APOLOGIZING IN SPANISH: A STUDY OF THE STRATEGIES USED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA

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Abstract

This article provides insights into the strategies used by a group of university students of Canarian origin to perform the speech act of apologizing. Though Canarian Spanish has been recognised as one of the most deeply studied dialects in the Hispanic world (Medina 1996; Álvarez 1996; Corrales, Álvarez and Corbella 2007), little has been said about this variety at the socio-pragmatic level, and, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been carried out on the issue of speech acts, let alone about apologies in Canarian Spanish.

This article attempts to start filling this gap by describing the most frequent apology strategies used by one hundred university students at the ULPGC (Canary Islands, Spain) when apologizing in eight different situations. Following the lines of many other studies, we obtained the data through the application of a Discourse Completion Test, slightly adapted from the well-known CCSARP (Cross-cultural Speech Act Realisation Project). Gender differences are explored, along with the role of other situational factors such as degree of familiarity between the participants, severity of the offense and age of the offended person. Suggestions for further work in the fields of intercultural pragmatics and EFL teaching and learning are also given.

Keywords: Speech acts; Apologies; Apology strategies; Canarian Spanish.

1. Introduction

In the last decades a considerable number of empirical works focusing on the speech act of apologizing have been published. Many researches have defined, described and characterized apologies from a variety of approaches and using different techniques and theoretical backgrounds. Some authors have investigated the apology strategies used by the members of a particular culture or speech community (Afghari 2007; Bataineh and Bataineh 2006; Holmes 1990; Nureddeen 2008; Robinson 2004; Shariati and Chamani 2010; Wagner 2004; Wouk 2006), whereas others have carried out comparative studies either on the way apologies are performed by speakers of different languages or language varieties, or by native versus non-native speakers of the same language (Bataineh and Bataineh 2008; Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989; Curell and Sabaté 2007; Kassanga and Lwanga-Lumu 2007; Maros 2006; Sugimoto 1997; Suszczynska 1999; Trosborg 1987; Wagner 1999; Wagner and Roebuck 2010; Wierzbicka 1985).

As regards the Hispanic world, we can find a relatively short number of works dealing with how Spanish speakers apologize when using their own language (Cordella

1991; Klaver 2008; Márquez-Reiter 2000, 2001, 2008; Rojo 2005; Ruzickova 1998; Wagner and Roebuck 2010) or when trying to communicate in a foreign language (Cordella 1990; García 1989; Mir 1992).

The present paper is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first investigation that tries to shed some light on the type of strategies used in Canarian Spanish, a variety which has been widely studied, as Medina (1996: 10) and Álvarez (1996: 67) confirm and Corrales, Álvarez and Corbella's (2007) bibliographical compilation proves. However, as Morgenthaler (2008: 27) states, while many studies on Canarian Spanish have adopted a quantitative or variationist sociolinguistic perspective, other fields related to qualitative sociolinguistics, pragmatics or ethnomethodology remain totally unexplored. In this sense, one of our aims is to find out whether, apart from their many dialectological distinctive features, this speech community has also any pragmatic particularity.

When justifying the importance of this type of study, Holmes (1989: 194) agrees with Hymes that "research on speech acts can yield interesting cultural information of considerable value for cross-cultural comparison". In addition, Wolfson states that "by observing what people apologize for, we learn what cultural expectations are with respect to what people owe one another" (Wolfson 1988: 68), thus underlining the necessity to learn "about the rights and obligations that members of a community have toward one another, information which is culture specific and not necessarily available to the intuitions of the native speaker" (Wolfson 1988: 64). This has important implications for foreign language teaching and learning.

In this article, we will provide some preliminary data obtained from a particular speech community, that of a group of university students of Canarian origin studying at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain) (henceforth, ULPGC. In their apologetic utterances the informants used a varied combination of strategies, which, apparently, were in accordance with the type and the relative weight of the offense. These strategies were analysed in an attempt to understand how they correlated with factors such as the gender of the apologist, the severity of the offense (minor vs. serious), the degree of familiarity or social distance between the participants (close vs. distant) as well as the age of the offended person.

Our paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we will approach a theoretical description of apologies, starting with a recognition of their close connection with politeness. Then, we will report briefly on the results of some previous works dealing with apologies in other varieties of Spanish. In the following section we will describe the aims and the methodological procedure of our investigation. Finally, we will provide and comment on our findings, before making some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

2. Apologies and politeness: A brief theoretical description

As Placencia and Bravo (2002, iii) observe, the study of speech acts and their linguistic realization is closely connected with the rules of politeness of the particular speech and sociocultural communities where they are performed. In the last decades, many studies have proved that the explanation and/or motivation for using certain linguistic forms to count as a specific speech act tends to be related to the different politeness norms in use in a particular sociocultural group. Although a large number of works have dealt with

speech acts and politeness in the English-speaking world, mostly following Brown and Levinson's (1978) model, the situation is very different in the Hispanic countries, where research on this issue started much later (Placencia & Bravo 2002; Bravo and Briz 2004). Taking into account the geographical diversity of Hispanic communities, together with the high number of contexts, acts and variables that can be considered, we can't but agree with Placencia and Bravo (2002: 16) that the studies carried out are still scarce.

2.1. *Approaching politeness*

Regarded as an element that is present in every interaction, politeness is, however, a difficult concept to define. In fact, as Cummings (2010: 327) points out, "there is no canonical definition of politeness" and relatively few scholars have given precise definitions, most of them including "an element of appropriate social and interactive behaviour, consideration and concern for the feelings of other people and some reference to 'face'". This is a basic notion in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, which refers to "a person's public self-image" (Swan et al. 2004) and to "that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize" (Yule 1996: 60). Face can also be defined as "what you lose when you are embarrassed or humiliated in public" (Trask 1999: 242).

In Brown and Levinson's theory, politeness results from the individual's wish for face-protection. As is well-known, they distinguish two aspects of face, which Swan et al. (2004: 243) clearly explain in the following terms:

> 'positive face' [is] the desire for appreciation and approval by others; and 'negative face' [is] the desire not to be imposed on by others. In interacting, speakers need to balance a concern for other people's face with a desire to protect their own. Participants in an interaction draw on politeness strategies as a means of paying attention to another person's face and avoiding 'face-threatening acts': positive politeness strategies involve the expression of friendliness or approval […]; negative politeness strategies involve not imposing on others or threatening their face.

As Yule (1996: 60) points out, politeness in an interaction can be defined as

> the means employed to show awareness of another person's face. In this sense, politeness can be accomplished in situations of social distance or closeness. Showing awareness for another person's face when that other seems socially distant is often described in terms of respect or deference. Showing the equivalent awareness when the other is socially close is often described in terms of friendliness, camaraderie, or solidarity.

Therefore, any piece of behaviour that can make another person lose face is considered to be a face-threatening act (FTA); whereas a face-saving act would be any piece of behaviour "which lessens or removes the threat of losing face" (Trask 1999: 242). In order to assess the seriousness of a FTA, Brown and Levinson mention three factors that must be taken into account, namely: The social distance (D) of speaker (S) and hearer (H); the relative power (P) of S and H, and the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture. They even provide a formula to calculate the weightiness of a

FTA (Brown and Levinson 1987: 76). Several factors are also said to determine the actual expression of politeness, such as the relative status of the participants.

Admittedly, some aspects of this model have been questioned. For instance, its capacity to account for the variety of politeness phenomena that are present in different cultures (Wierzbicka 1985). Similarly, for Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and Blum-Kulka (1992), the European concepts of politeness are "culturally coloured", while Wierzbicka (1985) makes reference to face-threatening acts which don't have the same function in all cultures. Also, Duranti (1992) argues that respectful terms of address, which are generally seen as a negative politeness strategy, may constitute an imposition, as long as they remind the hearer of the obligations of his/her position. All in all, and despite the fact that the universality claimed by Brown and Levinson has been rejected in many ways by several researchers (Davies et al. 2007; Holmes 1995; House 2005; Márquez-Reiter 2008; Meier 1995, among others), their model has been and continues to be highly influential. Contemporary authors like Ballesteros (2001) or Fernández Amaya (2009) defend Brown and Levinson's theory as a valuable and complete paradigm whose validity to measure the typical sociocultural values and patterns of communicative interaction of a social group has no limits. As Boretti (2009: 233) states, it became a model to facilitate the explanation of how the relationship between language and society works in terms of extralinguistic and contextual factors such as social distance, relative power and degree of imposition of the particular speech act. They all determine the choice of politeness strategies to protect speaker's face in the communicative interaction. In fact, Brown and Levinson's distinction between negative and positive politeness has been adopted by many scholars (Hickey 2005; Márquez Reiter 2000; Ballesteros 2001; Lorenzo-Dus 2001; Haverkate 2003, etc.). Nevertheless, several developments have recently presented new approaches to politeness (cf. Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003; Locher 2004, among others). One of the most interesting alternatives is that of Diana Bravo's (2003). This author adopts a sociocultural approach, admitting the universality of the concept of face but suggesting that it has to be redefined, by using the crucial notion of "sociocultural context", which determines and explains the differences in the perception, realization and interpretation of speech acts and politeness. Bravo (1999, 2004) and other researches involved in the EDICE Program network have highlighted the importance of the sociocultural context for the study of politeness, by redefining facework and underlining the link between language users' face needs and their social roles as well as the situational factors (Bravo and Hernández Flores 2009: 16-19). The premise, as explained by Dumitrescu (2011: 109) is that

> participants in a communicative interaction have some face wants characterized according to the sociocultural parameters of their own community. These face wants - or images - are related to the role or roles that speakers are representing in a given communicative situation, so that the face want or image is completely dependent on the role played, the latter being, like the face itself, socially, culturally and situationally defined.

According to Boretti (2009: 241), the definition of this category of sociocultural context can only be understood from the perspective of sociocultural pragmatics, which provides an ideal framework for the study of politeness as a social phenomenon. This subdiscipline defines the sociocultural context as 'the communicative situation (seen from the point of view of the ethnomethodological tradition) plus the specific values,

beliefs, attitudes and shared knowledge which are materialized through language and which shape up the social image of a group of speakers.' It is a sociocultural component that is shared by these speakers and that must be taken into account by the researcher in his analysis of both the production and the perception of politeness.

2.2. *Approaching apologies*

Just as there are cultural differences in the expression of politeness, different speech acts may also exhibit culturally shaped features. In particular, apologies are expressive acts of a social or convivial nature. For Holmes (1990: 156) apologies are mainly and essentially a social act aimed at helping conversationalists to keep a good relationship. In her words (Holmes 1995: 26), "apologizing for an offense is an essential feature of politeness behaviour". However, as pointed out by Lakoff (2003: 201), apologies are

> hard to identify, define, or categorize, a difficulty that arises directly out of the functions they perform. […] they occur in a range of forms from canonically explicit to ambiguously indirect; the functions served by those forms range from abject abasement for wrongdoing, to conventional greasing of the social wheels, to expressions of sympathy, advance mollification for intended bad behaviour, and formal public displays of currently "appropriate" feeling. Thus, in terms of the relation between form and function, apologies are both one-to-many and many-to-one, a fact that only makes the analyst's task more daunting (and more exciting).

Actually, there is agreement among scholars about the complexity of the act of apologizing, since it involves linguistic and non-linguistic acts (Bolívar 2010: 492). As Álvarez and Blondet (2009: 298-99) state, although the act of apologizing is universal, there is variation among different speech communities regarding not only whether an act is supposed to be offensive and its degree of severity, but also concerning the adequate compensation for the offence. The reason for this seems to be that the concept of face and the values it is built upon are not the same everywhere. In fact, as underlined by Wagner (1999: 28), apologies constitute a deeply rooted sociocultural phenomenon in which the offender violates a particular social norm or fails to fulfil another person's expectations. As already explained by Fraser (1981: 259) in his seminal paper "On apologizing", if the offender recognises that the offended individual has perceived the infraction, he may feel the need 'to set things right' by undertaking what Goffman (1971) called 'remedial work'. For this, he must invoke "the appropriate formula under the appropriate circumstances" (Fraser 1981: 261), so that he manages to change an offensive act into a more acceptable one. Esentially, then, apologies are a type of speech act that attempts to "provide support for the H (hearer), who is actually or potentially malaffected by a violation X", as Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 156-7) remark. Therefore, the main aim of an apology is to redress face-threatening behaviour, in order to maintain "social contract and social harmony between the interactants" (Curell and Sabaté 2007: 78). This means that apologizing is face-saving for the hearer or addressee, since it provides some benefit for the offended person, while it implies some cost for the apologist, who perceives it as face-threatening.

Holmes (1989) takes function as the crucial criterion and proposes a broad definition of an apology in the following terms: "An apology is a speech act addressed to V's face-needs and intended to remedy an offence for which A takes responsibility,

and thus to restore equilibrium between A and V (where A is the apologist and V is the victim or person offended)" (Holmes 1989: 196). Notwithstanding, what seems obvious, as argued by Wagner (1999: 1) is that an apology may not refer "to the same social act across all cultures and societies" as long as "notions of offense, the obligation to apologise and the means by which an apology is rendered are not global in nature, but rather are socially and culturally defined".

Álvarez and Blondet (2009: 299) provide an overview of the various criteria which different works on apologies seem to adopt. They are the following: a) types of offence and their severity, b) strategies used, c) apology formulas, d) felicity conditions of apologies, and e) influence of external factors. In this paper we will focus on the strategies and apology formulas used by our Canarian informants, while we try to explore their connection with the different types of offence (minor/serious) and the influence of factors such as the age of the offended person and the type of relationship (close/distant) between the participants.

3. Some literature review on apologizing in Spanish

In this section we will try to summarise briefly the main findings of previous research on apologies in other varieties of Spanish. This will allow us to establish whether there are possible similarities and/or differences with the features found for the speakers of the Canarian variety. Actually, in our initial hypothesis we drew a parallel with Wierzbicka's (1985) idea that different cultures and different languages involve different speech acts. Following the same line of thought, it also seemed reasonable to expect some differences in the realization of speech acts, and in this case in the realization of apologies, by speakers of different varieties of the same language, particularly in a language so culturally diverse and geographically extended as Spanish.

In fact, as Wagner and Roebuck (2010: 254) have recently argued, we must not assume that all native speakers of a language like Spanish "have and will use a closed set of linguistic strategies in the same way when they apologize". Rather, we support their claim that "speech acts, politeness and face are socio-culturally sensitive variables whose values and effects vary between communities of practice". In agreement with these scholars, we also believe that "studies on community-based value systems are crucial". Therefore, it may be of interest to mention the results obtained by a number of studies focusing on how native speakers of several varieties of Spanish apologize. They would only lead us to agree with Wagner and Roebuck (2010) on the inappropriateness of using a language-specific parameter such as 'Spanish language' when dealing with issues such as politeness, speech acts and, particularly, apologies, even when there may be certain general pragmatic tendencies shared between the different communities. As Bravo and Hernández Flores (2009: 19) put it, "in a language so socioculturally varied as Spanish, it is better to avoid generalizations that may hamper comprehension of the rich linguistic and communicative reality of its users" (our translation). Despite this fact, Hickey (2005: 319-320) points out how "Brown and Levinson's division of politeness into positive and negative applies directly to Spanish society which, on a positive-negative cline, is very close to the positive end". This means that English speakers will tend to use more negative politeness strategies than Spanish speakers, who will prefer much more often to use positive politeness strategies (Fdez.-Amaya 2009: 113). Thus, among some other findings, García (1989) concluded that her Venezuelan

informants tended to use positive-politeness strategies, which included giving explanations, avoiding disagreement and repetition of the host's words. In turn, Cordella's (1990) study found that when apologizing, Chilean speakers employed hearer-oriented strategies. They always gave explanations and frequently used the explicit Spanish expression of apology *Disculpe*. Interestingly, Mir (1992) found that native Peninsular Spanish speakers used fewer apology strategies than native U.S. English speakers, but tended to increase the frequency with which they apologize when they use English. In addition, these native Peninsular Spanish speakers preferred to give explanations, minimize their offenses and even deny them when they needed to apologize.

As regards the patterns followed by Cuban Spanish speakers when apologizing, Ruzickova (1998) found that IFID (*Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices*) strategies are preferred five times more than the rest of the strategies and that Cubans tend to use more positive than negative politeness strategies. Similarly, in her comparative research of apologies by Uruguayans and British English speakers, Márquez-Reiter (2000) found that Uruguayans valued negative politeness less highly than the Britons, who also tended to give more explanations. According to her data, the most important factor in determining the production of apologies was the severity of the offense, while the use of strategies such as an IFID or acknowledging responsibility were not situationally dependant.

Wagner (1999) focused on the speech communities of Cuernavaca (México) and Granada (Spain) to refute the claim that speech acts –and particularly the speech act of apologizing - were "subject to universal principles of verbal interaction" (Wagner 1999: 163). Among other conclusions, her data confirmed that members of the two communities compared perceived the strength of the apology strategies differently. In addition, Cuernavaca speakers found complex strategies to be stronger than simple apologies; particularly, they "rated apologies as stronger when an IFID preceded rather than followed another strategy within a complex strategy" (Wagner 1999: 166).

After a comparative research on the production of apologies by Uruguayan Spanish and British English speakers, Márquez-Reiter (2001) came to the conclusion that the former showed a marked preference for the non-intensification of their expressions of apology, the most frequent formulaic remedies being realised by the verbs *disculpar* and *perdonar*. According to the author this indicates that "the need to redress the hearer's 'negative' face does not seem to be as high in Uruguayan Spanish" (Márquez-Reiter 2001: 10). Likewise, Uruguayans didn't seem to show an orientation towards negative face. The crucial factors behind the use of apologies in both communities were the severity of the offense and the social power.

Wagner (2004) carried out an investigation of naturally occurring apologies in Cuernavaca Spanish. The results showed that like their Cuban and Uruguayan counterparts, when apologizing, speakers of Cuernavaca Spanish preferred to use an IFID. Another highly preferred strategy was that of giving explanations. In contrast to the members of the Cuban and Uruguayan communities, Cuernavaca speakers also included many instances of 'no responsibility'. In addition, they clearly preferred to use negative politeness strategies, while research conducted on other Spanish speaking communities has proved just the opposite.

In her preliminary study on apologies in Peninsular Spanish, Rojo (2005) found a definite preference for the strategy of acknowledging responsibility among Spanish acquaintances in general and, secondly, for offering repair. However, perhaps due to the

limitations of her study, she concluded that there seemed to be no fixed structured sketch for apologies in Peninsular Spanish. In Rojo's (2005: 77) words, "[t]he complex use of strategies, upgraders and downgraders on the data illustrates the complexity of this speech act within the speech community being studied". One basic problem, as Rojo (2005: 78) herself admits, is that the variety of Spanish named Peninsular does not really exist,[1] at least as a monolithic entity. While her aim was "to describe common features occurring in the realization of the SA of apologizing in the Spanish society", it is only at the end that she realizes how important it is to note that

> there is no such variety on the Spanish language, but rather there are many different varieties of Spanish within Spain. Furthermore, as pragmatics is not only about language but rather about culture and socio-cultural groups, it also needs to be observed that the Spanish society entails several diverse cultures with different values and linguistic patterns, which will therefore show different pragmatic norms/rules.

In a comparative study of apologies by Spanish and Dutch university students, Klaver (2008) found that the former prefer to use IFIDs when apologizing. In addition, the two other most frequent strategies were - in decreasing order of frequency - acknowledging responsibility and offering redress. Spaniards also seemed to favour the use of upgraders when apologizing to people with a higher social status and/or when the offense was considered to be severe. In socially close situations, where the participants have the same social status, Spaniards favoured the use of downgraders when apologizing.

More recently, Wagner and Roebuck (2010) carried out a comparative research on the apology strategies used by speakers of Cuernavacan and Panamanian Spanish. While they found some similarities with the results of research in other Hispanic communities, they also encountered differences. Specifically, speakers from the two communities preferred negative politeness strategies, which seems to contradict the findings of research conducted in other Spanish-speaking communities.

To sum it all up, we can simply underline the fact that the results obtained in the studies commented above are varied and sometimes even contradictory, which clearly makes us refute the claim that this particular speech act of apologizing is subject to universal principles of verbal interaction. Rather, we must insist on the need to carry out community-based research as long as it becomes obvious that an apology is a socially and culturally defined communicative function. In addition, we agree with Dumitrescu (2011, x) that all this justifies the development of sociopragmatic variation across Spanish(es) as a new topic in the pragmatics of Spanish by Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2005), who focus on three key areas of the sociocultural study of communication: Speech acts, conversation and politeness. These authors (Márquez Reiter and Placencia 2005: 190) suggest that "the degrees of positive and/or negative

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[1] As is well known, Peninsular Spanish, also called European or Iberian Spanish, refers to the varieties of the Spanish language spoken in the Iberian Peninsula, as opposed to the Spanish spoken in the Americas and in the Canary Islands. There is considerable lexical and phonological variation among these peninsular varieties and it is in this sense that Rojo said (and we understand) that it does not exist, i.e., as a single, distinctive or specific variety, but as a group of different varieties which share, as a common general feature, the distinction between the phonemes /s/ and /θ/, with the exception of some areas of Andalucía.

politeness appear to be different" from one community of speakers to another. In their words:

> If we were to place the different studies reported on a politeness continuum, we would find the Argentinians, Spaniards and Venezuelans in these studies sitting at one end of the spectrum, followed by the Chileans and Uruguayans in the middle, and the Mexicans, Ecuadorians and Peruvians in a slightly lower position toward the negative end of the continuum.

4. Our study: Aims and methodology

Our main objectives when carrying out the present investigation can be best described in the following three research questions:

1. What apology strategies are most frequently chosen by our Canarian informants?
2. Do our Canarian male and female informants use the same strategies, i.e., does the gender of the speaker or apologist have any influence on the choice of a particular strategy?
3. What influence do the situational factors have on the choice of an apology strategy? Here we will focus on each of the three variables identified, namely, the degree of familiarity between the participants (social distance), the severity of the offense and the age of the offended person.

Like in many other previous studies, the data for this research were obtained through the preparation and application of a Discourse Completion Test (henceforth DCT), slightly adapted from the well-known CCSARP (Cross-cultural Speech Act Realisation Project) project. Although this type of written elicitation technique has been questioned by some authors, it is still widely used because it is considered to be a reliable method with a number of advantages. Some of them are that it allows for "large amount of data to be collected quickly" (Ellis 1994: 164), and, as Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 13) recognise, it helps to obtain more stereotyped responses, the prototypes of the variants speakers have in mind about how to realise a particular speech act. In this respect, and despite their criticism, in their recent contribution to the current debate on the natural data versus elicited data in pragmatics and speech act research, Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus (2008: 279) admit the validity of the DCT data as long as they are treated as a reflection of informants' perception and beliefs about appropriate linguistic behaviour [...] in different situations controlled for power and social distance" and not "as language in use". In this line, no claim is made here about the data obtained being instances of real language in use but examples of the type of strategies speakers have in mind. Besides, this is precisely what DCTs allow for: "a tentative categorisation of routines for the realisation of speech acts". In addition, DCTs provide "an almost ready-made and user friendly tool for research on the realisation of speech acts" (Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus 2008: 249) and this explains why they continue to be so popular.

As for the language production task, we tried to select subjects with relatively similar backgrounds. Finally, the survey was completed by 100 young university EFL students of Canarian origin, 50 males and 50 females, whose ages ranged between 18 and 26. The questionnaire was passed at the ULPGC faculties of Geography and

Philology between October and November 2010. Students were asked to read carefully the eight situations described and write in a realistic way what they would say in each case. All the situations were designed to include a combination of the following variables (which of course were not mentioned in the test): Serious/minor offense; close/distant person; young/old offended person. Below we offer a transcription of the English version of the survey, with indication of the variables combined in each situation:

1. Your friend has just left his glasses on the sofa. You don't notice and sit on them, so you break them. (SERIOUS / CLOSE / YOUNG)

2. You are accompanying your aunt, an old lady you get on very well with, on a short trip by bus. You leave a bag with some souvenirs on the rack above your aunt's seat. On a sharp bend, the bag falls down, hitting your aunt's glasses, which break. (SERIOUS / CLOSE / OLD)

3. Backing out of a car park, you crash into another car which was passing by. The driver is a young man you don't know. (SERIOUS / DISTANT / YOUNG)

4. One of your teachers, a rather old professor, has lent you a book which you have spoiled: You dropped a little coffee on it and also some pages have come out. (SERIOUS / DISTANT / OLD)

5. You have arranged to play a basketball (or football, etc.) match with your group of friends, but you arrive 20 minutes late. (MINOR[2] / CLOSE / YOUNG)

6. You are eating at a restaurant with a close friend and his parents, whom you have known quite well for a long time. By mistake you take your friend's father's glass and drink. Then you realise what you have done. (MINOR / CLOSE / OLD)

7. You are away from home, in another city (Madrid/Barcelona) and you get lost. Then you see a group of students talking and sharing their books and class-notes. You approach them and interrupt to ask them for directions to get to your hotel. (MINOR / DISTANT / YOUNG)

8. You are walking quickly along a busy street and suddenly you bump into an old lady who almost falls down. (MINOR[3] / DISTANT / OLD)

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[2] In Canarian society, there seems to be a certain generalised relative tolerance for unpunctuality in informal contexts.

[3] As Spanish citizens, Canarians seem to fit in Haverkate's (2003) description of Spanish culture regarding proxemic behaviour. This has to do with their preference for a short physical distance among interlocutors in interpersonal communication, thus revealing their belonging to a solidarity culture. Similarly, socially acceptable levels of touching varies from one culture to another. In fact, Anglosaxon and Hispanic cultures have different perceptions for touch (haptics), the latter having perhaps a less negative sense for accidental bumping, as suggested in this context.

All these contexts coincide in the fact that either the offender violates a particular social norm or fails to fulfill another person's expectations. When giving linguistic expression to an apology, there is a variety of strategies that apologists can use. The main 9 apology strategies firstly identified by Fraser have been simplified by other authors, such as Trosborg (1987), who just takes 7 into consideration, or Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), who reduced them to 5. Initially, we assumed that in the answers given by our students, we would find the same set of strategies as those found in other languages. Therefore, in order to systematically analyse the utterances produced by our informants to express the illocutionary or pragmatic force of an apology, a coding scheme was developed, following the categorization previously used by Mir (1992) - based on Trosborg (1987). Later on, however, with the data collected, we realised that we needed to add another strategy to the seven categories initially established: Humour. We found that to a considerable extent, humourous or ironic utterances served as apologetic responses. As far as we know, this is something that already happened in the study carried out by Jebahi (2011) with Tunisian university students. This is hardly surprising since humour - which according to Attardo (2003: 1290) always has a pragmatic component - has been recognised and studied (Norrick and Spitz 2008) as a resource for mitigating conflict in interaction.[4] Thus, in a corpus of 800 apologetic messages, a total of 8 strategies were finally identified. Examples of each are provided in Table 1 below:

STRATEGIES	EXAMPLES
1. Denying responsibility	. *No fue culpa mía.* ('It was not my fault.*')* . *¡La culpa fue del conductor!* ('It was the driver's fault!')
2. Minimizing the offense	. *Da igual, ¿no? Somos como de la familia!* ('It's all the same, isn't it? We're like a family!') . *No te importa, ¿verdad?* ('I'm sure you don't mind, do you?')
3. Acknowledging responsibility	. *¡Oh! Cometí un error.* ('Oh! I made a mistake.') . *Es culpa mía por ser tan irresponsable.* ('I'm to blame for being so irresponsable.')
4. Offering to apologize	. *Ay, lo siento mucho de verdad.* ('Oh, I'm really very sorry!') . *Por favor, discúlpame.* ('Please, forgive me.')
5. Giving an explanation	. *¡ Se me escapó la guagua[5]!* ('I missed the bus!') . *Parece que hoy no me concentro en nada!* ('I

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[4] Admittedly, there are more possible explanations for the use of humour. One could be that our informants, because of the elicited nature of the data, felt free for using witty utterances which in real situations would probably not be used. Secondly, it could be argued that humour can actually be a communicative resource for accomplishing the second strategy, namely, for minimizing the offence. In any case, the role of humour as a resource for mitigating conflict appears to be a remarkable feature of our Canarian informants' apologetic responses. In fact, as observed by Bravo (1999: 176), jokes seem to abound in the communicative behaviour of Spaniards, in contrast to that of Swedish speakers'. This might also be related to Haverkate's (2003) findings about the positive politeness orientation of Spanish culture.

[5] The term *guagua* is a very popular Canarianism meaning 'bus'.

	just can't seem to concentrate today!')
6. Offering redress	. *Le puedo comprar uno nuevo.* ('I can buy you a new one.') . *Ya lo pago yo.* ('I'll pay for it.')
7. Promise of forbearance	. *No lo volveré a hacer más.* ('I won't do it again!') . *No volverá a ocurrir.* ('It won't happen again.')
8. Humour	. *Hey chicos. Aquí llega la nueva estrella* ('Hey guys! The new star player has just arrived!') . *Pero si no te quedaban nada bien.* ('Anyway, they didn't really suit you.')

Table 1: Examples of the eight apology strategies used by our Canarian informants

Many of the students' responses included two or more segments as illustrated in examples (1) and (2) below:

(1)   *Lo siento mucho. Fue sin querer, pero no deberías haber dejado las gafas en el sofá.* ('I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to break your glasses but you shouldn't have left them on the sofa.') (3 segments: Offering an apology or IFID, minimizing the offense, denying responsibility.)

(2)   *De verdad lo siento mucho. Ha habido un accidente, mi perro me tiró el café y se manchó el libro, pero le compraré otro en cuanto pueda.* ('I'm really very sorry, my dog accidentally spilt my coffee on the book, but I will buy you a new one as soon as possible') (3 segments: offering an apology or IFID, giving an explanation, offering redress.)

Thus the respondents' apologetic utterances or messages were broken into segments and each one was coded only once according to the coding criteria. Repetitions of the same strategy were not counted; neither did we consider the possible combination patterns of several strategies.

In order to check the statistical significance[6] of our findings we employed a hypothesis test. In statistical terminology we considered a binomial test of equal proportions, where the distribution of the proportions has been approached, asymptotically, by a normal distribution (Rohatgi 1976).

Having described the aims and the procedure of our study, in the next section we will provide and comment on the data obtained.

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[6] We are greatly indebted to Dr. Fernando Fernández Rodríguez, Full Professor at the ULPGC Department of Quantitative Methods, for his valuable help with this issue.

5. The findings: Analysis and discussion

After coding our informants' responses and obtaining the critical p-values[37], we tried to analyse the data. Firstly, we performed a frequency count of the strategies used by our students, including their correlation with the gender of the apologist. Then we tried to analyse the role of the situational factors in the performance of apologies, namely, the severity of the offense, the degree of familiarity or social distance between the participants and the age of the offended person. Finally, we offer an account of the patterns of use for each apology strategy, as derived from the data obtained.

5.1. *Analysis of the data according to each of the variables*

Table 2 below offers our frequency count of the strategies used by our informants together with an indication of the results by gender of the apologist. In turn, Tables 3, 4 and 5 respectively illustrate the results obtained for each of the other three variables considered in our study: Table 3, the degree of the offense (i.e. serious vs. minor offense); Table 4, the degree of familiarity between the participants (i.e., close/distant relationship); and Table 5, the age of the offended person (i.e. old vs. young). Each table will be followed by a brief analysis of the data.

As regards the significance level or critical p-value, in each of the tables below we have marked with an asterisk (*) those results which are statistically significant with a confidence level higher than 95%, while those which imply a confidence level higher than 90% are marked with a double asterisk (**). In each case, the closer the critical p-value is to zero the stronger the influence of the variable studied and, therefore, the relationship between the strategy used and the corresponding situational variable becomes obvious.

STRATEGIES	Total answers MALES	Total answers FEMALES	TOTAL Nr of segments (percentage)	*p-values*
1.Denying responsibility	72	72	144 (3.47%)	0.5
2. Minimizing the offense	114	138	252 (6.07%)	0.0662**
3.Acknowledging responsibility	75	72	147 (3,54%)	0.4023
4. Offering to apologize	837	888	1725 (41.59%)	0.1098
5. Giving an explanation	267	426	693 (16.71%)	0*
6. Offering redress	273	253	526 (12.68%)	0.1918
7. Promise of forbearance	12	21	33 (0.79%)	0.0653**

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[7] The *p*-value is the probability of the test statistic being at least as extreme as the one observed given that the null hypothesis is true. A small *p*-value is an indication that the null hypothesis is false, the null hypothesis being that there is no relationship between two measured phenomena.

| 8.   Humour | 342 | 285 | 627 (15.11%) | 0.0117* |

Table 2: Distribution of strategies by gender and p-values.
   (*) = Statistically significant, with more than a 95% confidence level.
   (**) = Statistically significant, with more than a 90% confidence level.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

An analysis of the data in Table 2 above leads us to make a number of observations. First of all, it's worth noting that the most frequent strategy among our respondents is that of 'offering to apologize' (41,5%), with an IFID, i.e., an explicit expression of apology like *Lo siento* ('I'm sorry'). This type is followed in decreasing order of frequency by strategy 5, 'give an explanation' (with 16.71%) and by strategy 8, 'humour' (15.11%).

   Another observation has to do with the statistical significance of some data, particularly those which indicate that women tend to give more explanations than men, as an expression of remedial work, whereas men are more prone to use humour as an apologetic strategy. This seems to go in agreement with the results of other studies, such as the ones carried out by Holmes (1989, 1995) or Wagner (1999), which support the idea that men and women may have different perceptions of politeness devices and, most particularly and importantly, that they evaluate the need for apologies differently. This explains why apologies seem to function differently for men and women, in such a way that the "norms for appropriate use of apologies may differ" between them (Wagner 1999: 153-54). More specifically, Holmes (1989, 209) suggests that men tend to avoid apologies where possible, which, in the case of our research, seems to justify their opting for humour. Similarly, our female informants tend to promise forbearance and to minimize the offense more often than men.

STRATEGIES	Severe offense (1, 2, 3, 4)	minor offense (5, 6, 7, 8)	Total Nr responses	*p-valores*
1.Denying responsibility	T= 48	T= 0	48	0*
2. Minimizing the Offense	T= 47	T= 19	66	0.0007*
3. Acknowledging responsibility	T= 38	T= 11	49	0.0004*
4.Offering to apologize	T= 238	T= 337	575	0*
5.Giving an explanation	T= 77	T= 151	228	0*
6.Offering redress	T= 145	T= 34	179	0*
7. Promise of forbearance	T= 3	T= 11	14	0.0317*
8. Humour	T= 102	T= 107	209	0.3648

Table 3: Results for the variable 'severity of the offense': severe / minor
   (*) = Statistically significant, with more than a 95% confidence level.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

What the figures in Table 2 above indicate is that all the results for the variable 'severity of the offense' are statistically significant, except for the last strategy, that of humour. The interpretation for this seems to be that the choice of a humorous utterance as a form of apology does not depend on the seriousness of the offense, i.e. our informants may produce it no matter if the offense is serious or minor. In contrast, the rest of the strategies seem to have been chosen in function of the severity of the offense.

     In the majority of the situations, the offender's most frequent reaction is that of directly offering to apologize with the typical semantic formula *Lo siento* ('I'm sorry'). Contrary to expectations, these direct apologies tend to occur a bit more frequently with minor offenses, whereas when the offense is serious, apart from offering a direct apology, the offender would alternatively opt for offering redress, denying responsibility, minimising the offense or acknowledging responsibility, in this decreasing order of frequency. Notice that none of our informants opts for denying responsibility. Other findings that can be derived from the data are that explanations are more frequently given for minor offenses, while redress is mostly offered when the offense is severe.

STRATEGIES	close people (sit. 1, 2, 5, 6)	distant people (sit. 3, 4, 7, 8)	total Nr responses	*p-values*
1.Denying responsibility	T= 32	T= 17	49	0.0202*
2. Minimizing the offense	T= 52	T= 32	84	0.0169*
3.Acknowledging responsibility	T= 21	T= 28	49	0.1611
4.Offering to Apologize	T= 271	T= 304	575	0.0847**
5.Giving an Explanation	T=126	T= 82	208	0.0014*
6.Offering Redress	T=69	T= 110	179	0.0014*
7.Promise of forbearance	T= 10	T=1	11	0.0179*
8. Humour	T= 100	T= 109	209	0.2670

Table 4: Results for the variable 'degree of familiarity' between participants
       (*) = Statistically significant, with more than a 95% confidence level.
       (**) = Statistically significant, with more than a 90% confidence level.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

As for the results according to the variable 'social closeness/distance between the participants', once more we observe that the use of the strategy of humour is not statistically significant, which means that using humour does not depend on the type of relationship between the offender and the victim, i.e., the social distance between the interactants does not affect the choice of humour. The same can be said for the third

strategy, 'acknowledging responsibility', which is neither determined by this factor. In contrast, our informants' choice of any of the other strategies does seem to be related to the social distance. Thus, the figures in Table 4 above lead us to conclude that in most cases our students prefer to offer a direct apology, especially when the offended person is socially distant; while explanations are preferably given to close people. Similarly, redress is more frequently offered to distant people, while it is with close people that our informants prefer to minimize the offense, deny responsibility or promise forbearance.

STRATEGIES	young persons (sit. 1, 3, 5, 7)	old persons (sit. 2, 4 , 6 ,8)	total Nr responses	*p-values*
1.Denying Responsibility	T= 33	T= 15	48	0.0075*
Minimizing the Offense	T=21	T= 63	84	0*
3.Acknowledging Responsibility	T=12	T= 37	49	0.0007*
4.Offering to apologise	T=303	T= 272	575	0.0984**
6. Giving an Explanation	T= 153	T= 75	228	0*
7. Offering redress	T= 77	T= 102	179	0.0321*
8. Promising forbearance	T= 6	T= 5	11	0.3820
8. Humour	T=80	T= 129	209	0.0004*

Table 5: Results for the variable 'age of the offended person'
(*) = Statistically significant, with more than a 95% confidence level.
(**) = Statistically significant, with more than a 90% confidence level.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

When analysing the influence that the age of the offended person may have for the apologist's choice of each apology strategy, we find that, once more, all the data are significant, statistically speaking, except for strategy 7, promising forbearance. This means that the use of this strategy, which is the one with the lowest degree of frequency, is not related to the age of the offended person.

Following the general tendency, we can see that direct apologies are preferred, giving explanations being the next favoured strategy. In both cases they are used especially –and this is rather surprisingly– with young people. Humour and offering redress are the two strategies respectively ranked in the third and fourth places, both being used mostly when the offended person is old.

5.2. *An overview of the patterns of usage for each apology strategy*

In the light of the data given above, we will now make some brief comments on the patterns of usage for each of the eight strategies that we have identified in the apologetic utterances produced by our informants. We will organise our comments for each strategy following the decreasing order of their frequency of use:

1. *Offering to apologize.* According to the data, this is the most frequent strategy used by our informants (with the highest percentage of usage, 41.59%). Among our Canarian respondents, direct apologies or IFIDs are almost always used regardless of the offender's gender, especially when dealing with minor offenses and with distant people. Surprisingly, they are even favoured when the offended person is young.

2. *Giving an explanation.* This strategy is relatively frequent (16.71%) among our informants, since it stands in the second position of our frequency ranking. Explanations seem to be favoured by women, especially in situations in which the offense is a minor one. They are much more often given to close and young people.

3. *Humour.* This strategy, with a frequency of 15.11%, is clearly favoured by men, no matter the social distance between the participants nor the degree of the offense. It also seems to be especially used when the offended person is old.

4. *Offering redress.* This is a relatively frequent apology strategy (12.68%) among our respondents, since it stands in middle position of the frequency ranking. Gender does not seem to be the factor that determines its use. However, the seriousness of the offense, together with the social distance and the age of the offended person seem to play a role in the offenders' choice of this strategy. It tends to be used more frequently when the offense is severe and when the offended person is old and distant.

5. *Minimising the offense.* This strategy occupies the fifth position in our frequency ranking, with a percentage of usage of only 6.07%. It is relatively favoured by women when the offense is serious. It's more frequently used with close and old people.

6. *Acknowledging responsibility.* Among our informants, this is not very frequent (3.54%) as an apology strategy and gender does not seem to determine its use. It seems to be favoured by the seriousness of the offense, regardless of the type of relationship between the participants. The age of the offended person does seem to have an influence on its use, since they are more frequently used with old people.

7. *Denying responsibility.* As an apology strategy, it is not frequent, since it stands in the second to last position of the frequency ranking with only 3.47%. Gender does not seem to affect its choice but the seriousness of the offense does. Notice that it is never used for minor offenses (Table 3). It is preferably used when the offended person is close and young.

8. *Promise of forbearance.* As an apology strategy, this is hardly often used (0.79%) but seems to be a bit more favoured by women when dealing with minor offenses to close people, no matter their age.

6. Concluding remarks

Once we have commented the results obtained in our study, in this final section we will try to answer the three research questions that were initially posed. As regards the first, we can definitely state that offering direct apologies (IFID) with the typical apologetic

formula *Lo siento* ('I'm sorry') is the strategy that seems to be most frequently used by our informants. IFIDs obtain the highest percentage of use (41.59%), followed at great distance by the other strategies, which can be ranked in decreasing frequency order as follows: Giving an explanation (16.71%), humour (15.11%), offering redress (12.68%), minimizing the offense (6.07%), acknowledging responsibility (3,54%), denying responsibility (3.47%) and promise of forbearance (0.79%). This is in fact one of the clearest conclusions, which is in agreement with the results obtained in other studies such as the ones conducted by Ruzickova (1998) and Klaver (2008), where IFIDs are also preferred as an apology strategy. This seems to imply a clear tendency towards negative politeness in our respondents. Nevertheless, the use of humour as an apology strategy is a noticeable feature. In fact, joking and giving explanations (which respectively stand in the third and second place of the frequency ranking) are considered to be positive politeness strategies. This shows that two positive politeness strategies are among the three most frequently used by our respondents, immediately after the typical negative politeness formula *Lo siento* ('I'm sorry'), which is rather stereotypical, and seems to be the favourite. However, not until we know more about the social behaviour of the members of this Canarian speech community can we draw valid conclusions regarding their negative/positive politeness orientation; therefore, more specific research needs to be carried out in this respect.

In relation to gender differences, the data indicate that men significantly opt for humour as an apology strategy much more often than women, who seem to prefer giving explanations. The figures also reveal women's tendency to promise forbearance and to minimize the offense more often than men. This answers our second research question and constitutes perhaps one of the most interesting findings.

Last, but not least, our analysis of the results obtained in this investigation seems to illustrate the complexity involved in unravelling a satisfactory interpretation of the role played by the situational factors in the performance of our informants' apologies. Putting it simply, the three factors studied seem to play a role in the choice of the majority of the strategies, except for humour, which does not depend either on the severity of the offense or the social distance between the interactants and, surprisingly, tends to be favoured as an apologetic strategy when the offended person is old. Similarly, acknowledging responsibility does not depend on the degree of familiarity between the participants, while the age of the offended person has nothing to do with promising forbearance. Notwithstanding, our final contention here is that further research with larger samples is needed in order to confirm the suggested interpretation of the data obtained in this preliminary study.

Alternatively, since all methodologies have their own strengths and weaknesses, another option would be to follow Beebe and Cummings' (1996) suggestion and try to gather data through different approaches, including natural data. Although we agree with Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus (2008: 271) that "collecting and analysisng natural data does not constitute in itself a methodological panacea for research", it might be of interest to contrast our findings here with data taken from naturally occurring exchanges, despite the obvious difficulties involved (see McKay and Hornberger 1996: 391-92 for a list of general drawbacks) particularly when trying to ellicit natural language data for the speech act of apologizing. However, they (Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus 2008: 271-72) are probably right when they say that "natural discourse data analysis that draw upon smaller samples than those used in highly elicited data based studies can still offer invaluable, and in our view richer, insights into a variety of

hitherto uder explored aspects of general and crosscultural speech act realisation research."

To conclude, what seems obvious from what we have said so far is that apologies do not refer "to the same social act across all cultures and societies". In contrast, we can't but agree with those authors who have proposed that the realization of an apology often involves differences in the verbal behaviour not only of speakers of different languages but, most importantly, among speakers of the same language, as is the case of Spanish and, particularly of speakers of Canarian Spanish. This argument can be used to justify our investigation, which clearly supports the claim that "notions of offense, the obligation to apologize and the means by which an apology is rendered are not global in nature, but rather are socially and culturally defined" (Wagner 1999: 163).

Finally, in addition to the issues mentioned above to complement this preliminary study, other topics can be suggested for future research. These might include possible comparative analyses with the apology strategies used by the members of other speech communities either of Canarian or any other Hispanic origin. This will be especially relevant for the field of intercultural pragmatics. Likewise, it will be interesting to carry out a contrastive analysis of the apologies performed both in English and in Spanish by the same community of EFL university students in order to see to what extent there are interferences from Spanish in their use of apology strategies in English. This will have clear implications for the area of EFL teaching and learning.

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