

**INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION ON PAKISTANI ENGLISH SPEAKERS APOLOGY RESPONSES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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**Abstract**

*This paper follows a phenomenology approach to investigate the influence of social stratification on Pakistani English speakers' apology responses. Some researchers have played quite a significant role in advancing the field, but their data collection methods (discourse completion tests and role plays) have received much criticism. In order to address this issue, the current study followed the phenomenology approach and based its data collection procedure on focus group discussion. The data of the current study were collected through a focus group discussion questionnaire. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was carried out by following Braun and Clarke's (2013) six steps. Major themes were coded, identified, and classified through Atlas.ti software. Findings indicate that participants stressed the significance of accepting others to keep healthy relations. Accepting apology was perceived not only as moral but also as aesthetic behavior that can beautify the moments of social interaction. Further, social position and power performed an important role to determine the techniques and function of responding to the apology in Pakistani English speakers' responses. Interlocutors who were in a lower public position and power were found responding to apologies more pleasantly and politely than those who had a higher public position. In comparison, those who were in a high position responded to apologies in a different way to the addressees with a lower status. Thus, the contextual aspects such as social status, and the degree of imposition had a great part in producing apology responses as well as perceiving apology responses as conversation act behavior. The impact of social status on the Pakistanis English speakers' efficiency was subject to a cultural filter that reveals various orders of values.*

**Keywords:** Phenomenological approach, social stratification, apology responses, social power, cultural filter

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In the world, various nations have their own unique cultures that display certain "universalities and peculiarities" (Wei, 2009, p. 1). Culture and language are closely related in such a way that our way of thinking and communicating is determined by socio-cultural norms (Sapir, 1949; Whorf & Chase, 1956; Whorf, Carroll & Levinson, 2012; Azam & Saleem, 2018a). Therefore, every culture has its own unique communicative patterns in its speech behavior. During inter-cultural interactions, people interpret the utterances of cultural "others" according to their own native sociolinguistic norms or according to the conventions of their own cultural settings. The studies, over the decades, have disclosed not only the universalities but also the variations relevant to the patterns of the speech act realization across cultures and languages.

Wouk (2006) asserts that a review of the relevant literature on apologies demonstrates that though researches on apologies have been a trend since the 1980s, there is an incessant increase in their number over the last twenty years. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) opine that certain investigations on various languages have been accomplished which have put forward variations as well as overall similarities in expressing apologies. The representative instances of such studies that have been conducted on apologies are Al Ali (2018), Alsulayyi (2017), Bashir, Rasul, Mehmood (2018), Cedar (2017), Hitomi (2017), Huwari (2018), Jucker (2019), Kartika and Ditiawarman (2019), Keshani and HeidariShahreza (2017), Khan and Sultana (2014), Jones and Adrefiza (2017), Othman and Ali (2018), Schumann (2018).

In fact, many of the studies which are based on apologies have been carried out in isolation, and the interlocutor's possible reactions to the act of apology have not been considered. Though scholars (Adrefiza & Jones, 2013; Agyekum, 2005; Waluyo, 2017; Wu & Wang, 2016), have involved some of the pragmatic responses to the act of apology in their researches, the investigations are still lacking the inclusion of socio-pragmatic subtleties and linguistic strategies.

However, the vital aspect of how people belonging to divergent cultures, social power, and degree of imposition as well as languages express themselves while responding to an apology is missing in the previous researches. Therefore, ARs, i.e. Apology Reactions are not among the investigations' key concerns. This gap seems to have urged the researcher to carry out this study. This is possibly the most vital cause for commencing the current study as it implies that this study is original. The following research questions were proposed to answer:

1. What are the apology responses used by Pakistanis English speakers?
2. How does sociocultural variable (social status) affect Pakistani English speakers' preferences for particular apology responses?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers (Cohen, 2006; Grainger & Harris, 2007) opine that "apology" as a speech act has achieved the special attention of pragmatic as well as socio-cultural scholars as compared to the other speech acts such as compliments, refusals, and others. Cohen (2006) opines that for suggesting better insights for language teaching pedagogy, apology as speech act has posed numerous challenges not only for the researchers but also for the language teachers. Numerous investigations such as the studies of Lakoff (2001) and Cohen (2006) argue that apologies have not only been evaluated in accordance with the socio-cultural and linguistic perspectives, but they have also been analyzed with regard to Syntax, Pragmatics, Lexical Semantics, Conversational Analysis, and Phonology. Moreover, Ogiermann (2009) argues that various researches based on apologies have been carried out from functional and formal, interactive and cognitive, group and individual, interlanguage as well as societal perspectives.

In fact, many of the studies which are based on apologies have been carried out in isolation, and the interlocutor's possible reactions to the act of apology have not been considered. Though scholars (Adrefiza & Jones, 2013; Agyekum, 2005; Owen, 1983; Robinson, 2004; Waluyo, 2017; Wu & Wang, 2016), and have involved some of the pragmatic responses to the act of apology in their researches, the investigations are still lacking the inclusion of sociopragmatic subtleties and linguistic strategies. The outcome of the studies such as that of Adrefiza and Jones (2013) reveal that the attention of the investigators towards the topic is incomprehensive and limited as interlocutor's social status, power, the severity of the offense, and possible reactions in such sociocultural aspects have not been the major concern of the studies.

Wouk (2006), Sultana and Khan (2014) analyze that numerous researches on apologies have merely put forward major issues concerning 'apology as a speech act' while including queries such as keeping in view the cultural dissimilarities what are the differences in the ways through which an apology is carried out, and in certain given situations, what are the certain strategies being employed by the interlocutors, when an apology is to be accurate and appropriate, what certain semantic

formulas have been employed, what are particular sorts of apology terms that have been used, and also how an apology is intensified, minimized, upgraded, and strengthened.

However, the vital aspect of how people belonging to divergent cultures, social power, and degree of imposition as well as languages express themselves while responding to an apology is missing in the previous researches. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Pakistanis English speakers express their responses to the apology in the politeness of social power, degree of imposition, and social distance between interlocutors. It examines how the act of ARs are realized, looking specifically at the influence of social stratification in the use of strategies, linguistic expressions, and politeness patterns which are inherent within gender and sociocultural variables.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative approach. Focus group discussions were conducted for collecting a substantial number of ARs, which can be generalized, and for analyzing them qualitatively. Phenomenology field techniques were chosen which are based on a qualitative paradigm (Creswell et al., 2005). Phenomenology is “to understand an experience from the participants’ point of view” (Leedy & Ommrod, 2001, p. 157). The focus is “on the participant’s perceptions of the event or situation and the study tries to answer the question of the experience”. The purpose behind following the phenomenology approach is that previous studies conducted on speech acts collected their data through discourse completion tests (DCTs). In recent years, DCTs have received much criticism because of its unnaturalness. Keeping in view DCTs limitations, the current study utilized focus group discussion in order to make the environment of data collection natural by including the participants’ voices.

#### 3.1. POPULATION AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

The participants who took part in this study included 50 Pakistani English speakers. The participants were recruited from different professions including teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, and army personnel (as mentioned in Rahman, 1998). All the participants were graduates between the ages of 25 and 65. The PakE group consisted of 25 males and 25 females. The only criterion for selecting PakE participants from various organisations and institutions was that the respondent should be qualified (at least up to the level of the bachelor’s degree and have studied English as a compulsory subject) and should be in a role where the official written work is carried out in English or English and Urdu and where socio-cultural competence in the use of ARs can be demonstrated.

#### 3.2. INSTRUMENTATION

A semi-structured focus group discussion questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument because the current study focused on Pakistani English speakers’ apology responses. The purpose of conducting a focus group discussion was to explore new aspects (ARs) used by Pakistani English speakers. As mentioned earlier, the use of DCTs in speech act studies are severely criticized. Hence, the current study uses a focus group discussion questionnaire to glean a sort of natural make-up data. Consequently, the focus group discussion was the best type to reach the objectives of our study because of its flexibility and controllability by the researcher (i.e. a moderator) at the same time. The following items were designed to elicit qualitative data:

1. What do you often say when you respond to an apology? What’s your preference while responding to an apology?
2. What do you say in the following situations?
  1. Employee forgot to pass on an urgent letter to you. Employee: Sorry Sir/Ma’am, I forgot to pass it to you. It won’t happen again. You \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. A friend promised to return your laptop after a week. Friend: O’ Sorry dear, I forgot, really I’ll give you tomorrow, promise. You \_\_\_\_\_.
  3. Head forgot to inform the junior officer to join the meeting. Head: I’m really sorry dear; it just skipped out of my mind. You \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Junior copied an article from a website for his/her presentation. Junior officer: I beg pardon Sir/Ma'am, forgive me this time and assure you it won't happen again. You \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Do you think that responding to apology differs according to the interlocutors or is it the same for all? For example, how do you consider the following factor in your apology?

- Social status: such as a high official, a famous social character, or a religious personality.

### 3.3. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

For data collection, the heads of the departments and institutions were helpful in devoting a special room for the focus group discussions. Some of the focus group discussions of the participants (doctors, engineers, and army personals) were conducted in their workplaces. I abided by the time that was convenient for them. In addition, I informed them that the purpose of this focus group discussion was academic and nothing else. Moreover, I took their permission to record their voice.

#### 3.3.1 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study helps in improving the design of the research and checking the viability (feasibility) of the study. Hence, the focus group discussion questions were piloted with five Pakistani English lecturers serving in the Departments of CS & IT, Civil Engineering, and English, in the University of Lahore, Pakistan (three males and two females) to check the acceptability of the questions contained in the focus group discussion in the light of the Pakistani cultural values. We also consulted two university senior professors from the University of Lahore, Pakistan. They both gave me their positive feedback about the focus group discussion questions. These procedures made me more satisfied and comfortable about conducting focus group discussions as a reliable and valid instrument before using it in the final data collection.

### 3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

As mentioned earlier, the phenomenological field method is followed in this study based on the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2013). Thematic analysis is employed for identifying, scrutinizing, and commenting upon themes or specific points inside data.



**Figure 1:** Six Phases of Braun and Clarke's (2013, p. 89) Framework for Thematic Analysis

Nevertheless, we used *Atlas.ti* software for coding as according to Silver and Lewins (2014), it helps researchers uncover and systematically analyze “complex phenomena hidden in unstructured data (text, multimedia, geospatial) and let the user locate, code, and annotate findings in primary data material, to weigh and evaluate their importance, and to visualize the often complex relations between them” (p. 16). Further, it helped us in visualizing the data and making sense of it according to the research questions we aimed to answer. Thus, we arranged all the related coded information and revised them to place this information under major patterns. A contrastive and comparative analysis of these codes was made.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the focus group discussion, thematic analysis was carried out to analyze the findings. As suggested by Javadi and Zarea (2016), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in (rich) detail. Hence, the first question of the study asked:

1. What are the apology responses used by Pakistanis English speakers?

The answer to the first question of the current study is addressed through the first question of FGD's question. The use of ARs while responding to an apology as data shows depends on the severity of the offense and the social power of the interlocutor as well. Regarding the preference for apologizing, it was found from the focus group discussions that Pakistani English speakers prefer both ways of responding to apology, based on the situation and the size of an offense. There are found certain sub-themes which illustrate what ARs are used and what are preferences.

**Table 1** Distribution of preferred ARs

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
<b>1 Acceptance</b>		
a. Absolution	28	16%
b. Dismissal	16	0.9%
c. Request	19	11%
d. Intensifiers	11	06%
e. Expressing Empathy	08	05%
<b>2 Acknowledgement</b>		
a. Absolution plus	31	18%
b. Dismissal plus	21	12%
c. Advice/Suggestion	27	16%
d. Accepting Remedies	13	08%
e. Evaluating	11	07%
f. Accepting Promises	09	05%
<b>3 Rejection</b>		
a. Warning/Caution	25	14%
b. Asking for compensation	09	05%
c. Refusing Remedies	07	04%
d. Expressing Strong Emotions	13	08%
Total	167	100%

Table 1 shows that Pakistani English speakers tend to use the Acceptance strategy more often consisting of (Absolution) “that’s okay” with a proportion of 28(16%), (Dismissal) “no problem/no worries” 16(0.9%), (Request) “That’s ok. Thanks for apologizing” 19(11%), (Intensifiers) “That’s pretty fine” 11(06%), and (Expressing empathy) “That’s fine, I understand such stuff happens” 08(05%) respectively. The second most preferred AR strategy is Acknowledgement consisting of (Absolution plus) “That’s okay but I hope you won’t do this blunder again” with a proportion of

31(18%), (Dismissal plus) “No worries, but you got to be vigilant hereafter” 21(12%), (Advising/Suggestion) “Buddy try to lose your weight please don’t mind my words” 27(16%).

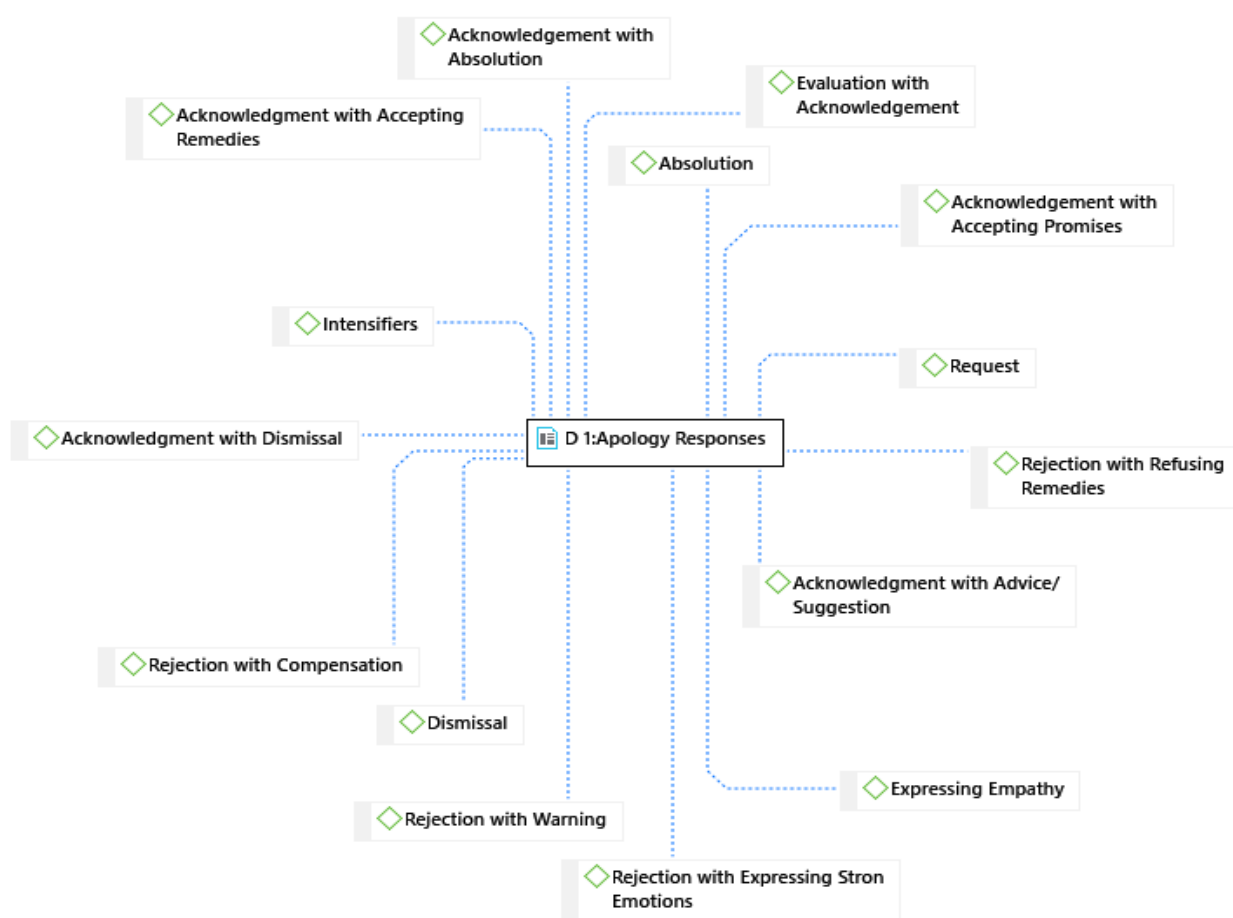


Figure 2: Thematic map in Atlas.ti

And remember, Acknowledgment is considered a weak acceptance as mentioned by Adrefiza and Jones (2013). Surprisingly, the third main strategy that added complexity in the ARs of EuP data is the Rejection strategy, consisting of (Warning/Caution) “I’m not gonna tolerate this behaviour next time” with a proportion of 25(14%). Here are some examples:

“I mostly say ‘Its ok, no problem’. No doubt, I respond to an apology as per the offense and the interlocutor. If the situation is quite severe, I still prefer to forgive but with a caution. If the offense is committed by my senior I will not caution him/her, I simply accept the apology (FGD4, participant 29)”.

“Yeah! I quite often acknowledge the apology. I would say, for example ‘It’s OK, but you need to be careful next time’. Yup! It depends on the situation as well. If the situation is quite severe, and I believe this offense can damage my self-respect and dignity, I can warn the offender to abstain from such actions in future. Though, I remain very humble, but you know if we don’t amend others then people take you easily every time (FGD5, participant 49)”.

"I would prefer to say 'OK fine, it's OK' but better be careful next time because it hurts' this is how I would respond to an apology. Yeah! I prefer to respond to an apology keeping in mind the situation and severity of the offense. If something very serious happens, I cannot refrain myself responding to apology without a caution (FGD5, participant 38)".

"Hmmm, I more often use expressions like 'Okay miss/sir! But look you often make such mistakes. Be careful next time'. Adding to this, I do consider the situation and the interlocutor with whom I'm interacting. Yeah! One more thing, in order to keep good relations, I believe in forgiving (FGD3, participant 45)".

"I often say 'It's OK. No problem, be careful next time'. 'Well, it's alright'. I prefer to be positive in all situations because our religion teaches us to be righteous and careful of others. So, I believe in forgiving and restoring good relations (FGD1, participant8)".

"Being honest, I accept the apology with an expression such as "It's Ok! No worries buddy", but mind you, I at my office situation, do warn in a bit harsh manner as well, I don't tolerate negligence (FGD2, participant 8)".

The focus group discussion data report that majority of the speakers prefer to forgive the offender. One thing is noticeable that while responding to the apology, Pakistani English speakers tend to keep in their mind the severity of the offense and the addressee as well. As one of the respondents reported that if the offense is committed by my senior I will not caution him/her, I will simply accept the apology. In other words, they try to keep a healthy relationship with the transgressor but at the same, they do not want to let the offender get off the hook comfortably. Anyway, during the discussion, I asked the participants, what you would say in this situation:

**Head forgot to inform the junior officer to join the meeting.**

Head: I'm really sorry dear; it just skipped out of my mind.

**EuP:***No issue sir. It's alright. I will attend next meeting on time. Inshallah!*  
(FGD5, participant 34).

The above response from PakE speaker confirms that the majority of the respondents try to be polite and positive while responding to the apology. Further, the focus group indicates that the majority of the responses of PakE data fall into the Acceptance and Acknowledgement categories. Both these categories carry positive speech behavior of the respondents, though Acknowledgment is weak acceptance (Adrefiza & Jones, 2013).

The second question of the current study asked:

2. How does sociocultural variable (social status) affect Pakistani English speakers' preferences for particular apology responses?

The second question of the study is responded through the second question of FGD. As regards responding to apologies of high social rank, the focus group discussion data revealed that all the participants regardless of their gender and social status show politer ARs to people of higher social status. The sub-themes of high, equal, and low status are identified in relation to "Acceptance", Acknowledgment, Evasion, and "Rejection" categories of apology responses. Table 2 below illustrates the results of social distance.

**Table 2 Distribution of ARs in Social Status Variable**

Themes	High Status		Equal Status		Low Status		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptance	27	60%	11	24%	07	16%	45	100%
Acknowledgment	18	60%	8	27%	4	13%	30	100%
Evasion	2	29%	3	42%	2	29%	07	100%
Rejection	0	0%	5	36%	9	64%	14	100%

Table 2 demonstrates that more Acceptance 27(60%) and Acknowledgement 18(60%) strategies are offered to the interlocutors of high social status and less Acceptance (11 and 07) and Acknowledgement (08 and 04) strategies for equal and low-leveladdressees.

Nonetheless, Evasion and Rejection strategies are not offered to speakers of high social status. In contrast, more Rejection 9(64%) strategies are addressed to the interlocutors of low social status. Following are some of the quoted responses presented as samples from qualitative data:

“Yes, my response to apology would be different as per the social status is concerned. You know being at the office, sometimes, I need to follow professional politics. I accept more politely if the apology is from a senior and would show some authority if the apology is from junior, and you know at equal status, I’ll behave quite moderately (FGD5, participant36)”

“Yup! As I would mention, when you are at working place, social status bounds to either accept or acknowledge apology when the apologizer is of higher rank. But if the apologizer is of lowest rank then, you know I may reject the apology. But mostly I accept apology having used ironic expressions if it is coming from lower ranks (FGD7, participant51)”.

“Definitely, most of the time, when I respond to somebody’s excuse. I keep in mind the hearer’s social position in my mind. Yup! I believe these things function in our society. When someone of higher position apologizes, we happily accept that. Otherwise, with low position people we behave quite rudely. Isn’t that. I believe so. So, am I not different”.

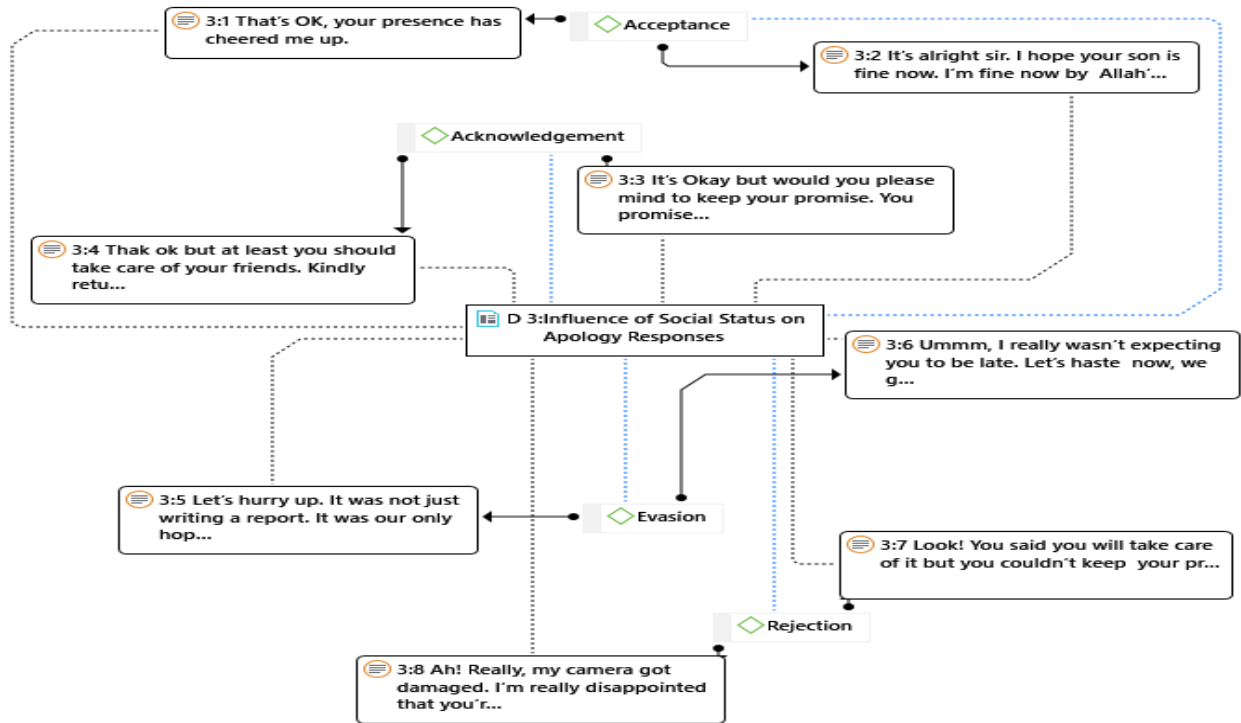


Figure 3: Thematic map and quotations in *Atlas.ti*

To know the exact picture of the influence of social power, I asked the participants, what you would say in this higher social status situation:

**At the office, your employee forgot to pass on an urgent letter to you. The next day you complained to your employee that he/she did not pass it to you. He/she says. (Situation 1)**

**Employee:** Sorry Sir/Ma'am, I forget to pass it on to you. It won't happen again.

**EuP:** Look dear! Be careful next time. I mind such behavior (FGD7, participant51).

As mentioned above, the response clearly clarifies that Pakistani English speaker preferred to use quite a negative politeness strategy while responding to a lower level addressee. Although apology is not rejected, it carries negative face-threatening intent. Anyways, while having a discussion, I created another scenario and asked the participants, what you would say in this low social status situation:

In the officer's mess, a senior officer stepped on your foot passing by you. Senior officer says?

**Senior officer:** Ouch! Sorry dear, I didn't see you coming. Are you OK? Hope I didn't hurt you.

**EuP:** It's Okay sir. No worries. I'm fine. No damage was done (FGD5, participant38).

The data of focus group discussions illustrate that participants keep in their mind the social status of their interlocutors while responding to an apology. They all claim that their ARs for seniors would be different as compared to their equal or lower status apologizers. They even state that they may reject an apology if it is coming from a lower status apologizer.

"Recently my co-worker misbehaved with me. He realized his inappropriate behavior and then apologized to me. I accepted his apology by saying, 'I accept your apology

but never do that again with me. I cannot tolerate such attitude. So social hierarchy matters in such interactions (FGD7, participant 52)".

"The first thing I must mention here is that you know people of higher ranks don't apologize usually if someone does, yeah! Then, you know to accept an apology from higher social status speaker easily as compared to equal and lower level speakers (FGD9, participant52)".

"Yes, social status is considered mostly at working places. I do keep in mind the status of the apologizer while responding to an apology(FGD9, participant 53)".

"A few days ago, my junior hadn't prepared his course folders for HEC's visit. I asked him the reason for being late in completing the task. He apologized to me. I accepted his apology but politely made him realize his negligence. Yeah! Definitely, I keep in mind such factors (FGD7, participant 53)"

"How can I deny the importance of social status at work places? Yeah! We all keep in our mind the status of the person with whom we talk, and definitely respond accordingly (FGD8, participant 55)".

"Yeah! Social status is always in important at working places while having daily interaction (FGD9, participant 62)

Apology Responses to the manager and senior officer were deemed more serious and successful than reacting to others' apologies. Therefore, ARs from low to high positions of authority contained expressions of honour and address titles and acknowledged and remembered the offense rather than mitigated it. Apology reactions, however, were not significant to other people of lower social status; they included gestures of irony, sequences of guidance and frustration, and trying to warn the perpetrator.

Therefore, in ARs, such linguistic politeness can be interpreted as a double-sided phenomenon involving two main facets: a behavior-based and a conceptual-based facet. The former demonstrates the actual way in which ARs are used and interpreted as a part of a communication mechanism, whereas the latter relates to ARs' general sense or ideological meaning in that people represent their beliefs and views on ARs. The participants viewed ARs dependent on social standing as an essential feature in the situations of Pakistani English speakers. This result is consistent with the findings of Holmes '(1989) research that reported that it is more systematic and successful to apologize to individuals with a high social status than to apologize to individuals with a low social status.

## CONCLUSION

Focus group discussions data illustrate that Pakistani English speakers confirm Carranza, et al. (2015) who argue that making and accepting apologies is a matter of redressing wrongdoings and establishing restorations which are honorable. The results, however, display a few extra phenomena of interest. First, PakE speakers are generally rather self-denying and other-oriented in their apology replying actions. It is manifested by the percentage of Acceptance realized by the participants. This technique is realized more often as compared to others, subsequently, that looks to be in line with the previous studies of Waluyo (2017), Wu and Wang (2016), Adrefiza and Jones (2013), who all report that approval of regret is the most recommended AR. Simultaneously, the recurrence of Acknowledgement is clearly rich in PakE data signaling that in Pakistani culture, positive politeness has prodigious domination in apology responses (Gillani& Mahmood, 2014; Azam& Saleem, 2018b). It seems that the participants absolutely limit their self-oriented actions. The degree of frequency at which Rejection ARs have occurred in the current study seems to acknowledge the claim of Bennett and Earwaker (2001, as cited in Waluyo, 2017), who recommended that apology is hardly ever refused. Though Pakistan is a non-egalitarian society as claimed by Kousar (2015), still social and religious aspects play quite a significant part in responding to apologies. The responses of PakE

exhibit that respondents tend to use less Evasion and Rejection strategies, and preferring the use of more Acceptance and Acknowledgement strategies also indicate that English-using Pakistanis incline to use ARs while keeping in mind social and religious norms and values, as Islam teaches and believes in forgiving and restoring relationships (Adrefiza & Jones, 2013). Overall, the FGD results demonstrate the extraordinary use of Acknowledgement based ARs by the participants while responding to high-level interlocutors.

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