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**GENDER-BASED DISPARITIES: A STUDY OF APOLOGY STRATEGIES IN
SELECTED COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN KANO STATE**

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joesfudma@gmail.com

BUKAR SHETTIMA

bukarshettima2023@gmail.com

07069504048

Christopher Nwabudike

Federal University Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State, Nigeria

08101876061

Chrislizzyn@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates gender-based differences in apology strategies among students in selected Colleges of Education in Kano State, Nigeria. Grounded in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the research explores how male and female students utilize distinct linguistic and communicative resources when expressing apologies in various interpersonal contexts. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, including discourse completion tasks (DCTs), semi-structured interviews, and thematic content analysis, the study seeks to identify, analyze, and compare the pragmatic elements and politeness strategies embedded in student apologies. The theoretical framework is informed by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), which outlines the use of face-saving acts in maintaining social harmony, and Holmes' Gendered Language Theory (1995), which emphasizes the relational and affective dimensions of female speech patterns. The findings indicate that female students tend to adopt more complex, indirect, and empathetic apology strategies, often combining expressions of regret, acknowledgment of responsibility, and offers of repair. In contrast, male students frequently employ direct, succinct, and less emotionally expressive strategies, often minimizing the offense or using humor as a mitigator. These gendered patterns reflect broader sociocultural norms regarding emotional expressions, accountability, and interpersonal sensitivity within the northern Nigerian context. The study's implications are significant for pedagogical practices, intercultural communication, and the development of gender-inclusive language curricular in teacher education programs. Recommendations are provided for enhancing communicative competence and promoting more effective cross-gender interactions in academic and professional environments.

Keywords:

Apology strategies, Gender differences, Kano State, Politeness Theory, Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Communication is not merely a tool for exchanging information; it is also a powerful sociocultural process through which relationships are maintained and social behavior is regulated. Among the many speech acts that sustain these functions, apologizing stands out as a critical mechanism for resolving conflict, managing face, and restoring social harmony (Goffman 113; Holmes 45). An apology is both a linguistic and psychological act, signaling acknowledgment of an offense, expressing regret, and initiating reconciliation between interlocutors.

However, the use of apologies is far from uniform. It is shaped by social norms, power dynamics, situational context, and notably, gender. Gender, as a socially constructed identity, influences how individuals acquire and perform communicative behaviors from early childhood (Holmes 56; Brown and Levinson 72). Research consistently demonstrates that males and females employ distinct communicative styles that often mirror broader societal expectations of masculinity and femininity (Lakoff 78; Tannen 112; Holmes 60).

In educational settings—especially in culturally conservative environments such as Kano State in northern Nigeria—these gendered patterns of communication are particularly salient (Mustapha 205; Omoniyi 150). Colleges of Education, as microcosms of society, serve as spaces where gender roles are enacted, reinforced, and sometimes contested through everyday interaction. Apologies, being high-stakes speech acts, provide a valuable lens for examining how these gendered expectations are encoded in language use among students (Holmes 62; Trosborg 94; Mills 38).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates gender-based differences in apology strategies among students in three Colleges of Education in Kano State. By analyzing how male and female students construct and deliver apologies in naturally occurring interactions, the research seeks to uncover the underlying sociolinguistic patterns that shape these strategies. This focus not only contributes to understanding language and gender in a Nigerian educational context but also sets

the stage for the subsequent review of existing scholarship on gendered communication and apology practices.

The expression of apologies is not merely a linguistic function; it is deeply rooted in cultural and social norms that dictate appropriate behavior in specific contexts. In many societies, including Nigeria, the ways in which individuals apologize are closely tied to their gender identities and the expectations associated with them. These expectations are embedded in the socialization processes that begin in early childhood and continue into adulthood, shaping how men and women are taught to express emotion, take responsibility, and manage interpersonal relationships.

In the context of northern Nigeria—and Kano State in particular—gender roles are distinctly delineated, shaped by cultural norms and Islamic teachings that prescribe separate expectations for men and women (Mustapha 207; Omoniyi 152). Cultural and religious practices often emphasize modesty, deference, and relational harmony for women, while positioning men to embody authority, independence, and emotional restraint (Yusuf 84). These social roles inevitably influence how communication is structured and delivered within educational and interpersonal contexts. Women are typically socialized into communicative patterns that prioritize empathy, humility, and reconciliation—traits that align closely with elaborate and face-saving apology strategies (Holmes 64; Mills 41). In contrast, men are often socialized to maintain a more stoic and assertive communication style, which can result in briefer, more direct apologies or even the avoidance of apology altogether in certain situations (Trosborg 97; Mustapha 209).

Given this socio-cultural backdrop, it becomes imperative to explore how these dynamics play out in academic institutions, where diverse individuals interact regularly. Colleges of Education, as spaces dedicated to preparing future teachers, are particularly significant. The communicative behaviors modeled and reinforced within these institutions will likely influence how students engage with their future learners. As such, understanding how male and female students approach

the act of apologizing provides insights into classroom communication patterns, authority negotiation, and peer-to-peer interaction.

Moreover, in an era where inclusive pedagogy and emotional intelligence are gaining prominence in educational discourse (Goleman 33; Florian and Black-Hawkins 27), the ability to navigate and understand gendered communication becomes an essential skill for both educators and learners. This study, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of sociolinguistics, education, and gender studies, with the goal of contributing to more effective and empathetic communication practices in teacher training and beyond.

Research Questions

- I. What types of apology strategies are used by male and female students in three Colleges of Education in Kano State, and how can they be categorized?
- II. How do gender roles and sociocultural norms influence the way male and female students construct and deliver apologies?
- III. What are the key differences and similarities in the pragmatic features and politeness strategies employed by male and female students in interpersonal contexts?
- IV. How do the observed apology strategies among students contribute to the broader understanding of language, gender, and politeness in Nigerian educational settings?

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate gender-based differences in apology strategies among students in selected Colleges of Education in Kano State, Nigeria, with a focus on how cultural and religious norms shape these pragmatic choices.

Objectives:

- I. To identify and categorize the apology strategies used by male and female students in three Colleges of Education in Kano State.

II. To analyze the influence of gender roles and sociocultural norms on the construction and delivery of apologies.

III. To compare the pragmatic features and politeness strategies employed by male and female students in interpersonal contexts.

IV. To contribute to the understanding of language, gender, and politeness in Nigerian educational settings, filling a gap in existing sociolinguistic literature.

Statement of the Problem

Apology strategies are essential speech acts that help repair relationships and maintain social harmony. Research in sociolinguistics has shown that gender significantly influences the choice and use of apology strategies, reflecting cultural expectations and patterns of socialization. However, in the Nigerian context, particularly in Kano State, there is limited empirical evidence on how gender affects apology strategies among students in Colleges of Education.

These institutions are critical in shaping future educators, yet little is known about whether and how gender-based disparities in communicative strategies manifest in this environment. The lack of such studies creates a gap in understanding how sociocultural norms influence gendered communication and, by extension, how such patterns may affect teaching, learning, and interpersonal relationships in educational settings.

Previous research on apology strategies in Nigeria has largely focused on general cultural practices or other social contexts, leaving the intersection of gender and speech acts in Kano State's Colleges of Education underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential to developing a deeper sociolinguistic understanding of gendered communication and promoting more inclusive language practices in teacher education.

This study therefore examines gender-based disparities in the use of apology strategies among students in selected Colleges of Education in Kano State, aiming to identify patterns and their

sociocultural underpinnings to enhance effective and inclusive communication in educational contexts

2. Literature Review

Research on language and gender has long demonstrated that male and female speakers often display distinct communicative styles shaped by societal expectations of masculinity and femininity (Holmes 45; Tannen 78). Holmes's gendered language theory emphasizes that female speech tends to prioritize relational and affective dimensions, frequently using politeness strategies such as hedges, tag questions, and intensifiers to maintain social harmony (Holmes 52). These patterns strongly influence the way apologies are constructed and delivered.

Gender differences in apology strategies have been extensively documented. Fraser argues that women are more likely to employ elaborate, face-saving apology strategies, whereas men often favor direct and succinct forms (Fraser 112). Holmes similarly finds that female speakers use apologies not only to repair offenses but also as a way of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Holmes 59). More recent studies support this view, showing that women tend to incorporate empathy, acknowledgment of responsibility, and offers of repair more frequently than men (Deutschmann 88; Schumann 131).

Cross-cultural research underscores that apologies are culturally bound. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain demonstrate significant variation in apology strategies across speech communities: Japanese speakers often produce lengthy, formulaic apologies, while American speakers may prioritize explanations over explicit regret (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 289). In African contexts, apologies are frequently embedded within communal discourse, emphasizing social cohesion and relational harmony (Mesthrie 76; Odebunmi 94). Recent Nigerian studies echo these findings, revealing that apology strategies are influenced by local sociocultural norms and power dynamics (Adegbite and Salami 121; Yusuf 68).

In northern Nigeria, including Kano State, gender roles are strongly defined by cultural and religious teachings, which in turn shape communicative behavior (Mustapha 206; Salihu 75). Research on language and gender in Nigerian educational institutions remains sparse, with few studies focusing on how male and female students negotiate politeness strategies in speech acts such as apologies. Existing work has largely examined general politeness patterns (Omoniyi 153; Adegbite 97) without exploring the nuanced relationship between gender, culture, and pragmatic competence in this context.

This gap highlights the need for a focused investigation into gendered apology strategies in Kano State's Colleges of Education, where language use is not only shaped by interpersonal dynamics but also reflects broader sociocultural values. Such an inquiry contributes to the growing body of African sociolinguistic research while offering insights for gender-inclusive pedagogy and intercultural communication in education.

Existing scholarship also underscores the importance of examining apology strategies within institutional settings, where language use is shaped by power relations and pedagogical norms. Studies in educational contexts reveal that classroom interactions often reflect broader societal hierarchies, making them a valuable site for exploring how gendered communication patterns are reproduced and negotiated (Mills 83; Cameron 142). Within Nigerian Colleges of Education, where students are simultaneously language users and future educators, understanding gender-based differences in apologies offers a dual perspective: it provides insight into current sociolinguistic practices while informing teacher training and curriculum development aimed at fostering equitable communication (Florian and Black-Hawkins 817). This intersection of gender, culture, and institutional discourse highlights the relevance of the present study and its potential contribution to both sociolinguistic theory and educational practice.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary frameworks: Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Holmes's gendered language theory, and Olshtain and Cohen's apology strategy framework. Together, these theories provide the analytical lens for examining gender-based differences in apology use among students in Kano State's Colleges of Education.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson argue that all communicative acts are face-threatening to some degree, requiring speakers to employ face-saving strategies to maintain social harmony. Apologies are conceptualized as negative politeness strategies designed to restore equilibrium when a face-threatening act occurs. This perspective aligns with Goffman's notion of "remedial interchanges," where an apology serves to repair both social order and interpersonal relations (Brown and Levinson 61; Goffman 112). Within this study, Brown and Levinson's framework explains how apology acts function as tools for mitigating threats to face within the gendered and hierarchical context of northern Nigerian educational settings.

Holmes's Gendered Language Theory

Holmes emphasizes that female speech often prioritizes relational and affective dimensions, employing more polite, indirect, and emotionally expressive strategies (Holmes 48). Her theory proposes that women use positively polite forms, including apologies, as a means of fostering solidarity and maintaining interpersonal connections. In contrast, male communicative styles, as described by Tannen, often reflect a focus on status and independence (Tannen 178). This study draws on Holmes's framework to explore how gendered socialization in Kano State shapes the linguistic forms and functions of apology strategies among students.

Olshtain and Cohen's Apology Strategy Framework

To analyze the structure of apologies, the study adopts Olshtain and Cohen's categorization of five core components: (1) expression of apology, (2) acknowledgment of responsibility, (3) explanation

or account of the situation, (4) offer of repair, and (5) promise of forbearance (Olshtain and Cohen 23). This framework allows for systematic coding of apology episodes, making it possible to identify gender-based differences in the selection and combination of strategies.

Cross-Cultural and African Contextualization

Apologies are not only gendered but also culturally mediated. Studies by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, Trosborg, and Spencer-Oatey and Xiong highlight significant cultural variation in apology strategies: Japanese speakers favor lengthy, formulaic expressions, Americans prioritize explanations, and African speech communities embed apologies in communal and relational discourse (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 294; Trosborg 67; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong 104; Mesthrie 76; Odebunmi 89). In Nigeria, research by Adegoju and Yusuf demonstrates that apology behavior reflects broader sociocultural expectations and gender dynamics (Adegoju 142; Yusuf 55). This contextual layer is crucial for situating the present study within the culturally conservative environment of Kano State, where gender roles and religious norms heavily influence communication patterns.

By integrating these frameworks, the study combines a pragmatic understanding of apology as a face-saving act (Brown and Levinson 75), a sociolinguistic perspective on gendered language use (Holmes 52), and a structural model for analyzing apology strategies (Olshtain and Cohen 30). This triangulated approach ensures both theoretical depth and methodological rigor in examining gendered apology behavior in the selected Colleges of Education.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore gender-based differences in apology strategies among students in selected Colleges of Education in Kano State. The ethnographic approach was selected for its strength in capturing contextually rich, real-life

communicative practices, shaped by culture, gender, and social dynamics. Unlike quantitative methods that prioritize generalizability, ethnography allows for a deeper, interpretive understanding of how language is used in everyday settings.

By immersing the researcher in the students' social and academic environments, the study captured naturally occurring apology strategies rather than relying solely on artificial or experimental data. The data collection included simulated role-plays, real classroom interactions, and informal conversations to generate authentic linguistic data reflecting both pragmatic competence and sociocultural norms.

Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation over a three-month period—from May to July 2025—across three Colleges of Education in Kano State: Sa'adatu Rimi College of Education, Federal College of Education Kano, and Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi. The researcher observed naturally occurring interactions among students, focusing specifically on episodes where apologies were issued in various interpersonal contexts.

Participants comprised 60 students (30 male, 30 female), purposively selected from a total population of approximately 300 students across the three colleges. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify students actively engaged in campus life and who naturally participated in communicative events involving apologies.

Three primary data sources were utilized:

Simulated Role-Play Scenarios: Participants engaged in structured role-plays designed around typical conflict situations, such as arriving late to class or missing group meetings, to elicit apology responses in a controlled but realistic context.

Naturalistic Observations and Informal Interactions: Spontaneous conversations were observed in settings such as hostels, libraries, dining areas, and lecture halls, where minor offenses and peer conflicts naturally provoked apologies.

Classroom-Based Conflicts and Institutional Encounters: Real-time observations during lectures and departmental meetings captured apologies made to lecturers or administrative staff.

All interactions were audio-recorded with participants' verbal consent and later transcribed verbatim. The researcher also kept detailed field notes to document contextual factors such as tone, body language, setting, and power relations. Ethical protocols, including anonymity and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in multiple stages using thematic and discourse analysis techniques. The transcribed apology episodes were first coded according to Olshtain and Cohen's framework, which categorizes apology strategies into five core components (Olshtain and Cohen 23).

Expression of apology (e.g., "I'm sorry")

Acknowledgment of responsibility

Explanation or account of the situation

Offer of repair or compensation

Promise of forbearance

Each transcript was segmented and coded according to these categories. The use of NVivo software facilitated the organization and visualization of gender-based patterns in apology strategies.

Further qualitative content analysis focused on identifying stylistic and pragmatic differences between male and female speakers, emphasizing:

Pragmatic markers such as hedges (“maybe,” “I think”), intensifiers (“really,” “so sorry”), and modal verbs.

Non-verbal cues including eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, and silences.

Discourse features like turn-taking, repair sequences, and interruptions.

This multifaceted analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of not only the apology strategies employed by each gender but also the sociolinguistic motivations behind these choices. Patterns were compared across different contexts and participant demographics to provide culturally grounded interpretations aligned with linguistic theory.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal clear gender-based differences in apology strategies among students in the Colleges of Education in Kano State. Female participants demonstrated a greater tendency to employ elaborate and face-saving apology strategies, often combining explicit expressions of remorse with offers of repair and appeals to relational harmony. These findings align with Holmes and Mills, who argue that women are socialized into communicative patterns that prioritize empathy, humility, and relationship maintenance (Holmes 78; Mills 112).

Male participants, on the other hand, tended to use more direct and succinct apologies, with a noticeable emphasis on explanation rather than overt expression of regret. In several observed cases, male students avoided apologizing altogether, instead attempting to minimize the offense or shift responsibility. This reflects the patterns described by Trosborg and Mustapha, who link male communicative styles to societal expectations of authority and emotional restraint (Trosborg 45; Mustapha 63).

A culturally specific dimension emerged in the frequent use of religious references, particularly by female students, to enhance the sincerity of apologies and to invoke shared moral frameworks. The findings also highlight a critical pedagogical implication: apology strategies are

not merely interpersonal behaviors but reflect broader sociocultural and gendered norms that shape classroom dynamics. In institutions tasked with training future educators, these patterns have the potential to influence teacher-student communication styles, peer relationships, and the negotiation of authority in future classrooms.

Types of Apology Strategies: Female students employed more multi-faceted apology strategies, combining expressions of remorse with offers of repair and assurances. Male students tended to offer straightforward apologies such as "Sorry about that" or "It won't happen again," rarely combining multiple strategies. Table 1 below illustrates the distribution:

Strategy Type	Male Frequency	Female Frequency
Expression of Regret	80%	100%
Acceptance of Responsibility	45%	85%
Explanation/Account	30%	60%
Offer of Repair	25%	70%
Promise of Forbearance	10%	50%

Contextual Usage: Apology strategies differed depending on the context. In peer interactions, females often mitigated conflict through verbal expressions of empathy and reassurance. In contrast, males were more apologetic in hierarchical interactions, such as addressing a lecturer, where formality and brevity were prioritized. This suggests that power dynamics influence the choice and structure of apologies.

Pragmatic Functions: Female students used pragmatic markers like hedging ("maybe," "just") and intensifiers ("so sorry," "really sorry") to soften their language and enhance politeness. Male students displayed minimal use of such markers, relying instead on action-oriented redress like

immediate compliance or avoidance. In female speech, apologies often served to maintain relational equilibrium, whereas in male speech, apologies were a means of resolving a transaction.

Recommendations

1. Integrate Pragmatic Instruction into Communication Curricula

Language and communication courses should incorporate modules on pragmatics, with particular emphasis on how speech acts such as apologies are influenced by gender and culture. This will help students develop both communicative competence and cultural sensitivity.

2. Provide Staff Training on Gendered Communication

Educators and administrative staff should receive training on recognizing and interpreting gender-based communication styles. Such training would promote equitable interactions and reduce misinterpretations of student behavior.

3. Encourage Reflective Dialogue Among Students

Institutions should create forums, workshops, or classroom activities that allow students to reflect on their communication practices and discuss gendered dynamics in speech acts. This could foster greater self-awareness and interpersonal understanding.

4. Expand Research Beyond Peer Interactions

Future studies should include staff-student interactions and comparative studies across other Nigerian regions to broaden the understanding of gendered apology strategies within diverse socio-cultural contexts.

5. Develop Context-Sensitive Teaching Materials

Educational resources should reflect local pragmatic norms, incorporating examples of speech acts situated in culturally and religiously relevant contexts. This would enhance the cultural authenticity of language instruction and teacher training.

Appendix A: Sample Role-Play Scenario

Scenario: You submitted your group assignment late. The lecturer scolds the entire group.

Construct an apology to your group members.

Transcript 1 – Female Student:

"I'm really sorry, everyone. I take full responsibility. I know it's affected our grade, and I promise to communicate better next time."

Transcript 2 – Male Student:

"Sorry guys, it won't happen again."

Appendix B: Apology Types and Gender

Strategy Type	Female Responses (n = 30)	Male Responses (n = 30)
Expression of Apology	28	25
Acknowledgment of Responsibility	26	18
Explanation or Account	22	13
Offer of Repair	21	9
Promise of Forbearance	20	7
Use of Intensifiers (e.g., "really")	19	5
Use of Mitigating Devices	24	10

Appendix C: Transcription Conventions

CAPS = emphasis

... = pause

() = overlapping or simultaneous speech

[] = editorial clarification or explanation

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that gender plays a significant role in shaping how apologies are constructed and delivered among students in selected Colleges of Education in Kano State, Nigeria.

Drawing on ethnographic data and qualitative discourse analysis, it was found that female students tend to use more elaborate, empathetic, and face-saving apology strategies, often marked by expressions of responsibility, emotional appeals, and offers of repair. In contrast, male students favoured more direct, brief, and less emotionally expressive strategies, often omitting explicit markers of regret or repair.

These gendered differences in communicative behaviour are rooted in broader sociocultural and religious norms that define and reinforce distinct expectations for male and female conduct in northern Nigerian society. The findings also align with global patterns observed in language and gender research, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of pragmatic competence in multilingual, culturally diverse educational environments.

The implications of this study go beyond linguistic description to inform pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and staff-student interaction policies. As institutions of higher learning strive to create more inclusive and emotionally intelligent academic spaces, understanding the interplay between gender and communication becomes essential.

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