



## APOLOGY STRATEGIES IN CAMEROON FRENCH

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### **Abstract:**

This article discusses the results of a case study on strategies used by Cameroon French speakers to apologize in situations involving friends and superiors. The data of the study were collected by means of a Discourse completion Task Questionnaire that was administered to two groups of university students. The findings show that the participants used a wide range of direct and indirect apology strategies and that the apology utterances mostly occurred in speech act sets, which generally involved combinations of direct and indirect apologies and supportive acts. The results also reveal the use of nominal address terms, codeswitching and some indigenized patterns of French to modify the illocutionary force of apologies. Overall, the linguistic and pragmatic choices made by the respondents varied according to degree of familiarity and power distance between the interlocutors.

**Keywords:** apology strategies, Cameroon French, postcolonial pragmatics, politeness, socio-pragmatic variation

### **1. Introduction**

This paper presents the results of a case study of linguistic and pragmatic strategies used by speakers of French in Cameroon to apologize in two situations – (a) apologizing for having broken a vase belonging to a friend; (b) apologizing to for arriving late for an appoint with a professor. The aim of the study is to add to a growing body of research on Cameroon French pragmatics. The structure of the paper is as follows. After this introduction, the next section presents the theoretical framework of the study while section 3 focuses on aspects of the methodology used. The findings of the study are presented and discussed in section 4, and it will be followed by a discussion and summary of the main results of the study.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Defining apologies

An apology can be defined as an expressive speech act by which a speaker intends to remedy an offense for which s/he takes responsibility and to restore equilibrium between him/her and the addressee, i.e. the apology recipient (cf. Holmes, 1995: 155). From this point of view, an apology is considered as an aspect of “*remedial work*” (Goffman, 1973:113). The present study is based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, which uses the central concept of the face of Goffman. Within this framework, there are two opposing views on apologies. The first view describes apologizing as a face-threatening act for the speaker (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68). In this respect, an apology is perceived as a self-demeaning act for the speaker, since s/he, by apologizing, directly or indirectly admits responsibility for the offence. On the other hand, an apology is viewed as an attempt to restore the speaker’s image or social status: it portrays the apologizer’s humility and his/her endeavour to “*set things right*” or to restore a strained relationship with the offended person (Trosborg 1995:373). These opposing perceptions of the act of apologizing also have an impact on the way in which apologies are realized and negotiated in verbal exchanges. Many studies on this speech act in and across languages and cultures have shown that the act of apologizing may be performed by means of a single speech act (simple reparation: e.g., *sorry, I am really sorry* in English; *désolé, je suis vraiment navré, je ne l’ai pas fait exprès* in French, etc.) or a speech act set / complex act, i.e. a combination of several acts. A complex reparation may consist of a combination of two or more apologies as in (1) or a combination of apologies with other speech acts, as in (2).

- 1) *Je suis vraiment désolée, je ne l’ai pas fait expressément, excuse-moi.*  
‘I am really sorry. I did not do it on purpose. Excuse-me.’
  
- 2) *Bonjour Monsieur, excusez pour le retard, je ne me suis pas réveillé(e) à temps. Je ne le ferai plus.*  
‘Good morning Sir. Excuse-me for coming late. I did not wake up on time. It will not happen again.’

Looking at the data used for the present study, it is clear that the vast majority of apology utterances produced by the participants are apology events or communicative acts made up of several acts. These acts result from combinations of two or more apologies. For instance, when an apology is followed by another apology act in an apology event, as in (1), the second act serves as an intensification device. In an apology event, the first apology act constitutes the core or the central unit of the communicative act and each of the other speech acts functions as secondary units or modification devices. According to Obeng Gyasi (1999:717), “*the role to the secondary unit is to reinforce the core or central unit of apology and [to act] as a mitigator of the face-threat associated with the core apology*”. The communicative act of apologizing can also be made up of the apology acts

proposer and different types of speech acts with various pragmatic functions. Additional acts are used because:

*“despite the fact that apologies could provide costs and benefits to addressees or speakers, it is still possible to reinforce an apology if the offense is considerable, and more especially if apologizers want to show that offenses were not committed intentionally, or that they are truly sorry for their actions” (Gyasi Obeng, 1999:717).*

Also noteworthy is the fact that the choice of apology realization patterns (either minimal or complex) depends on a number of factors. These include the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors, the social or institutional status of the interlocutors, the magnitude of the offence act, the perception of the speaker as whether he/she needs to apologize, and other politeness considerations in the social context where the interaction is taking place.

The speech act of apologizing has been extensively examined in many languages and from many different perspectives. Many studies have examined apologies in languages such as English (Aijmer, 1996), Russian (Rathmayr, 1996), German (Martens-Cleef, 1991; Meyer, 2007), Akan (Obeng Gyasi, 1999), French (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998; 2001), New Zealand English (1990), Spanish (Gonzalez-Cruz, 2012), to name just a few. Studies from a cross-cultural or contrastive pragmatics perspective compare apologies in many different languages (English, French, Danish, German, Hebrew, Russian) Blum Kulka et. al (1989), British English and Uruguayan Spanish (Márquez Reiter, R. (2000), English and Setwana (Kasanga & Lwanga-Lumu, 2007), Japanese and English (Tanaka et. al, 2008), English, Polish, and Russian (Ogiermann, 2009), etc. Studies from an interlanguage pragmatics viewpoint include Trosborg's (1995) work on apologies by Danish learners of English, Abe's (2017) work on apologies in English L2 by Japanese learners, an analysis of apologies in English by Jordanian Arabic learners (cf. Bataineh, & Bataineh, 2008). Rieger (2017: 558 – 562) provides an overview of studies on apologies in and across languages and cultures.

As far as French is concerned, the studies currently available include Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1998), analysis of apologies and compliments, and responses to both acts. In her classification of apology strategies, she distinguishes between direct apologies, i.e. those using either the performative utterance *je vous demande pardon*, the elliptical *pardon* or *désolé*, declarative constructions like *je m'excuse*, imperative utterances such as *excusez-moi*, *veuillez me pardonner*, etc. (163-164), and indirect apologies, i.e. those occurring in the form of different speech acts. She identifies different types of indirect apologies, namely expressions of regret, embarrassment or remorse (e.g. *j'ai honte*, *je suis désolé*), justifications (e.g. *on m'a poussée*), acknowledgement of responsibility, (e.g. *c'est ma faute*, *je n'ai pas fait attention*) (164-170). Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1998, 179-184) also distinguishes between positive and negative responses to apologies. In another study, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005) examines apologies, thanks, and responses to both acts in the same chapter of her book on speech acts in discourse (2005-122-143). Also noteworthy are comparative studies focusing on apologies in two regional varieties of French (cf.

Schölmlberger, 2008), in French and other languages (cf. Mulamba, 1991), in French as a second/foreign language (cf. Warga & Scholmlberger, 2007; Bodapati, 2009; Esmonds, 2010).

Some studies have been carried out in the past on apologies in Cameroonian discourse. These include Diyani Bingan's (2010) comparative analysis of greetings, apologies and leave-taking in Cameroon and Germany, Kouega's (2018) article on apologies in Cameroon Pidgin English, and Mulo Farenkia's (2018) article on apologies and face-work in Cameroon French. The goal of the present study is to add to the growing body of research in Cameroon French pragmatics in general and to contribute in particular to a better understanding of the choices made by speakers of French in Cameroon when apologizing.

The present study operates on the premises of postcolonial pragmatics (Anchimbe 2011a: 421–422) that it is necessary to factor in the complex multiethnic and multicultural postcolonial nature of the Cameroonian society in order to explain some linguistic and pragmatic choices made by Cameroon French speakers. Also, French is an official language in Cameroon alongside English. These official languages are permanently in contact with more than 250 native languages so that the setting is clearly multilingual. From the postcolonial pragmatics viewpoint, apologies in French spoken in Cameroon are aspects of postcolonial pragmatic behavior and they reflect as such the cultural context in which these speech events are performed. Since a postcolonial pragmatic approach links *“language specific norms of interaction with specific cultural values”* (Wierzbicka 2003: 64), it represents an interesting framework to describe the choice of apology realization patterns and their socio-pragmatic variation, the use of address terms and features of code-switching, etc. as reflections of social norms and sociolinguistic realities governing verbal exchanges in French in Cameroon.

### 3. Method

The data for the study were collected in Yaoundé and Douala, Cameroon, by means of a discourse completion task questionnaire consisting of several situations in which the participants had to realize a number of different speech acts in short dialogs. Each scenario comprised a brief description of the setting, i.e., *“the general circumstances [...] and the relevant situational parameters concerning social dominance, social distance, and degree of imposition”* (Jautz, 2008: 43). The discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaire is one of the most widely used data collection instruments in pragmatic research. Established in the CCSARP (cf. Blum-Kulka et. al, 1989), this instrument has the greatest advantage of producing a large number of data in a short time and it helps to account for variation in speech act realization influenced by social and contextual variables. While such data may not always be natural, they at least help to *“inform about speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented and about their sociopragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate”* (Kasper, 2000: 329). The two scenarios used to elicit apologies, the focus of the present study, were described as follows:

- a) Situation 1. *Vous arrivez chez votre ami(e) et, en enlevant votre manteau, vous renversez un vase qui se brise en plusieurs morceaux. Que lui dites-vous? "You accidentally break vase belonging to your friend while taking off your jacket. What do you say to your friend?"*
- b) Situation 2. *Vous avez accepté d'aider votre enseignant(e) dans le cadre de son projet de recherche. Vous avez une rencontre avec lui/elle à cet effet à 9:00 le lendemain. Vous êtes en retard au rendez-vous. Qu'est-ce que vous lui dites? "You offered to help your professor in a research project. You were supposed to meet with him/her at 9:00 am. You are late for the appointment. What do you say to your professor?"*

The questionnaire was administered in two phases. In the first phase it was administered to 142 students (97 females et 45 males) of the University of Douala and the University of Yaoundé I, in the age range of 18-30 years (the majority of these respondents (n=105) were in the age range of 20-25 years. The questionnaire was administered, in the second phase, to a group of 80 students (64 females and 16 males) of the University of Yaoundé I. This time, the respondents were asked to construct possible dialogues with their interlocutors, i.e. friends and professors, in both situations. In situation 1, the speaker (the offender) and the addressee (the offended) are equal in social status and they know each other very well: the relationship is a close one. In situation 2, the addressee (the offended) has a higher power position (professor) than the speaker (student): the relationship is that of student-professor, so they both know each other as acquaintances. The apologies in the data were realized in many different ways. While the examples produced by the first group of participants consisted of only one turn (which could either be a single move or a combination of multiple moves), the examples provided by the second group of informants overwhelmingly consisted of at least two turns: an apology and an apology response. The present study focuses on apologies.

The realization structures of apologies in the examples collected illustrate two types of reparations commonly used by the participants. The first type is the simple form of reparation, which consisted, as the name suggests in apologizing using a single speech act, as in *Je suis vraiment désolé*. The second type, the complex form of reparation, consisted in apologizing using a combination of several speech acts, a communicative act or speech act set. Two different patterns of complex reparation appeared in the data. An offender may offer an apology event using complex structure made up of two or more main apology strategies as in the following example produced in the friend situation:

- 3) *Aie! Je m'excuse sincèrement, je ne l'ai pas fait intentionnellement.*  
'Ouch. I sincerely apologize. I did not do it intentionally.'

This example consists of an interjection (*Aie!*), a direct apology (*je m'excuse sincèrement*), followed by a statement that the action was not intentional (*je ne l'ai pas fait intentionnellement*). A complex apology may also occur in the form a combination of several apologies as in (1), an exchange between two friends.

- 4) A : *Ekié! Que s'est-il passé avec le vase?*  
'Ekie! What happened to the vase.'  
B : *Laisse seulement ma sœur en enlevant mon manteau j'ai fait une fausse manœuvre qui l'a brisé. Ne t'inquiète pas, je t'en achèterai deux demain.*  
'I don't know what to say, my sister, while taking off my jacket I did a wrong move which broke the vase. Don't worry, I will buy you two tomorrow.'

In the example above, A and B. A begins her turn with an exclamation of surprise “Ekié” and asks B what happened to the vase. B begins the apology event by describing the circumstances in which the offense was committed. Noteworthy here is the use of the expression *laisse seulement ma soeur* which could be interpreted here as an acknowledgement of responsibility and as an expression of helplessness on the part of B. Also interesting is the fact, the offended person is described as a sister by means of the kinship term *ma soeur*. By using this address term, B intends to make a plea for understanding and expect A accept it. The fact that B reminds A that the offense has been committed by somebody who is close and by relocating the interaction within the family realm, B hopes to dissipate A's anger and disappointment and to ask for understanding. B does not only take full responsibility of the offense, s/he goes on to ask A not to worry (“*ne t'inquiète pas*”), because the broken vase is going to be replaced. In the last turn of the exchange, B's promise to buy not one but two vases the next day is a significant remedial strategy: It could be considered as a bid to calm A, to push A to accept the apology and to restore their friendship.

The second pattern of complex reparation is that performed by means of “a complex apology” (cf. Gyasi Obeng, 1999: 717). In this case, the apologizer combined one or more main apology strategies with different types of speech acts as in extract (5), an exchange between a professor (P) and a student (S).

- 5) P : *Bonjour Madame. Vous avez vu l'heure qu'il est? Mais il y a inversement de rôles là! Qui est sensé arrivé avant l'autre?*  
'Good morning ma'am. Do you know what is it? But, I notice that there are inverse roles here! Who is supposed to arrive before the other?'  
S : *Bonjour professeur. Je vous prie de m'excuser. Loin de moi l'idée de vous manquer de respect. En fait, la circulation le lundi matin dans la ville de Yaoundé n'est pas évidente. Excusez-moi pour ce retard s'il vous plaît.*  
'Good morning, professor. Please excuse me. I did not intend to disrespect you. In fact, Monday morning traffic in the city of Yaoundé is not easy. Please excuse me for me this delay.'

In the exchange above, P opens his turn with a greeting, which serves a preparatory act for the complaint proper. The greeting is made up of two items, the greeting itself and the address term “madame”. The address term creates a distant relationship with the student, as it signals with a pinch of irony that the interlocutor has unilaterally decided to inverse social roles, i.e. to act as a superior, by coming late. In the

second turn, P complains about S's late coming in the form of a question. The two remaining turns are complaint utterances: In saying *Mais il y a inversement de rôles là!* P expresses his surprise and disappointment that his student has to transgress a social norm by keeping him waiting. As a matter of fact, there seems to be an unwritten society's norm stipulating that the younger persons should be the ones to wait for the older persons. In other words, the late coming in this exchange is face threatening because it undermines the social status of the superior.

In response to P's complaint, S produces a complex apology. She begins with a greeting, which is accompanied by the honorific title *professeur*. The use of the address term serves to highlight the social and institutional status of the addressee and to flatter his face. The greeting is followed by an apology act *je (vous prie de m'excuser)*. The use of the modal clause *je vous prie de* signals on the part of S an attitude of supplication in apologizing. S follows the apology act with a mitigating comment, in which she indicates that the offense was not intentional, that she did not intend to be that disrespectful. She implicitly recognizes that coming late for an appointment is a sign of disrespect and she intends to set the record straight by explicitly saying that there was no intent to disrespect the superior. She goes on to give a justification of her late-coming by evoking issues with the Monday morning traffic in the city of Yaoundé. The pragmatic role of the justification is to reinforce her claim that she did not mean to be impolite, by keeping her professor waiting. S follows the justification with an explicit apology act, which takes a different realization pattern. This second apology act is accompanied by a politeness device *s'il vous plait* which serves here as a marker of supplication. Overall, S shows respect, deference and remorse, and indicates that she recognizes her fault while asking P, in a very polite manner, to forgive her.

The apology utterances collected were analyzed based on the schemes used in previous studies in which apologies are examined with respect to degree of directness of utterances, number of moves involved in the same utterance, use of supportive acts and mitigating or intensifying devices, etc.

The first step was to segment the apology utterances produced by the participants and to classify each occurrence or token as a strategy belonging one of the following three pragmatic categories: direct apologies, indirect apologies and supportive acts. The strategies used to perform apologies in the two situations were classified, following the taxonomy of Olshtain and Cohen (1983), consisting of the following strategies: *direct apologies (explicit expressions of apologies) and indirect apologies (taking responsibility, explanation, offer of repair / restitution, and promise of forbearance)*. The examples show that the participants, in many cases, employed, in addition to these apology strategies, a wide range of speech acts or clauses as supportive acts to modify, i.e. mitigate or intensify, the force of the apologies proper. The supportive acts (single supportive acts or a combination of them) could appear, as already indicated, before or after the head acts. The next section presents the apology strategies attested in the data with respect to their frequencies, realization forms and situational distribution.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Overall distribution of strategies

Table 1 shows the distribution of the apology strategies in the data. Overall, the respondents employed 1,159 individual utterances of which 912 (78.7%) tokens were main apology strategies and 247 (21.3%) were supportive acts. We also see here that the respondents produced slightly more direct apologies than indirect apologies, which respectively accounted for 40.3% and 38.4% of the data.

**Table 1:** Overall distribution of apology strategies

	Friend (S1)	Professor (S2)	Total
Direct apologies	263 (56%)	204 (29.6%)	467 (40.3%)
Indirect apologies	176 (37.6%)	269 (39%)	445 (38.4%)
Supportive acts	30 (6.4%)	217 (31.4%)	247 (21.3%)
Total	469 (100%)	690 (100%)	1,159 (100%)

Table 1 also shows that the participants used the three main strategies differently in the two situations. Overall, there were more tokens in the professor situation than in the friend situation (professor situation: 690 tokens (59.5%) vs friend situation: 469 tokens (40.5%). The order of preference of the strategies attested was not the same in both situations. As a matter of fact, while direct apologies were, with 56%, the most preferred strategy in the friend situation, the respondents most commonly used indirect apologies (39%) in the professor situation. Also, indirect apologies were, with 176 tokens (37.6%) the second most frequent strategies in the friend situation, while the supportive acts appeared, with 217 tokens (31.4%) as the second most common strategies in the professor situation. Table 1 also shows a major difference regarding the frequency of supportive acts in both situations (professor situation: 31.4% vs. friend situation: 6.4%).

Let us now turn to the pragmatic functions, realization patterns of direct apologies, indirect apologies and supportive acts.

### 4.2 Direct apologies: realizations and pragmatic functions

There were three main realization types of direct apologies. These were 'expression of regret', 'offer of apology', and 'request for forgiveness'. A small number of peripheral types were also attested, as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Types of direct apologies

Type of direct apology	Friend (S1)	Professor (S2)	Total
Expression of regret	122 (46.3%)	49 (24%)	171 (36.6%)
Offer of apology	84 (32%)	89 (43.6%)	173 (37%)
Request for forgiveness	54 (20.5%)	64 (31.4%)	118 (25.4%)
Other types	3 (1.2%)	2 (1%)	5 (1%)
Total	263 (100%)	204 (100%)	467 (100%)



Table 2 indicates that the most frequent direct apologies were offers of apologies. They accounted for 173 instances, representing 37% of all direct apologies. This type had a higher frequency in the professor situation (43.6%) than in the friend situation (32%). The second most preferred realization type was the expression of regret: it accounted for 171 tokens, representing 36.6% of direct apologies. This type was nearly twice more frequent in the friend situation (46.3%) than in the professor situation (24%). The third realization, request for forgiveness, had 118 examples, representing 25.4% of direct apologies. It appeared much more frequently in the professor situation (31.4% than in the friend situation (20.5%). The other types had a very low frequency.

The analysis also reveals that direct apologies were realized in many ways. Direct apologies appeared in the form of fixed expressions that generally contained adjectives such as *désolé* and *navré*, nouns such as *excuses* and *pardon* and verbs such as *excuser* and *pardoner*, etc. Direct apologies occurred in elliptical and expanded forms and they could be modified by means of adverbs, adjectives, address terms, etc. Overall, the repertoire of direct apologies was more varied in the professor situation than that produced in the friend situation.

Offers of apologies were realized using elliptical constructions (e.g. *Mes excuses* 'My apologies.', *mille excuses*, *toutes mes excuses* 'My sincere apologies. '); performative utterances (e.g. *Je m'excuse*, *Je te/vous présente mes excuses* 'I apologize. '), hedged performative utterances (e.g. *Je veux/voudrais m'excuser pour le retard* 'I want/would like to apologize for the delay.', *J'aimerais m'excuser* 'I would like to apologize.' *Je tiens/tenais à m'excuser pour le retard* 'I want/wanted like to apologize for the delay. ') and other more complex forms (e.g. *Je vous appelle pour vous présenter mes excuses* 'I am calling to apologize. '), *C'est pour m'excuser du fait que je serai en retard* 'This is to apologize (in advance) for being late. ').

Expressions of regret were realized using elliptical constructions (e.g. *Désolé*, *Désolé du / pour le retard*) and more or less elaborate constructions (e.g. *Je suis (vraiment/sincèrement) désolé(e)/navré(e)* 'I am really sorry.', *Je regrette vraiment ce qui vient de se passer* 'I really/sincerely regret what just happened. ').

Requests for forgiveness appeared in elliptical constructions (e.g. *Pardon*), performative utterances (e.g. *je te/vous demande pardon* 'I beg your pardon', *je te/vous demande les/des excuses* 'I apologize. '), hedged performative utterances (e.g. *Je vous prie de pardonner mon retard* 'Please forgive me for being late.' *Je vous prie de bien vouloir excuser mon retard; Je vous prie d'accepter mes excuses* 'Please accept my apology. '), imperative constructions (e.g. *excuse-moi (s'il te plait)* 'Please forgive me.', *veuillez m'excuser / me pardonner, pardonne-moi/ pardonnez-moi* 'Please forgive me.' *Vraiment ne vous fâchez pas* 'Please don't get angry. '; *Ne te mets pas en colère* 'Don't get angry. '), interrogative and declarative utterances (e.g. *Est-ce que vous me pardonnez Monsieur* 'Do you forgive me sir?' *Vous allez m'excuser pour le retard* 'You will have to excuse me for the delay.' *J'espère que tu ne m'en veux pas trop* 'I hope you don't blame me too much.' / I hope you are not too mad at me. '), combinations of many expressions (e.g. *Veuillez me comprendre et ne vous mettez pas en colère* 'Please understand me and don't get angry. '). The analysis also reveals that direct apologies appearing alone were very rare in the data. Rather, they mostly occurred in complex structures.

In terms of socio-pragmatic variation of the direct apologies attested, the results show that, in addition to differences with respect to the frequencies of types of direct apologies across the two situations, major differences emerged with regard to the linguistic realizations and modifications of the apologies in the two situations.

### 4.3 Indirect apologies: realizations and pragmatic functions

The respondents produced 445 tokens of indirect apologies using four different realization types, namely ‘taking responsibility’, ‘explanation’, ‘offer of repair or restitution’, and ‘promise of forbearance’ (cf. Table 3). The most preferred realization type was ‘taking responsibility’. It represented 43.8% of all indirect apologies. The second most frequent type was ‘explanation’, which accounted for 36.2% of the data. ‘Offer of repair’ was the third most common type while ‘promise of forbearance’ was the least employed type of indirect apology.

**Table 3:** Realization types of indirect apologies

Type or indirect apology	Friend (S1)	Professor (S2)	Total
Taking responsibility	108	87	195 (43.8%)
Explanation	15	146	161 (36.2%)
Offer of repair / restitution	50	17	67 (15%)
Promise of forbearance	3	19	22 (5%)
Total	176 (100%)	269 (100%)	445 (100%)

Table 3 also reveals that the participants used more examples of the taking responsibility strategy in the friend situation (55.4%) than in the professor situation (44.6%). In contrast, the frequency of explanations, the second most common type of indirect apologies, was by far higher in the professor situation (90.7%) than in the friend situation (9.3%). Not showing up on time for an appointment is a face-threatening act that may have a very negative impact on the relationship. The choice of the participants here was probably due the fact that there seems to be a social norm requiring students to explain why such an offence took place in order to protect the face and authority of their professors and to preserve the socio-institutional relationship. Table 5 also shows that the number of offers of repair/restitution was by far higher in the friend situation (50 tokens in the friend situation vs. 17 instances in the professor situation), while the frequency of promises of forbearance was higher in the professor situation (19 tokens vs. 3 examples in the friend situation).

Let us now examine the strategies used in indirect apologies, focusing on their pragmatic functions and linguistic realization patterns.

#### 4.3.1 Acknowledging / taking responsibility

By using this strategy, “the speaker admits responsibility for the offence” (Márquez-Reiter, 2000: 153). In order to do so, the participants in our study chose a number of realization types or sub-formulas. These were ‘explicit self-blame’, ‘explicit self-deficiency’, ‘lack of intent’, ‘expression of embarrassment or surprise’, etc.

In choosing the explicit self-blame strategy, the speaker “explicitly acknowledges that s/he has been at fault and thus accepts a high level of responsibility” (Márquez-Reiter, 2000: 153). This type / strategy was realized in the data using the constructions like *c’est (de) ma faute* ‘It’s my fault’, *j’ai tort* ‘I am wrong.’, *C’est très impoli de ma part* ‘That’s very rude of me.’, etc.

The taking responsibility strategy was also realized by expressing self-deficiency. This type consisted in the speaker acknowledging his/her involvement in the offense and attempting to explain it by alluding to a self-deficiency (e.g. awkwardness, lack of attention, etc.) as the main reason for the offensive act. Some of constructions used to express self-deficiency include *Parfois je suis maladroit* ‘Sometimes, I am clumsy.’ *Je suis un peu maladroit* ‘I am a little clumsy.’ *Je n’ai pas fait/prêté attention* ‘I did not pay attention.’ Another realization type of the taking responsibility strategy was the expression of lack of intent. It was employed to indicate that the offence was non-intentional, using constructions like *Je n’ai pas fait exprès* ‘I did not do it on purpose.’, *C’est un accident* ‘It’s an accident.’, *C’est vraiment involontaire* ‘It’s really unintentional.’ Some participants expressed embarrassment or surprise. To this end, they used constructions like *Je ne sais vraiment pas comment c’est arrivé* ‘I really don’t know how it happened.’ *Seigneur, je ne sais vraiment pas ce qui m’arrive* ‘God, I really don’t know what is happening to me.’

#### 4.3.2 Explanation

By using this strategy, the speaker “expresses the reasons which (in)directly brought about the offence” (Márquez-Reiter, 2000: 157). Explanations or accounts are intended to protect the speaker’s positive face, since they help to operate a sort of transfer of responsibility of the offence to another source. While explanations may appear alone, i.e. in lieu of direct or indirect apologies, most of the examples in the data illustrate the use of explanations in combination with direct apologies and/other types of indirect apologies. Also interesting is the different with respect to the types of explanations given differ across the two situations. In the friend situation, the respondents mostly mentioned stress/fatigue, limited space in the room, etc. to justify the incident. In the professor situation, the participants invoked health issues, stress, congested traffic, problem with the alarm clock as the main reasons for their late coming.

#### 4.3.3 Offer of repair

Some participants offer to repair the damage that resulted from their infraction. In the friend situation, some respondents offered to buy a new vase for the interlocutor, using constructions like *Je vous achèterai un autre* ‘I will buy you another one.’, *T’inquiète pas je t’en achèterai un autre* ‘Don’t worry I will buy you another one’. Other participants offered to clean up the mess without any indication whether they intend to replace the broken vase, using constructions like *Je vais débarrasser la saleté* ‘I will clean up the mess.’, *Je vais tout nettoyer* ‘I will clean everything.’. In the professor situation, offer of repair occurred in the form of the promise to show up for the appointment as soon as possible (e.g. *Je ferai tout pour être là le plus tôt possible* ‘I will do everything to be there as soon as possible.’) Some participants offered to catch up the time wasted (e.g. *Je vous promets que ce retard*

*sera rattrapé le plus vite possible* 'I promise that the delay will be caught up as soon as possible.')

#### 4.3.4 Promise of forbearance

Some informants promised that the incident would not happen again, using constructions like *C'est la première et la dernière fois* 'It's the first and last time.' *La prochaine fois je ferai bien attention* 'I will pay attention / be more careful next time.' *Cela ne se répétera plus* 'It will not happen again.'

Having discussed the strategies used by the respondents to apologize indirectly, I will now look at the types of supportive acts used to modify direct and indirect apologies.

#### 4.4. Supportive acts

Several speech acts were used as supportive acts in the data. The most frequent supportive acts found in the data were, in decreasing order, greetings, self-introductions, comments offence mitigations, and requests. Table 4, below, shows the frequency of all supportive acts in the two situations. It reveals differences in the choices of the respondents with respect to familiarity and social status.

**Table 4:** Types of supportive acts

Type of supportive act	Friend (S1)	Professor (S2)	Total
Greetings	0	94	94
Self-introductions	0	88	88
Requests	0	11	11
Offence mitigations	9	3	12
Reprimands	4	0	4
Comments	9	11	20
Expressions of gratitude	1	5	6
Questions	3	5	8
Suggestions	3	0	3
Compliment	1	0	1
Total	30	217	247

In the following section, I will discuss pragmatic roles played by the most frequent supportive acts in the apology utterances.

##### 4.4.1 Greetings

They preceded an apology head act and occurred only in the professor situation. Greetings served to initiate the interaction with the superior and to prepare the ground for the apologies. The respondents used constructions like *bonjour, allo, oui bonjour*, generally accompanied by the address terms such as *monsieur, madame, professeur*. These terms were used to index the institutional status of the addressee. Greetings with such honorific or deferential terms marked power asymmetry and created an atmosphere whereby the superior was ready to listen to and accept the forthcoming apologies.

#### 4.4.2 Self-introductions

Self-introductions, another type of supportive move, were the second most preferred supportive act by the respondents. They occurred only in the first data set, more precisely in the situation where the participants had to make a phone call in order to apologize to their professors for being late. Many respondents introduced themselves before apologizing. The respondents usually gave their first or last names and/or reminded the professors that they had an appointment. Self-introductions appeared in the pre-sequence of the apology utterance either alone or in combination with greetings, and they were very important in this situation because they helped the professor to know the identity of the caller and to listen to what s/he had to say. Self-introductions were strategies that helped, in combination with greetings, to prepare to the interlocutor for the reason of the phone call. The participants used constructions like *C'est Douglas* 'It is Douglas.' *Je suis l'étudiante X* 'I am student X.', *C'est moi, votre étudiante avec qui vous avez rendez-vous à 9h 00* 'It's me, your student with whom you have an appointment at 9:00 am.'.

#### 4.4.3 Comments

Comments were also used as supportive acts in the data. The comments made by the participants in the friend situation were intended to mitigate the apologies proper. they appeared in the form of proverbs, as in (6), or as humor, as in (7), to dissipate any tension in the atmosphere. In (6), the proverbial saying that "to err is human" is intended to reinforce the three apologies. In (7), B attempts to lessen the tension by transferring some of the blame to his/her jacket. In spite of the blame shift, B promises to do something to repair the damage caused and goes on to exhort A to forget the incident and forgive her. Interesting here is the way in which the apology act is framed: the utterance *Ne fais pas le deuil pour ça* is used to urge the addressee not to worry too much about the loss. The choice of such an utterance is motivated by the friendship existing between the apologizer and the offended person.

- 6) *Chère amie, je m'excuse, s'il te plait pardonne-moi. Je n'ai pas fait cela exprès. L'erreur est humaine.* (Friend)  
'Dear friend, I apologize, please forgive me. I did not do it on purpose. To err is human.'
- 7) A : *Oh! Regarde ce que tu fais. Quelle bêtise! Ton manteau, vraiment!*  
'Oh! Look what you are doing. What a mess! Your jacket, really!  
B: *Je suis désolée ma puce. Oh, mon Dieu, ces habillements des blancs voilà les conséquences. Nous allons arranger cela. Ne fais pas le deuil pour ça. Pardon.* (Friend)  
'I am sorry sweetheart. Oh my God, these clothes from the whites, look at the consequences. We will make it up to you. Please don't mourn over it.'

The comments in the professor situation were also used to reinforce the apologies. In (8), for instance, the speaker (S) begins her turn with a complex apology act, namely a

combination of two apologies: the first apology is a plea for understanding and it is softened by the 'pre-modifying' clause *je vous prie de bien vouloir*, the second apology is a direct request for forgiveness that is mitigated with the honorific *professeur*. The complex apology is followed by the statements *J'ai pourtant réglé mon réveil* and *Hélas le sommeil m'a emportée*. in which the student explains that she did what she could do to get up early (by setting her alarm clock) and goes on to say that her action was in vain: she overslept. This comment is intended to dismiss any interpretation of her late coming as an irresponsible act. In other words, this comment works as a disarmer. She uses another apology followed by another comment *Vous me savez ponctuelle pourtant* in which she reminds her professor that she is generally on time. This comment also works as a disarmer in the sense that the student wants to present herself as a committed person in order to dissipate any negative interpretation of her behavior and ensure that the good relationship with the professor is preserved.

- 8) S : *Je vous prie de bien vouloir me comprendre et m'excuser professeur. J'ai pourtant réglé mon réveil. Hélas le sommeil m'a emportée. Je suis désolée Professeur. Vous me savez ponctuelle pourtant.* (Professor)

'Please understand me and forgive me professor. I did set my alarm clock. Unfortunately, I overslept. I am sorry professor. You know that I am usually on time.'

#### 4.4.4 Offence mitigations

This supportive was also documented in the two situations: it occurred much more often in the friend situation than in the professor situation. By using this supportive act, the participants intended to mitigate the consequences of the offence and to render their apology acts more acceptable. To achieve this, some of them hinted to the value of their relationship with addressee, as in (9), asked the addressee to calm down as in (10). In the professor situation, offence mitigation consisted in reassuring the superior that the delay would not impact the research project negatively, as in (11). The primary goal here to get the addressee to accept the apology and to restore the situation.

- 9) *Ma puce, c'est juste un accident et de plus **notre amitié vaut bien plus que les objets du monde réunis**. Je t'en trouverai un autre pareil si tu y tenais tellement.* (Friend)

'Honey, it's just an accident and besides our friendship is worth more than the objects of the world put together. I'll find you another one like that if you loved it.'

- 10) *Oh je suis sincèrement désolée, **tu n'as pas à t'en faire** c'est de ma faute comme je suis si maladroit.* (Friend)

'Oh, I am sincerely sorry, you don't have to worry it's my fault, I am so clumsy.'

- 11) *Oui monsieur, c'est votre étudiante! J'appelle pour m'excuser car je serai quelque peu en retard. Je dois toutefois vous promettre que cela ne nuira en rien à votre projet de recherche. Encore désolé monsieur pour le retard.* (Professor)

'Yes sir, It's your student! I am calling to apologize because I will be a little late. I must promise that this will in no way affect your research project. Once again, sorry for the delay sir.'

#### 4.4.5 Requests

Request supportive acts were only produced in the professor situation. Appearing before or after the apologies, such requests were intended to ask the apology recipient for more time to show up for the meeting. They were generally realized using interrogative structures with the verb *pouvoir* in the conditional, as in (12), the politeness marker *s'il vous plaît* and the modifying clause *je vous prie* as in (13-14), Another type of request used as supportive act is that which functions as a suggestion, as in (15).

- 12) *Je suis désolée, car je ne pourrais être à l'heure au rendez-vous. Pourriez-vous m'accorder une marge d'une heure?* (Professor)

'I am sorry because I will not be able to be on time for the appointment. Could you give an hour margin?'

- 13) *Monsieur, s'il vous plaît accordez-moi quelques minutes de plus je vous prie. Je me suis réveillé tard, car je me suis endormi tard.* (Professor)

'Sir please give me a few more minutes please. I woke up late because I fell asleep late.'

- 14) *C'est X, je suis désolé monsieur, j'arriverai un peu tard parce que j'ai trop dormi. Accordez-moi 15 minutes de plus s'il vous plaît.* (Professor)

'It's X, I am sorry sir, I will arrive a little late because I overslept. Please give me another 15 minutes.'

- 15) *Bonjour Monsieur, c'est votre étudiant. Le sommeil m'a juste emporté. Pouvez-vous fixez un autre rendez-vous?* (Professor)

'Good morning sir, this is your student. I overslept. Can you set up another appointment?'

#### 4.5 Codeswitching in apology utterances

Another interesting result of the study was the use of codeswitching as a persuasive strategy. It was found that some participants apologized using the expression *assia/assiah*, a term borrowed from Cameroon Pidgin English and Camfranglais, where it functions as an expression of sympathy or apology. In Cameroon French, this term has the same pragmatic function and it is prevalent in informal contexts where it can appear with other apology strategies. This example of codeswitching in apology events has a very interesting pragmatic function. According to Anchimbe (2015: 164), "codeswitching in

postcolonial societies has complex pragmatic functions which include indexing social relationships, accommodating speaker competences, closing group boundaries, indicating closeness or distance and adapting to contextual requirements". Let us consider the following two examples from our data.

16) A : *Mama! Je dis hein! Tu es venue tout casser chez moi?*

'Mama, I say eh! Did you come to my house to break everything?'

B : *Wééé! Assiah! Je n'ai pas fait expressément.*

'Weee! Assiah (Sorry)! I did not do it intentionally.'

17) A : *Waiais Ines! Regarde alors ce que tu me fais! Mon pot s'est cassé!*

'Waiais Ines! Look what you are doing to me. My vase/jar is broken.'

B: *Assia! Excuse-moi! J'ai pas fait exprès. Je voulais juste enlever mon manteau.*

'Assia (Sorry)! Forgive me! I did not do it on purpose. I just wanted to take off my jacket.'

The choice of this strategy in these examples is motivated by the desire to highlight the friendly relationship between the offender (B) and the offended (A). By indexing the social relationship that exists, the offenders in both examples attempt to make their apologies more acceptable. In (16), we can see that A, the offended person, uses the term *mama*, a very common address term and attention getter in Cameroon, combines it with another attention getter *je dis hein*, to preface the expression of displeasure with the situation created by B. The complaint is framed in an indirect and exaggerated manner, namely *tu es venue tout casser chez moi?* B's apologetic response also shows instances of codeswitching. The apology is prefaced by a local interjection *wééé*, which serves to express surprise and request for forgiveness and it is associated with the direct apology *assia*. B goes on to apologize indirectly by expressing lack of intent to break the vase. The choice of these strategies is motivated by the context, the relationship between A and B and the friendly tone already set by the complainer. These examples show the impact of the multilingual environment on speakers' choices of apology strategies. Other instances of code-switching in apologizing include the use of indigenous interjections/exclamations such as *waiiais*, *ouais*, *hééé*, *mama*, etc. in the pre-sequences of apology utterances.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined strategies used by Cameroon French speakers to apologize in situations involving offences towards close friends and professors, using examples provided two groups of respondents. The findings reveal that the participants used a wide range of strategies to accomplish remedial work and that factors such as the nature of the offence committed, the level of familiarity between the speaker and the hearer, and



the power distance between the interaction partners played an important role in the choices and combinations of apology strategies.

With respect to the complexity of remedial work performed, the analysis reveals that the informants mostly used complex apology utterances. While some of the participants combined or repeated direct and indirect apologies other respondents preferred combinations of apologies with other types of speech acts with various pragmatic functions (greetings, comments, questions, suggestions, etc.). Overall, the choice of complex apology utterances was motivated by the desire to render the apology or request for forgiveness more persuasive and to play down the guilt attached to the person apologizing.

In relation to types of apologies, the data indicate that the participants employed more direct apologies than indirect apologies. The analysis of direct apologies reveals the use of three different realization types, namely “expressions of regret”, “offers of apology”, and “requests for forgiveness”, with the two first mentioned appearing as the most preferred by the participants. Also noteworthy is the fact that some differences emerged regarding the distribution of types of direct apologies across the two situations. Indirect apologies occurred in the form of different speech acts, with “acknowledging or taking responsibility” as the most frequent indirect apology, followed by “explanations”. The examples also indicated major situational variations in the use of indirect apologies. For instance, while acts of “taking responsibility” were used much more toward friends than professors, explanations were employed most frequently in the professor situation. Offers of repair, the third most common pattern, mostly appeared in the friend situation. The findings also reveal the use of different types of speech acts to modify direct and indirect apologies and the data indicate major differences in the situational distribution of these supportive acts.

The analysis also reveals the deployment of a number of supportive acts and other communicative strategies that seem to reflect some sociocultural norms of interaction and the multilingual nature of the Cameroonian society. For instance, the abundant use of nominal address terms in the friend situation seemed to reflect a group-based conceptualization of relationship when apologizing to friends. Such terms index closeness, affection, in-group belonging, and the pragmatic intent behind their use is to intensify the plea for forgiveness. Also noteworthy is the abundant use of honorific terms to index the power imbalance between the speaker (student) and the interlocutor (professor) and to show respect for the superior’s social and professional status. The use of codeswitching and some indigenized Cameroon French patterns in the act of apologizing, a noticeable feature in the data, seems to reflect the multilingual nature of the Cameroon society and their function as a persuasive strategy in informal contexts.

As the study was based on data elicited by means of a questionnaire, it is legitimate to ask whether the examples analysed would reflect respondents’ choices in naturally occurring situations. While caution should be taken in interpreting the findings of this study, they still offer invaluable insights into the apologetic behavior of Cameroon French speakers. The study is a contribution to the growing body of research on pragmatic aspects of Cameroon French and it is my hope that subsequent studies will

address some of the aforementioned limitations of this preliminary analysis. Future research could consider factors such as age, socioeconomic groups, gender, and ethnic group in the analysis of apology strategies. It is likely that such factors lead to the use of strategies that differ from those found in the present study.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest in connection with the work submitted.

### **About the Author**

The author is Full Professor of French and Linguistics at Cape Breton University, Canada. His main research interests include second / foreign language education, L2 French pragmatics, Language contact, Cross-cultural, Postcolonial, and Variational Pragmatics, Regional pragmatic variation in French.

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