researchers to look at how interaction can influence the speech acts. In addition, role plays elicit spoken language, though as with DCTs, participants are asked to imagine what they would say rather than responding in a real situation. If the role plays are videotaped, researchers can also study the nonverbal aspects of speech acts.

*1.3.4. Speech corpora.* Another source of data to study speech acts is speech corpora, that is, compilations of transcripts of conversations, transcripts of interviews, lectures, etc. Examples of speech corpora include the spoken sections of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

Spoken sections of established corpora can potentially provide a large amount of natural data, and they can demonstrate the effects of interaction on speech act strategies. However, they do not necessarily include many conversations, which, for most researchers, would be the focus of interest in study speech acts. The BNC, for example, is made up of a combination of transcripts of conversations recorded by volunteers and of such events as lectures, news broadcasts, sermons, and interviews (British National Corpus, n.d.), and the COCA is compiled from transcripts of news programs, news magazine programs, etc. (Corpus of Contemporary American English, n.d.).

Researchers can also use speech corpora compiled from film and television scripts, DVD subtitles, and so on, using DVD and movie subtitles by downloading them from the Internet or existing corpora. Davies (2012), for example, used subtitles from US soap operas to compile a speech corpus. Davies (2012) found that compared to the spoken language from the BNC and the COCA, the language in this corpus had more informal expressions and more informal vocabulary and less formal or technical vocabulary than the BNC and the COCA and thus the soap opera corpus better represented the everyday conversation of ordinary people. The dialogue in such programs represents everyday language well

and includes the topics that people use in everyday life.

In addition to established corpora, researchers can compile their own corpora to fulfill their own purposes for research (Evans, n.d.; W3-Corpora Project, 1998).

For the purpose of finding authentic examples of speech acts, Rose (1993, 1994, 1997, 2001) showed that material from film and TV can be a suitable source. In addition, Huang (2004) found that “apologies in film do reflect a large portion of real-life situations” (p. 1).

Using movie or television dialogue also allows the researcher to look at the nonverbal aspects of the speech acts and to analyze how the context or the relationships among characters influence speech acts.

However, when using corpora to study speech acts, variables cannot easily be manipulated, and only a limited number of speech acts can be found using a keyword search. For example, Kitao (2012) found that 98% of the apologies in a small corpus (160,000 words) could be identified using a lemmatized search for only five keywords, so it is possible to study apologies using a speech corpus. On the other hand, a study of requests in an 80,000 word corpus showed that only 76.8% of requests were found using 30 search terms (Kitao and Kitao, 2012), indicating that corpora would not be useful for studying requests.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

While each of the methods of gathering data to study speech acts has strengths and weaknesses, for this study, we have chosen to use a corpus compiled of subtitles from a television series in order to study responses to apologies. This method offers a large number of apologies and responses from a variety of situations in context and in relatively natural spoken language.

#### 1.5 Research Questions

In order to provide a description of responses to apologies in American English and to examine how they are used, in this study, we will consider the following research questions:

1. How do American English speakers respond to apologies?
2. What are some standard expressions for responding to apologies?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Overview

In order to study responses to apologies in a speech corpus, we used the results of a previous study (Kitao & Kitao, 2013) in which we identified and analyzed apologies in a corpus composed of the English subtitles from the American television comedy *Modern Family* (Levitan and Lloyd, 2009). Using those apologies, we looked at the responses and developed a typology of the responses and counted the responses in each category. We also looked at what might be influencing the choices of responses.

### 2.2 Materials

For a previous study (Kitao & Kitao, 2013), we developed a corpus of spoken English using subtitles from the first three seasons (2009, 2010, and 2011) of the US television program *Modern Family* (Levitan and Lloyd, 2009). We downloaded the subtitles from the Internet in srt files, which are a type of file that contains subtitles downloaded from DVDs using a program called SubRip. The three seasons include a total of 72 30-minute episodes. The speech corpus that we created included approximately 246,000 words. While this is a small corpus, it does contain frequent apologies – a total of 362 examples (Kitao & Kitao, 2013).

*Modern Family* is appropriate for a corpus used to study speech acts because it has a great many examples of everyday conversation. These are mainly among extended family members, but conversations with co-workers, customers, friends, service people, strangers, etc., are also included. There are many examples of apologies, which is not always the case with TV series (G. Demeter, personal communication, February 17, 2012).

*Modern Family* also met Rose’s (2001) criteria of being less than 15 years old and depicting contemporary characters in real-life situations. Huang (2004,

p. 5) looked at movies and found that those of the genre romance/comedy portrayed protagonists that “experience ups and downs in relationships and the interactions between characters are emotionally packed; therefore, apologies were frequently made to tie up the bond.” A television comedy would be likely to have similar characteristics.

In addition, because *Modern Family* is a television series that we are familiar with, it is easier to analyze the apologies that we found than an unfamiliar series would have been, since we could recognize, in most cases, the context.

*Modern Family* depicts the Pritchett family. Jay Pritchett has two adult children. He is divorced from his children’s mother and married to a younger second wife, Gloria Delgado-Pritchett, who is from Colombia. Gloria has a son, Manny Delgado, from her first marriage to Javier Delgado. Jay’s daughter Claire Dunphy is married to Phil Dunphy and has three children, Haley, Alex, and Luke. Mitchell Pritchett, Jay’s son, lives with his partner (later husband), Cameron Tucker, and their adopted daughter from Vietnam, Lily Tucker-Pritchett.

### 2.3 Procedures

For the previous study (Kitao & Kitao, 2013), we did lemmatized searches for five performative words for apologies: “sorry,” “forgive,” “apologize,” “excuse,” and “pardon” and separated the apologies from the non-apologies, including lines before and after the apology to provide a context. Using the

apologies identified in the previous study, we looked at the responses to those apologies. Apologies were eliminated from the analysis of responses if the response was not accessible (e.g., speaking on the telephone when the interlocutor could not be heard; apologizing at the end of a scene, with no response was shown) or if a response could not be expected (e.g., speaking to a person who did not understand English; speaking to an animal; speaking directly to the camera). As a result, we analyzed responses to a total of 320 apologies, which we divided into categories. We went through the responses, putting them into categories, and then reconsidered the categories and combined categories that seemed similar. The categories we used were no response, minimizing the offense, focusing on the offense, responses to justification/explanation/question, asking for clarification, reciprocating the apology, vocalization, expression of disbelief, and other. We chose to develop a new typology rather than use Holmes’s (1995) typology because it fit our data better and because we did not agree with some of the categorization in Holmes’ typology.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Frequency of Responses

The number of responses in each category, the percentage of all apologies the response in each category was used in, and the percentage of all responses that that represents are in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Responses to Apologies

Category	Frequency	% of All Apologies	% of Responses
No response	161	50.3%	
Minimizing the offense	92	28.8%	48.4%
Focusing on the offense	38	11.9%	20.0%
Responses to justification/explanation/question	29	9.0%	15.3%
Asking for clarification	7	2.1%	3.7%
Reciprocating the apology	6	1.9%	3.2%
Vocalization	6	1.9%	3.2%
Expression of disbelief	4	1.3%	2.1%
Other	8	2.6%	4.2%

Note: The “Percentage of All Apologies” adds up to more than 100% because some apologies had more than one response.

In about half of all cases, there was no response to the apology. There were a total of 190 responses to apologies. Of the cases in which there were responses, the majority fell into one of three categories – minimizing the offense, focusing on the offense, and responding to the justification/explanation/question.

Together, these three categories made up 49.7% of all the interactions and 83.7% of the responses to apologies. The remaining apologies fell into one of five categories. “Other” includes denial of responsibility in response to self-justification (3), rejecting the apology (3), asking for time (1), and finishing the offender’s thought (1).

### 3.2 Analysis of Responses

In this section, we will look at the categories of responses and discuss examples in each category as well as expressions that are used. (Note: The person who made the apology will be referred to as “the offender” and the person who responds as “the interlocutor.”)

*3.2.1 Number of responses to each apology.* There were a total of 190 responses to 159 apologies. Most of the apologies had only one type of response. The highest number of types we found was five. In cases where there was more than one type, the offender had usually used more than one justification or had apologized repeatedly.

Claire was trapped in the bathroom when the door became jammed as a result of an earthquake and became upset with Phil for not getting her out quickly. Later she apologized.

*Claire: Umm, ... I'm sorry.*

*Phil: Well, don't worry about it.*

*Claire: Um, I'm sorry.*

*Phil: Don't.*

*Claire: I was so nervous, I freaked out.*

*Phil: It's all right. It's all right. I think it was a bit of a rough morning.*

*Claire: Yes.*

Phil responds to the first apology by telling Claire not to worry about it and to the repetition by telling

her not to apologize. After Claire offers a reason for her behavior, Phil tells her that it’s all right and explains her behavior by saying that she had had a difficult morning.

*3.2.2 No response.* In 50.3% of the interactions, the interlocutor did not respond to the apology. In this section we will look at some of the examples and see why it might be appropriate not to respond to an apology.

In cases where the offense was minor, the interlocutor sometimes did not respond to the apology. Some examples of minor offenses were brushing against people walking down the aisle of an airplane, asking to talk to someone briefly, correcting the interlocutor, interrupting someone, and having been distracted.

In some cases, the offender has gone on to another subject immediately after apologizing, and, particularly if the offense is relatively minor, it may not seem necessary to go back and respond to the apology.

Mitchell and Cam go to the beach house of Charlie Bingham, a friend Mitchell’s father who is interested in hiring Mitchell. He answers the door wearing a wetsuit.

*Charlie: Pardon the get-up. Killer waves today. You guys surf?*

*Mitchell: Um, only for bargains on the Web.*

Charlie apologizes for what he is wearing, explains why he is wearing it, and then asks whether Cameron or Mitchell surf. Rather than returning to the apology, Mitchell responds to that question.

In another case, Manny is participating in a fencing tournament and has learned he will be in the final against a girl. He says he will refuse to participate, since he does not want to fight a girl, but Gloria disagrees with him.

*Gloria: Manny, you always call yourself a lover of women, but if you don't compete with this girl, you're showing me and all the women that you*

*don't respect us.*

*Manny: I'm sorry.*

*Gloria: OK, so take back your sword and go fight this girl like a bull.*

Here, Gloria doesn't respond to the apology, but she takes the apology as acknowledgement that Manny understands and agrees with what she said, and so she goes on to tell him what to do about it.

In the case of self-correction, a response does not seem to be necessary.

In one example, Cam approaches Jay and some friends of his who are talking on the sidewalk. After a brief exchange with Jay, Cameron introduces himself to Jay's friends.

*Cam: Hi, I'm Cameron.*

*Jay: Oh, geez, I'm sorry. Guys, this is Cam: He's a... friend of my son's.*

*Friend: Hey.*

In this example of self-correction, Jay is correcting himself for not having introduced Cam earlier. It does not seem necessary to respond to the apology, and instead, one of Jay's friends responds to the introduction.

*3.2.3 Minimizing the offense.* Among the responses, the most common category was minimizing the offense, a category of response that was used in 28.8% of all cases of apologies and 48.4% of all strategies used. In these cases, the interlocutor may feel that the offender is taking the offense more seriously than necessary, may feel that there was an understandable reason for committing the offense, or may want to quickly repair the relationship. This category includes denying the need for an apology, denying the fault of the interlocutor, minimizing the offense, blaming him/herself for the offense rather than the offender, explaining why the offender committed the offense, commending the offender for the apology, and responding with "That's OK" or "That's all right."

Phil brings Mitch a cup of coffee.

*Phil: I am really sorry about the cold coffee.*

*Mitchell: It's not that cold. It's lukewarm, so...*

Here, Mitchell minimizes the offense by saying that the coffee was not as bad as Phil had said it was.

In a scuffle between Mitch and Cam, Mitch's ankle is injured. Later, when Mitch is sitting with an ice bag on his ankle, Cam asks him how he is doing.

*Cam: How's your ankle?*

*Mitch: It's cold.*

*Cam: I'm sorry I hurt you.*

*Mitch: No, no, don't be. I- I could just as easily hurt you.*

*Cam: Well, it's cute that you think that.*

In this example, Mitch tells Cam not to be sorry because he thinks that either of them could have been injured in the scuffle.

Javier, Gloria's ex-husband and Manny's father, is visiting the Prichetts. He is up at night playing pool when Jay comes in.

*Javier: Hey, Jay. Listen, I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?*

*Jay: No. No, I'm a light sleeper. That's what happens when you get older.*

Here, Jay reassures Javier that it is not his fault Jay is awake.

Jack, an employee of Jay's, had let Manny steer a forklift truck, which led to the forklift running into a wall. Later, Manny apologizes for the damage caused in the accident.

*Manny: Jay, I'm sorry about your wall.*

*Jay: Wasn't your fault. It was Jack's, and I've already taken care of him.*

In this case, Jay responds to the apology by placing the blame on someone other than Manny.

Barry, a new friend of Cam's and Mitch's, has noticed that Mitch is not sympathetic to his New Age beliefs and practices.

*Mitch: I'm sorry if I offended you.*

*Barry: No, don't apologize.*

*Mitch: Look, I...*

*Barry: Only thing that offends me is a man who doesn't live in his own truth.*

Barry tells Mitch not to apologize, because he was not offended by Mitch's attitude.

Cam had believed that Mitch's assistant, Broderick, had a crush on Mitch. They argue about it, and later, Cam apologizes.

*Cam: By the way, I need to apologize to you. I'm sorry I got so silly about that Broderick stuff earlier.*

*Mitch: No. Please do not worry about it. Cam, I like it when you get a little jealous.*

Here, Mitch tells Cam not to worry about it, because he didn't really mind the behavior as an indication of Cam's jealousy.

Whitney, a woman that Manny met online, comes to meet him, not realizing that he is only 11 years old. She apologizes to Gloria.

*Whitney: This is so humiliating. I am sorry.*

*Gloria: It's okay.*

Since Manny is mature for his age and would come across online as being older than he is, Gloria can understand why Whitney would think that he was an adult. She minimizes the offense by saying it is okay.

Later in the same episode, Manny apologizes to Whitney.

*Manny: I'm sorry this didn't turn out like you wanted.*

*Whitney: That's okay. Probably didn't turn out how*

*you wanted it either.*

In this example, there is a combination of two types of responses – Whitney both minimizes the offense ("That's OK") and sympathizes with Manny's disappointed expectations.

In the example above in the "Number of responses" section, Phil sympathizes with the reason that Claire got upset and explains it by saying, "It's all right. You've had a bit of a rough morning."

In these examples, we can see several common expressions for responding to apologies – "(Please) do not worry about it," "Don't be (sorry)," "(It) wasn't your fault," "Don't apologize," "It's all right," and "It's OK."

*3.2.4 Focusing on the offense.* After minimizing the offense, the second most common response was to focus on the offense, by emphasizing, explaining, or agreeing with the seriousness of the offense, by suggesting that the interlocutor does not understand the offense, or by criticizing the offender. In 11.9% of the cases and 20.0% of responses, this type of response was used.

In one exchange, Phil confronts Luke because he believes that Luke allowed his new bike to be stolen.

*Phil: Anything you want to share with me?*

*Luke: Not really.*

*Phil: So, if I, uh, went out to the garage, took a picture for a scrapbook, there'd be no surprises?*

*Luke: I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it. I just made a mistake.*

*Phil: Yeah, a big mistake! You're making me look really bad here. I told Mom you were ready for this.*

In his response to the apology, Phil emphasizes how serious the offense was – what a big "mistake" Luke made – and explains that, because he had told Claire that Luke was responsible enough to have a bike, it makes him look bad if Luke behaves irresponsibly with the bike.

In another exchange, Claire reacts to Phil getting a dog without consulting her.



*Claire: I cannot believe you got a dog without consulting me. This was a major family decision.*

*Phil: It was wrong.*

*Claire: Yeah.*

*Phil: And I'm sorry.*

*Claire: Mmm.*

*Phil: But we have talked about getting a dog for years, and you're the only one who wasn't into it.*

*Claire: Because I knew that I would be the one taking care of it.*

Here, Claire points out to Phil that the reason the offense was serious was that it is she who will be most inconvenienced by the decision, since she will do most of the work to care for the dog.

In some cases, the interlocutor tries to explain the reason for the offense.

In this example, Gloria had damaged a life-sized dog-butler statue that Jay bought.

*Gloria: Sorry, Jay. It was an accident.*

*Jay: You know, I'm beginning to think you don't like Barkley that much. I mean, first you hide him in the guest room, and now this.*

In his response, Jay explains Gloria's behavior – she damaged the dog statue because she does not like it.

In a few cases, the interlocutor responded by criticizing the offender for the offense.

Jay and Manny are working together to install a ceiling fan, and Jay accidentally hits Manny with one of the pieces.

*Manny: Ow!*

*Jay: Sorry!*

*Manny: I think my arm is broken.*

*Jay: Relax. It's not broken.*

*Manny: How do you know? You don't know anything. You have no concern for safety.*

Here, Manny explained the seriousness of the offense by claiming that his arm was broken and, when

Jay minimized the offense, responded that Jay could not know that his arm was not broken and criticized Jay's lack of concern for safety.

In the category of focusing on the offense, there do not seem to be particular expressions that are commonly used. The expressions used to focus on the offense depend heavily the situation and what the offense was.

*3.2.5 Responses to the justification/explanation/question.* In 9.0% of all cases and in 15.3% of the responses, the interlocutor responded to the justification that the offender gave, to a question the offender asked about the effect of the offense, or to something about the explanation rather than to either the apology or the offense.

An example of this took place when Phil mistakenly thought he had a serious health problem.

*Claire: Phil, you've gotta let this go.*

*Phil: I'm sorry, Claire. I don't know how to react when I find out there's a 70% chance I'm gonna die.*

*Claire: Honey, listen to me. You're gonna be fine.*

Here, Claire does not respond to the apology or the offense, but she does react to Phil's explanation of why he cannot let go of his concerns by reassuring him.

In another example, Mitch and Cam are in a movie theater, which they mistakenly think will be showing a violent movie. They see a father with small children.

*Cam: Oh, my God. This guy brought his kids, Mitchell.*

*Mitch: What, to this movie? Isn't it supposed to be super violent?*

*Cam (to children's father): I'm sorry. I don't mean to overstep, but I don't know that this movie is really appropriate for children. I'm terrified to see it. That's why we're here during the day.*

*Father: It's okay. We're good.*

Here, the father responds to Cam's advice rather than to the apology or the offense by saying that he does not think there is a problem.

In the category of responses to the explanation/justification/question, there do not seem to be any particular expressions that are commonly used.

*3.2.6 Asking for clarification.* In some cases, it is not clear to the interlocutor what the offender in apologizing for, the interlocutor wanted more information about the situation, or the interlocutor didn't understand/misunderstood the situation, so the interlocutor asks for clarification. This was used in response to 2.1% of the apologies and made up 3.7% of the responses.

Gloria learned that Claire had once called her a "gold digger," and Claire apologizes.

*Claire: I don't know what to say, except for I am really, really sorry.*

*Gloria: Just tell me one thing. How do you really feel that I am with your father.*

*Claire: Uh, well—Honestly, at first, it was hard.*

Here, Gloria wants to know Claire's feelings are about her marriage with Claire's father now, and she asks that question rather than responding to the apology itself.

Interlocutors do not seem to use any particular expressions in this category.

*3.2.7 Reciprocating the apology.* In 1.9% of the apologies and 3.2% of all responses, the interlocutor responds by apologizing in return, either because he/she feels partly responsible for the for the offense or because he/she committed a related offense.

When Cam's mother Barb visits, Mitch thinks she touches him (Mitch) too much. Mitch complains to Cam, but Barb overhears. Mitch apologizes to Barb.

*Mitch: Oh, Barb, I am so sorry.*

*Barb: Well, no, h-honey, you hush. Look, I.. I've been thinking about what I heard... and... maybe I do touch you too much. And I could say it's 'cause*

*we're family... but, you know, I don't know. I guess I have been having some fun with you, and I... I-I-I thought that it was harmless...but I would never want to make you uncomfortable.*

*Mitch: Barb, it's my fault too.*

In this case, while there is no performative, Barb expresses an apology. First, she tells Mitch to "hush," which suggests that there is no need for an apology; and then she apologizes by admitting to her fault, explains why she was touching him, and asserts that she had not intended to do any harm or to make Mitch uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, too" is an expression that can be used to reciprocate the apology.

*3.2.8 Vocalizations.* Vocalizations occur in 1.9% of the apologies and 3.2% of all responses. They include expressions like "Mm-hmm," "Mmm," and "Yeah." They seem to be rather non-committal or dismissive responses.

Manny decides to go to with Jay as he plays golf rather than to go to church with his mother, and he apologizes to her.

*Manny: Sorry, Mom. Hope you understand.*

*Gloria: Mmm.*

When Manny apologizes, Gloria dismisses his apology with "Mmm," perhaps because she felt that he could have avoided committing the offense if he had chosen to.

As pointed out above, the interlocutors use such expressions as "Mm-hmm," "Mmm," and "Yeah" as vocalizations in response to apologies.

*3.2.9 Expression of disbelief.* In a very few cases (1.3% of all the apologies and 2.1% of the responses), the interlocutor expressed disbelief that the apology was sincere. This can be based on past history between the offender and interlocutor or on the situation.

Luke has a gun that shoots plastic BBs, and he shot Alex with it. Claire talks to Phil about Luke's pun-

ishment.

*Claire: [T]he agreement was that, if he shoots someone you shoot him.*

*Phil: We were serious about that?*

*Claire: Yes, we were and now you have to follow through.*

*Luke: I'm so sorry!*

*Claire: Liar!*

In this example, Claire does not believe that Luke is sincere about the apology, apparently because he did not apologize until he realized that he would be punished.

*3.2.10 Other.* The remaining types of responses had three or fewer examples. They were denial of responsibility in response to self-justification (3), rejecting the apology (3), asking for time (1), and finishing the offender's thought (1).

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

### 4.1 Findings

We found that in about half of the apologies studied, there was no response. Among the reasons for not responding were that the offense was minor, the offender had moved on to a different subject, the apology was self-correction, and the apology was taken as acceptance of criticism. In half of the apologies, there was a response. The majority of the responses – four out of five – fell into one of three categories: minimizing the offense, focusing on the offense, and responding to the justification/explanation/question. Of these, the most common was minimizing the offense.

For the most part, the interlocutors seemed to be willing to give the offenders help in maintaining the relationship by accepting, or at least not openly rejecting, the apology, which is consistent with the findings of Bennett and Dewberry (1994) that interlocutors feel obligated to accept an apology if one is offered and with Bennett and Earwaker (2001) that apologies are rarely rejected.

If interlocutors did respond to the apology, they tended to minimize the offense, and only in a few

cases was the response completely negative. In only four cases out of 320 apologies did the interlocutor question the sincerity of the apology, and in only three cases was the apology rejected outright. When the apology was rejected, it was generally because the offense was egregious and the offender was not genuinely remorseful. For example, Jay's ex-wife DeeDee had physically attacked his second wife Gloria. Later, DeeDee apologized to Gloria but in the midst of the apology, attacked Gloria again. When DeeDee tried to apologize a second time, Gloria rejected the second apology.

In looking at common expressions, we found that of all the categories, only minimizing the offense and vocalization seemed to have a significant number of standard expressions. For minimizing the offense, "(Please) do not worry about it," "Don't be (sorry)," "(It) wasn't your fault," "It's all right," and "It's OK" were conventional phrases. For vocalizations, "Mmm," "Mm-hmm," and "Yeah" were the expressions that were used. In other categories, the expressions used seem to depend on individual situations, so it is difficult to identify particular expressions.

### 4.2 Limitations of the Study

The percentage of each response depends on the situations found in this particular corpus. Since the corpus is made up mainly of conversations among members of an extended family who know each other well, almost all of the apologies and responses were among people who were close to each other – spouses, parents and children, siblings, and in-laws. People in such relationships may have felt freer to use such strategies as focusing on the offense or expressing disbelief, rather than such strategies as minimizing the offense, than strangers or casual acquaintances would have been. A corpus with more offenders and interlocutors who are in business relationships or who do not know each other all well would yield different percentages.

About 2% of the apologies in the corpus did not include a performative (Kitao, 2012), and thus they were not included in the analysis. Therefore, we do not have any information about how interlocutors respond to an apology that does not include a performative.

### 4.3 Suggestions for Future Research

As pointed out above, the corpus on which this study is based includes mainly conversations among people who know each other well. It would be useful to expand the corpus to include srt files from a TV series that includes situations where the offender and interlocutor with different levels of familiarity and other variables.

In addition, further research about the circumstances in which different types of responses are used, including the characteristics of the situation, of the relationship between the offender and the interlocutor, and of the apology itself, would be useful.

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