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THE SPEECH ACT OF APOLOGY IN THE DISCOURSE OF ENGLISH NATIVE SPEAKERS AND MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the speech act of apologizing and the similarities and differences that appear in the use of the apologizing strategies employed by native and non-native speakers of the English language. The analyzed data were obtained through an online Discourse Completion Task (DCT) among native and non-native speakers of the English language. The DCT includes ten situations that differ in accordance with the social distance, the social status of the participants, and the degree of the offense. Moreover, the aim was to determine the most common pragmatic strategies of apologizing used by native English speakers as well as by Macedonian learners of English in the given situations. The findings of this study can be helpful to Macedonian EFL teachers and their students in particular as they can raise their awareness with respect to the differences in the use of the apologizing strategies, which, in turn, can contribute to avoiding possible misunderstandings in the communication between these two groups of English language users.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech act, apologizing, native speakers, non-native speakers, strategies

Introduction

Pragmatics is one of the branches of linguistics (the study of language), which focuses on the interactions between speakers. It enables us to focus on how meaning is created in particular settings and enables us to see beyond the literal meaning of words and statements. In other words, pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that focuses on hidden meanings and inferences. This branch of linguistics deals with many concepts, of which "conversational implicature", proposed by Paul Grice (1975), is at its core. When looking at implicature, we want to know what the speaker means, even if he doesn't say it explicitly. It is a form of indirect communication.

Speech act, a type of verbal communication and also a part of pragmatics, usually takes place in verbal and non-verbal communication. Yule (1996) argues that speech acts are a study of how speakers and hearers use language. On the other hand, Bach (1979) explains that verbal communication involves both language and action because each action has a message of its own.

The speech act of apologizing is one of the most commonly researched speech acts since it occurs continually in all languages and cultures.

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the different apologizing strategies used by two groups of speakers, i.e. native and non-native speakers of English. More precisely, this research focuses on the way these two groups apologize in specific situations set in an academic context, and it aims to disclose the possible similarities and differences between the two selected group of speakers.

Theoretical background

There are different definitions of apology, but what most of them have in common is that they mainly start with the function of this speech act. Thus, an apology is defined as a speech act that re-establishes the broken relationship between the interlocutors caused by a mistake, insult, or offense (Goffman, 1971).

Apology strategies represent different ways of apologizing that speakers choose when they commit a violation of a social norm or when they intend to do so. In essence, they can be of two types: a) direct apology –an expression for apology (e.g., *Sorry; I'm sorry; Don't be mad. I'm sorry!; I apologize, please forgive me; unfortunately...* etc.) and taking responsibility; and b) indirect apology – an offer to correct the mistake, showing concern for the interlocutor and a promise that the mistake will never happen again (e.g. *I know I hurt your feelings. It'll never happen again!*).

Trosborg (1995) offers a very thorough classification of the different apologizing strategies. His classification includes 6 strategies and several sub-strategies, shown in the *Table 1*. In this research, we only stick to the strategies, the sub-strategies will not be discussed because that would exceed the limits of this research paper.

Strategy	Sub-strategy
I Opting out	Denial of Responsibility Justification Blaming Someone Else
II Indirect apology	Implicit Acknowledgment Explicit Acknowledgment Expression of Lack of Intent Expression of Self-deficiency Expression of Embarrassment Explicit Acceptance of the Blame
III Direct apology	Expression of Regret Offer of Apology Request for Forgiveness
IV Explanation or Account	Implicit Explanation Explicit Explanation
V Evasive strategies	Minimizing of the Degree of Offense a. minimizing b. querying precondition c. blaming someone else
VI Remedial support	Expressing Concern for Hearer Offer of Repair Promise of Forbearance

*Table 1.
Strategies and sub-strategies for expressing an apology*

Research methodology

The subject of analysis of this paper is the speech act of apologizing. More precisely, the aim of this study was to detect the similarities and the differences that appear in the use of apologizing strategies used by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English.

The degree of the offense and the social distance between the interlocutors' social standing are the dependent variables. These factors are relevant to Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory. The level of familiarity between the interlocutors—which might be close, medium, or distant—is used to measure the social distance. The social standing of the speaker might be neutral, equal, or unequal depending on their place in society. There are three different strategies of offense that might result in an apology: low, medium, and high.

The native language of both groups—native and non-native—is the independent variable. The participants in the research are mostly university students, but there are students from high schools and colleges too. The total number of students who agreed to participate in the study was 78. Some of the respondents were from the University of Toronto, The Ohio State University, George Brown College - Toronto, the University of Ljubljana, the University of Valencia, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University - Skopje, Wollongong, Concordia University, American College - Skopje, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, SOU “Car Samoil” - Resen, Copenhagen Business School, Brainster, IBU, SOTU “Gjorgi Naumov” - Bitola, Bi Norwegian business school. The speech act of apology is a basic speech act that EFL students are introduced to from an early age on, and irrespective of their actual proficiency level they are all expected to do well in expressing an apology in a given situation.

In this research, there are respondents from different countries. The majority of the respondents, i.e., 52 were from Macedonia; 16 respondents were from Canada, 5 from the USA and 1 from Norway, Denmark, Egypt, Slovenia and Spain., respectively.

55 respondents that were part of this questionnaire are NNS of English language, that is, their mother tongue is Macedonian, and they are learners of English. On the other hand, we have 23 respondents that are NS of English.

Our main DCT instrument, which was conducted online, consists of 10 situations (S1 – S10), inspired by the most common real-life situations in which students find themselves. For each situation a very brief description was provided and the respondents were invited to write down what they would say in a situation like that (the descriptions of the situations are stated in the next section of this paper).

The respondents’ answers were then analyzed and classified according to Trosborg’s classification of the apologizing strategies.

Results and analysis

Based on Trosborg's method, the apologizing strategies obtained in the informants’ responses were divided into 6 strategies. Additionally, in our corpus, there were instances of responses in which one answer contained multiple utterances belonging to different apologizing strategies, so we decided to introduce an additional strategy, which we dubbed *complex apologizing strategy*.

The chart below shows which strategies of apologizing were the most popular in the responses received from both NS and NNS.

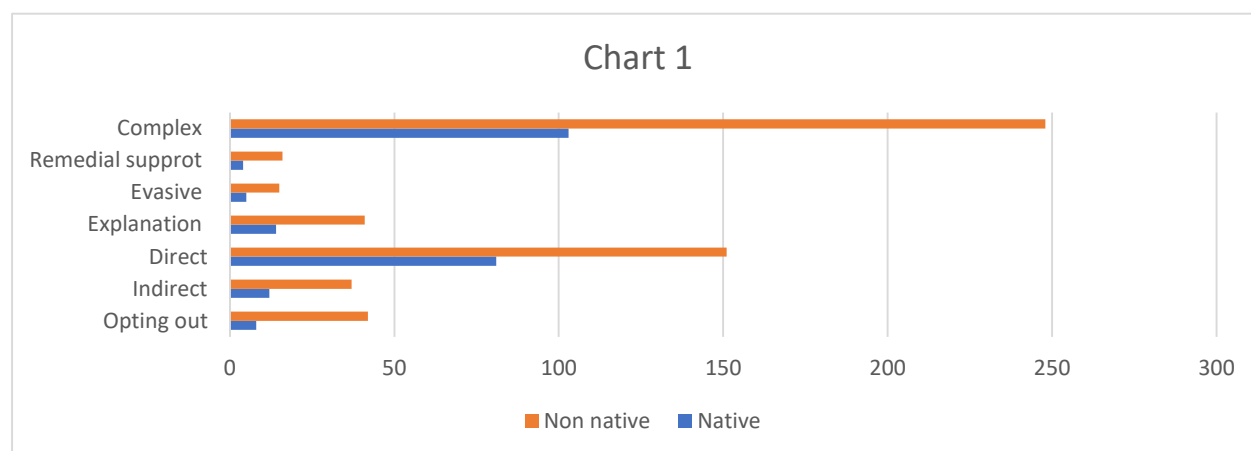


Chart 1. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS of English

The obtained results showed that the complex strategy prevailed in both groups of respondents. The second most frequently used strategy was the strategy of direct apology; then the explanation strategy in which basically an explanation was offered as to why the mistake was made, came third. After that, the indirect apology strategy and opting out as strategies followed in both groups and, finally, the evasive strategy and the remedial support strategy were the least frequently used by both groups.

In the S1 (*You called your classmate by bad name - calling or provocative comments*), the interlocutors had medium social distance between them, their social status was equal, and the degree of offence was high. In this situation, the responses showed that direct apology was the most frequently used strategy among 40% of the NNS (e.g. *"I am sorry about my words towards you"*).

38% of the respondents used the complex strategy (e.g. *"Sorry, I didn't mean it. It will never happen again."* (direct + indirect + remedial support)). 9% of the respondents used opting out (e.g. *"Sorry not sorry"*, *"No I didn't"*); 5% used the indirect apology (e.g. *"I said it in the heat of the moment, but I didn't mean it"*). Explanation was used only by 3% of the respondents (e.g. *"It was a mistake"*). The other 2 strategies, the remedial support and the evasive strategy, were used only by 1% (e.g. *"That's abuse"*/ *"Only with those I am close to... But that's a joke"*).

On the other hand, 52% of the NS used the complex strategy (e.g. *"I am so sorry. It was not my intention to offend you, I said this without thinking and it will never happen again."* (direct + indirect + remedial

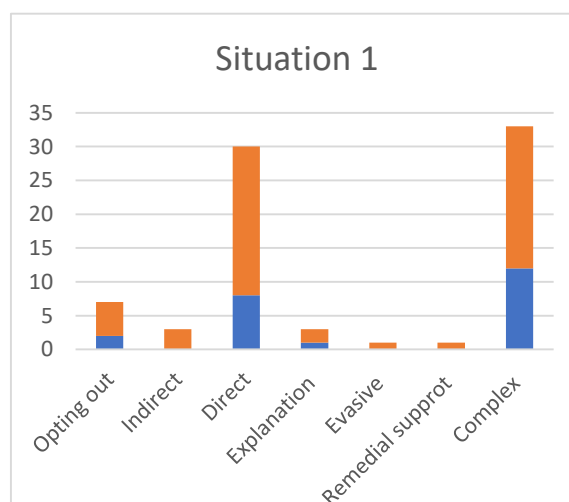


Chart 4. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

support)); 34% of them used the direct apology (e.g. *“Sorry for calling u names”*); 8% respondents were opting out (e.g. *“I’m not”*), and 1% offered an explanation (e.g. *“I don’t believe that I would ever do this as it would be disrespectful. If I was placed in a circumstance whereby I was upset, to the point of using ‘bad names’ I would pause, diffuse my emotions and then have a conversation with the individual as to why or what promoted me to want to use a derogatory term towards them”*).

In the S2(You borrowed a friend’s book, and now you can’t find it to return it to him/her), the interlocutors were close, their social status was equal, and the degree of offence was low. In this situation, the complex strategy was dominant among 65% of the NS (e.g. *“I looked and looked for the book you lent me and unfortunately I can’t find it. I am so sorry this happened, however what I’ll do is go out on the weekend and get you a new book.”* (explanation + direct + remedial support)). 21% of the respondents used direct apology (e.g. *“I’m so sorry I lost your book”*); The remedial support occurred in 8% of the responses (e.g. *“I’ll buy you a new one”*).

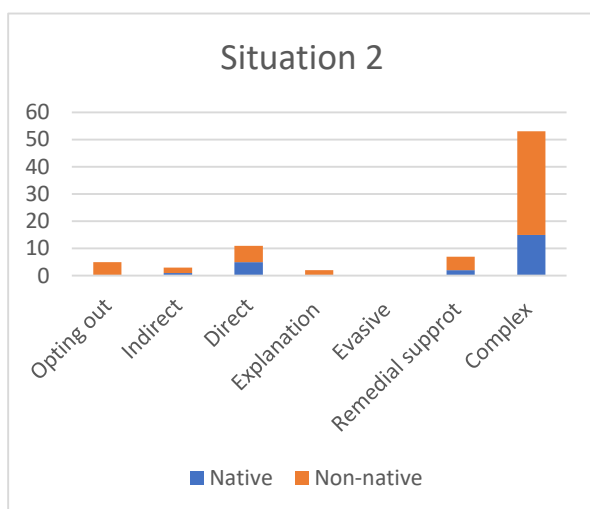


Chart 5. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

The complex strategy was also the most frequently used strategy in the case of the NNS too, as 69% of them used it (e.g. *“I am so sorry, I couldn’t find the book you borrowed. I can’t believe I’ve lost it. I would like to buy you a new example of the same one.”* (direct + explanation + indirect + remedial support)). The direct apology strategy was used by 10% of the respondents (e.g. *“I am sorry but I couldn’t find the book to return it”*); 9% of the respondents were offering a repair (e.g. *“I will try to find same book to the book store or buy something else or some new better book for him/her”*); 3% used the opting out strategy (e.g. *“Nope, never I always return everything”*, *“No, I didn’t”*); and 3% used the explanation strategy (e.g. *“I will find her”*).

In the S3 (You've shown disrespect towards a teacher, staff member, or authority figure), the interlocutors were distant, the social status was unequal, and the degree of offence was high. 52 % of the NS used the complex strategy (e.g. *"My sincerest apology for my offensive conduct, I promise to do better, nor will I allow it to happen again. I hope you'll be able to forgive my actions"* (direct + indirect + remedial support)). Direct apology was used by 34% respondents (e.g. *"I would like to sincerely apologize for the disrespect"*). 4% of the respondents used the indirect strategy (e.g. *"Once again I would not do this. If I was displeased with a teacher or authority figure I would talk with them to express my opinion. Being disrespectful achieves nothing"*). 8% of the respondents used opting out (e.g. *"Why did I do that though? I won't apologize if I was right to disrespect"*).

The majority of the NNS, i.e. 41%, used the complex strategy (e.g. *"I want to apologize for my behavior. My actions were disrespectful, and I regret that. I understand the importance of treating authority figures with respect, and I'm sorry for not doing so"* (direct + indirect + explanation)). 34% of the respondents used direct apology (e.g. *"Please accept my sincerest apology"*); 9% were opting out (e.g. *"No teacher I will not do the homework, because we've already done this page and you asking us to do it again is just indecent"*, *"Sorry not sorry"*, *"No I didn't"*); 7% of the respondents used evasive strategies (e.g. *"They deserve it"*); 5% offered explanations (e.g. *"Never, that is a disrespectful to me"*). Indirect apology was used by 3% of the respondents (e.g. *"I would be respectful to them"*).

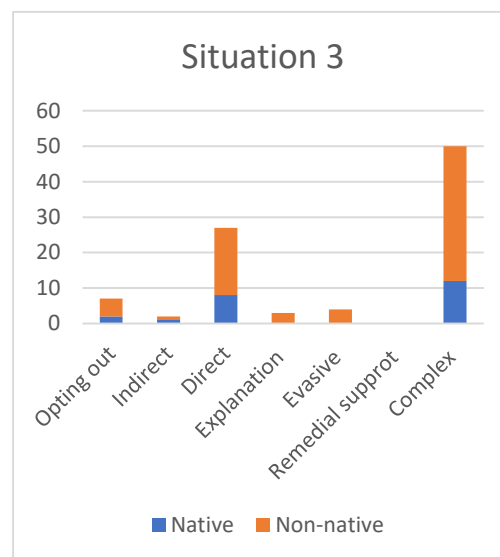


Chart 6. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

In the S4 (You accidentally damaged school property (textbook, equipment, or other resources)), the interlocutors were distant, the social status was unequal and the degree of offence was high. 43% of the NS used the complex strategy (e.g. *"I am so sorry! I really didn't mean to damage that. I will do whatever it takes to make it right and even help fix it or pay for it if I can"* (direct + indirect + remedial support)). 30% of them used direct apology (e.g. *"I have accidentally damaged school property. I sincerely regret it and I am sorry"*); 13% were using indirect apology (e.g. *"I'm sure they would understand it was an accident!"*); 8% were offering a repair (e.g. *"I would advise the school/teacher of what occurred and offer to replace or repair it"*); 4% were using the opting out strategy (e.g. *"Try to hide it and pretend it didn't happen"*).

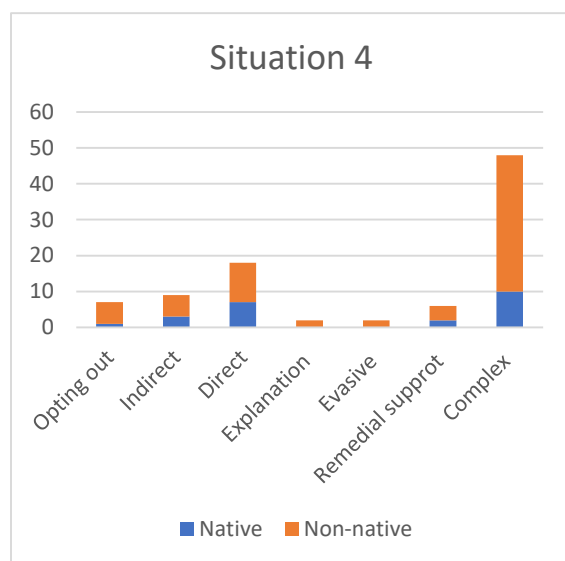


Chart 7. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

The complex strategy was the most frequently used strategy and among NNS (43%) in Situation 4 (e.g. *"I apologize for accidentally damaging the school property. It was not my intention, and I'm willing to take responsibility for the repair or replacement."* (direct + indirect + remedial support)), whereas 20% used direct apology (e.g. *"I apologize that I have damaged the school property"*).

In this situation, the same number of respondents – 10%, used the indirect apology strategy and opting out (e.g. *"Yes, I've drawn over desks and broken a few space keycaps on the keyboards"* (indirect) and *"Would keep quiet..."* (opting out)). Remedial support was found among 7% of the respondents (e.g. *"I will pay the damage"*), while evasive strategy and explanation among 3% (e.g. *"I blame my friend"* (evasive) and *"I will tell them that it wasn't on purpose"* (explanation)).

In the S5 (You needed a pencil, and you took a friend's pencil without asking), the interlocutors were close, the social status was equal and the degree of offence was low. 52% of the NS used the complex strategy (e.g. *"Sorry for taking your pencil without asking. I should have asked you first"* (direct + explanation)). Furthermore, the direct apology was selected by 12% (e.g. *"I am sorry, I took your pencil without asking"*), 8% of the respondents used the indirect apology (e.g. *"Ask if I can take it"*). The evasive strategy and explanation were used by 4% (e.g. *"I would not apologize since this person is my friend and they would understand. I would just let them know I took their pencil. If it was a spare pencil, they likely won't mind. If it was not a spare pencil than I'll give them their pencil back and look for another one by asking other people"* (evasive) and *"I hope you didn't mind me borrowing the pencil"*).

The results from the NNS showed that the complex strategy was preferred by them as well by 40% (e.g. *"Hey, I needed the pencil at that moment so I borrowed it, I'm sorry for not asking you. I hope that's fine with you"* (direct + explanation)). 25% used direct apology (e.g. *"I'm sorry, I should have asked you before"*); 12% of the responses were explanations (e.g. *"I would return it and tell you what I needed it for"*). Indirect apology was used by 7% of the respondents (e.g. *"I hope you don't mind that I used your pencil. Here it is"*), and opting out and the evasive strategy by 5% (e.g. *"I didn't do that"* (opting out), and *"Of course, we always do that"*). Last but not least, 3% used the remedial support for this situation (e.g. *"I'll return it when I'm done"*).

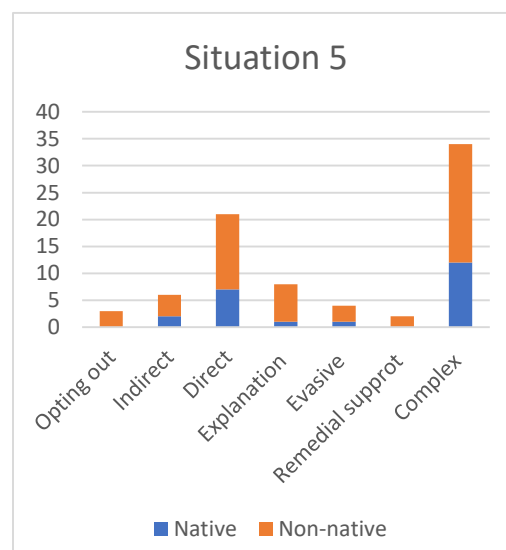


Chart 8. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

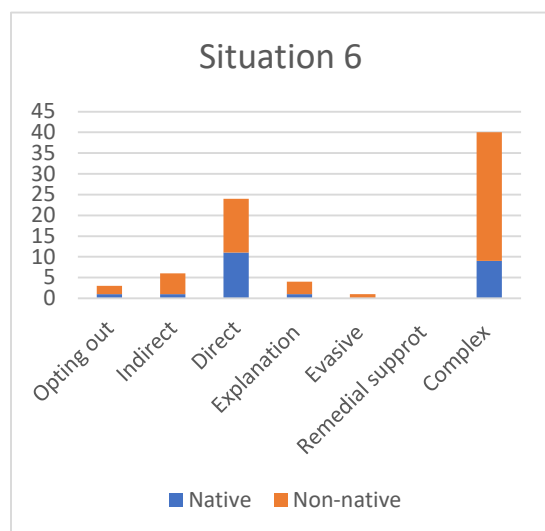


Chart 9. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

In the S6 (*You were late to class*), the interlocutors were distant, the social status was unequal and the degree of offence was medium. The majority of answers from the NS belonged to the direct apology strategy (47%) (e.g. *"Please excuse my lateness"*). 39% belonged to the complex strategy (e.g. *"I understand that when I'm late to class it impacts everyone. I apologize and promise to not let this happen again"* (explanation + direct + remedial support)). Indirect apology, opting out and explanation were used by 4% of the respondents (e.g. *"Yes"* (indirect), *"I would not apologize for being late unless it caused a complete disruption"* (opting out) and *"I apologize for being late to class today. Unfortunately, I encountered unexpected traffic on my way to school, which caused the delay. Please let me know if there's anything I need to catch up on from the beginning of the class. Thank you for your understanding"* (explanation)).

For S6, another strategy was most popular among NNS (56%) – the complex strategy (e.g. *"Sorry I am late Miss. I have overslept. I will try this not to happen again"* (direct + explanation + remedial support)). 23% used the direct apology (e.g. *"I apologize for being late"*); 9% of the respondents used indirect apology (e.g. *"I would say good day; morning or afternoon and try not to disturb the class or lecture further"*). Explanation is used by 5% respondents (e.g. *"It was an emergency"*). 3% of the respondents were opting out (e.g. *"No answer"*, *"Never"*). Evasive strategy was used by 1% (e.g. *"It happens"*).

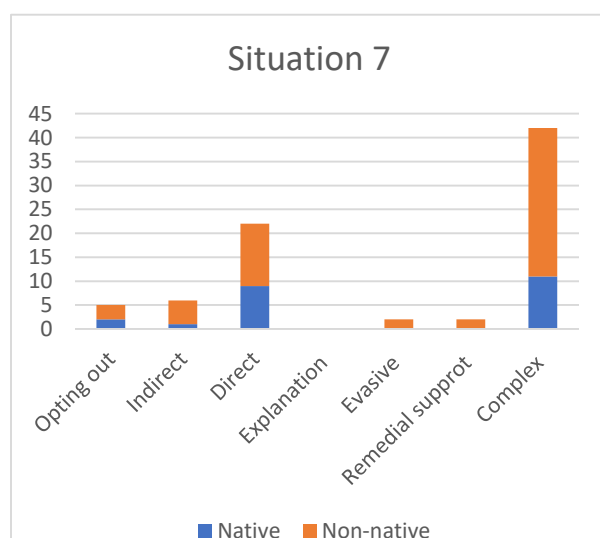


Chart 10. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

In the S7 (*You've broken specific classroom rules, like using your phone during class or not following the dress code*), the interlocutors were distant, the social status was unequal, and the degree of offence was high. According to the results, the NS used the complex strategy the most 47% (e.g. *"I apologize for using my phone during class. I had felt that my reason for doing so was important, but I realize now that following rules is more important. It will never happen again"* (direct + explanation + remedial support)). Direct apology was used by 39% (e.g. *"I apologize for my actions"*); 8% used opting out, (e.g. *"I would not apologize for this unless the teacher said something to me"* and *"No"*). And the last strategy used in this situation was the indirect apology with 4% of the respondents

choosing it (e.g. *“I understand I broke a rule but here is why and I would appreciate if we can make an exception”*).

As in the previous group, the complex strategy was dominant with 54% of NNS (e.g. *“I want to apologize for breaking the classroom rules. I recognize that they are in place for a reason, and my actions were inappropriate. I’ll make sure to follow the rules moving forward”* (direct + explanation)). 23% used the direct apology (e.g. *“I apologize for the inconvenience”*). 9% used the indirect apology (e.g. *“Yes just sitting on the phone”*); 5% of the respondents used opting out (e.g. *“I don’t care I’m going to do it again”*). Remedial support and evasive strategies were used by 3% (e.g. *“I don’t think its that big of a deal as long as it doesn’t happen too often”* (evasive) and *“I will go home and change my clothes”* (remedial support)).

In S8(You’ve engaged in academic dishonesty, such as cheating on a test or plagiarizing someone else’s work), the social status between interlocutors was unequal and they were distant. The degree of the offence was high. In this situation, 43% NS used the complex strategy (e.g. *“I honestly cheated on this test, and would like to take full accountability for my actions. I will never do it again, and would accept a deduction in my grade for the dishonesty”* (explanation + indirect + remedial support)). Direct apology was used by 26% (e.g. *“I’m deeply sorry”*); 13% used evasive strategy (e.g. *“Depends on the teacher, if cool - apologize and take the consequences. If terrifying teacher, try to deflect blame on to the other person...”*); 8% of them opted out (e.g. *“I would not do this”*); 4% used indirect strategy (e.g. *“This was my error, I take responsibility”* (indirect).

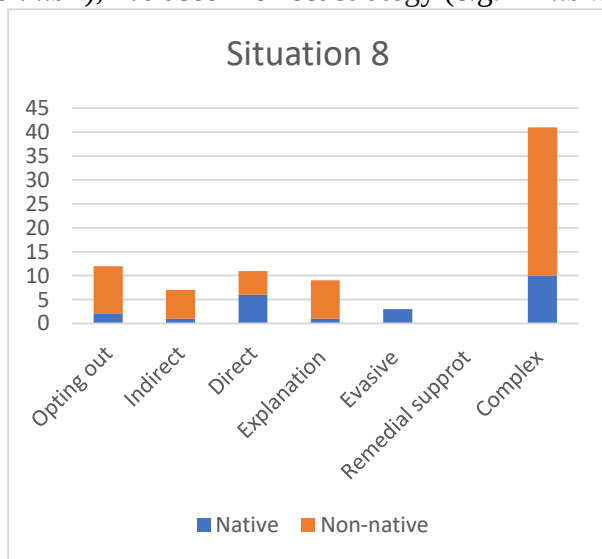


Chart 11. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

As it can be seen in Chart 11, the complex strategy had quite a large number of responses among NNS. The Chart shows that 47% of non-native respondents used a combination of strategies (e.g. *“I want to sincerely apologize for cheating on the recent test. It was a poor choice on my part, and I fully understand the implications of my actions. I’m committed to making amends and to approach my studies with honesty and integrity from now on”* (direct + explanation)). Surprisingly, there were 18% of the respondents that were opting out (e.g. *“Hide the fact that I was cheating and apologize to the person I stole their work from”*). Furthermore, 14% gave an explanation (e.g. *“I wasn’t prepared for the exam and I should have told you that I’m not prepared”*).

Also, there were slightly more indirect than direct apologies. 10% used indirect apology (e.g. *“I didn’t mean to”*), and 9% chose direct apology (e.g. *“I am sorry for cheating”*).

In S9(You were walking around the corner and accidentally bumped into your classmate), the social distance between the interlocutors was close, the social status was equal and the degree of offence was low. According to the answers received from the NS, we can see that 73% used the direct strategy. (e.g. *“Oops! Sorry!”*). In this situation, the complex strategy was used by 13% (e.g. *“I would always apologize and take ownership of my action. I would also inquire to ensure they are okay and/or I didn’t cause them to drop /spill an item”* (direct + explanation)). 8% of the

respondents used the indirect apology (e.g. *"My bad, you okay?"*). The evasive strategy was used by 4% (e.g. *"Depends on my mood, I'd either apologize 'sorry about that' or stare at them briefly and then walk away"*).

The results obtained from NNS show that 72% of the respondents would use the direct apology (e.g. *"Oh, so sorry. Are you okay?"*). 12% combined their direct apologies with some other strategy (e.g. *"I'm so sorry for bumping into you. It was entirely unintentional, and I apologize for any discomfort or inconvenience I may have caused"* (direct + explanation)). In all the remaining strategies, we had 3.6% respondents (e.g. *"I didn't see"* (indirect), *"No I didn't"* (opting out), and *"Hey, how are you? Hope you are doing well"* (evasive)).

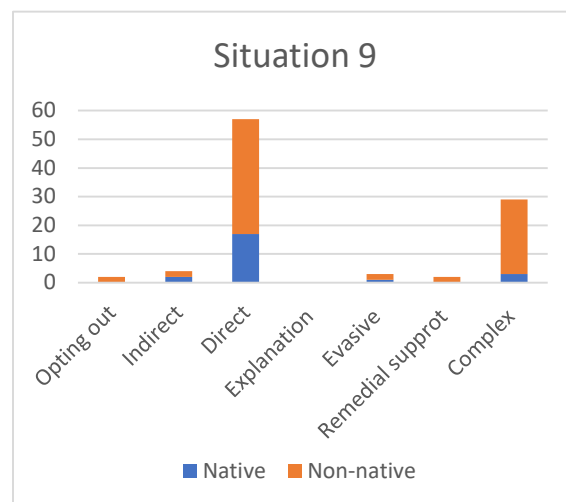


Chart 12. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

Finally, in S10 (*You're unable to submit an assignment on time*), the interlocutors were distant, the social status was unequal and the degree of offence was medium. Students are apologizing to their professor for not submitting an assignment on time. Unlike the previous situations, in this situation among the NS the explanation was prevalent (43%) (e.g. *"Professor, I am unable to submit this assignment on time, because I have another project due on the same day, and I mismanaged my time. Can we construct a plan together so I can submit this assignment on time, while being fair to the rest of the class?"*). Next is the complex strategy (39%) (e.g. *"Dear teacher, I am unable to submit my assignment on time due to xyz reason. Can I please get an extension? I apologize for the inconvenience and am grateful to your understanding"* (explanation + direct + remedial support)). 13% used direct apology (e.g. *"My apologies, I am wondering if I can ask for an extension"*).

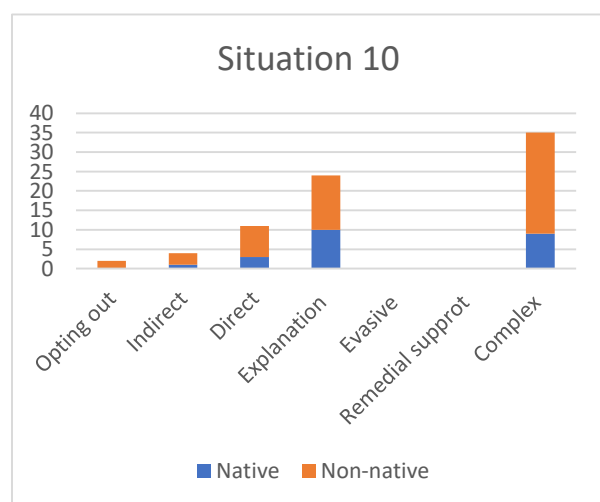


Chart 13. Apologizing strategies used by NS & NNS

Among NNS, the complex strategy was the most frequently used (47%) (e.g. *"I apologize for not being able to submit the assignment on time because of XX. I hope you understand. I'll do my very best to have it done as soon as possible. Thank you for your understanding"*). The explanation strategy was used by 25% (e.g. *"I would explain myself and ask if I can turn it in late"*); 14% of the respondents used direct apology (e.g. *"I am sorry for not respecting the deadline"*); 7% were opting out (e.g. *"I hate assignment"*). The indirect apology was used by 5% (e.g. *"That's my fault"*).

Conclusion

Generally speaking, on the basis of the results obtained, we may conclude that there are more similarities than differences in the speech act of apologizing between the NS and NNS of the English language. The results reveal that the most frequently used strategy is the complex apologizing strategy — which is a combination of two or more apologizing strategies used at the same time, usually direct apology combined with remedial support or explanation. Following the complex strategy, the second most commonly used strategy is direct apology. Both groups made a moderate use of remedial support, indirect apology and opting out. The least frequently used strategies among both groups of informants are the evasive strategy and remedial support.

This research shows that social factors indeed play a significant role in influencing the choice of the apologizing strategies. Namely, in the situations selected for the purposes of this research, both similarities and differences between NS & NNS are observed.

More precisely, in six of the ten given situations (60%) we noticed similarities in the way both groups apologize. S4, S7, S8 had the same combination of social factors – distant interlocutors, unequal social status, and a high degree of offense – and that led to a frequent use of the complex apologizing strategy in both groups of respondents. Then, what S2, S5 and S9 have in common is that in these situations the social distance between the interlocutors is close, their social status is equal, and the degree of offense is low. The most frequently used strategy is complex apologizing strategy for both groups of speakers, except in S9 where direct apology is the most used strategy.

As to the differences in the choice of the apologizing strategies which were spotted in 40% of the given situations between NS and NNS, two main distinctions stand out. In S3, S6, and S10, characterized by distant interlocutors, with unequal social status, and a high level of offense, differences also arise. In the sixth situation, NS tend to use the direct apology strategy with formal expressions, while NNS mostly use the complex strategy. In the tenth situation, NS primarily use explanation as their chosen strategy, while NNS lean toward the complex strategy. The first situation has a completely different combination of social factors. Social distance is medium, social status is equal and the degree of offense is high. We also have different strategies from both groups of speakers. NNS use the direct apology strategy, and NS use the complex apologizing strategy.

On the basis of these results it can be concluded that the most conspicuous differences appear when the offense is high, the social status unequal and the distance between the interlocutors big, as Macedonian speakers of English tend to use the complex apologizing strategy (they combine more strategies together) in their attempt to repair the broken relationship with their interlocutors; whereas, the English native speakers, in addition to the complex strategy, very frequently resort to some of the other strategies too – direct apology (with formal expressions, such as *I do apologize!*) and explanation.

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