

# The Cantonese apology style for personal offences in native and second languages in electronic communication

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## Abstract

The paper examines Cantonese tertiary students' email apology style for personal offences to teachers in their native language (L1, Cantonese) and second language (L2, English) learnt at school by testing three hypotheses. Firstly, the Cantonese students' L1 and L2 apologies are always multi-componential, with at least two parts in one apology email, in spite of the fact that there is no statistically significant difference between Cantonese and English strategies and patterns. Secondly, in terms of linguistic devices, they adopt a consistent linguistic choice in both languages by means of using the low or mid degree of apologetic verbs to express their regret. Thirdly, the expressions of *I'm sorry* and *deoi3 bat1 hei3* not only express regret but also initiate and prepare for the upcoming actions. It is argued that Cantonese students generally tend to adopt a multi-componential apology style in either language, and the use of low degree of apologetic verbs may be influenced by the nature of the offence and the students' interpretation of the seriousness of the offence. The findings have provided a better understanding of Chinese apology style, with particular reference to Cantonese, for personal offences and corresponding linguistic devices in a specific medium and a specific communicative situation.

**Keywords:** Cantonese, English, apology work, personal offence, electronic communication.

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## Apology as a speech act and as a politeness strategy

Apology is an important speech act in human communication. It is classified as an 'expressive act' in Searle's taxonomy (Searle 1969, 1975). Apologizing involves at least two parties – the person who initiates the act of apology and the recipient (Olshtain & Cohen 1983), and it is found to be multi-functional, from being personal to social or political events, including helping the apologizer to 'set things right' (in the words of Olshtain & Cohen 1983), harmonizing relationships between interlocutors (Olshtain 1989), preserving social relations within and between ethnic groups (Holmes 1990, Obeng 1999), face-repairing work (Meier 1995) managing discourse (Bean & Johnstone 1994) and maintaining equilibrium between nations (Zhang 2001). Whatever is said, an apology for an offence of any kind is a face-threatening act to the apologizer.

The main research into the speech act of apologising was first proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), based on Fraser's nine strategies for apologizing (Fraser 1981:263) from a linguistic perspective. Their work formed the base of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) which analyzed the structure and linguistic devices of apologies. Its categories for apologies were widely adopted by subsequent researchers to examine the form, meaning and respective cross-linguistic comparisons in different cultures (e.g., Olshtain & Cohen 1983, Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989, Voller & Olshtain 1989, Trosborg 1987, Holmes 1990, Suszczyńska 1999) in the subjects' first and foreign languages in the 90s, resulting in a wealth of typologies. Some researchers approach the same topic from a conversation analysis perspective from the late '90s onwards, focusing on its function (Bean & Johnstone 1994, Jaworski 1994) and sequential organization (Robinson 2004). Apology is also viewed 'not only as a simple speech act but also a discourse event extending from individual to national behavior'. (Zhang 2001:383), and its production and interpretation reflect both cultural and ideological differences from both sides. The study of apology from different perspectives offer insights into the varied aspects of apology – form, function, typologies, meaning and sequential organization, as well as its functions from an individual user level to a national socio-political level.

## Chinese apology style and apologetic verbs

There is a dearth of research on Chinese apology style. Recent studies focused on the strategies and corresponding linguistic devices mainly used by Putonghua-speaking Chinese and/or Putonghua learners of English based on written texts and questionnaire data. Zhan (1992) found two apology strategies used by Chinese after committing an offence or violating the social norm in a classical book written in standard written Chinese – *The Red Chamber*. These strategies are: (1) begging forgiveness and saying something to deprecate oneself or raise the partner, and (2) making an apology in an indirect way by explaining the reason why one did not do something involving the partner. In a cross-cultural study, Liu (1987, quoted in Zhang 2001) found that the Chinese learners of English overused the strategies of ‘acknowledgement of responsibilities,’ ‘repair’ and ‘minimization,’ but under-utilized the strategy of ‘explanation or account’ in comparison with American English speakers.

Regarding linguistic expressions for an apology, Zhang (2001), who examined the interrelationship between apology, culture and ideology in political discourse between the Chinese and the American governments in an international affair, states that the Chinese language (i.e. Putonghua/standard written Chinese) has a ‘complex system of apologizing vocabulary and a greater emphasis on assuming responsibility’ (p.383). He lists six apologetic verbs in the Chinese language that mediate interpersonal relationships. They are:

Table 1

Chinese	English
<i>Dui bu qi</i>	Sorry
<i>Bao qian</i>	Be sorry, feel apologetic, regret
<i>Zhi qian</i>	Apologize (assuming responsibility)
<i>Dao qian</i>	Apologize, make an apology (assuming responsibility)
<i>Pei li</i>	Apologize, offer an apology (for inappropriate behavior or mannerism)
<i>Qing zui</i>	Admit one’s error and ask for punishment; humbly apologize

According to a number of Chinese (Hanyu) dictionaries, the six verbs are synonyms, but with some differences in the degree of regret, sincerity, acknowledgement of responsibility or remedial actions according to their literal meanings, from simply expressing regret, admitting one’s fault as a sin to asking for punishment. The use of the six verbs is indeed determined by a number of socio-cultural variables and expectations such as cultural norm, social and power hierarchies between the speaker and the hearer, offence and linguistic choices. For instance, a son may be expected to use a high degree of apologetic verb to express an apology and make a promise to his father for not being naughty again. Based on the literal meanings of the six verbs, they can be ranked as follows.

Table 2

Chinese	Literal Meaning of the phrase	Equivalent English expressions	Degree of regret, , responsibility & remedial actions
<i>Dui bu qi</i>	Expressing regret towards someone	Sorry	Least
<i>Bao qian</i>			

	Showing one's psychological uncomfortable and regrettable feeling caused by one's fault	Regret (assuming psychological uncomfort)	Most
<i>Zhi qian/dao qian</i>	Making an official self-criticism, admitting fault and showing an apologetic feeling to someone	Make an apology for/apologize	
<i>Pei li</i>	Making an apology to someone, offering a compensation	Make an apology (assuming compensation)	
<i>Qing zui</i>	Admitting one's sin and asking for punishment	Admit one's sin and ask for punishment (remedial action)/ humbly apologize	

In contrast, American English speakers usually use *I'm sorry/sorry* to acknowledge any infringement or imposition or offence because individual independence and autonomy are the great concern in every social context in the United States (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998). The expression is an acknowledgement of the speaker's responsibility and is regarded as 'an expression of dismay and regret at an unpleasantness suffered by the speaker and/or the addressee' as a result of violation of someone's rights or hurting someone's feelings in English (Borkin & Reinhart 1978:61). It may only carry a culturally salient meaning which does not necessarily mean regret or dismay as expressed (Kotani, 2002). Nevertheless, *I'm sorry/sorry* is still the most common apology phrase/word to express regret for an offence that has occurred, and for an offence that is about to occur (Edmondson 1981:282-283, quoted in Bean & Johnstone, 1994:61). However, in Zhang's view (2001), the expression in English does not constitute any sense of apology from the Chinese perception as the Chinese expect someone to assume the responsibility in an apology. Thus, the cultural and ideological differences not only affect interpretation but also production in terms of linguistic choices for an offence at either a personal or a national level.

## The Study

### *Aim and hypotheses*

Given that the Chinese language has a complex system of apologizing vocabulary, different cultural expectation on apology and limited research on Chinese apology style, the study continues to explore the apology style of Chinese with particular reference to the Cantonese who are a major ethnic group that speaks the dialect in Hong Kong, a special administrative zone in China, from an interlanguage perspective by comparing the subjects' apologies for personal offences based on authentic data – emails written in their native language (L1, in this case Cantonese) and second language learnt at school (L2, in this case English). The review on apology strategies in standard written Chinese used by Putonghua speakers or in written texts, and corresponding linguistic choices in both Chinese and English provides the basis for the following hypotheses about Cantonese apology strategies and linguistic choices.

*Hypothesis 1: (Apology strategies and style) Hong Kong Cantonese structure their apology discourse in Cantonese and English in a different manner, using different strategies. In the same way as Putonghua-speaking Chinese, Hong Kong Cantonese assume responsibility, beg for forgiveness, deprecate oneself and/or explain in Cantonese. In English, they acknowledge responsibility, repair, minimize and/or explain.*

*Hypothesis 2: (Linguistic choice in Cantonese) Hong Kong Cantonese use a range of apologetic verbs to express different degrees of regret, acknowledgement of responsibility or remedial actions in Cantonese.*

*Hypothesis 3: (Linguistic choice in English) Hong Kong Cantonese use the English apologetic verbs that correspond to the Cantonese ones to express different degrees of regret, acknowledgement of responsibility or remedial actions.*

### **Source of data and data collection**

The apologies collected for the study were email apologies for personal offences in a university. Email is an indispensable modern electronic communication tool, particularly in the academic context, in which both students and teachers have access and knowledge to manage the system. The context is a real community in which to practise human communication and language use, and the email discourse is a valid and reliable source for the study of communication and language. Apologies for personal offences are characterized by regrettable intent and effect, and may involve relatively repeated and elaborated forms, including explanatory accounts (Bean & Johnstone 1994:62).

A total of one hundred and seventy-one English emails (171 emails) and 18 Cantonese emails were collected from four Cantonese English teachers and two Cantonese Chinese teachers who received the emails from their first-year university Cantonese students in the same academic year. The number of English emails exceeded that of the Cantonese emails because many students are used to communicating online in English in Hong Kong. Their apologies were about personal offences, including not being able to submit assignments on time, not being able to attend a scheduled meeting and absence from class. The various types of personal offences identified from both languages are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: A summary of various types of personal offences

Type/ Language	Frequency	
	Cantonese (L1)	English (L2)
Not able to submit assignments on time	11	70
Not able to attend a scheduled meeting/appointment	1	36
Absent from class/test		23
Causing trouble or inconvenience to teacher	5	38
Late for school/meeting	1	2
Early departure		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>171</b>

### **Subjects:**

The subjects were native speakers of Cantonese, aged 19-22, studying in a Hong Kong university during the research period. All of them had studied English as a second language for over 13 years at schools and were able to read and write standard written Chinese. Eighteen first-year students wrote to their two Cantonese Chinese teachers in the Chinese language, and 171 first-year students wrote to their four Cantonese English teachers in English. There was no overlap in senders in both languages.

### ***Language of Cantonese emails: Cantonese mix with standard Chinese***

Cantonese is the first language of the subjects. Its spoken form is for daily oral communication while the written form is for less serious communication such as communication between friends, peers, or people with intimate relationship. Standard Chinese is the language for official written communication and is learnt as a subject since primary education. The Cantonese subjects are able to speak, listen, read and write the three languages – Cantonese, Standard Chinese and English (a second language taught at schools) which are used for communication from within Hong Kong's mainstream culture. Most students write primarily in standard Chinese but will mix some Cantonese words and/or phrases with Standard Chinese randomly as this form is used in some less serious newspapers and communication within the social circle (e.g. ICQ and email) as a sign of Hong Kong in-group identity (Snow 2004). In the study, the emails are of this kind; and all the Chinese characters were transcribed based on the Cantonese romanization developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (Fan et al. 1997) (For examples, please refer to Appendix 1).

### ***Email apologies***

#### ***Procedures: Coding categories, reliability, pattern identification and statistical analysis***

All email apologies were coded, cross-checked and analyzed, followed by pattern classification or identification. Coding was largely based on the five major apology strategies listed in the CCSARP Coding Manual, namely Illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), taking on responsibility, explanation or account, offer of repair and promise of forbearance (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). IFIDs are 'the formulaic, routinized expressions in which the speaker's apology is made explicit', among which are included expressions such as 'sorry', 'I apologize for', 'I regret that', 'forgive me' (ibid, 285). Taking on responsibility is an expression 'to express responsibility for the offence which created the need to apologize' (285), including the strategies of 'explicit self-blame, lack of intent, justify hearer, expression of embarrassment, admission of facts but not responsibility' (ibid, 287-288). Explanation or account 'covers any external mitigating circumstances offered by the speaker'; offer of repair is 'related to the offence... repair a reparable' and promise of forbearance 'promise(s) that the offensive act will never occur again' (289) (For examples of each category, please refer to Appendix 1).

Each part of an email was coded into the most appropriate category once by a well-trained research assistant in consultation with the researcher and a native Cantonese-speaking teacher for the Cantonese data analysis, in particular. The frequency rate of each identified category was recorded, and the unique pattern or style, if any, was carefully studied. For instance,

(1) Discourse: Sorry for the late submission of my assignment.

The discourse consists of an IFID and an acknowledgement of responsibility, based on the CCSARP's coding categories (1989).

(2) Categorization: Sorry (*IFID*) for the late submission of my assignment (*admitted responsibility*).

Since there are two parts in the apology, it is glossed as a two-part apology. Apart from the strategies and the identified pattern, other features such as speech function were also examined and recorded. In extract (3), the function of the underlined discourse is the student's desire or want.

S-T (English)

(3) I am so sorry (*IFID*) that I missed two Wednesday lessons (*admitted fault and responsibility*). It is because I had my original lesson at the same time. I couldn't leave my class, otherwise I would fail the tutorial exercises (*explanation/account*). So sorry about that (*IFID/ apology*). I really like to attend the class and improve my English (*desire/ want*). (Student A)

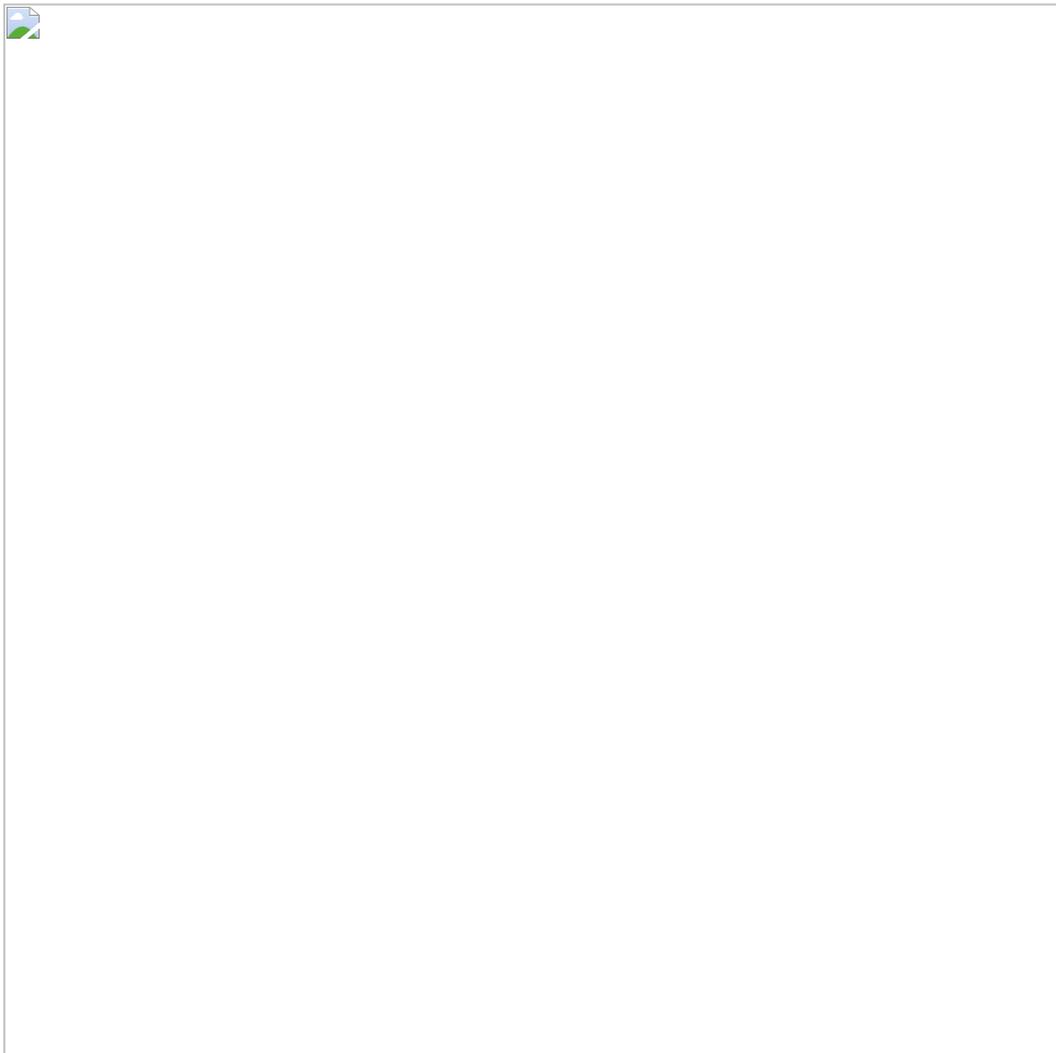
After analyzing the categories, the chi-square test was then used to measure the statistical significant differences between Cantonese and English apology strategies and patterns.

## Results and discussion

### *Hypothesis 1: Apology strategies and patterns*

The Cantonese subjects used the same three strategies, namely an acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation and repair when they wrote to their teachers in both languages, except forbearance. The main difference lied in frequency rate only (Figure 1). Their apology strategy was similar to that of the Putonghua-speaking Chinese reported in the literature. However, the difference between Cantonese and English strategies was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level according to the Chi-square test (Table 4).

Figure 1



Key: English emails = 171; Cantonese emails = 18

Table 4: Chi-square test

Strategies	English (171)	Cantonese (18)	Total

Acknowledgement of responsibility	0.00	0.00	0.00
Explanation	0.00	0.01	0.01
Repair	0.00	0.02	0.02
Forebearance	0.04	0.29	0.33
Total	0.05	0.32	0.36

$$df = 3 \quad p = 0.948$$

Structurally, the subjects started their Chinese and English apologies mostly with an IFID and in combination with one or more than one of the four types of identified apology strategies, namely (1) an acknowledgement of responsibility, (2) explanation, (3) repair and (4) forbearance, to increase the degree of regret and sincerity (Table 5). Only one Cantonese apology consisted of deprecation of oneself, praises of the partner, and no IFID was used alone. The IFID was expressed in the linguistic form of *I'm sorry* or *sorry* in English and the Cantonese equivalent *deoi3 bat1 bei3/ deoi3 m4 zyü6*.

Some examples of the two-, three- and four-part Cantonese and English apologies are extracted below.

#### S-T (English)

##### A two-part apology

(4) Sorry (*IFID*) for the late submission of my assignment (*admitted responsibility*).

##### A three-part apology

(5) I am very sorry (*IFID*). I have something to do that I'm unable to present on Monday language lesson (*explanation/account*). I will hand in my homework on Tuesday (*repair - promise*).

##### A four-part apology

(6) Sorry (*IFID*) for the absence from today's class (*admitted fault and responsibility*). It was because I caught a cold today and stayed at home for a rest (*explanation/ account*). For the DILLS class on Friday, yes, I could be able to attend (*repair -promise*).

#### S-T (Cantonese)

##### A two-part apology

(7) *Sing1 kei4 luk6 ngo5 ji5 jung6 email send liu5 pin1 zok3 man6 kap1 nei5. Ho2 din6 jau4 dei6 zi2 dda2 co3 liu5, So2 ji5 nei5 sau1 bat1 dou3 ngo5 dik1 man6 (explanation/account). Han2 deoi3 bat1 bei3 (IFID)*

*I sent my composition to you by email on Saturday. Maybe I typed the wrong email address, so you haven't received my composition. Very sorry.*

##### A four-part apology

(8) *Zok3 tin1 jan1 wai6 jiu1 baan6 lei5 passport (account), mei6 naag4 ceot1 zik6 (admitted responsibility), mann6 mong6 jyun4 leong6 (begged for forgiveness). Ngo5 wui6 zoi6 haa5 sing1 kei4 jat1 bou2 gaau1 gung1 fok3 (repair - promise). Gan6 wai4 kap1 nei5 daai3 loi6 dik1 bat1 pin4, biu2 si6 maan6 ji6 fan6 dik1 hip3 ji3 (offered an apology). (Student E)*

*Yesterday because (I) had to handle passport, I couldn't attend. Thousands of hopes for forgiveness. I will submit the assignment next Monday. Hereby I express thousands of apology for causing you so much inconvenience. (Edited English version)*

Table 5: Total frequency and percentages of two-part, three-part and four-part apologies in emails

	English emails	Cantonese emails
Two-part apology		
1. IFID+ responsibility	42 (24.56%)	5 (27.78%)
• IFID+ explanation	1 (0.58%)	
• IFID+ repair	2 (1.17%)	
Three-part apology		
1. IFID+ explanation + repair	11 (6.43%)	
• Responsibility + repair + explanation	--	3 (16.67%)
• IFID + responsibility + repair	21 (12.28%)	
• IFID+ responsibility + explanation	<b>49 (28.65%)</b>	2 (11.11%)
Four-part apology		
1. IFID+ responsibility + explanation + repair	<b>45 (26.33%)</b>	<b>8 (44.44%)</b>
Total	171 (100%)	18 (100%)

Nevertheless, the difference between the apology patterns in Cantonese and English was also not significant at the 0.05 level according to the chi-square test (Table 6).

Table 6: Chi-square test

	English emails (171)	Cantonese emails (18)	Total
Two-part apology	0.01	0.00	0.01
Three-part apology	1.24	0.13	1.37
Four-part apology	1.73	0.18	1.91
Total	2.98	0.31	3.30

The statistical analysis is not surprising as the email senders are bilingual adults who have used or learnt the languages for many years. They might have developed an apology style based on their understanding of the socio-cultural situations and language proficiency level gradually and unconsciously. In spite of it, an analysis of the discourse found that the Cantonese students used similar strategies as the Putonghua-speaking Chinese counterparts. The Cantonese students' apologies always consisted of an acknowledgement of responsibility. The frequent use of an acknowledgement of responsibility in both English and Cantonese emails is consistent with Liu's findings (1987), and explanation was not underutilized. The subjects always provided an explanation after an acknowledgement of responsibility. Their combination might be essential in an apology for a personal offence, especially from a student to a teacher in the academic context. Nevertheless, very few students begged for forgiveness or deprecated oneself in their apologies, and it appeared only once in a Cantonese email (Extract 14). Perhaps they do not consider the offence as a serious sin that requires forgiveness from the teacher. Rather some students expressed their desire, confirmed or checked with the teacher for another appointment, or apologized again at the end of their messages, as shown in the following underlined discourse (Extracts 9-14). It seems that the nature of offence and the way in which the offence is interpreted by the apologizer in some ways determine what strategies would be used rather than solely driven by the traditional Chinese apology style.

#### Student to teacher emails (English)

(9) I am so sorry (*IFID*) that I missed two Wednesday lessons (*admitted fault and responsibility*). It is because I had my original lesson at the same time. I couldn't leave my class, otherwise I would fail the tutorial exercises (*explanation/account*). So sorry about that (*IFID/ apology*). I really like to attend the class and improve my English (*desire/ want*). (Student A)

(10) Sorry (*IFID*) for the absence from today's class (*admitted fault and responsibility*). It was because I caught a cold today and stayed at home for a rest (*explanation/ account*). For the DILLS class on Friday, yes, I could be able to attend (*promise/forbearance*). So is it the same room for our class? (*confirmation check*) (Student B)

(11) I told you that I would have my presentation this Thursday, but since I spent the last five days preparing for my Chinese debate, I was really exhausted as I stayed at school until morning for the last three days (*explanation/account*). I don't mean to bother you but I really hope that you will be kind enough to let me do my presentation next Thursday (*request*). I promise I'll have my draft ready by the end of this week and I'll show you a very nice presentation next week (*promise/forbearance*). I hope you can accept my request and arrange a time for me (*desire/want*). Sorry for getting you into trouble (*IFID/apology*). Please inform me if you can arrange a time for me (*request*). See you tomorrow (*desire/want*). (Student C)

(12) I'm so sorry (*IFID*) that I forgot to give you the hard copy today (*admission of fault/responsibility*). The proposal is attached in the mail. I will give you a hard copy on Monday (*promise/forbearance*). I am really sorry about it (*IFID/apology*). (Student D)

#### Student to teacher emails (Cantonese)

(13) *Zok3 tin1 jan1 wai6 jiu1 baan6 lei5 passport (account), mei6 naag4 ceot1 zik6 (admitted responsibility), mann6 mong6 jyun4 leong6 (begged for forgiveness). Ngo5 wui6 zoi6 haa5 sing1 kei4 jat1 bou2 gaau1 gung1 fok3 (promise/ forbearance). Gan6 wai4 kap1 nei5 daai3 loi6 dik1 bat1 pin4, biu2 si6 maan6 ji6 fan6 dik1 hip3 ji3 (offered an apology).* (Student E)

*Yesterday because (I) had to handle passport, I couldn't attend. Thousands of hopes for forgiveness. I will submit the assignment next Monday. Hereby I express thousands of apology for causing you so much inconvenience. (Edited English version)*

(14) *Deoi3 bat1 hei3 (IFID), jau6 si6 ngo5. Sing1 kei4 luk6 coi4 gaau1 gung1 fok3. Daan6 bat1 zaang1 hei3 dik1 ngo5, ging2 jin4 mong4 liu5 daai3 loi4 gaau1 (admitting responsibility and account). Zan1 dik1 fei1 soeng4 pu5 hip3 (apology)! Ngo5 zan1 dik1 bat1 si6 cyun4 sam1 jiu1 to1 dik1, hei1 mong6 nei5 soeng1 seon3 zan1 dik1 hou2 liu5 (begging). Ngo5 sing1 kei4 ji6 bou2 gaau1 ho2 ji5 m4? (request) Joek6 ji5 taai3 ci4, si6 fau4 jiu1 kau3 fan6? (request) Zan1 dik1 bat1 hou2 ji3 si3 (IFID), ngo1 taai3 maa4 faan4 liu5! (self-blame).* (Student F)

*Excuse me, it's me again. Saturday is the time to submit the assignment. But poor me, I inadvertently forgot to bring it back, really very regretful. I really don't have any intention to delay, hope you believe in me. Can I submit on Tuesday? If it's too late, then will you deduct marks? Really sorry. I bring you too much trouble! (Edited English version)*

For instance, in extract (9), student A adopted almost the same technique as the identified apology style – an IFID followed by an admission of fault or responsibility and an explanation. In addition, he showed his desire to attend the class, believing that he would benefit from it. In extract (10), in addition to a four-part apology, student B ended with a confirmation check. In extract (11), student C did not begin the message with an IFID. Rather he started with an account, followed by a request and a promise prior to an apology. He finished the apology with another request on the assumption that the teacher would accept the explanation and arrange a time for him. His optimism was intensified by a desire to see the teacher the next day. In extract (12), student D felt regret or apologized for his carelessness twice in addition to the adverbial *so*. Similarly, student E (extract 13) provided an account for his absence in the first place, followed by a begging for forgiveness, a promise and an apology again. The student, however, intensified regret with an adjective *maan6 ji6 fan6 dik1: thousands of*. In the last extract (14), student F made a request and blamed himself for bringing trouble to the teacher. All identified features have impact on the discourse, the force of the apology and the recipient, conveying a greater degree of regret, sincerity and politeness.

To summarize, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. Although Cantonese students' L1 and L2 apology strategies and patterns do not have statistically significant differences, the apology discourse analysis has shown the way in which the Cantonese tertiary students structured their apologies and strategy preference. It seems that an apology style has emerged and been practised among the subjects unconsciously, regardless of what language they are using. The apology style of Cantonese subjects is also slightly different from that of Putonghua-speaking Chinese. Thus, hypothesis 1 is revised as follows.

*There are no statistical significant differences between Hong Kong Cantonese apology strategies and patterns in English and Cantonese. In terms of frequency rates, the Cantonese subjects tend to acknowledge responsibility, explain and repair in both Cantonese and English as Putonghua-speaking Chinese. However, they occasionally beg for forgiveness or deprecate oneself in Cantonese.*

### **Hypothesis 2: Linguistic choice in Cantonese**

A reasonable range of Cantonese apologetic verbs were found to express regret. The expression of *deoi3 bat1 bei3/deoi3 m4 zyu6: sorry* in Cantonese which is equivalent to *dui bu qi: sorry* in Putonghua or standard written Chinese, was the most popular apology word at the initial position of many messages, occupying an average of 45.45% of the data (Table 7). The second most popular expression was *bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/m4 hou2 ji3 si3: regret/excuse me* (22.73%); followed by *pou5 hip3: regret* (18.18%) which is the same as *bao qian; zi3 hip3: apologize* (9.09%) which is *zhi qian/dao qian* in Putonghua or standard written Chinese, and finally *jyun4 loeng6: forgive* (4.55%).

Table 7: Frequency rate of apologetic verbs in Cantonese emails

<i>Deoi3 bat1 hei3/</i>	<i>Bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/</i>	<i>Pou5 hip3: Regret</i>	<i>Zi3 hip3: Apologize</i>	<i>Jyun4 loeng6: Forgive</i>
<i>deoi3 m4 zyu6: Sorry</i>				

		<i>m4 hou2 ji3 si3:Regret/ Excuse me</i>			
Cantonese emails	10 (45.45%)	5 (22.73%)	4 (18.18%)	2 (9.09%)	1 (4.55%)

Key: Number of Cantonese email apologies: 18

(Note: Some Cantonese apologetic verbs appeared twice in the same email. That is why the number of apologetic verbs, 22, was greater than the total number of Cantonese email apologies, 18.)

Regarding the literal meanings of the five apologetic verbs, *bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/m4 hou2 ji3 si3*: *sorry/excuse me* is in fact not an apology. According to *Gong2 Zaul Fong1 Jin4 Ci4 Din2* (1998), a dictionary for Cantonese, it is a marker to initiate the request or subsequent action such as a repair, or to manage the discourse sequence. It carries very little or no sense of apology, responsibility or remedial actions. Similarly, *deoi3 bat1 hei3/deoi3 m4 zyu6*: *sorry* does not constitute any rigorous sense of apology in the Cantonese apologizing vocabulary; they only indicate indebtedness. Apart from these low degree of apologetic verbs, the subjects used *jyun4 loeng6*: *forgive*, an expression that carries a much greater degree of regret and acknowledgement of responsibility than *deoi3 m4 zyu6*, *m4 hou2 ji3 si3*, *pou5 hip3* and *zi3 hips*. These apologetic verbs basically share the same or similar literal meanings and degree of regret or acknowledgement of responsibility, except the fact that they are expressed in different linguistic forms. The following table makes an attempt to put together the Cantonese apologetic verbs and the corresponding Putonghua apologetic verbs based on their literal meanings in dictionaries and degree of regret developed from Zhang's list.

Table 8:

Chinese (Standard Written)	Cantonese (Written)	Literal Meaning of the phrase	Equivalent English expression	Degree of regret, sincerity & remedial actions
---	<i>Bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/ m4 hou2 ji3 si3</i>	A marker to initiate a request/manage the subsequent action	---	Least
<i>Dui bu qi</i>	<i>Deoi3 bat1 hei2/deoi3 m4 zyu6</i>	Regret towards someone	Sorry	
<i>Bao qian</i>	<i>Pou5 hip3/</i>	Showing one's psychological uncomfortable and regrettable feeling, caused by one's fault	Regret	
---		An official self criticism, admitting fault and showing an apologetic feeling		
<i>Zhi qian/dao</i>	<i>Zi3 hip3</i>		Make an apology	

<i>qian</i>			for/ apologize	Most
---	<i>Jyun4 leong6</i>	Ask for forgiveness	Forgive	
<i>Pei li</i>	---	Making an apology to someone, admitting one's fault	Make an apology/ apologize	
<i>Qing zui</i>	---	Admitting one's sin and asking for punishment	Admit one's sin and ask for punishment	

Among the five Cantonese apologetic verbs, four of them belong to the low or mid degree, namely *deoi3 bat1 hei3/deoi3 m4 zyu6* (45.45%), *bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/m4 hou2 ji3 si3* (22.73%), *pou5 hip3* (18.18%) and *zi3 hip3* (9.09%). The low or mid degree of apologetic verbs have taken up nearly 95%, indicating the subjects' attitude and interpretation of the offence in the specific context. According to their frequency rates and range, hypothesis 2 is supported but could be slightly revised as follows:

*Hong Kong Cantonese use a range of apologetic verbs, namely deoi3 bat1 hei3/deoi3 m4 zyu6: sorry, bat1 hou2 ji3 si3/m4 hou2 ji3 si3: excuse me, pou5 hip3 and zi3 hip3: make an apology for/apologize, representing and assuming the low or mid degree of regret and responsibility in Cantonese.*

### **Hypothesis 3: Linguistic choice in English**

Three English apologetic verbs were found (Table 9), and each of them corresponds to a Cantonese apologetic verb indicating a different degree of regret (refer to Table 8). The expression of *sorry/I'm sorry* corresponds to *deoi3 m4 zyu6* in Cantonese; *apologize* corresponds to *zi3 hip3*; and *forgive* corresponds to *jyun4 leong6* (Table 6). In addition, over 85% of the subjects also preferred *I'm sorry/sorry*, a low degree of apologetic verb, in comparison with *apologize* (9.36%) and *forgive* (5.26%) that carry a slightly greater degree of regret. The subjects seem to use the English apologetic verbs that correspond to the Cantonese ones, and they are consistent in using the low or mid degree of apologetic verbs to express their regret most of the time.

Table 9: Frequency rate of apologetic verbs in English emails

	Sorry/I'm sorry	Apologize	Forgive
English emails	146 (85.38%)	16 (9.36%)	9 (5.26%)

Key: Number of English email apologies: 171

In this light, hypothesis 3 is supported but could be revised more precisely as follows.

*Hong Kong Cantonese mainly use three English apologetic verbs that correspond to the Cantonese ones, namely sorry/I'm sorry, apologize and forgive, representing and assuming low or mid degrees of regret and responsibility. Sorry/I'm sorry is the most preferred apologetic verb.*

In short, the subjects are inclined to adopt the low or mid degree of apologetic verbs in both Cantonese and English to express their regret. The subjects' linguistic choices and consistent social behaviour have demonstrated their mastery of the language and interpretation of the level of seriousness of the offence. They may feel that postponing appointments, keeping teachers waiting for too long, not being able to

submit assignments on time or being late are misconduct or non-observation of rules or social norms which may cause disruption or inconvenience, rather than being a sin (*zeoi6*) or a criminal act which requires serious punishment from a teacher. Therefore, the low or mid degree of apologetic expressions - *I'm sorry* and *deoi3 m4 zyü6: sorry* are believed to be adequate and appropriate for the situation. Nevertheless, the students feel the need to explain to their teachers and offer repair whenever necessary, and this accounts for the structure and sequential organization of the email apologies which differs from Chinese apology style and apologetic verb choices reported in the literature, but fits into the characteristics of an apology for personal offence (Jean & Beanstone 1994).

## Conclusion

To conclude, the study has testified the three hypotheses and has provided us with a better understanding of the apology style of Chinese for personal offences from an interlanguage perspective, with particular reference to Cantonese, in the authentic context. Despite the fact that there is no statistical significant difference between the use of Cantonese and English apology strategies and patterns by the adult Cantonese students, an apology style appears to emerge for a less serious personal offence. According to apology discourse analysis, they tend to use an IFID at the beginning followed by a mixture of strategies such as an acknowledgement of responsibility, an explanation or a repair, with at least two parts in one apology email and sometimes ends with a request or a confirmation check. In terms of linguistic choices, the subjects tend to adopt a low or mid degree of apologetic verbs to express their regret and assume responsibility in the specific context in both Cantonese and English. The IFID is usually made in the linguistic form of *I'm sorry* or *deoi3 bat1 hei3* which not only expresses regret but also initiates and prepares for the upcoming actions. It is therefore felt that the multi-componential apology style and the use of low or mid degree of apologetic verbs may be related to the nature of the offence, the apologizer's interpretation of the seriousness of the offence or the specific apologizer-recipient relationship instead of following the traditional Chinese apology style. The offence, which is personal, does not constitute any element of 'sin' in the eyes of the students. The students are honest with their offences and prefer to explain to their teacher who may require an account, a remedial or follow-up action whenever necessary. Although the sample size is relatively small, it has provided some significant observations on the apology style of adult Cantonese tertiary students for personal offences to their teachers in the academic context. Last but not the least, the interlanguage comparison allows us to examine apology discourse from a new perspective, which in return facilitates a better understanding of human communication and language use for a specific purpose in a specific context. Further research on comparing the email and the face-to-face apology style of Cantonese in both languages for other communicative purposes (e.g. an apology for a serious social or political offence) and social variables (e.g. an apology in a high-low or equal-equal power hierarchy) is deemed useful.

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### Appendix 1: Types and examples of apology strategies identified from the database

Type	Example – English	Example – Chinese, with English version
<b>1</b>	<b><i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID)</i></b>	
1.1 Offering apology	I apologize	<i>Pou4 hip6</i> <i>Apologize</i>
1.2 Expressing regret	I'm so sorry	<i>Deoi3 bat1 hei2</i> <i>Sorry</i>
	I regret	---
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Taking on responsibility</i></b>	
2.1 Explicit self-blame	It's my mistake.	<i>Bat4 zaang1 hei4 dik1 ngo5:</i> <i>I have not that well performed.</i>
2.2 Admission of facts but not of responsibility	I am not aware of it.	<i>Jan1 ngo5 jau5 se1 si6:</i> <i>Because I have some other matters.</i>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Offering repair</i></b>	
Suggesting an alternative action	Could we have the meeting a week later at the same time?	<i>Ngo5 dik5 duk6 syu1 bou3 gou3 wui5 jin4 ci4 zi3 haa6 sing1 kei4 ji6 coi4 kap1 nei6:</i> <i>My book report will be postponed to next Tuesday for submission.</i>
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Promise of forbearance</i></b>	
Promising to perform an action/ make a repair	I will not be late next time.	<i>Zoeng1 wui5 zoi6 juk1 jat6 (sing1 kei4 sei3) can3 zi6 dou3 lou5 si1 dik1 baan6 gung1 sat1 gaau1 gung1 fo3:</i> <i>Will submit the assignment tomorrow (Thursday) in person to the teacher's office.</i>
<b>6</b>	<b><i>Explanation or account</i></b>	

	External factors (non-human circumstances)	The traffic was bad. That's why I am late.	<p><i>Ngoi6 jyul gei6 seot6 man6 tai4, waan4 si6 ci4 jat6 wui6 coi4 kap1 Nei6</i></p> <p><i>Due to a technical problem, I have to submit it later to you.</i></p>
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(Based on S. Blum-Kula, J. House, & G.. Kasper,(Eds.). (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 289-293). Norwood, NJ: Ablex, Publishing Corporation.

### Endnotes

1 The project examined the similarities and differences of the realization patterns (i.e., semantic formula and linguistic devices) of apologies and requests across different languages and between native and non-native speakers of a given language presented in a discourse-completion test, relative to the same social constraints and within specific speech communities.

2 Dictionaries include: He Guowei (ed.) (2005) *Xiandai Hanyu Tongyici Ci dian*, Shanghai: Shang Hai Ci Shu Chu Ban She Wen Ci Shu Bian Zuan Zhong Xin; Zhang Qing Yuan (ed.) (1996) *Tongyici Ci Dian*, Si Chuan: Si Chuan Ren Min Chu Ban She; Wu Hai (ed.) (1996) *Xiandai Hanyu Tongyi Fanyi Cidan*, Beijing: Xue Yuan Chu Ban She; and You Zhi Ren (ed.) (1982) *Xiandai Hanyu Tongyi Ci Bian Xi*, Ning Xia: Ning Xia Ren Min Chu Ban She.

3 Dictionaries consulted include: *Xiandi Hanyu Cidian* (5<sup>th</sup> edition) (2005), Beijing: Commercial Press; Wong, K. S. (ed.) (1989) *Shang Wu Xin Cidian*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press.

4 Special thanks should be given to Dr. Ho Shing Bon at Language Centre, Hong Kong Baptist University, who discussed the meanings of the words with me.

5 The meanings of the corresponding Cantonese apologetic verbs are based on Li Rong et al (ed.) (1998) *Gong2 Zau1 Fong1 Jin4 Ci4 Din2*, Jiang Su: Jiang Su Jiao Yu Chu Ban She, a dictionary for Cantonese as a dialect.

6 Since the frequency rate of each apologetic verb was very small (less than 5), no chi-square test was performed.

7 Cantonese transcription

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