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An Analysis of Gendered Differences in Apology Strategies

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Plain Language Summary

Do women apologize more than men? This study explores this question using a large collection of real conversations from people across the UK. Focusing on common phrases like *I'm sorry*, *I apologise*, and *my bad*, I compared how often men and women used these phrases and the kinds of situations they used them in. My analysis showed there was no clear difference in how often men and women apologized. However, I also looked at the types of apologies. Women were more likely to use apologies in serious or emotional situations. Men were more likely to use them casually for small mistakes or before saying something uncomfortable. These findings suggest that men and women use apologies in different ways. The difference isn't about how often they say sorry, but about why and when they do so. These findings help us better understand how gender relates to everyday speech and politeness.

Abstract

This study uses a corpus-based approach to examine how men and women differ in the ways and how often they apologize. The analysis draws on the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014) and focuses on four frequent apology expressions: *I'm sorry*, *I apologise/apologize*, *my bad*, and *forgive me*. The goal is to test whether British women apologize more frequently than British men and whether they use different apology types. Although the raw counts first suggested that men apologized slightly more, a Chi-Square Test of Independence showed no significant difference in overall frequency. However, the same test revealed clear differences in apology strategies. Women tended to use apologies that repaired serious or emotional situations (RA2), while men more often used apologies in advance (AA) to preface their actions. These results indicate that gender shapes the function and context of apologies more than their frequency. The study contributes to ongoing research on gender and language by showing how corpus data can reveal patterns in everyday British speech.

Publication Category

Course-based project

Academic Context

This paper began as a final project in Professor Maria Pia Gomez-Laich's Fall 2024 Introduction to Corpus Linguistics. Students analyze a corpus of texts using some combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The specific computational methods applied depend on the research question(s). As a methods class, close attention is paid to the intentionality of analytical choices and the ability to communicate those intentions in the project.

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Introduction

The concept of face plays a central role in interpersonal communication. Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2012) define it as "the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event" (p. 47). People use apologies to maintain face because apologies let speakers acknowledge their offenses and take responsibility. Kitao and Kitao (2013) explain that apologizing "helps achieve the social goal of maintaining harmony in a relationship" (p. 1). When people fail to apologize, they risk damaging relationships by threatening the other person's face.

Researchers have long examined how gender influences apology behavior. Schumann and Ross (2010) found that women tend to apologize more readily than men. In their first study, they asked participants to recall situations in which they committed or experienced an offense. Women reported more offenses than men, yet both genders apologized at similar rates. In a follow-up study, women rated offense scenarios as more severe. These findings suggest that men may apologize less often not because they refuse to, but because they view fewer actions as offensive. These conclusions rely on self-reported and experimental data.

The current study tests whether these gendered trends appear in real-world conversations by using a corpus-based approach. Unlike controlled experiments, corpus data reveal how people use language in everyday settings, offering a more natural picture of apology behavior.

Corpus-based research has provided valuable insights in studies of apologies. Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) examined *sorry* and *I'm sorry* in spontaneous conversation and found that *sorry* softens minor conversational offenses such as interruptions, while *I'm sorry* conveys stronger emotions like regret or sympathy. Their study, however, did not analyze gender, leaving a gap in the research.

Kitao and Kitao (2013) identified five major types of apologies: co-constructed apologies, repair apologies, apologies in advance, mutual apologies, and conditional apologies. Each type serves a different social purpose and carries a distinct level of pragmatic weight. These categories provide a useful framework for classifying apologies in the present analysis.

Recent studies have also shown that gender and region influence apology strategies. Thaler and Elsweiler (2023) compared British and New Zealand English in formal contexts such as council meetings. They found that men and women favored different strategies and that regional norms shaped how each group apologized. British men tended to use formal expressions such as *apologise*, whereas women and New Zealand speakers used more informal forms like *sorry*. Their review of Holmes (1989), Deutschmann (2003), and Aijmer (1995) revealed inconsistent findings in British English: some studies identified gender differences, while others did not. These inconsistencies show that more research is needed, especially on informal conversation.

Apology strategies also depend on context and social role. Murphy (2015) and Ponomarenko et al. (2018) observed that in formal, male-dominated settings such as political institutions, women often adopt cooperative and apologetic language. Yet these speech patterns may not extend to casual, peer-level interactions—the kind most common in the BNC2014 corpus.

Taken together, the literature paints a mixed picture. Experimental studies show gender differences in how people perceive offenses (Schumann & Ross, 2010), and corpus studies show variation in apology form and function (Arizavi & Choubsaz, 2018). However, few studies link these two perspectives, and most have not isolated gendered patterns in informal British English.

This study fills that gap by analyzing four frequent apology expressions—*I'm sorry, I apologise/apologize, my bad, and forgive me*. These expressions are the most common and prototypical realizations of apologies in spoken English. Deutschmann (2003) found that most apologies in the British National Corpus use explicit illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) such as *sorry* or its variants. Holmes (1990) and Aijmer (1996) also note that phrases like *I'm sorry* and *I apologize* are highly routinized forms central to English apology acts. Although *my bad* is newer and more informal, it serves the same function and helps capture variation in tone and register. Including these expressions ensures balanced coverage across both formal and informal contexts.

By looking at both frequency and strategy, this study seeks to clarify how gender shapes apology uses in natural

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British English conversation. It uses the BNC2014 spoken corpus to examine not only how often men and women apologize but also which apology strategies they prefer. The findings aim to determine whether the gendered tendencies observed in experiments and formal settings also appear in everyday speech.

Research Questions:

1. Do British women use apology expressions such as *I'm sorry, I apologise/apologize, my bad*, and *forgive me* more frequently than British men?
2. Which apology subtypes (co-constructed apologies, repair apologies, advance apologies, mutual apologies, and conditional apologies) do British men and women use when saying I'm sorry?

Methods

Corpus Selection

This study draws on the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014), a dataset of about 11.5 million words taken from 1,251 informal recordings involving 668 speakers. Collected between 2012 and 2016, the corpus represents contemporary spoken British English. The BNC2014 was chosen for its accessibility, its detailed speaker metadata—including gender, age, and dialect—and its overall suitability for sociolinguistic analysis. All data were retrieved through the BNClab interface, which allows searches to be filtered by gender and other demographic factors.

Expression Selection and Data Extraction

In the first research question, I examine whether British women apologize more frequently than British men. I analyzed four apology expressions—*I'm sorry, I apologise /apologize, my bad, and forgive me*—chosen for their frequency and their coverage of both formal and informal usage. Each expression was searched in BNClab, and I recorded the number of occurrences by gender. I then compared these raw frequencies to expected values to determine whether either gender used the expressions more or less often than expected. Although corpus studies typically rely on normalized frequencies, BNClab does not provide total word counts by gender. For this reason, I used raw frequencies, supported by a dispersion analysis to assess reliability.

To ensure that one speaker did not disproportionately affect the results, I calculated Juilland's D to measure how evenly *I'm sorry* was distributed across individuals. Women's use of I'm sorry was more consistent, with 46 female speakers each using it between one and seven times. In contrast, 30 male speakers used it between one and twenty-eight times, and one speaker alone produced 28 tokens in a single conversation—an outlier that heavily skewed the male results. Including this outlier yielded a Juilland's D value of 0.63 for men and 0.87 for women. After removing the outlier, the men's Juilland's D rose to 0.83, showing a more balanced distribution. This adjustment was applied only to *I'm sorry*, while the remaining apology expressions were analyzed without modification.

Apology Subtype Coding

In the second research question, I examine whether men and women differ in the types of apologies they use. For this analysis, I focused only on tokens of *I'm sorry*, as it was the most frequent and consistent expression across both genders. I reviewed every concordance line containing *I'm sorry* to confirm that the phrase functioned as a genuine apology and excluded cases where it expressed sympathy, interrupted another speaker, or conveyed sarcasm. The remaining valid tokens were manually classified into six apology subtypes based on the framework by Kitao and Kitao (2013). I further divided repair apologies into two categories—RA1 and RA2—because some addressed minor conversational problems, while others repaired more serious or emotionally charged offenses. The final classification included:

- CCA – Co-Constructed Apology: Apologies produced jointly by more than one speaker for a shared offense.
- RA1 – Repair Apology (minor): Apologies used to fix small conversational mistakes (e.g., mishearing, interrupting, small slips).
- RA2 – Repair Apology (serious/emotional): Apologies used to repair more serious or emotionally charged offenses.
- AA – Apology in Advance: Apologies given before doing something that may inconvenience or trouble the listener.
- MA – Mutual Apology: Exchanges where both speakers apologize to each other.
- CA – Conditional Apology: Apologies using an *if*-clause that soften or qualify responsibility.

Statistical Analysis

I used two statistical tests to analyze the data. First, a Chi-Square Test of Independence tested whether the gendered distribution of apology subtypes differed significantly by. Expected frequencies were calculated using the formula:

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$$E = \frac{(Row\ Total\ \times\ Column\ Total)}{Grand\ Total}$$

Standardized residuals (z-scores) were then computed for each cell to identify which differences contributed most to the overall result:

$$z = \frac{O - E}{\sqrt{E}}$$

Values exceeding |2.0| were interpreted as statistically significant contributors.

Second, another Chi-Square Test of Independence evaluated whether men and women differed in the overall frequency of apology expressions. This test was selected because the data consisted of categorical frequency counts rather than continuous variables.

Results

Research Question 1: Do British women apologize more frequently than British men?

Four apology expressions—*I'm sorry, I apologise/ apologize, my bad,* and *forgive me*—were retrieved from BNClab and manually filtered to include only tokens that functioned as genuine apologies. This process yielded 95 apology tokens from women and 72 from men (See Table 1).

Before the analysis, one male speaker who produced 28 tokens of *I'm sorry* in a single conversation was excluded, as described in the Methods section. This adjustment ensured that the results were not disproportionately influenced by a single individual.

To test whether men and women differed significantly in how often they used apology expressions, I conducted a Chi-Square Test of Independence. The test compared the frequency of the four expressions across gender groups and found no statistically significant association, **$\chi^2(3) = 4.24$, $p = 0.375$.**

These results indicate that British men and women used apology expressions at comparable rates. Although raw counts suggested that men initially appeared to apologize slightly less often, the statistical analysis confirmed that the difference was not meaningful.

Research Question 2: Which apology subtypes do men and women use with *I'm* sorry?

To explore differences in apology context, all valid tokens of *I'm sorry* were manually coded using Kitao and Kitao's (2013) apology subtype framework. A total of 153 valid tokens were analyzed, 66 from men and 87 from women, (See Table 2). I conducted a Chi-Square Test of Independence which showed a statistically significant relationship between gender and subtype, **$\chi^2(5) = 17.91$, $p = 0.003$.**

The largest gendered deviations appeared in:

RA2 (Repair Apologies – Serious/Emotional Offenses)

- Women**:** More frequently than expected ($z = +1.80$)
- Men: Less frequently than expected ($z = -2.07$)

AA (Apologies in Advance)

- Men**:** More frequently than expected ($z = +2.12$)
- Women**:** Not used at all; residual just below significance ($z = -1.85$)

For the remaining subtypes—CCA, MA, and CA—gender-based deviations were minimal, and all standardized residuals fell within ±1, indicating no significant differences.

TABLE 1. Observed Frequency of Apology Expressions by Gender (Outlier Removed).

Apology Expression	Men	Women	Total
I'm sorry	61	87	148
I apologise	6	6	12
My bad	4	2	6
Forgive me	1	0	1
Total	**72**	**95**	**167**

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TABLE 2. Apology Subtypes by Gender: Observed, Expected, and Standardized Residuals.

Apology Subtype	Observed (Men)	Observed (Women)	Expected (Men)	Expected (Women)	Std. Residual (Men)	Std. Residual (Women)
CCA	1	1	0.86	1.14	+0.15	-0.13
RA1	39	38	33.22	43.78	+1.00	-0.87
RA2	14	42	24.16	31.84	-2.07	+1.80
AA	6	0	2.59	3.41	+2.12	-1.85
MA	5	4	3.88	5.12	+0.57	-0.49
CA	1	2	1.29	1.17	-0.26	+0.22

Concordance Line Examples by Subtype

Co-Constructed Apologies (CCA)

1. *(Male)* "It was worse than a soap opera your sister's behavior." → "**Oh I'm sorry**. You couldn't even put that on TV."
2. *(Female)* "**No no I'm sorry** she couldn't make it. Maybe something came up."

Repair Apologies 1 (RA1) – Minor

1. *(Male)* "I think I was stingy with the portions **I'm sorry**."
2. *(Male)* "I missed that **I'm sorry**, I wear hearing aids."
3. *(Male)* "Look **I'm sorry**, I haven't a clue."
4. *(Female)* "I've just dripped juice on your book **I'm sorry**."
5. *(Female)* "I'm gonna have to go inside in a minute **I'm sorry**."
6. *(Female)* "It's extremely sweet **I'm sorry** about this."

Repair Apologies 2 (RA2) – Emotional/Serious

1. *(Male)* "Mum **I'm sorry** but I really couldn't find my passport."
2. *(Male)* "**I'm sorry**, I'd love to console you but I'm not very good at this."
3. *(Male)* "**I'm sorry** I shouted at you."
4. *(Female)* "**I'm sorry** I didn't call the police on him."
5. *(Female)* "I just don't know if I can do it and **I'm sorry** not to come keep you company."
6. *(Female)* "I killed it, I had to, **I'm sorry sorry**—God, I'm an actual bitch."

Apologies in Advance (AA)

1. *(Male)* "We will watch it. **I'm sorry**."
2. *(Male)* "**I'm sorry** to say that is the only one who doesn't know her dad very well."

Mutual Apologies (MA)

1. *(Male)* "**I'm sorry** then I don't wanna... (I'm sorry too)."
2. *(Female)* "**I'm sorry** darling, had like five cans of beer."
3. *(Female)* "Yeah **I'm sorry** (I'm sorry), there's no one your height."
4. *(Female)* "Try that in Poland. **I'm sorry** (sorry)."

Conditional Apologies (CA)

1. *(Male)* "**I'm sorry** if you end up in..."
2. *(Female)* "**I'm sorry** if it makes it difficult to talk about."

Discussion

The results indicated no meaningful gender difference in how often men and women apologized. However, the types of apologies they used did differ, with gender showing a significant effect on apology subtypes.

These results add nuance to previous research. Schumann and Ross (2010) suggested that men apologize less frequently than women because they have a higher threshold for what counts as an offense. The present findings refine that view: even when men and women apologize at similar overall rates, they differ in how they apologize. Women tend to use more emotionally engaged or face-threatening apologies (RA2), while men more often use anticipatory apologies (AA), which may serve a procedural or self-protective purpose.

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This pattern aligns with earlier corpus-based work. Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) observed that apology expressions vary in pragmatic function depending on context, while Thaler and Elsweiler (2023) showed that gendered preferences in apology strategies shift across settings. The current results reinforce these insights by demonstrating that gender differences lie not in how often people apologize, but in what their apologies aim to achieve—emotional repair versus preemptive politeness.

Cultural context may also play a role. This study examined only British English speakers, who are known for their frequent use of apologies. A BBC report (Geddes, 2016) found that Britons say *sorry* on average eight times per day. In such an environment, frequent casual apologies (such as RA1 or AA) may be socially expected, potentially explaining why anticipatory apologies (AA) were particularly common among male speakers in this sample.

Limitations

Two main limitations should be acknowledged. First, a single researcher coded all apology subtypes. Although consistent criteria were applied, the absence of interrater reliability may have introduced bias, especially when judging the pragmatic weight of certain apologies. Second, the study relied on raw frequency counts rather than normalized data because the BNClab interface does not provide total word counts by gender. This constraint limits direct comparison of overall usage patterns. However, its effect was reduced by analyzing data on a per-speaker basis and by removing the outlier who disproportionately influenced the results.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by showing that gender differences in apology use concern type rather than frequency. Earlier studies such as Schumann and Ross (2010) focused on how often men and women apologize, but the present findings reveal that the difference lies in *how* they apologize. Women tend to use serious, emotionally engaged apologies (RA2), while men more often use anticipatory apologies (AA) that serve self-protective or face-saving purposes.

Future research should explore how cultural expectations, emotional labor, and changing gender roles shape these patterns. For instance, women's greater use of RA2 may reflect social norms that encourage empathy and caretaking, whereas men's preference for AA may reveal discomfort with emotional vulnerability. Expanding this research across other English-speaking contexts—or examining factors such as speaker age, social role, and conversational topic—could deepen our understanding of how gender influences the pragmatics of apology.

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