The speech act of apologising in Japanese online communication

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17 February 2025

The speech act of apologising in Japanese online communication: A corpus-assisted study on the use of *gomen* in written, computer-mediated settings

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Abstract

Gomen*, the object of analysis in this study, is an informal expression commonly signalled as an apology in Japanese. Drawing from a corpus of online Q&A forums in Japanese compiled by the author, the study demonstrates that the real communicative intent of* gomen *can be something different from an expression of apology, or indeed can be apologising plus other intentions. First, the article describes the pragmatic functions of* gomen *in real-life situations. Second, it shows different patterns of speech act realisation with respect to* gomen *when used as an apologetic device. This argument is developed by analysing multiple linguistic and contextual variables that frequently co-occur with* gomen *and play a role in the realisation of its pragmatic functions.*

KEYWORDS: JAPANESE APOLOGIES, DIGITAL SPEECH ACTS, (IM)POLITENESS, *GOMEN*, CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE STUDIES

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1. Overview

This work aims to cast light on the interactional features of *gomen*, a Japanese expression meaning 'sorry (NON POLITE, literal meaning 'forgive me' or 'excuse me')', as observed in the Internet Q&A forum Yahoo! Chiebukuro. *Gomen* is what Blum-Kulka and Olsthain (1984) define as an illocutionary force indicating device (henceforth IFID), i.e., an explicit linguistic marker of pragmatic force "which selects a routinized, formulaic expression of regret" (pp. 19, 20; this terminology first appeared in Searle, 1969, p. 64). The expression is a noun consisting of two morphemes: *go*, a prefix used to express politeness, and *men*, whose primary meaning is 'permission', and it is commonly translated in English as 'sorry'. *Gomen* is classified as 'NON POLITE' because it includes no polite verbal suffix, whereas, for instance, the form *gomen-nasai* 'sorry (POLITE)' includes the polite form *nasai*, derived from the verb *nasaru*, which is the honorific form of the verb *suru* 'to do'. It follows that the label 'NON POLITE' indicates the formality level of the linguistic marker, rather than the markedness of the utterance in terms of perceptions of (im)politeness, and that it is not necessarily perceived as less polite than other forms.

The main purpose of the present work is to show a whole picture of the use of *gomen* in Japanese online Q&A forums, while answering the following two research questions: (1) What are the main pragmatic functions that *gomen* enacts in online settings? (2) When *gomen* is used as an apology, how is the act performed by the speaker in the specific setting of online communication?

Drawing from corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS, see Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013), corpus linguistics and discourse analysis are combined to ensure a balanced use of (quantitative and qualitative) analysis while giving a central role to interactional contexts. In order to analyse the pragmatic functions served by *gomen*, a lexical search-based methodology was adopted where I proceeded from form to function. First, a topical corpus of webpages containing the word *gomen* was compiled. Then, using methodologies of both corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, utterances containing *gomen* were identified, counted, and analysed for function within a limited

amount of linguistic co-text. The methodology of combining the interpretative power of politeness studies and discourse analysis with the empiricist approach typical of corpus linguistics is relatively innovative. The analysis of the current study may reveal that the real communicative intent of *gomen* can be something different from an expression of apology, or indeed can be apologising plus other intentions.

2. Theoretical background

Combining the two areas of linguistics, i.e., discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, the current study investigates (im)politeness in Japanese, specifically apologies, in the language of the Web, which includes the linguistic choices of Japanese participants in internet forums. This section reviews the key theoretical and methodological assumptions about politeness underlying the current study. A definition of apology is presented in Section 2.1, followed by an overview of previous research on online interactions in Japanese.

Over the last four decades, different theoretical models relating to politeness have been proposed. Among them, Brown and Levinson's (1987) view of politeness as a system of linguistic devices used to redress face threat and avoid conflict still has an unprecedented status within the field of pragmatics. However, Japanese scholars criticised Brown and Levinson's politeness theory by pointing out that these authors failed to fully consider the normative usage of languages with rich honorific systems, such as Japanese (among others, Matsumoto, 1988, 1989; Ide, 1989). Drawing from Usami (2002), the present article advocates an extension of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model and analyses linguistic (im)politeness from the perspective of language use that conforms to social conventions (what Ide, 1989 defines as *wakimae*) and the individual speaker's strategic language use (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Employing both schools of thought should contribute to putting politeness theory on a sounder footing.

For a better understanding of the various actions *gomen* can perform, a sufficiently sound methodology for the analysis of specific speech acts in real-life situations and across different languages is required as well. The present article adopts the

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terminology proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) (see also Olshtain & Cohen, 1983 and Olshtain, 1989) to describe how speech acts are realised linguistically and how their pragmatic meaning is discursively constructed in online conversations. Brown and Levinson (1987) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) adopted a universalistic perspective and analysed realisation patterns of polite language cross-linguistically using intuitive data and elicited data respectively. None of these studies focused on Japanese, but they did mention several non-Western languages, demonstrating that their perspective did not neglect languages with honorifics, such as Japanese. The methodological framework set up for this study is based on the assumption that there are certain pragmatic regularities underlying apologising behaviour across languages, which can be described combining early approaches to speech acts with corpus-assisted methods.

2.1 Defining apologies

As Aijmer (1996) states, "ultimately, it is how one chooses to define an apology that determines whether a particular utterance counts as an apology strategy" (p. 81). Many of the previous studies on the use of apologetic expressions (among others, Fraser, 1981; Ide, 1998; Oishi, 2011; Owen, 1983) used Goffman's (1971) notion of 'remedial work' to identify apologies. According to Goffman (1971), the function of remedial interchanges is "to change the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable" (p. 109). Goffman's definition made it clear that apologies need to be studied in the ongoing interaction between the apologiser and the one apologised to (Oishi, 2011, p. 11) and that we need to devote greater attention to the participants' understanding of (im)politeness. However, this conceptualisation of apologies as conflict avoidance strategies, further expanded by Brown and Levinson (1987), did not account for the complexity of a wide range of apologetic expressions which cover quite different functions and meanings.

   As Coulmas (1981, p. 70) has shown, in Japanese there are different kinds of apologies which can often serve a variety of

functions. For instance, when apologising in Japanese one can either admit one's responsibility for the violation or minimise the need to apologise, which can be quite face-threatening for the addressee. Or, again, there may be cases where the speaker has no pragmatic intention of apologising, and the use of apologetic expressions is merely ritual. Finally, there are also 'sarcastic' and 'face-attack' apologies (Deutschmann, 2003, pp. 92–95). This type of apology challenges the idea of apologies as face-saving devices and demonstrates that structures usually marked as polite can result in a hostile attitude perceived as impolite by the interlocutor (Calvetti, 2020, p. 102). All these are 'apologies', but they are completely different affairs.

The current study departs from Coulmas's (1981) definition of apologies as "expressions directed towards some action or event or a consequence thereof … considered to be negative and unwanted for the recipient of the apology" (p. 71). For a more accurate description of apologies in the ongoing discourse between the speaker and the hearer in Japanese, contextual and linguistic factors affecting the interactional outcome (e.g., whether the receiver takes the apology as such) will be taken into consideration.

2.2 Previous research

In Japan, one stream of research has analysed the use of specific apologetic expressions such as *gomen* 'sorry (NON POLITE)' (Hidaka, 2019), *gomen-nasai* 'sorry (POLITE)' (Sandu, 2012, 2013; Hidaka, 2017), and *sumimasen* 'sorry (POLITE)' (Ide, 1998; Miyake, 1993, 1994; Sandu, 2013), shedding some light on the multiple functions they serve in spontaneous conversations, especially in the co-occurrence with thanks. *Sumimasen* 'sorry (POLITE, literal meaning 'it is not finished')' is, above all, the most studied IFID in the literature, and other apology expressions have been left largely unexplored.

Particularly in the context of (im)politeness in Japanese computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), recent studies include work by Nishimura (2008, 2010), combining discourse analysis and Ide's (1989) theory of *wakimae* 'discernment' to analyse linguistic features in online communities. Nishimura (2003) and Backhaus (2013) have

examined the Japanese language used in two different forms of internet communication, internet relay chat and spam email respectively, pointing out a great number of features very popular in Japanese CMC but not observable in English. Finally, in a recent study, Miyake (2020) looked at the use of multimodal components such as emoji, *kaomoji*, and other visual representations in mobile phone messages, relating such digital pictograms to (im)politeness and phatic communication.

3. Corpus construction and analysis

The corpus constructed for the present study is a search-term specific or *topical* corpus (Taylor, 2015, p. 154), which consists of only webpages containing the search term. Contextualised, naturally occurring data were retrieved from Yahoo! Chiebukuro using the free software BootCat, a tool for the automated extraction of specialised corpora by web-mining which was developed by a team of researchers from the Universities of Trento and Bologna (Forlì) in Italy (see Baroni and Bernardini, 2004 for more information on the BootCat toolkit). First, the collocates of *gomen* were analysed in two large-scale Japanese corpora: the Web corpus jaTenTen11 with 8 million words and the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ) with 100 million words, provided by Sketch Engine and the National Institute for Japanese Language (NINJAL), respectively. Second, the collected collocates of *gomen* were added to the search terms list in BootCat and tuples of two words were created. Finally, the word *gomen* was manually added to each tuple, in order to create tuples of three words, each of them containing the Japanese word for *sorry* and two of its most frequent collocates. The search was narrowed to the website under analysis by specifying in advance the retrieval of texts only from the URL of Yahoo! Chiebukuro, namely https://chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/. The corpus collected contains 88,187 tokens with 525 occurrences of the word *gomen*. Duplicates in the corpus were manually eliminated and an analysis was conducted on 385 occurrences of *gomen* using Sketch Engine. Using concordances and close attention to the wide co-text, utterances containing *gomen* were identified as performing a specific speech act function. The analysis of what

is commonly believed to be acts of apologising has led to some considerations.

4. Results on the use of *gomen*

The results of the analysis suggest that *gomen* is a polyfunctional word used by Japanese native speakers to perform 11 actions: apologising for a past offence (retrospective apology), apologising for an expected offence (anticipatory apology), rejecting a request or an offer, demanding an apology, rejecting an apology, making first order considerations, leave-taking, mitigation of impolite expressions (disarmer), in idiomatic expressions, thanking, and ultimately requesting. The 11 observed functions are presented with instances in Table 1. The total and relative distributions for each pragmatic function are summarised in Figure 1.

Table 1: Examples of *gomen* retrieved from the collected data.

Communicative function	Example
Retrospective apology 210 (54.5%)	ごめん、間違えた *Gomen, machigaeta.* Sorry, my mistake
First order 57 (14.8%)	家族や彼氏、親しい友人なら「不安にさせてしまってごめんね 」でもおかしくはないですが。「不安にさせてしまい申し訳ございませんでした」は後半だけ敬語なのが変です。 *Kazoku ya kareshi, shitashii yūjin nara "Fuan ni sasete shimatte gomen ne" demo okashiku wa nai desu ga. "Fuan ni sasete shimai mōshiwake gozaimasen deshita" wa kōhan dake keigo na no ga hen desu.* If it's a family member or your boyfriend, or a close friend of yours I think "I'm sorry [NON POLITE] for making you worry" wouldn't be that unusual. However, "I'm sorry [POLITE] for making you worry" sounds weird because only the last part is in *keigo*.
Idiomatic expression 47 (12.2%)	まっぴらごめんだ *Mappira gomen da.*

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	No way!
Rejecting a request/an offer 18 (4.7%)	「もしヒマなら○○に参加しない？」 みたいな感じで「ごめん、○○の予定 があるので、ごめんなさい」 *"Moshi hima nara ○○ ni sanka shinai?"* *mitai na kanji de "Gomen, ○○ no yotei ga* *aru node, gomen nasai".* [I said] something like "If you're free, why don't you come to ○○?" "Sorry, I have plans, sorry"
Disarmer 14 (3.6%)	ごめん、、 今好きじゃないっちゃん *Gomen、、 ima suki jya nai cchan.* Sorry, now I don't like you.
Demand for apology 11 (2.9%)	ちょっとくらい「また移ってもいい?」 とか「ごめんね」とか言ってほしいで す *Chotto kurai "mata utsutte mo ii?" toka* *"Gomen ne" toka itte hoshii desu.* I'd appreciate if you could say "Can I move?", or "Sorry"
Thanking 8 (2.1%)	今日遊びに誘ってくれて、ごめんね *Kyō asobi ni sasotte kurete gomen ne.* Thank you for inviting me out today.
Leave-taking 7 (1.8%)	ごめんね眠くなったから寝る! *Gomen ne nemuku natta kara neru!* Sorry, I'm sleepy, I'll go to bed.
Rejecting an apology 7 (1.8%)	ごめん、ごめんはいらない。 *Gomen, gomen wa iranai.* "Sorry", I don't need "sorry"
Anticipatory apology 4 (1.0%)	ごめん、急な用事があって、行くの遅 くなってしまうよ会う時間が減るけ ど、今度埋め合わせするから、ごめん ね *Gomen, kyū na yōji ga atte, iku no osoku* *natte shimau yo au jikan ga heru kedo,* *kondo umeawase suru kara, gomen ne.* Sorry, something came up, I'll be late. We won't have much time, but next time I'll make it up to you, sorry.
Requesting 2 (0.5%)	あらら─、チョットごめんな、あんち ゃん。そこ、どいてくれるか。そいつ は俺の友達なんだよ。 *Arara, chotto gomen na, an chan. Soko,*

doite kureru ka. Soitsu wa ore no tomodachi nan da yo.
Ehy ehy, sorry, young man. Could you please move? He's a friend of mine.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
Figure 1: Relative distributions for each pragmatic function of *gomen.*

A close reading of the wide co-text surrounding *gomen* in the collected texts has shown that there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic forms and pragmatic meanings, thus validating the identification-in-context methodology adopted in the current study to explore the illocutionary force of *gomen*. However, as the literature suggests, results so far have demonstrated that in the majority of cases *gomen* is used to express regret for a past offence (54.5%), that is, in Brown and Levinson's (1987) words, mitigating the face-threatening act. The second most frequent use of *gomen* is in metapragmatic, first order considerations (14.8%), defined as the "various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of a sociocultural group" (Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 1992, p. 3). These occurrences in the corpus are relevant because they allow the researcher to access emic conceptualisations of (im)politeness norms in online settings. Finally, in the data *gomen* is commonly used when rejecting a request or an offer (4.7%), an activity which can be very face-threatening for the addressee. It should also be noted that the sequence of apologetic and refusal interactions appears to be quite fixed. As a result, apologies and refusals in Japanese may be heavily constrained as to patterns of productivity just as other speech acts (see Aijmer, 1996, pp. 12, 13), thus validating the ritualisation of certain polite speech (what Coulmas, 1981 defined as "conversational routines").

Of the remaining types of pragmatic functions listed in Table 1, thanking and requesting have been a popular subject of investigation in the field of Japanese pragmatics (see, among others, Coulmas, 1981; Fukushima, 2003; Miyake, 1993; Nishizawa, 2014). Coulmas (1981) points out that apologies

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and thanks in Japanese closely resemble each other and links them to the notion of 'indebtedness', through regret and gratitude respectively (p. 69). This explains why Japanese speakers use *gomen* where English speakers would say *thank you*. With respect to requests, the finding that *gomen* can be used to perform a request is mirrored in Nishizawa's (2014) work, where in over half of the exchanges studied an apologetic device such as *gomen* is used to introduce and somehow soften a request (p. 158).

Responses to apologies are often missing in the corpus of the current study. Kitao and Kitao (2014) found a similar tendency in their study of American dialogue, where in approximately 50% of the interactions the interlocutor did not respond to the apology (p. 6). When the addressee of the apology does respond to the apology, apologising back and rejecting the need for apologising represent the two most frequent reactions in the collected texts. These findings also confirm Kumagai's (2013) idea of "reciprocal face-support" (pp. 32–33), according to which in Japanese the preferred and expected response to an apology is, in fact, an apology. When used to reciprocate an apology, *gomen* carries no real apologetic meaning, but it rather functions as a conventionalised formula to restore the interlocutor's face and the debit-credit equilibrium between the participants. A unit of bidirectional apology may thus form an adjacency pair, although it is beyond the scope of the present study to prove it in any scientifically adequate way. The centrality of *gomen* as an apology is further discussed in the following sections, but the range of possible non-apologetic meanings *gomen* can acquire in larger corpora can be expected to be not small.

4.1 Linguistic and contextual variables affecting apologies

If a given utterance in the corpus is recognised as an apology, four linguistic and contextual variables are included in the analysis in order to explore their role in context. The four variables are as follows:

a. the communicative strategies users employ to apologise, which are described using the terminology proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Fraser (1981);

    b. whether there is the presence of one or more intensifications of the apology (e.g., amplifiers, repetition, but also supportive moves expressing concern for the hearer; see Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Fraser, 1981; Olshtain, 1989);

    c. whether there is the presence of sentence-final particles (SFPs);

    d. whether there is the presence of visual representations (see Miyake, 2020).

It should be noted that the above variables were taken into consideration only if they appeared in the immediate co-text of the IFID. It follows that the inclusion of a wider co-text may lead to different quantitative considerations. In the next sections, each of the above variables is analysed in greater detail.

   As previously stated, although the focus of the present analysis is on pragmatic functions in online discourse, grammatical and lexical features of speech acts that affect the politeness level of the utterance are taken into consideration as well. For example, the verb-ending form *-te shimau* carries a feeling of regret or unintentionality (Uchiyama, 2012, p. 1) and serves a function similar to what the English adverb *unfortunately* does. Among other possible meanings, it expresses the speaker's 'apologetic' attitude, and it can be used to intensify the apologetic message, as in (1):

 (1)
本間違えて捨ててしまってた。ごめん。
Hon machigaete sutete shimatte ta. Gomen.
I threw away your book by mistake. Sorry.

The benefactive verbs *kureru* and *morau* are also considered. As illustrated by (2), when used as auxiliary verbs, Japanese benefactives express the speaker's relation with the addressee and indicate that the subject of the predicate provides some favourable effects on the affectee of the event (Hasegawa, 2018, pp. 509, 511):

 (2)
A   疲れてるのに会いたいなんて言ってごめんね–
    Tsukarete ru no ni aitai nante itte gomen ne (lengthening dash)
    Sorry for asking you to meet me, you must be tired.

B   俺のわがままだからごめんね 。会いたいって言って<u>くれる</u>のはうれしいよ。ありがとう。

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> *Ore no wagamama da kara gomen ne. Aitai tte itte kureru no wa ureshii yo. Arigatō.*
>
> I was being selfish, I'm sorry. I'm happy to hear you wanted to see me. Thank you.

In Example (2), the auxiliary verb *kureru* is used in the response to an apology to convey the speaker's empathy and his/her feeling of gratitude, made explicit by the form *arigatō* 'Thank you' at the end of the utterance. By acknowledging through syntactic means that the addressee's behaviour has some favourable effect the speaker is grateful for, the speaker addresses the addressee's positive face and restores balance in the relationship. Syntax-pragmatic phenomena such as the verb-ending form *-te shimau* and benefactives play a central role in the realisation of pragmatic functions and allow the researcher to gain more insights into politeness at the discourse level.

4.2 Apologising strategies

A total of seven main apologising strategies were identified in the corpus. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 19), there are five main potential strategies which can be used by speakers of any language to apologise. The five potential strategies are as follows:

a. an IFID (illocutionary force indicating device);
b. an explanation or account of the cause which brought about the violation;
c. an expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offence;
d. an offer of repair;
e. a promise of forbearance.

As mentioned above, in the analysis of the present study the speech act of apology was identified using a lexical search approach by searching for the use of *gomen*. This methodology allows us to identify direct speech acts containing the IFID, which is why the apologising strategy labelled 'IFID' is used in all the 214 apologetic utterances found in the data set. 26 out of those 214 were 'unmarked utterances', that is, complete one-word sentences where the IFID alone constitutes the utterance (Sandu, 2012, p. 346).

In addition to the above main strategies, two additional strategies were identified in the corpus:

   f.   asking for forgiveness;
   g.   minimising the offence.

For example, consider (3).

  (3)
ごめん本当にごめん。謝っても謝りきれない。許して欲しいんだ。
良かったらまた仲良くしてくれない?

Gomen hontō ni gomen. Ayamatte mo ayamari kirenai. Yurushite hoshii n da. Yokattara mata naka yoku shite kurenai?

Sorry, (I'm) really sorry. I can't apologise enough. I want you to forgive me. Don't you mind if we can be friends again?

Here the speaker adopts at least three different strategies to convey the apology: an IFID (*sorry*), an admission of responsibility (*I can't apologise enough*), and, ultimately, a request for forgiveness (*I want you to forgive me*), followed by a request.

There are also ways in which the speaker can downgrade or minimise the illocutionary force of an apology. These cases were labelled 'minimising the offence'. For instance, the exchanges where *gomen* was accompanied by various versions of the proposition *jyōdan da* 'it's (just) a joke' or *nanka* 'something like' were labelled 'minimising the offence'. By saying that *it's just a joke* or that *I'm something like sorry for last time* (*kono mae wa nanka gomen ne*) the speaker implicitly questions the need to apologise and refuses to admit responsibility for the face-threatening act. Thus, it can be argued that the apology that either precedes or follows these statements is more or less automatic and does not express authentic regret. A basic distinction between apologies as a social phenomenon with no real semantic meaning and apologies with a clear implication of speaker's responsibility is the starting point to differentiate between the ritual and the genuine apology (Fraser, 1981, p. 266).

4.3 Apologising and intensification

It is also found that *gomen* occurred with intensifiers in 139 out of the 214 cases (64.9%). According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), intensifiers can be divided into internal intensifiers and

external intensifiers, both found in the data set in 15.9% and 57.5% of apologetic utterances respectively. In 8.4% of the examples both internal and external intensifiers were observed in the same utterance. The former terminology refers to intensifiers internal to the IFID: for instance, adverbs used with the IFID, such as *hontō* 'really', and repetition of the IFID itself. The latter refers to various expressions, such as *matta?* 'have you been waiting?', sentence-final particles, graphic elements, the above-mentioned verb-ending form *-te shimau* and benefactives. External intensifiers are used to index affective common ground or to express concern for the hearer, while seeking for his/her sympathy (Sandu, 2012, p. 347). They address the hearer's positive face, intensifying the apology, as seen in the following two examples from the study:

(4)
あ、これはホントにごめんね(-_-;) …

A, kore wa honto ni gomen ne (kaomoji) …

Ah, (I'm) really sorry for this (*kaomoji*) …

Here the speaker expresses intensification via four different manners: the emotional exclamation *a* 'ah', the adverb *honto ni* 'really', the sentence-final particle *ne* and the Japanese emoticon or *kaomoji* (-_-;) (see Sections 5.4 and 5.5 for a more detailed explanation of sentence-final particles and emoticons and how they serve as modality expressions). It is also worth noticing that the adverb *honto* transcribed as ホント in *katakana* (a moraic alphabet mainly used for loan words) is a less formal form of *hontō* 本当 in *kanji* (Chinese characters) or *hontō* ほんとう in *hiragana* (another moraic alphabet). It can be said that the observed form *honto* is less formal both orthographically and phonologically with the use of *katakana* and the shortening of the final vowel *ō* respectively. In this communication, traditional conventions of polite linguistic behaviour, such as the use of honorifics, is avoided. Instead, the speaker adopts visual orthographic elements to convey politeness in order not to hurt his/her interlocutor, as we can see also in the example below:

(5)
Gomen, (kaomoji) mada henji konai. Isogi datta? Henji ki shidai mēru suru ne.
ごめん、(´・ω・`)まだ返事こない。急ぎだった?返信きしだい

メールするね

Sorry, (*kaomoji*) I haven't received any reply yet. Was it urgent? As soon as I get a reply I'll text you.

Again, the speaker uses a visual orthographic element, in this example a *kaomoji*, to convey positive politeness, but we can also observe how intensification can be brought about by an expression of concern for the addressee (*Isogi datta?* 'Was it urgent?).

The data have shown that conversational moves added to the core apologetic expression emphasise the apologetic tone and are likely to be used in more serious apologies, such as (3). These empirical findings support Brown and Levinson's (1978) prediction that, with the power that the addressee has over the speaker and the social distance between the interactants held constant, the more an act threatens the addressee's face, the more the speaker will want to choose more mitigated expressions and/or a combination of strategies. In this investigation, 142 out of the 214 exchanges containing an apology involved more than one strategy, in the majority of cases the IFID plus an expression of responsibility or an explanation of the violation. Following Aijmer (1996), these exchanges will be referred to as 'compound' apologies, namely "apologies made up of a combination of strategies" (p. 94). Compound apologies also reveal that we are looking at acts which are *signalled* as apologies, but the real communicative intent can be apologising plus other intentions. In Sperber and Wilson's terms, "an utterance which explicitly expresses one thought may implicitly convey others" (1996 [1986], p. 11).

4.4 Apologising and sentence-final particles

An additional finding is that sentence-final particles (SFPs, see Morita [2018]), such as *ne* and *na*, co-occur regularly with *gomen*. These particles play a pragmatic role in Japanese discourse: they index speaker's evaluations and attitudes (Nishimura, 2008, p. 3) and hedge the illocutionary force of speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 147). A common pattern, found in 45.3% of examples, is *gomen* followed by *ne* (see above Example (2) and Example (4)). These findings confirm Hidaka's (2019) prediction that the particle *ne*

increases the relative politeness of apologetic expressions. Adding *ne* to *gomen* has the effect of positive politeness because it establishes empathy between speaker and addressee (Ide & Yoshida, 1999, p. 464) and creates an atmosphere of sharedness. It is well established that sentence-final particles are often used in spoken Japanese particularly among intimate people (Morita, 2018, p. 587), hence their strong collocation with the informal *gomen*. The results of the present study show that these characteristics of *ne* in oral discourse are also found in written CMC.

4.5 Apologising and visual representations

Due to the multimodal nature of CMC, (im)politeness is conveyed also through novel semiotic practices that involve the visualisation of ideas and concepts (Blommaert, 2019, p. 9) in ways not observable in speech or in formal writing. In this study, special attention is given to visual representations (see Miyake, 2020), a major characteristic of Japanese CMC. Visual representations are observed in 40 out of the 214 cases of apologies (18.7%) with *gomen* under analysis (see also Examples (4) and (5) above). Drawing from Miyake (2007) and Backhaus (2013), the following visual representations (underlined) were observed in the corpus:

a. Non-standard script choices, for instance the use of *katakana* instead of *kanji* or *hiragana*:

ラインでゴメンねとはありましたが、顔を合わせた時に一言謝ってほしかったです。
Rain de gomen ne to wa arimashita ga, kao o awaseta toki ni hitokoto ayamatte hoshikatta desu.
S/he texted me on LINE saying "sorry", but I wish s/he had apologised in person as well.

b. Non-standard marking of vowel lengthening, indicated either by a wave dash or a small letter:

ごめんね～
Gomen ne (wave dash)
Sorry (wave dash)

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それはさせてあげられたらするんだけどきついんだぁ
Sore wa sete ageraretara suru n da kedo kitsui n da a
If I could do that I would, but I don't think that's possible.

c.   *Kaomoji* (Japanese emoticons):

ごめん間違えた m（＿＿）m
Gomen machigaeta (*kaomoji*)
Sorry my mistake (*kaomoji*)

The *kaomoji* in (c) represents someone bowing down on the ground, a traditional Japanese gesture to make a deep apology. The roman letter *m* on the left and right sides of the *kaomoji* stands for two hands put on the ground.

d.   *Kanji* emoticon, where a *kanji* enclosed by parentheses gives additional information about the writer's attitude based on the meaning of that *kanji* (Nishimura, 2003; 2015, p. 3):

ごめんね(泣)ごめんね(泣)
Gomen ne (kanji) gomen ne (kanji)
Sorry (*kanji*) sorry (*kanji*).

Here the ideograph 泣, taken from the standard transcription of the verb 泣く *naku* 'to cry' (a sequence of the *kanji* or Chinese ideogram 泣 and the *hiragana* letter く) visually conveys a meaning immediately understood by speakers of Japanese in a way that is not observable in speech.

It has been suggested in previous research that visual representations such as the above four examples compensate for the lack of paralinguistic features in written communication (Nishimura, 2003). The examination of actual use in CMC has indeed shown that they can compensate for the lack of interactional intonation and body language in writing (Miyake, 2020, pp. 4–6). However, they are often employed in many other ways. For instance, they appear to be used in the substitution of punctuation marks and objects, or to "evoke an atmosphere" of sharedness (Miyake, 2020, p. 6). This latter function is related to the use of an in-group language which expresses positive politeness and mitigates face-threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 111).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of *gomen*, a device usually signalled as apologetic, in the Q&A Website Yahoo! Chiebukuro. The first research question was about the pragmatic functions *gomen* has in online settings. The analysis revealed 11 potential meanings *gomen* can carry in situated contexts. While earlier studies on apologies in Japanese largely focused on the use of *gomen* (Hidaka, 2019) and *sumimasen* (Ide, 1998; Miyake, 1993, 1994; Sandu, 2013) mainly in the co-occurrence with thanks or specific morpho-syntactic structures, the present study conducted a more comprehensive analysis by demonstrating in empirical settings that the functions of *gomen* could go well beyond apology.

The second research question dealt with how apologies with *gomen* are performed in the data set. The multiple apology strategies employed in the immediate co-text of *gomen* were categorised using the terminology proposed in Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), which proved to be very helpful for the description of apologies as part of larger discourse units. The analysis also confirmed some earlier findings about speech acts in Japanese by investigating morpho-syntactic and visual orthographical features that, when used in co-occurrence with *gomen*, convey positive politeness and mitigate face threat. Results show that patterns of human interaction in apologising in CMC are partly ritualised and partly creative, which suggests a need for analysis from different perspectives to further understand the speech act of apology in this discourse type. As a matter of fact, as the emergence of a new communication technology increasingly shapes the way we interact with each other, we need to investigate whether the way of using written language on the Internet is becoming different from linguistic behaviours in traditional communication settings. One of the major findings of the present study is the importance of "visual language" (Miyake, 2020, p. 13) for successful communication, a topic which has not received much attention in the literature.

Finally, the current study has made a methodological contribution as well. The majority of previous studies were based on data collected using questionnaires (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Miyake, 1993; Olshtain, 1989) or on the researcher's intuition (Coulmas, 1981). Instead, the present

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work tackled linguistic phenomena of real-life communication using corpus linguistic tools. Results show that the combination of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis offers potential for new insights in (im)politeness studies and may be of use for future research.

It should be remarked that this study has not explored some important aspects related to apologies in Japanese CMC. The first is linguistic and contextual variables related to the reception of speech acts: how the interlocutor responds to the apology also plays an important part in the maintenance of human relationships. It is hoped that further research on the reception of speech acts in online settings will be conducted in the near future. The second is other Japanese IFIDs signalled as apologetic devices, such as *sumimasen* 'sorry (POLITE, literal meaning 'it is not finished')', *gomen-nasai* 'sorry (POLITE, literal meaning 'please excuse me')' and *mōshiwake arimasen* 'sorry (SUPER POLITE, literal meaning 'I have no excuse')'. The extension of the study to these IFIDs is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of apologies in consideration of all politeness levels, from non-polite to super-polite speech. The study also revealed the limitations of a lexical-search methodology for the corpus collection which, as McAllister (2015, p. 29) pointed out, cannot account for the full range of linguistic forms which can possibly be used in real-life situations when apologising. Apology may indeed incorporate fixed lexico-grammatical features, but their illocutionary force may as well be identified in context through other linguistic cues which cannot be searched using traditional corpus techniques. A more efficient method to collect indirect speech acts in a much larger data set would contribute greatly to future research.

About the author

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