"*Wallah*! I Beg Your Pardon...": A Cross-cultural Study of Apology Speech Acts

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Abstract: This study explores the cross-cultural pragmatic features of apology speech acts generated by Arabic native speakers, English native speakers and advanced Saudi learners of English. The instrument employed for this study was a discourse completion task (DCT). The DCT included eight situations that elicited apologetic responses from 69 participants. Results revealed that Arabic native speakers and Saudi learners of English use apology strategies following a similar order of frequency that differs than English native speakers. Saudis frequently use oaths and use sarcasm instead of apology, or accompanied by apology, in their responses. Saudi learners of English are influenced by their Arabic culture, which leads to efficient communication at times while interfering with it at others.

<u>Keywords</u>: apology speech acts, English as a foreign language, sociolinguistics, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

A cultural gap exists between Arabic and English populations (Al-Sofi & Abouabdulqader 2020). Many English native speakers encounter difficulty when they teach in Saudi Arabia. They misunderstand the pragmatics of Arabic, which is evident in their students' English productive skills. If they are introduced to these pragmatic differences, it can facilitate communication, teaching and, as a result, learning.

English has become the medium of instruction in most Saudi universities, so it is crucial to direct attention to Arabic pragmatics, which apparently has explicit influence on English acquisition (Macaro 2020). These linguistic and pragmatic differences must be taken into consideration when teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition to instructors, curriculum designers need to be aware of these differences and incorporate them into curriculum design. Developing intercultural competence (Ruiz & Spínola 2019) is important for EFL learners, who need to communicate with native and non-native speakers in a variety of contexts.

This study is important toward raising cultural understanding and sensitivity, which are necessary in the language-learning process (Wu & Marek 2013). Several interesting studies have examined pragmatics across cultures and languages; however, the Saudi dialect of Arabic still invites much research in this area, particularly toward understanding apology expressions. The production and interpretation of these expressions are vital for effective communication (Schauer 2019). Yet, apology speech acts and L1 influence on foreign language acquisition remain under-researched, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia (Alsulayyi 2016, Almegren 2018). The present study selects a number of apologetic situations to examine linguistic and cultural differences between English and Saudi apology speech acts, along with how the differences may influence EFL learners. This study aims to examine the realization patterns for apology by Saudi and English speakers identifying cases of positive

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and negative L1 transfer based on EFL participants' production. The study seeks to answer four questions:

1. What patterns of apology speech acts do English native speakers use?
2. What patterns of apology speech acts are used by Arabic native speakers?
3. What patterns of apology speech acts are used by advanced-level Saudi EFL speakers?
4. In what ways does L1 interfere with or support L2 apology speech act acquisition?

2. Literature review

Smith (2008) focuses on apology's social significance rather than how it has been discussed in linguistics (see Smith 2005). He makes a distinction between individual and collective apology, where an apology offered to a friend is different from one offered to a group by, say, a politician. Speech Act Theory provides a more extensive conceptualization of apology than otherwise available and supports the purposes of the present cross-cultural and cross-linguistic study.

2.1 Apology speech acts

Austin (1975), the founder of Speech Act Theory, defined speech acts as the actions performed in saying things. When someone says "it is hot here", the hearer completes an action by switching on the air conditioner. The theory divides utterances into categories rather than restricting them to truth-conditional statements (Wittgenstein 1953), linking each utterance with its social context and associated action.

Utterances are divided into three categories: locutionary, perlocutionary and illocutionary. Illocutionary acts are further subdivided into five classes: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declarative. Apology falls under the expressive category, which includes illocutionary acts whose purpose is to convey the intention of the speaker. The intentions of an apology can further be divided into categories known as apology strategies.

2.2 Apology strategies

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) examined speech acts of apology across eight languages and identified two main strategies used: (1) direct realizations of apology via illocutionary force-indicating devices and (2) expressions of responsibility or causality, offers of repairs, and promises of forbearance. Here are examples of the first category:

(be) sorry: "I am sorry I lied to you"
forgive: "forgive me for missing your birthday"
apologize: "I apologize for being late"
regret: "I regret that I can't be with you"
excuse: "excuse me for interrupting your conversation"
pardon: "pardon me for the inconvenience"

The second category includes four strategies for performing the act of apologizing:

1. explaining that which brought the harm: e.g., "the bus was late"
2. taking responsibility: e.g., "I am so forgetful"
3. offering repair: e.g., "I'll pay for the damage"
4. promising forbearance: e.g., "this won't happen again"

Recent studies have modified this conceptualization (Ogiermann 2009, Aydin 2012, Almegren 2018). Ogiermann extends the original approach to include more realization patterns, following semantic formulae she generates by eliciting responses to offensive situations from three languages: English, Polish and Russian.

While investigating apologizing in negative-politeness cultures, Ogiermann created a discourse completion task aimed at eliciting apology speech acts. Negative politeness means satisfying the hearer's "negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 70) in case of violating a social norm that is considered a face-threatening act (see Brown & Levinson 1987). Ogiermann writes that individuals "of negative politeness cultures are sensitive to negative face" unlike members "of positive politeness cultures" who "are more attentive to positive face needs" (2009: 55).

Speakers of languages with "a positive politeness tendency are less protective towards their negative face when performing speech acts addressed to positive face needs than are members of negative politeness cultures" (2009: 260). Ogierman classifies Polish and Russian as positive politeness cultures with British as a negative politeness culture such that the British could be seen as "reluctant, superficial and even insincere to Poles and Russians" (2009: 260).

Ogiermann provided her participants with situations in which they were asked to imagine that they had caused offense. She asked them to respond in a way that seemed appropriate. She arrived finally at five sub-categories of apology speech acts: (1) illocutionary force-indicating devices, (2) accounts, (3) offers of repair, (4) promises of forbearance and (5) concern for the hearer.

Illocutionary force-indicating devices use several semantic formulae to serve as direct apology. Forms under this category include the infinitive "to" + the apology or the modal "should" or "must" + the apology. See Table 1.

Table 1: Illocutionary force-indicating devices.

Realization pattern	Example
performative	"I (should/must) apologize."
offer of apology	"I offer my apology."
request for forgiveness	"Forgive me."
expression of regret	"I am sorry."
conciliatory expression	"I am afraid I hurt you."
disarming softener	"I hope I did not bother you."

Accounts reference the circumstances that led to loss of face or violation of social norms. Accounts may further be categorized into upgrading and downgrading accounts. With upgrading accounts, the intention is to take responsibility for the offense and outcomes. Downgrading accounts are more closely related to the circumstances that led to them. See Table 2.

Table 2: Accounts.

	Realization pattern	Example
Upgrading	justification	"I was busy."
	lack of intent	"I did not mean to."
	embarrassment	"I am really ashamed of myself".
	accepting responsibility	"It was my mistake."
	self-criticism	"What a fool I am!"
Downgrading	denial of responsibility	"I did not see you."
	minimization	"It is all right."
	excuses	"I was sick."
	admitting facts	"I know I was wrong."

Offers of repair allow the speaker to compensate for offence or damage. Again, there are two forms: direct and indirect. A direct offer indicates the speaker's willingness to compensate for the offense, whereas an indirect offer makes implicit suggestions that take the form of questions or requests for permission. See Table 3.

Table 3: Offers of repair.

	Realization pattern	**Example**
Direct	compensation for the offense	"Let me get you a tissue."
	ability questions	"Can I get it back tomorrow?"
	want statements	"I want to fix it."
Indirect	offer in form of question	"Can I pay for it?"
	request for permission, asking the hearer's opinion	"Should I get you a tissue?"

Promises of forbearance have just one realization pattern, of negating the reoccurrence of the offence. It is used when the relationship between the speaker and hearer is close, communication is constant, and it is important to maintain harmony. An example of this realization pattern is "I promise never to do it again."

2.3 Native vs. non-native speaker apologies

Sociocultural competence is required to form appropriate apology speech acts. Some aspects of apology speech acts are similar across languages regardless of cultural background. Otherwise, if the cultures of native and non-native speakers share similar sociocultural values, this should result in similar apology speech acts. In most cases, however, a key factor is sociocultural pragmatic competence: i.e., being aware of differences across cultures. In particular, one or another realization pattern may be used more in one culture than another.

Languages are inherently connected to culture (Daiani & Omari 2013). Language learners depict their culture through their utterances. What sounds polite in one culture could be impolite in another. Two factors are essential in the process of learning a foreign language: cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity (Wu & Marek 2013, Zülküf Altan 2018l Róg et al. 2020). Shaules writes (2019: 138) that "language and culture are complex and dynamic systems of shared meaning". Róg et al. (2020) describe how intercultural communication enhances understanding and acceptance of the target culture. If learners demonstrate intercultural competence when interacting with native speakers, only then can they communicate effectively (Wu & Marek 2020).

Apology speech acts are associated with politeness features in pragmatics. When EFL learners express apologies they may inadvertently conform to the pragmatic features of their mother tongue rather than English.

Saudi culture is both unique and conservative. There is a restriction against gender mixing in many social contexts, including schools, universities and many workplaces. Visitors are required to "respect segregation". "A woman should avoid contact with men outside of her family and show restraint when this cannot be avoided" (Anishchenkova 2020: 220). These social restraints affect the use of apology speech acts when men and women apologize. People from outside this community should show respect to the Saudi Islamic social values and avoid initiating conversation with Saudi women. They should avoid using prayer time for any social activity. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day and their prayers should be performed on time; all their other activities stop until they finish their prayers. If an oversight occurs, someone deserves an apology.

3. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional design. Data from online questionnaires was collected within a certain timeframe. The main instrument employed was an online survey that incorporated a *discourse completion task* (DCT). A DCT is a production questionnaire in which the participant responds to a situational prompt (Hua 2016).

The advanced EFL learners in this study were recruited from two Saudi universities. The English and Arabic native speakers were recruited via social media applications and email. The study adapted Beckwith & Dewaele's DCT model (2008) ensuring that the social contexts were appropriate to the conservative nature of Saudi culture: e.g., the situations described in the DCT do not describe men and women interacting. A pilot study was conducted by sharing the survey with one Arabic native speaker, one English native speaker and one advanced EFL learner. Responses showed that participants described what they would say instead of directly responding. Further instruction was added for the final survey: "don't describe what will you say but respond directly to prompts".

In all, 102 participants completed the survey; 33 responses were excluded for irrelevant content or missing responses, leaving 69 responses for analysis. The responses of 24 English and 24 Arabic native speakers were used to explore apology speech acts in Arabic and English, while the responses of 21 advanced EFL learners were used to evaluate whether the elicited speech acts were acceptable according to English pragmatics. The language production of this group was essential in establishing the role that L1 transference plays in facilitating or hindering foreign language acquisition.

Data was analyzed according to each of the eight situations outlined in Table 4 below. Participants were asked to say how they would respond in each case. The data was coded for the five realization patterns described by Ogiermann's (2009) model. An additional category other, where responses did not fit any of Ogiermann's categories, was included. Results were statistically analyzed for variance using an ANOVA test comparing English native speakers, Arabic native speakers, and advanced EFL learners.

Table 4: Apologetic situations.

Number	Scenario
1	an instructor delayed feedback on a student's assignment
2	a student forgot to return a book borrowed from his instructor
3	a manager was late for interviewing an applicant
4	a tailor made a mistake with measurement
5	a student had not finished a school project and was late to a meeting
6	a stranger hit a customer by accident and the customer's eggs were cracked
7	one guest offended another by making an awkward comment
8	a stranger spilled juice on another passenger on a plane

4. Results

English native speakers used all five apology strategies: illocutionary force indicating device 73% of respondents, offer of repairs 64%, account 53%, concern for the hearer 2% and promise of forbearance 1%. See Figure 1.

All respondents made use of explicit apology using the formulae *be* + "apologize", *be* + "sorry" or *s* + "would like to apologize". Across all scenarios, respondents said "I am sorry". For Scenario 7, one respondent said "I would like to apologize".

As noted, offers of repair ranked second. This strategy is often used when the situation requires a remedial act such as in Scenario 4. The most commonly used realization formula

was *s + modal verb + verb + …*: "I can fix this for you now". The second most used was "let us" *+ verb + …*: "let's see what we can do to solve this for you".

Accounts were used just over half of the time. Their realization was often preceded by an illocutionary force-indicating device and did not usually stand alone. The formula used was *s +* "did not" *+ infinitive verb + ...* For Scenario 7, one respondent said "I did not intend to offend you". For Scenario 5, one respondent made a culture-specific reference: "I got a massive hangover".

The formula used for concern for the hearer was *be + s +* "all right"/"okay"? One response to Scenario 6 was, "are you okay?" One response to Scenario 8 was, "is it all right?"

The formula used for promise of forbearance *was s + modal verb + infinitive verb + ...* One respondent said "I would never do that again".

Other forms of apology were used including paralinguistic exclamations: "oh no!" or "huh!". One idiomatic expression was used to show regret: "I dropped the ball". Intensifiers such as "extremely", "very" and "terribly" were used.
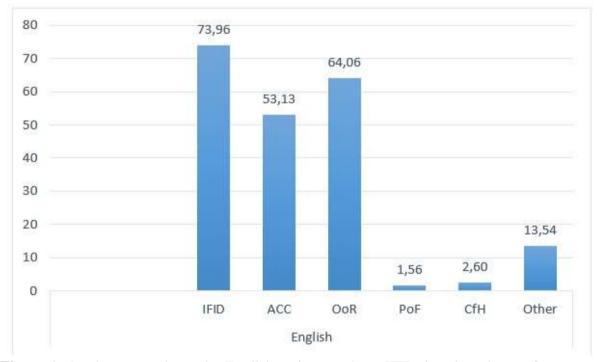

Figure 1: Apology speech acts by English native speakers. IFID=interlocutionary force-indicating device, ACC=account, OoR=offer of repairs, PoF=promise of forbearance, CfH=care for hearer.

Arabic native speakers likewise used all five apology strategies: illocutionary force indicating device 59% of respondents, accounts 54%, offer of repairs 45%, promise of forbearance 2% and concern for the hearer 1%. See Figure 2. Explicit apology was made using the Arabic equivalent of the formula be + "apologize" (اعتذر) or be + "sorry" (اسف).

As noted, accounts ranked second behind illocutionary force-indicating device. For Scenario 1, two semantic formulae were used: "*Wallah*" *+ s +* "has"/"have not" *+ verb + …* (e.g., "*Wallah*, I have not checked your assignment yet") and *s + verb + object +* "*Wallah*" (e.g., "I forgot it, "*Wallah*"), where "*Wallah*" is an Islamic oath meaning "by God".

The formulae used for offer of repair were inconsistent between questions and statements. Speakers often used double or quadruplet repairs to intensify their apology: e.g.,

ابشر بالعوض امر تدلل كيف أقدر اعوضك و تكون راضي؟

...meaning "you just order. How can I compensate you? How can I make you satisfied? I will make it up for you." This result is unique to Saudi culture, where interlocuters often show such an exaggerated response to convey their apology.

The formula for promise of forbearance was *s* + "promise" + *s* + *modal verb* + "not" + *inifinitive verb* + …. One response to Scenario 2 was

اعدك ان لا يتكرر

...meaning, "I promise it won't happen again".

The expression for concern for the hearer was

سلامات سلامات

…meaning, "get well soon". The Arabic expression is a noun repeated twice, which again has no equivalent in English.

The results identified other speech acts used in the absence of apology or in combination with apology realization patterns, all of which were categorized under the heading of "other". Speech acts that fell under this catch-all were more complex than the rest and all unique to the Saudi culture. They served two purposes: to intensify apology and (2) to cause severe offence. Seven instances were noted of sarcasm and seven offering compliments; there were 28 oaths, eight endearing expressions, and one of an illocutionary force-indicating device combined with code switching. Some EFL learners made use of these forms.

Like the English native speakers, the Arabic native speakers used paralinguistic features to express their apology such as *Afaa* or *Uof*. *Afaa* and *Uof* are unique to the Saudi dialect of Arabic, used to realize apology and indicate a higher level of politeness and empathy.
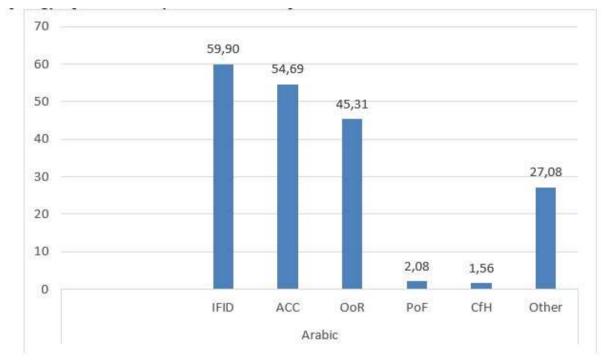

Figure 2: Apology speech acts by Arabic native speakers.

The advanced Saudi EFL learners again used all five apology strategies: illocutionary force-indicating device 75% of respondents, accounts 48%, OoR 44%, PoF 2%, CfH 1%, in the same order used by Arabic native speakers; see Figure 3. EFL learners, like the English native speakers, used explicit apology with the formulae *be* + "apologize" or *be* + "sorry" but did not

use *s* + "would like to apologize". Across all scenarios, respondents used "I am sorry" or "I apologize".

The realization formula for accounts was *s* + "did not" + *infinitive verb*: e.g., "I apologize; I didn't mean to". This was the identical formulation to English native speakers.

For offer of repair, the same two semantic formulae used by English native speakers were used. The first was *s* + *modal verb* + *verb* + …. In Scenario 2, respondents expressed their proposed reparation with "I will bring it tomorrow". The second formula was "let us"/"let me" + *verb* + …. In Scenario 8, the response was "let me help you".

For promise of forbearance, EFL learners used the semantic formula *s* + *be* + "not going to" + *infinitive verb* + … in Scenario 7: "I'm not gonna do it again". For concern for the hearer, EFL learners used the formula *be* + *s* + "okay"?

EFL learners used other forms of apology: four compliments (e.g., "you always look good anyways" in Scenario 7) and four oaths (e.g., "I'm sorry, *Wallah*" in Scenario 5).
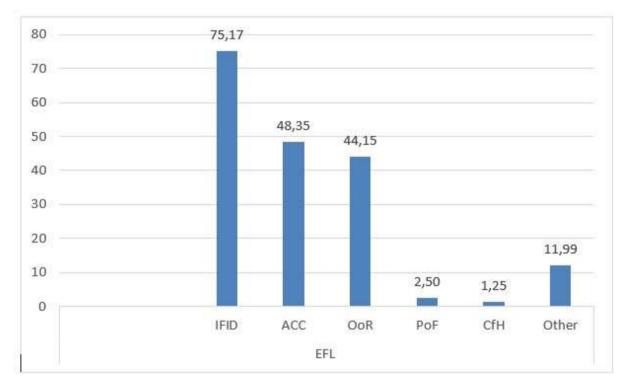

Figure 3: Apology speech acts by advanced EFL learners.

The results show that L1 interfered with speech act acquisition at points and supported it at other times. The use of compliments in the L1 culture interfered with apology speech acts when speaking English as a foreign language. With Saudi Arabic forms of apology, compliments are used by the offending person to defuse an awkward situation and avoid responsibility and embarrassment. The EFL learners used compliments with or without direct apology. In Scenario 1, Saudi participants avoided admitting facts and responded with phrases like "excellent!" and "you are a hero!" even though the instructor did not look at the assignment. In Scenario 7, compliments were used in combination with an illocutionary force-indicating device: "I am very sorry… but your hair is beautiful". The role of L1 led to negative pragmatic transfer. In an intercultural context, using compliments in situations requiring apologies may cause misunderstanding due to negative pragmatic transfer.

In Scenario 4, one participant responded, "the problem is with your leg not with the trousers, dear". In Saudi Arabic, sarcasm commonly features in apology, revealing an amiable

sense of humor. In other cultures, the use of sarcasm without an apology may instead result in a more severe offense.

The results show that the Arabic native speakers, unlike the English native speakers, frequently accompanied the illocutionary force-indicating device with oaths or terms of endearment: e.g., *Wallah*! or *habibay/habibaty* ("dear"), as in "*Wallah*! I beg your pardon." Some EFL learners apologized "I'm so sorry, *Wallah*" (Scenario 5) or "So sorry, *Wallah*!" (Scenario 8). Clearly, in some intercultural contexts, the use of "*Wallah*" will not be understood or (for those not familiar with Muslim culture) not understood as intended, as a way of intensifying the apology.

The ANOVA test revealed no statistical differences ($p = .654$) between the three groups. The averages for advanced EFL learners, Arabic native speakers and English native speakers were respectively 30.57, 31.77 and 34.81. The average across groups was 32.38.

5. Discussion

5.1. Illocutionary force-indicating device
The most frequently used strategy across all three groups in this study was the illocutionary force-indicating device (IFID). This result is compatible with findings by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Alsulayyi (2016). All respondents used explicit apology using the formulae *be* + "apologize" and *be* + "sorry". The English native speakers and EFL learners were very similar in their responses.

The results suggest positive transfer from Saudi Arabic to English, which was demonstrated by the EFL learners' responses. The illocutionary force-indicating device was relied on by Arabic and English using formulae that exist in both languages. The realization patterns for the speech acts were the same.

When respondents combined strategies, the most frequently used component was an illocutionary force-indicated device, suggesting that it is a compulsory component of apologetic formulae. Such a conclusion is supported by studies indicating the universality of apology, such Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Almegren (2018).

5.2 Account
Accounts (ACC) were the second most frequently used strategy for the Arabic native speakers and EFL learners and third for the English native speakers. Nureddeeen (2008) reported similar results in the context of the Sudanese dialect, as did Alsulayyi (2016) in the case of Saudi Arabic.

EFL learners demonstrated adoption of aspects of the target language culture by using such formulations as "I did not mean to" to assure hearers of their good intentions. Such cultural transfer in apologetic speech acts was also found by Bataineh (2008) and Alsulayyi (2016). Other times, holdovers from the birth culture led EFL learners to make pragmatic errors.

5.3 Offer of repair and concern for the hearer
The Saudi EFL learners used patterns in English that may result in negative transfer effect. However, they avoided using Arabic semantic formulae, showing a considerable level of pragmatic competence not so far from their native English-speaking peers. It is Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (198) view that learners who acquire pragmatic competence in the target language are highly likely to make the correct utterances.

With regard to concern for the hearer (CfH), the results revealed that Arabic and English native speakers employed two distinct formulae. Although EFL learners could occasionally show negative pragmatic transfer, they successfully used the correct English formula to express empathy.

5.4. Promise of forbearance

The Arabic realization pattern formula was … + *modal verb* + "not" + *infinitive verb*. An English alternative found in this study was, "I would never do that again", following a very similar Arabic formula. The Saudi group tended to use this strategy when the offended was of higher social status and offender lower, such as in Scenario 2. The strategy was never used independently nor at the beginning of an apology; it was always preceded either by an illocutionary force-indicating device or account (in some situations, by both). This conforms with Aydin (2012), who writes that promise of forbearance is frequently accompanied by an illocutionary force-indicating device and rarely appears alone.

There are not many intensifiers in Arabic. The EFL learners showed strong pragmatic competence, using the correct English intensifiers: e.g., "so", "very" and "terribly". Not all English intensifiers have Arabic equivalents. The results showed that invoking God expresses deep apology in Arabic but, as Nureddeen (2008) highlights, it can also be used as a hedge.

5.5 Other forms of apology

Sarcasm was at times used to make fun of the interlocutor which, ironically, may be considered rude in other cultures. Saudis were similar to Sudanese speakers who used such humor to diffuse the tension, as reported by Nureddeen (2008).

One example of code-switching was found, by a Saudi respondent. Arabic native speakers and EFL learners may use code-switching to smooth communication and mitigate risks of miscommunication (Ariffin & Rafik-Galea 2009).

6. Conclusions

The results suggest several implications:

1. Raising cultural awareness must be integrated into professional development for English instructors who are English native speakers, to help them understand aspects of Arabic/Saudi culture and avoid miscommunication.
2. Academic institutions should give cultural orientation sessions to these instructors. Taking cultural differences into consideration may help teachers better educate their learners on realization patterns and their functions.
3. Native-English-speaking language instructors need to be given orientation sessions on intercultural communication as well: e.g., the use of *Wallah* in oral or written discourse is often meant to intensify apologies and show politeness. When they explain the function of apologies in English, they need to instruct their students explicitly to avoid oaths, which do not serve the function in English that they do in Arabic. They should avoid using culturally inappropriate or insensitive statements such as "I got a massive hangover".
4. Textbook writers and curriculum designers must take into consideration teaching language functions such as making requests and expressing refusals and denials.
5. Textbook writers and curriculum designers should highlight common mistakes and guide learners explicitly to abstain from using incorrect realization patterns. These common mistakes should be indexed in the syllabus. Correct alternatives should be provided and explained.

English has become the medium of instruction in many Saudi universities, and yet little attention is often given to the importance of pragmatic competence including speech acts while teaching English in the Saudi EFL context. As this research showed, even advanced Saudi speakers of English are prone to make pragmatic errors. It is necessary for EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia to be aware of the pragmatic similarities and differences between Saudi Arabic and English. Native English speakers serving as EFL instructors need to

increase their awareness of Arabic pragmatics to understand potential sources of errors through negative transference. That said, this study found that Arabic and English mostly use the same semantic formulae for the various apology strategies.

Realizing that Arabic language is a multiglossic language, the researcher reminded informants not to use their own dialect. However, little evidence was found of Arabic speakers using standard Arabic instead of their local dialect. Unfortunately, with the great number of dialects in Saudi Arabia, this vastly complicated the attempt made here to examine apology speech acts.

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings should enhance understanding of some of the cultural variations in apology speech acts in English and Arabic. This study is of relevance for understanding Arabic apology expressions.

Future research may benefit from focus-group interviews to enhance understanding of what respondents meant by what they said. It would benefit from including a larger variety of scenarios and taking account of more contextual factors. Finally, it would benefit from conducting longitudinal studies.

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