

THE ROLE OF *PROVIDING AN EXPLANATION* WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EMAILED APOLOGIES: A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the realisation of apologies by Australian learners of Italian, in a cross-cultural comparison with those produced by native speakers of Italian and native speakers of Australian English. More specifically, the article focusses upon differences in the realisation of one apology strategy, namely *providing an explanation*, and participants' perceptions of this strategy.

The apology is here defined as a remedial speech act which repairs or maintains relationships between interlocutors when they assume that the speaker has violated, or will violate, a social norm (Businaro, 2002: 494; Cheng, 2017: 2; Jones, Adrefiza, 2017: 91; Martínez-Flor, Beltrán-Palanques, 2014: 51; Trosborg, 1987: 147-148). Hence, the goal of apologies is to restore order and/or harmony to a relationship or an interaction (Kasanga, Lwanga-Lumu, 2007: 65-66). Apologies are also one of the most culturally-sensitive speech acts (Suszczyńska, 1999: 1053). While the existence of some apology strategies may be universal, there is much variation in how these acts may be performed by speakers of different languages, and the frequency, intensification of, conditions for and strategies used to perform apologies can vary to a great extent both cross-linguistically and cross-culturally (Cohen, Olshtain, 1985: 179).

Apologies may be performed using a variety of strategies which may be used individually or in conjunction with each other in an apology speech act set, which refers to a number of semantic formula used together to perform a particular speech act (Olshtain, Cohen, 1983: 20-21). This article investigates one specific apology strategy, namely, *providing an explanation*, which may be used alone as an apology or alongside other strategies as part of the apology speech act set.

An *explanation* is defined in this research as one or more clauses in which the participant describes the events or reasoning for why the offence happened or how it happened. Across typologies of apology acts, the provision of an explanation or account for an offence features as an apology strategy (including: Blum-Kulka, House, Kasper, 1989a; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Suszczyńska, 1999; Trosborg, 1987, 1995). However, scholars have rarely focussed on this apology strategy in any detail; indeed, the research cited here has either briefly commented upon explanations or only mentioned explanations among other strategies. Indeed, it seems that explanations as an apology strategy have not yet been specifically investigated, either in one language or in a cross-cultural perspective. This is surprising, given the consistency with which explanations feature in apology typologies across languages.

In order to partly fill this gap in apology research, the strategy of *providing an explanation* is here explored through elicited emails addressed to academic staff that were written in

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Italian by Australian learners of Italian and native speakers of Italian, and in English by native speakers of Australian English.

In addition to this, this article investigates participants' perceptions of their elicited language, their attitudes regarding apologies, and their understanding of relations between students and academic staff. The analysis demonstrates that while Australian learners of Italian tend to deliberately construct explanatory stories as an obligatory stage in the performance of apologies, native Italian speakers frequently omit this. Such strong differentiation in how Italian and Australian students perceive apology appropriateness in student-teacher communication evidences that explanations and apologies are heavily situated in cultural contexts. As discussed in the conclusion, such findings therefore point to potential difficulties in cross-cultural communication, particularly in the university context.

2. PROVIDING AN EXPLANATION AS AN APOLOGY STRATEGY IN PREVIOUS STUDIES

As mentioned above, across typologies of apology acts, the provision of an explanation or account for an offence often features as an apology strategy (including: Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989a; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Suszczyńska, 1999; Trosborg, 1987, 1995). Each of the scholars referred to here used these typologies to explore apologies in English in comparison with apologies other languages, including Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and Uruguayan Spanish.

The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) spanned eight different languages, one of which was Australian English, and investigated the performance of speech acts, including apologies, across these languages. In discussing some of the findings of this project, Olshtain (1989: 164) notes that explanations were identified in 4% of the apologies produced by speakers of Australian English; however, there is no elaboration on this data and what its implications might be. Márquez Reiter (2000: 157) did note that British participants in her study used explanations in some instances in which Uruguayan participants did not; however, the brief analysis that is provided only mentions these small situational differences in the provision of explanations, and no further comment or cross-cultural analysis of explanations is provided. Trosborg's (1987) comparison of apologies produced by Danish learners of English and native speakers of English provides some further, albeit not extensive, findings. Trosborg notes that English native speakers provided more frequent explanations than the learners, and that these native English explanations could be quite lengthy (Trosborg, 1987: 159; 1995: 398). Furthermore, across Trosborg's corpus, explanations were often used to support explicit expressions of apology (Trosborg, 1995: 399). However, no further interpretation was given regarding such differences between her participants.

Likewise, there is little data available regarding the use of explanations in apologies by native Italian speakers. While Lipson's (1994) discussion of apologies elicited from native speakers of Italian utilises a typology of apologies which includes *explanation* as a strategy, the analysis does not comment at all upon their use. Nuzzo (2007) and Trubnikova (2017) presented typology of Italian apologies which did not include explanations or accounts as a strategy, yet both scholars included the strategy of *justification*, which was described in much the same way as an explanation. Hence, it seems that explanations – or justifications – are present in apologies realised in both English and Italian. Nuzzo (2007) offers some insight into this apology strategy. In presenting her findings regarding the apology strategies used by native Italian speakers, Nuzzo demonstrated that of the eight apology strategies identified, justifications are the third most frequently used and were used in 10% of the scenarios considered. However, there is no further analysis of these instances. Trubnikova's (2017) qualitative comparison of Italian native speakers, Russian native

speakers and Italian L2 speakers of Russian background also revealed that the speakers of L2 Italian provided justification most frequently of the three participant groups, while the native Russian speakers utilised this strategy with the least frequency. However, Trubnikova does not provide any further specific analysis of justifications formulated in Italian, noting only that the strategy is used by all speaker groups to preserve positive face. Hence, despite the widespread acknowledgement of explanations as important elements of apology frameworks, it seems that explanations as an apology strategy have not been systematically or thoroughly explored in either English or Italian.

As demonstrated so far, explanations as a strategy are often overlooked in the actual analysis of apology realisation. Despite incorporating explanations into their apology frameworks, none of the above-mentioned scholars specifically investigated this strategy and therefore this important element of apology realisation has been somewhat neglected. A possible reason for this may be that most of the studies here discussed were large research projects which involved the collection of large amounts of data and the publications arising from these studies intended to present an overall representation of the totality of the speech act of apology, rather than a detailed analysis of particular apology strategies. However, to explicitly analyse individual strategies is important in understanding apology construction, particularly as the use of apology strategies can vary vastly in a cross-cultural perspective.

Aside from apology research, explanations have been included in analyses of other speech acts, including cancellations and refusals. In explorations of last-minute cancellations in Italian and Colombian Spanish (Nuzzo, Cortés Velásquez, 2020) and Italian and Austrian German (Brocca, Nuzzo, Cortés Velásquez, Rudigier, 2023), participants were asked to perform cancellations addressed to a friend, an acquaintance and a neighbour. In both of these studies, around 60% of explanations performed by the Italian participants were generic explanations, a feature also explored in this article (see Section 4). When detailed explanations were provided, the Italian participants differed from the Columbians in that their explanations were more likely to be detailed, referencing factors such as health issues, tiredness or work issues (Nuzzo, Cortés Velásquez, 2020: 348). Similarly, in comparing refusals performed in American English and in Italian, Verzella and Tommaso (2020) found that Italians speakers were more likely to perform explanations, at times combined with apologies; 70% of the Italians used explanations and justifications, in comparison to 48% of American English speakers. Evidently, explanations are a key strategy in managing face not only in the context of apologies, but also other face-threatening speech acts, including cancellations and refusals.

This study therefore aims to contribute to the exploration of explanations as an apology strategy. This will be done by considering apologies realised by Australian learners of Italian, Italian native speakers and native speakers of Australian English. In addition to filling a specific gap in the study of apologies, this study will also expand cross-cultural and intercultural studies involving Italian in contact with Australian English (Bettoni, Rubino, 2007; Formentelli, Hajek, 2013, 2015, 2016; Rubino, Bettoni, 2006), an area which so far has been under-researched.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data presented here are part of a larger research project² which considers three perspectives: how Australian learners of Italian perform emailed apologies compared with

² The data presented in this paper form part of the Doctoral research project of the author, under the supervision of Associate Professor Antonia Rubino and Dr. Caroline Lipovsky. I like to thank both for their support and guidance through the research process. This research is supported by the Australian Government's Research Training Program.

native speakers of both Italian and Australian English; the perceptions of these learners regarding their performance; and the perceptions of academic staff to whom the emails are hypothetically addressed. In order to holistically explore emailed apologies from students to academics, four different data collection methods are adopted: a written Discourse Completion Task (henceforth, DCT), post-task interviews, authentic emails from Australian learners of Italian to academic staff of the Department of Italian Studies, and an appropriateness evaluation completed by academics of Italian Studies.

The data presented in this article have been collected through a written DCT and post-task interviews. Specifically, the analysis concentrates upon one aspect of the learners' email responses: their use of explanations.

This article will present part of the data collected (the DCT and the interviews) in order to focalise on an analysis of the explanations provided by participants in elicited apology emails. The paper will specifically explore the preliminary analysis of the explanations constructed by participants, and then also draw upon insights from participants' reflections to inform the discussion of these explanations.

3.1. *The DCT*

The purpose of the written DCT was to elicit responses from the participants in a range of scenarios related to the university context, by presenting participants with prompts to which they were required to respond with a short email.

The DCT asked participants to respond to six short prompts, three of which specified a professor as the addressee and three of which nominated a tutor as the addressee. The differentiation between the two addressees aimed to investigate whether participants formulate their responses differently on the basis of the addressee. The underlying hypothesis was that students would have a more informal relationship with tutors than they would with professors, and that this may impact upon their language choices. While the difference in addressee is not a focus in this particular article, it is considered in the broader research project (Walker, 2022).

To facilitate the naturalness and reliability of data collection, the prompts included in the DCT were designed around scenarios which are relevant to and plausible in the university context. The scenarios were: missing a class test, not submitting an essay on time, and being unprepared to present in class. In order to maximise the naturalness of participants' responses and avoid influencing their choice of strategies, participants were not specifically instructed to write apologies.

The DCTs were conducted on campus in class conditions, and participants did not use any linguistic resources such as dictionaries or electronic applications. Participation was entirely voluntary.

3.1.1. *Participants of the DCT*

Three groups took part in the DCT: the learners of Italian, who were the main focus of the research, and two control groups. The two control groups comprised of native speakers of Australian English and native speakers of Italian, and these participants provided native speaker baselines against which the emails of the learners of Italian could be compared, to assess whether the learners performed apologies in a way which was more or less similar to native speakers of Italian or Australian English. The learners of Italian and Italian native speakers completed the DCT in Italian, while the native speakers of Australian English completed the task in English.

A total of 47 Australian learners of Italian completed the DCT. They were enrolled in intermediate or advanced Italian language courses at Australian universities in Sydney and Melbourne. Learners enrolled in beginners language courses were not invited to participate, as they would not have the language skills required to complete the task. Of these participants, 15 were male and 32 were female. This imbalance was not a cause for concern, as the higher ratio of females to males seems to be largely representative of general global trends in student enrolments in language courses (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016; Carr, Pauwels, 2006; Geoghegan, 2018: 224; Kissau, Salas, 2013). All participants fell between the 17 and 23 age range, apart from three mature-aged students.

20 participants currently enrolled in Australian universities provided the data for the Australian English native speaker control group. Of these 20 participants, 16 were female and 4 were male. Participants were aged between 18 and 27, apart from two mature-aged students.

In the Italian native speaker group, there were 53 participants, 13 of which were male and 40 of which were female. These participants were all aged between 18 and 27.

Table 1. *Number of participants and key characteristics*

	Total number of participants	Gender breakdown	
		Female	Male
Learners of Italian	47	32	15
Native speakers of Australian English	20	16	4
Native speakers of Italian	53	40	13
Total	120	88	32

In total, across the three groups, a total of 672 emails were elicited. 239 of these elicited emails were composed by 47 learners of Italian, 20 native speakers of Australian English produced 120 emails, and 313 emails were elicited from 53 Italian native speakers³.

3.2. *Post-task interviews and fieldnotes*

Following the DCT, semi-structured post-task interviews were conducted with willing participants from the group of Australian learners of Italian. These interviews were designed to explore participants' perceptions of their own performance in the DCT, allowing them the opportunity to explain and elaborate upon their linguistic choices. Furthermore, the interviews provided an opportunity to assess participants' understanding of speech act performance in relation to the social and situational variables of the scenarios presented to them in the DCT, as well as their perceptions and experiences of student – professor and student – tutor relationships.

Interviews loosely followed a predetermined set of questions and topics included the rationale behind participants' linguistic choices and choice of apology strategies, as well as participants' perspectives of their relationships with professors and tutors, email communication to these two interlocutors, and apologies in general. While focussing on key concepts defined by the researcher, the semi-structured format also allowed for the

³ In some cases, participants were not able to complete all sections of the DCT, due to arriving late or having to leave early. However, all participants completed the demographic section and therefore even incomplete DCTs were able to be included in the data set.

exploration and pursual of emerging ideas, and therefore provided very insightful qualitative data (Harrell, Bradley, 2009: 27; Wilson, 2014).

Key topics covered in these semi-structured interviews included:

- elements that should/should not be included in emails;
- what should be included in apologies, and if this is different depending on addressee;
- participants' perceptions of the roles of 'professor' and 'tutor';
- whether emails to academic staff would be different were the scenarios based in Italy;
- terms of address used by participants in their emails.

The data elicited from the post-task interviews was therefore extremely valuable as a supplement to the DCT data. The DCT has been extensively criticised as a data collection method, due to issues regarding the unnaturalness of elicited data (including, amongst others: Beebe, Cummings, 1996: 71; Brown, 2001; Golato, 2003; Sasaki, 1998: 458). The triangulation of this written data with post-task interviews therefore allows for a more insightful and reliable analysis of the elicited DCT data.

The interviews were conducted on campus, in the week following the collection of written data. The interviews were an average of 19.5 minutes in duration, for a total of over 2 hours of recording.

While these post-task interviews were conducted only with the Australian learners of Italian, informal conversations took place with several native speakers of Italian in Italy, following the completion of the DCT. In such cases, detailed fieldnotes were taken and these observations are incorporated into the analysis reported below.

3.2.1. *Participants of the post-task interview*

Nine of the Australian learners of Italian who completed the DCT also completed the post-task interview. Gender representation in the interviews was fairly even: four interviewees were male, while five were female. The median age of the nine participants was 19.6. In regard to ethnic background, seven of the nine participants reported Italian descent through their grandparents, and one of these participants also reported one parent born in Italy.

While formal interviews were not conducted in Italy, four native speakers of Italian made valuable comments following the DCT task, and these comments were noted down. These four participants were all females between 24 and 25, and were each enrolled in different university departments.

3.3. *Analytical Framework*

Each email produced by the participants generally comprises three sections: the Opening, the Speech Act Set, and the Closing. While the Opening includes the greeting and the title and name of the addressee, the Closing refers to the way in which the composer of the email signed off, as well as any routinised closing expressions they may have included. The Speech Act Set is the main body of the email, and refers to the section in which participants formulated their response to the DCT prompt. In using the term speech act set, I draw upon Olshtain and Cohen (1983), who introduced this term to refer to semantic formula which may be used either alone or in combination with each other to perform a speech act.

From my data, and drawing upon previous typologies of apologies (including: Blum-Kulka, Olshtain, 1984; Cheng, 2013; Nuzzo, 2007; Owen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987, 1995), I

identified three main strategies whereby participants performed the apology speech act set. They are: *explicit expression of apology*; *account for the offence*; and *remedial action*.

These may be used either in isolation or in combination with each other; only one is necessary for the performance of an apology, though more than one may be used. Each of the strategies listed above may be realised by a series of sub-strategies, which are more specific means of fulfilling the broad semantic function of the strategy, as further elaborated upon in Section 3.4.

3.4. Overview of Accounts

As in other typologies of apologies (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989a; Trosborg, 1995), this research identified *Accounts* as a strategy whereby apologies may be performed. Accounts address the fact that an adverse event, or an “offence”, has occurred.

In the DCT data collected, the analysis identified two sub-strategies whereby Accounts could be achieved:

- *stating the facts* of what had occurred, and
- *providing an explanation* for why the offence had occurred.

This article will focus on the second type of Account: *providing an explanation*. In this sub-strategy, the participant addresses the fact that an offence has occurred by providing reasoning as to why it has occurred.

4. RESULTS

This section will present i) differences in explanations between the three participant groups, and ii) rationale for these differences. In addition to the linguistic analysis of the emails elicited through the DCT, such differences will be explored also through the investigation of interview data and fieldnotes.

4.1. Analysis of DCT data

As previously outlined, three groups of participants completed the DCT: the learners of Italian, and two native speaker control groups.

Table 2 evidences that the decision to provide an explanation when composing these elicited emails was quite common across all three participant groups.

Table 2. *Distribution of explanations across the three participant groups*

Participant group (number of participants)	Number of explanations	Number of emails including explanations	Total number of emails	% of emails including explanations ⁴
Learners of Italian (47)	181	177	239	74.06%
Italian native speakers (53)	183	182	313	58.15%
Australian English native speakers (20)	80	79	120	65.83%
Total	444	438	672	

⁴ Calculated per group – that is, the number of emails including explanations as a percentage of the total number of emails for each group.

Although there is slight variation in the data collected from the learners and each of the two control groups, an explanation was provided in 65% of the emails composed across the corpus. Interestingly, explanations are more numerous amongst the native speakers of Australian English, followed by the learners of Italian and then the native Italian speakers.

The table also provides the number of explanations as well as the number of emails including explanations. In the learner group, there were three participants who included multiple explanations in one email response. In one of these emails, the explanation was reiterated at a later point. In another email, three separate explanations were provided within the one email; these explanations did not fall under combined reasons, as they were grammatically and semantically separate. In another email, the participant provided two explanations, one relating to themselves and one relating to their partner. In the native Italian speaker group, there was one participant who provided two explanations, and in the Australian English native speaker group, there was one participant who reiterated the explanation at a later point. The data presented in this article therefore draws upon a total of 444 explanations drawn from a corpus of 438 emails.

The analysis of the explanations provided by participants across the three participant groups brought to light a range of explanations, from recounts of very detailed and specific events to very brief and vague reasons. These factors or events to which the participants attributed their offence were coded and 13 different types of explanation therefore emerged. These explanation types were grouped into five categories: explanations relating to *health*, *generic* explanations, *issues with the academic task*, *other commitments*, and *specific events*. Although self-explanatory, a description of each of these has been provided in the Appendix. When participants referred to more than one reason within the same clause, this was coded as *combined reasons*.

The six categories and 13 explanation types are listed in Tables 3 and 4, respectively, presented in descending order from the most to the least common.

Table 5 presents the breakdown of the explanation type in relation to the three participant groups – the learners of Italian, the native speakers of Italian, and the native speakers of Australian English – highlighting the differentiation in explanation choice across these groups.

Table 3. *Explanation categories used across the whole data set*

Explanation category	Number of instances	Percentage of all explanations
Health reasons	161	36.26%
Generic reasons	113	25.45%
Issues with the academic task	108	24.32%
Other commitments	56	12.61%
Combined reasons	6	1.35%
Total	444	

Table 4. *Explanations categories and types used across the whole data set*

Explanation category	Explanation type	Number of instances	Percentage of all explanations
Health reasons	Personal illness	132	29.73%
	Family illness/misadventure	29	6.53%
Generic reasons	Personal reasons	57	12.83%
	Unspecified circumstances	56	12.61%

Issues with the academic task	Technological issues	45	10.13%
	Transport issues	29	6.53%
	Academic difficulties	24	5.41%
	Explicitly blame another	10	2.25%
Other commitments	Busy schedule	29	6.53%
	Employment commitments	12	2.70%
	Emergency	9	2.03%
	Important event	4	0.90%
	Family commitments	2	0.45%
Combined reasons		6	1.35%
Total		444	

Table 5. *Explanations used by each of the three participant groups*

Explanation category	Native speakers of Australian English		Learners of Italian		Native speakers of Italian	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Health reasons	32	40.00%	83	45.86%	46	25.14%
Generic reasons	16	20.00%	14	7.73%	83	45.36%
Issues with the academic task	24	30.00%	58	32.04%	26	14.21%
Other commitments	6	7.50%	25	13.81%	25	13.66%
Combined reasons	2	2.50%	1	0.55%	3	1.64%
Total	80		181		183	

In Table 5, the two most prominent explanation categories used by both the learners of Italian and the native speakers of Australian English were explanations relating to *health* and *issues with the task*, with all other explanation categories being used with much less frequency. However, the results for the Italian native speakers differ. The most common category used by the Italian students was *generic* explanations, and although health was the second most frequent explanation category, there was nearly a 20% difference in the frequency of use of these two categories. Hence, it becomes clear that non-specific explanations were favoured by the Italian native speakers, while other explanation categories were favoured by the learners of Italian and the native speakers of Australian English. This finding will be discussed in more specific detail below.

As demonstrated by Table 6, the most prevalent explanation types presented by the native speakers of Australian English were *personal illness* and *personal reasons*. Respectively, these accounted for 27.50% and 13.75% of the explanations that they produced. In addition, *academic issues*, *family illness or misadventure* and *technological issues* were not uncommon.

The explanations most commonly used by the learners of Italian were *personal illness* (35.36% of all explanations constructed by the learners) and *technological issues* (20.44% of explanations constructed by the learners). These were followed, with a lower frequency, by *family illness or misadventure* (10.50%), *busy schedule* (8.29%) and *personal reasons* (5.52%).

The Italian native speakers used two explanation types with nearly equal highest frequency: *unspecified circumstances* (referenced in 25.68% of their explanations) and *personal*

illness (referenced in 25.14% of their explanations). They also referred to *personal reasons* quite frequently, accounting for 19.67% of their explanations. *Transport issues* and *academic difficulties* were referenced less frequently (respectively, in 7.65% and 6.01% of explanations provided by these participants), as were *employment commitments* and *busy schedules* (each 5.46%).

Evidently, *personal illness* emerges as the most common explanation of all across the whole data set. Of the three groups, personal illness was most prominent in the emails elicited from the learners of Italian (35.36%). Although the percentage of explanations which referred to personal illness was lower in the emails written by Italian native speakers and Australian English native speakers – 25.14% and 27.50%, respectively – personal illness was still within the two most common reasoning provided in explanations by these two native speaker groups.

Table 6. *Explanations used by each of the three participant groups*

Explanation category	Explanation type	Australian English native speakers		Learners of Italian		Italian native speakers	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Health reasons	Personal illness	22	27.50%	64	35.36%	46	25.14%
	Family illness/misadventure	10	12.50%	19	10.50%	0	0.00%
Generic reasons	Personal reasons	11	13.75%	10	5.52%	36	19.67%
	Unspecified circumstances	5	6.25%	4	2.21%	47	25.68%
Issues with the academic task	Technological issues	7	8.75%	37	20.44%	1	0.55%
	Transport issues	6	7.50%	9	4.97%	14	7.65%
	Academic difficulties	5	6.25%	8	4.42%	11	6.01%
	Explicitly blame another	6	7.50%	4	2.21%	0	0.00%
Other commitments/events	Busy schedule	4	5.00%	15	8.29%	10	5.46%
	Employment commitments	0	0.00%	2	1.10%	10	5.46%
	Emergency	2	2.50%	4	2.21%	3	1.64%
	Important event	0	0.00%	4	2.21%	0	0.00%
	Family commitments	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	1.09%
Combined reasons		2	2.50%	1	0.55%	3	1.64%
TOTAL		80		181		183	

When considering some of the other types of explanations, the results begin to differ more strongly across the three groups.

Referring to *technological issues* is much more frequent in the data elicited from the learners of Italian than that elicited from the other two groups. Technological issues comprise 20.44% of the explanations provided by the learners, while only 8.75% of the

explanations from the native Australian English participants refer to the same thing. This number is even smaller in the Italian native speaker group – only one participant refers to a technological issue in their explanation.

Contrary to the Australian learners of Italian and the native speakers of Australian English, the native speakers of Italian never referred to *family illness or misadventure* in their explanations. On the other hand, the frequency of this explanation type is quite similar in the native Australian English and learner of Italian groups, with family illness or misadventure being referenced in 12.50% and 10.50% of the emails, respectively.

Furthermore, there are two types of explanations in particular which are very common in the emails written by the native speakers of Italian, compared to the other two participant groups: *personal reasons* and *unspecified circumstances*. Together, these two explanation types comprise nearly half of all explanations written by the native Italian speakers. Both of these explanations refer to non-specific causes, and neither gives any indication of what has actually occurred. As discussed previously, the use of generic explanations was quite common in the native Italian data.

The underlined phrases in the email extracts⁵ below, taken from the Italian native speaker corpus, evidence that the Italian participants resorted to employing generalised and vague accounts, using words such as *imprevisti* (roughly translating to ‘unexpected’) or *circostanze* (‘circumstances’), which do not actually give any indication of what has occurred.

la contatto per informarLa che, a causa di vari imprevisti, la presentazione di domani [data] che io e [nome + cognome] dovevamo preparare non è ancora completa

I am contacting you to let you know that, due to various unforeseen circumstances, tomorrow's presentation [date] that I and [name + surname] should have prepared is not yet complete

Purtroppo varie circostanze ci portano ad avere accumulato un po di ritardo
Unfortunately various circumstances have caused us to accumulate a little lateness

Con la seguente mail sono a scusarmi per non aver presenziato oggi in aula per il test finale a causa di gravi problemi personali

With the following email I am apologising for not being present in class today for the final test due to serious personal problems

In contrast, the Australian learners of Italian tended to provide specific reasons to account for their wrongdoings. Sometimes these excuses were quite concise and straightforward, such as in the case of the technological issues described in the examples below:

Ieri sera, purtroppo ho avuto alcune problemi col mio computer e non potevo usare bene l'internet a consegnare i compiti finali.

Yesterday evening, unfortunately I had some problems with my computer and I could not use the internet well to submit the final essays

Mi dispiace ma abbiamo problemi con il Google Slides è la nostra presentazione era deleted.

I'm sorry but we have problems with the Google Slides and our presentation was deleted

⁵ All email extracts included in this paper are presented as they were written by participants, including grammatical and/or lexical errors. Below each of the extracts, I have provided a translation in English.

In other instances, these explanations were presented in the form of long recounts, such as in this example of a *technological issue*:

Mi dispiace, ma ieri sera non ho consegnato il compito finale perche ho avuto problemi con il mio laptop. Oggi ho bisogno andare al Apple Store, allora non posso consegnarlo fino a quando finire al negozio. Ora sto scrivendo al mio telefono cellulare e non posso accesso il compito.

I'm sorry, but yesterday evening I did not submit the final essay because I had problems with my laptop. Today, I needed to go to the Apple Store, so I cannot submit it until I finish at the store. Now I am writing on my mobile phone and I cannot access my computer.

Overall, in contrast to the explicit and specific explanations favoured by the Australian English control group and the Australian learners of Italian, it seems that Italian students prefer to provide vague reasoning and general explanations. While explicitly stating the reason for the offence having occurred is prominent in the data from both groups of Australian participants, this is not the case in the Italian data.

4.2. *Participants' reflections: Interview data and fieldnotes*

This section presents the findings arising from the interview data and fieldnotes collected from a group of participants following their completion of the DCT.

During the post-task interviews, when asked what they must include in an apology, eight of the nine Australian interviewees made comments regarding the provision of a reason for or an explanation of the offence. For example, one interviewee stated:

it's important at the beginning to just give context at least for what's happened, like, this happened and this is why it happened

This was typical of the responses given, and there was a general consensus among participants that some form of explanation should be offered.

Some interviewees presented the validity of the explanation as essential, as demonstrated below. In some cases, this was related to the kind of image that the participant wished to project to the addressee, specifically, that of a good student.

Um, there definitely needs to be [...] a reason that is not an excuse, but like a genuine reason

I don't want to come across as like a bad student. So, either I had a really good reason for it or, if I didn't have a good reason, I'd prefer to say "sorry" in person and then take what's coming

One of the interviewees communicated that the inclusion of an explanation was even more important than the inclusion of an explicit apology:

I think, once it gets to when you are in this position, there's kind of no point in apologising because it's happened, so it's better to then describe "this has happened, there's a reason for it and I've been doing my best", rather than "oh I'm so sorry this happened"

As illustrated by these excerpts, these interviewees expressed explicit acknowledgement of having to provide a reason for why the offence has occurred. This therefore can explain the prevalence of explicit explanations in the DCT data collected from both Australian groups of participants.

While the interviews demonstrate the importance of explanations as communicated by Australian learners of Italian, native speakers of Italian seem to have a very different perspective.

Opinions commonly expressed by Italian native speakers were:

- i) that to provide an explicit excuse for an offence would suggest that the students were lying about what had happened; and
- ii) that professors and tutors do not care about why something has happened, and nor is it their business.

Hence, the native speakers of Italian appeared to find no benefit in explaining the reasons for an offence to academic staff. This attitude is in stark contrast to the comments made by the learners of Italian in the post-task interviews. Therefore, there seem to be distinct differences between the Italian and Australian participants regarding whether to perform an explanation when apologising, and specifically what types of explanations are appropriate when addressing academic staff.

For some Italian students, any form of apology is not even to be considered. One participant, a native speaker of Italian, in addition to responding to all six DCT scenario prompts, also annotated these prompts and their own responses with comments. Many of these annotations reflected upon the expectations of students and the appropriateness of student responses in the hypothetical DCT scenarios.

In the context of writing to a tutor about not being prepared for a class presentation, the participant wrote in the margin of the paper:

Mi è stato dato un compito, le scuse e i ritardi non dovrebbero esser contemplati

A task was given to me, apologies and delays should not be contemplated

The participant elaborates on this in the email to the professor for the same scenario:

Non mando la mail. Mi presenterei imbottita di farmaci

I wouldn't send the email. I would present myself filled with medications

In the context of writing to the professor about not submitting the final essay for a course, the participant wrote:

Mi metto a lavorare di notte per di consegnare il compito. Mandare una mail del genere è vergognoso ed è un ottimo modo per dimostrare di non essere all'altezza.

I would dedicate myself to working at night to submit the task. To send an email of this sort is shameful and is an optimal way of demonstrating that I don't measure up.

The response of this student echoes comments noted in my fieldnotes from conversations held with other native speakers of Italian. Overall, these comments suggest that within the Italian academic context there can be no excuses for not completing a task or an assessment. This marks an interesting difference with the Australian learners' insistence that explanations are an important aspect of apologies, thus demonstrating how differently Australian and Italian students perceive student expectations and how to appropriately perform apologies in academic contexts.

In fact, during the post-task interviews, some learners of Italian did acknowledge the cultural differences in Italian and Australian educational systems and expressed some confusion regarding the norms of the Italian language classroom in Australia. Specifically, the fact that many Italian language teachers in Australian universities are native speakers

of Italian was identified as a point of uncertainty, in that some participants were unsure as to whether they were to follow the social norms of an Italian classroom or those of an Australian classroom. Participants who mentioned this recognised the intercultural nature of exchanges within their own language classes, and thus made some interesting observations and comments. One of these participants stated:

I always try to think that I am in Italy, and I know that they're with their professors very formal, you know, you can't like do certain things and even though [our tutor]'s not like that with us, he's very, you know, friendly and nice.

Talking specifically of completing the DCT, the participant later continued:

I kept looking at [our tutor], because I feel like he is the thing that bridges the gap between Australia and Italy and like the educational setting, and I'm thinking, "I know if he was teaching in Italy, it would be different, his students would be different" [...] I was thinking about him and I was struggling with how to balance it out.

These comments offer further insight into the language choices of the Australian learners of Italian and the rationale behind their construction of emails during the DCT.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What has been presented in this article is but a small part of the research data collected and analysed in this project, and yet it presents some insightful cross-cultural findings regarding the construction of apologies.

Across the three participant groups, explanations were provided in over 65% of the elicited emails. The group which provided the lowest number of explanations was the native speakers of Italian (58.15% of emails composed by native Italian speakers included an explanation). Meanwhile, the Australian English native speakers and the Australian learners of Italian included apologies in 65.83% and 74.06% of their emails, respectively. These figures suggest that explanations are in fact a key stage of apology construction, particularly for Australians. This therefore paints a very different picture to the aforementioned findings of the CCSARP, in which explanations accounted for only 4% of the apologies produced by native speakers of Australian English. Likewise, the native Italian participants in my research performed explanations much more frequently than those in Nuzzo's (2007) aforementioned research. In contrast, Verzella and Tommaso (2020) found that Italian students tended to use explanations when refusing a request.

There are several potential reasons for this differentiation, including differences in the types of apologies collected and the different contexts of data collection in my project and in these other studies. In Verzella and Tommaso's (2020) research, for example, participants were asked verbally if they would join a conversation group to help international students practice their language skills, emphasising that this group would meet three times a week – this is a very different scenario and method of data collection to those used in my research. Additionally, my research focalises on a very particular communicative relationship, that from student to teacher, and all scenarios required participants to respond to a situation in which they hypothetically had not fulfilled their responsibilities as a student. These situational factors may have influenced participants' selection of apology strategies.

Furthermore, when comparing explanations provided by participants across the three participant groups, distinctions emerged. While Australian learners of Italian and native

speakers of Australian English favoured the provision of specific and informative explanations, native speakers of Italian were instead far more likely to provide explanations which were vague and indeterminate. The findings for the Italian participants align with previous studies which demonstrate a preference for generic explanations by Italian native speakers (Nuzzo, Cortés Velásquez, 2020; Brocca *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, these tendencies seem to be influenced by the differing perspectives of Italian and Australian university students regarding student-teacher relationships and how to appropriately communicate within this relationship. Although only nine learners of Italian participated in the post-task interviews and hence, the attitudes and perspectives of the vast majority of DCT participants are not present in this article, the findings of my research do echo comments by previous scholars regarding cross-cultural differences in Australian and Italian education contexts (Formentelli, Hajek, 2013, 2015, 2016). Specifically, the cross-cultural work of Formentelli and Hajek reveals differences in the interpersonal norms enacted by students and academic staff in Australian and Italian university classrooms contexts (Formentelli, Hajek, 2015, 2016), and the tendency of Italian language classrooms in Australia to adhere to Australian norms of student - teacher interaction rather than Italian norms contexts (Formentelli, Hajek, 2013). These observations are reflected in my own findings. Even beyond the classroom context, politeness norms vary across cultures, and the differentiation in this research between explanations performed by Italian students and those performed by Australian students may also be attributed to broader cross-cultural differences between the Italian and Australian cultures – particularly when the speech act in question is as delicate and varied as the apology is.

The findings from the data analysed in this study, together with the differences with the results from other studies, therefore point to the fact that apologies are highly contextualised speech acts which are closely entwined with cultural ideologies and values. The Italian and Australian university contexts are quite different, both in terms of the relationships between students and academic staff and the university policies⁶ in place, and this signifies that students in Italy and students in Australia will use language in culturally-specific ways, even when using a common language (in this case, Italian). This is reflected in the apology strategies adopted by the three participant groups and the way in which they constructed explanations, as well as in the post-task reflections provided by the native speakers of Italian and the Australian learners of Italian.

As mentioned in the introduction, while other studies have generally identified the provision of an explanation as an apology strategy (see: Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989b; Lipson, 1994; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Nuzzo, 2007; Olshtain, Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987, 1995; Trubnikova, 2017), explanations have not received much attention in the literature. What this article has done is bring an overlooked apology strategy to the forefront and revealed the role – and shape – that explanations can have in performing apologies within an academic context, including highlighting cross-cultural nuances in the construction of these explanations. The differences which have emerged between the Australian and Italian participants point to potential linguistic and pragmatic difficulties that Australian university students may face when operating in an Italian academic context, and to the necessity therefore of reconsidering the place of pragmatics and intercultural awareness in language teaching.

⁶ These refer to official university policies and processes regarding, for example, late submissions or special considerations for assessment tasks.

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APPENDIX

Complete definitions of all categories of explanations (i.e. the six items identified in Table 3)

Generic reasons: refers to unspecified or vague explanations which do not indicate a specific reason for the offence.

Health reasons: explanations which refer to health problems, either of the participant or a family member.

Issues with the academic task: these explanations refer to difficulties in completing the task which is referred to in the DCT prompt (i.e. completing a class test, submitting an essay, or presenting in class).

Other commitments: refers to commitments outside of the task which have impacted upon participants' ability to complete the task.

Combined reasons: in these cases, multiple reasons are referred to in the one clause.

Complete definitions of all types of explanations (i.e. the 13 items identified in Table 4), listed in alphabetical order:

Academic difficulties: difficulty in completing the work, due to complications with the work itself, conflicting schedules (in the context of a presentation with a partner), or time management issues.

Busy schedule: this refers to being busy with other university work or with extra-curricular activities (not including paid employment or family commitments).

Emergency: an unspecified emergency (not including family emergencies).

Employment commitments: the conflict of paid employment with university commitments.

Explicitly blame another: the participant explicitly blames another student for the offence; this usually occurs in the presentation scenario and is thereby scenario-specific.

Family commitments: non-specified commitments due to or relating to one's family.

Family illness or misadventure: illness or medical concerns experienced by one's family, including caring for ill family members and transporting/attending the medical appointments of family members.

Important event: a significant event which impeded the student from attending university or completing university work, including weddings, Christenings, and moving to a new home.

Personal reasons: these reasons are non-specified, and include personal misadventure and non-specified, and often grave, problems within one's family (not including illness and misadventure).

Personal illness: one's own illness (or, in the context of a presentation with a partner, the illness of the hypothetical classmate with whom the participant must complete the task).

Technological issues: difficulties with or the failure of technology, including broken equipment, problems with internet connections, or dysfunctional systems or programs.

Transport issues: issues in physically arriving at university, including traffic, public transport delays or strikes, and minor car accidents.

Unspecified circumstances: includes references to unspecified problems, issues or circumstances which do not indicate what has actually occurred.

