Apology responses and gender differences in spoken British English

A corpus study

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This study presents a corpus-based sociopragmatic investigation into apology responses (ARs) and gender differences in ARs in spoken British English. Using data taken from the recently released Spoken BNC2014, the investigation leads to an adjusted taxonomy of ARs which comprises five categories and several sub-categories. The investigation shows that 'Lack of response' is the most typical response, followed by 'Acceptance', 'Rejection', 'Evasion', and 'Acknowledgement'. The results are discussed in relation to the process of attenuation that apologies have undergone (e.g. Jucker 2019), i.e. apologies are becoming more routinised and less meaningful. The proposed taxonomy is subsequently used to examine the extent to which male and female recipients respond to apologies differently. While the investigation suggests no significant differences in ARs across genders, it has been observed that there is some correlation between ARs and the gender of the apologiser. Finally, the implications and applications of the study are briefly discussed.

Keywords: apology, apology responses, gender differences, spoken British English

1. Introduction

This study, drawing on insights from previous studies (Holmes 1989, 1995; Robinson 2004; Murphy 2016), proposes an adjusted taxonomy of apology responses (ARs) and further applies it to explore the extent to which men and women respond to apologies differently in spoken British English. The rationale of doing so is that, as indicated in the reviews recently offered by Jones and

Adrefiza (2017) and Jucker (2018), only a few studies have explored apology responses (e.g. Holmes 1989, 1995; Robinson 2004; Murphy 2016) and even fewer have investigated how male and female recipients respond to apologies made to them (see Section 2 for more detail). Therefore, using data taken from the recently released Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al. 2017; Section 3), the study presents a corpus-based sociopragmatic investigation into apology responses and the differences of ARs across genders. It contributes to the literature of apology studies particularly by providing a more fine-grained taxonomy of ARs and by examining the gender differences in ARs. It will be shown that the proposed taxonomy would facilitate the investigation of ARs across genders (or, more broadly, across contexts). It will also be argued that a systematic account of ARs could be of practical significance, especially in that it would be useful to inform language users, EFL learners in particular, of the ways to interpret and respond to apologies appropriately.

The remainder of this paper is organised into five sections. Section 2 offers a brief overview of previous studies on ARs. Section 3 discusses the data and methodology used in the current investigation. Section 4 presents the analyses and subsequently the refined taxonomy of ARs proposed in this study, followed by Section 5 in which gender differences in ARs are systematically explored. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study, discussing its implications and applications and suggesting directions that are worthy of further investigation.

2.   Literature review

Apologies are common in everyday life and play a crucial role in maintaining social relationships. Studies have extensively investigated apologies from the perspectives of, for example, cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Ogiermann 2009; Bella 2014; Jones and Adrefiza 2017) and interlanguage pragmatics (e.g. Trosborg 1995; Flores Salgado 2011; Cheng 2017). However, it appears that few studies have addressed the questions as to how recipients respond to apologies and whether there are any gender differences in ARs, as discussed in more detail below.

One pioneering work on ARs is Owen (1983). Using tape recordings of transactions and telephone conversations, the author identified three general categories: 'formulaic responses' (acknowledgements, acceptances), 'extended responses' (remedial responses like thanks, denials, shifts of blame, and affiliations), and 'withholding of response'. Another early and representative work is that of Holmes (1989, 1995), which explored the ways speakers make and respond to apologies in New Zealand English and proposed a taxonomy of ARs consist-

ing of six types: 'Accept', 'Acknowledge', 'Evade', 'Reject', 'No response', and 'Other' (e.g. another apology). In general, Holmes (1989, 1995) showed that the most preferred response is 'Accept', while 'Reject' and 'Acknowledge' are less likely choices, which also appears to be the case in other communities (e.g. Owen 1983; Adrefiza and Jones 2013).

Relatively more recently, Robinson (2004) examined the sequential organisation of apologies in English and found that apologies can take different sequential positions. Specifically, working within a conversation analytic framework, he focused on apologies as first turns in adjacency pairs and distinguished between preferred and dispreferred responses to such apologies.[1] The former includes "absolution" and "disagreeing with the need to have apologized", and the latter consists of "response delay", "mere acknowledgment", and "agreeing with the need to have apologized" (Robinson 2004, 319). Overall, these categories are to a large extent similar to those proposed by Holmes (1989, 1995). One limitation of Robinson's study, however, might be that it does not provide any quantitative information for each type of response and, consequently, it remains unclear which type of response is more frequently activated in conversations.

Adrefiza and Jones (2013) investigated ARs from a sociocultural perspective by comparing responses in Australian English and Bahasa Indonesia. They modified Holmes' (1995) taxonomy slightly and suggested four response types: 'Acceptance', 'Acknowledgement', 'Evasion', and 'Rejection'. Additionally, like Chen and Yang (2010) who suggested sub-types of compliment responses, they proposed a number of sub-types of ARs, as shown in Table 1. These sub-types further capture the complexity of ARs, which is evidenced by the fact that most ARs involve two or more sub-strategies. Adrefiza and Jones' (2013) investigation showed that 'Acceptance' was the most prevalent response in both communities, which is consistent with the observations drawn in previous research (e.g. Owen 1983; Holmes 1989, 1995). They further observed that Indonesians were more direct and face-threatening than their Australian counterparts in that they were more likely to acknowledge apologies than Australians (24.4% vs. 9.4%), whereas Australians were more evasive than Indonesians (33.3% vs. 14.4%). This was somewhat unexpected as it challenges the stereotype that Indonesians, as members of a High Context culture (Hofstede 1980), would be more deferential and indirect than their English-speaking counterparts (Adrefiza and Jones 2013, 95).

In another more recent study, Murphy (2016) explored triggers of and responses to apologies in the political context of the Leveson Inquiry in the United Kingdom. He identified four types of responses, including 'Rejection of

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1. Note that preferred and dispreferred responses are not about the psychological desire of a speaker, but about what is sequentially and/or culturally expected (Heritage 1984).

Table 1. Types and sub-types of apology responses in Adrefiza and Jones (2013, 78–79)

Response type	Sub-type
Acceptance	Absolution, Dismissal, Formal, Thanking, Advice/Suggestion, Requests, Expressing empathy, Expressing emotion, Questioning/Surprise
Acknowledgement	Absolution plus, Negation plus, Formal plus, Advice/Suggestion, Warning/ Threatening, Evaluating, Expressing emotion
Evasion	Deflecting/Explaining, Thanking, Questioning/Surprise, Requests, Advice/ Suggestion, Expressing emotion
Rejection	Refusal, Advice/Suggestion, Requests, Warning, Blaming, Swearing, Asking for Compensation, Evaluating, Non-apology 'Sorry', Expressing emotion, Thanking

need to apologise', 'Minimise the offence', 'Apology in kind', and 'Lack of response', which are also similar to those identified in Holmes (1989, 1995) and Adrefiza and Jones (2013). However, no equivalent category of 'Evade' or 'Reject' was found in the Leveson Inquiry. This may be due to the fact that many of the offences in the Inquiry are "interactional" in nature (e.g. speaking too quickly, interrupting), rather than "tangible transgressions" (Murphy 2016, 615). In addition, Murphy observed that apology response can be completely absent, which is very common at the Inquiry (85 out of 105).

The aforementioned studies are of great value in that they have offered a good starting point for subsequent investigations into ARs. Nevertheless, they have some limitations. The first is that most previous studies did not draw on large-scale authentic, naturally occurring data. For instance, Holmes (1989, 1995) used ethnographic data reported retrospectively; Adrefiza and Jones (2013) relied on data collected through discourse completion tasks. This indicates that the taxonomies of ARs proposed in previous studies may need to be further tested with a larger-scale investigation into naturally occurring data. In other words, this points to the necessity to explore the extent to which a taxonomy of ARs based on large corpora can be aligned with those developed in previous studies.

The second limitation is that the broad categories (i.e. Accept, Reject, Evade, Acknowledge) may not be sufficient to capture the subtlety and complexity of ARs, as responding to an apology is context- and politeness-sensitive and each response strategy may comprise different sub-categories (see Section 4 for more discussion). Although Adrefiza and Jones (2013) identified a few sub-categories of ARs, it seems that they have not clearly distinguished these sub-categories. For example, 'thanking' and 'request' are considered to be sub-categories not only of 'Acceptance', but also of 'Evasion' and 'Rejection'. This in turn points to the need to

identify and distinguish sub-categories of ARs in a more principled manner. The present study attempts to remedy these problems.

Another question to be addressed is whether gender affects the ways speakers respond to apologies. Previous studies have revealed gender differences in language use (e.g. Newman et al. 2008; Locke 2011; Coates 2013; Katz and Woodbury 2017; Wainwright 2019), which raises the question as to whether gender differences also exist with respect to ARs. While a number of studies have investigated gender differences in apology behaviour (e.g. Holmes 1995; Bataineh and Bataineh 2006; Schumann and Ross 2010),[2] it appears that very few studies have explored how male and female speakers respond to apologies, respectively (e.g. do they use and/or prefer different response strategies?). Holmes (1989, 1995) did pioneering work in this field. Her investigation showed that in New Zealand English women are more likely to accept apologies than men, whereas men use the rejection and evasion strategies more often than women. She further argued that, although the differences did not have statistical significance, they provide suggestive trends (Holmes 1989, 208). This, however, is not supported by Adrefiza and Jones (2013), who reported no such trends in Australian English and Bahasa Indonesia. While the differences may be attributed to different socio-cultural norms of each language community, the differences might also be a consequence of the data they used: Holmes (1989, 1995) was based on ethnographic data reported retrospectively whereas Adrefiza and Jones (2013) used oral DCTs to collect data for their study, as discussed above.

To recapitulate, while apologies have been extensively investigated, few studies have explored how speakers respond to apologies using large-scale authentic data and even fewer have looked into the possibility of gender differences with respect to ARs. In the present study we attempt to bridge these gaps. We use corpus methods to explore how language users respond to apologies, aiming to offer an adjusted taxonomy of, and to further investigate gender differences in, ARs, as will be discussed in the following sections.

3.   Corpus and methodology

The data used for the current investigation were taken from the newly released Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al. 2017). As the analyses require the analysts to manually examine all apology-response sequences, we further restricted the data to

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2. The stereotype is that women apologise more often than men, and the reasons for the differences have often been associated with women's relative lower social status and their perception of more offences (Holmes 1995; Schuman and Ross 2010).

those collected in 2015 and 2016 (hereafter the Spoken BNC2015-2016), i.e. the most recent data in the Spoken BNC2014. The metainformation of the Spoken BNC2015-2016 is given in Table 2 and the corpus is accessed via the BNCweb CQP-edition (https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2014spoken/; Hoffman et al. 2008).

Table 2. Metainformation of the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Total words	No. of texts	No. of words by female speakers	No. of words by male speakers
6,090,996	700	3,883,524	2,207,472

Following previous studies (e.g. Goffman 1971; Holmes 1995; Ogiermann 2009), apology in this study is defined as an act performed to remedy an offence so as to restore social harmony or equilibrium. The current investigation focuses specifically on explicit apologies whose realisations have been shown to be highly conventionalised, i.e. routinely realised by key items such as *sorry, excuse*, and *forgive* (e.g. Aijmer 1996, 2019; Deutschmann 2003; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2008; Su and Wei 2018; Su 2020). This means that this kind of apology is amenable to corpus search. We, therefore, used a set of lexical items, also known as illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), to search and retrieve apology-response sequences (see Table 3).

Table 3. Apology IFIDs and their frequencies in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Item	Frequency
sorry	3,050
pardon	310
excuse	307
afraid	165
apologize/se	61
regret	67
forgive	13
apology/ies	12
Total	**3,985**

As Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008, 233) noted, even if searching these items can only retrieve a subset of apology expressions, "it is likely to be a fairly substantial subset, and we believe that it is a very important subset". This would justify our choice of using a predetermined set of items to search and identify explicit apologies in the Spoken BNC2015-2016. We further manually examined all the

apology expressions retrieved to make sure that all the remaining instances have the illocutionary force of apologising. The examination allows us to identify 660 apology-response sequences.

Types of offences may influence the strategy one chooses to apologise and subsequently how the recipient responds to that apology; therefore, it is necessary to discuss offence types. We found Deutschmann's (2003) taxonomy, which is presented in Table 4, to be the most comprehensive one (cf. Holmes 1989; Aijmer 1996).

Table 4. Types of offences (adapted from Deutschmann 2003, 64)

Offence type	Explanation	Example
Breach of expectation	Not living up to the addressee's expectations, by not keeping promises or by rejecting invitations or requests, for example.	S0509: >> *sorry for my failure of a birthday present then* S0510: *no it wasn't at all I mean I still enjoyed it*
Lack of consideration	Transgressions where the positive face wants of the hearer are threatened in some way, such as interruptions, overlooking a person, causing inconvenience, and taboo offences.	S0679: *sorry I interrupt* S0680: *in this in this thing I was gon na say we went up to London in this thing*
Mistake and misunderstanding	Misunderstanding someone, or making mistakes	S0607: *hotel where?* S0644: >> o*h it's a bank sorry it's a bank*
Talk offence	Slips of the tongue, digressions, hesitations, corrections, being unclear, forgetting to mention something	S0679: *you know the spiky plants at your house that no sorry not at your house at – ANONnameM 's house* S0680: *yes*
Accident	Damage to property, bumping into a person, hurting someone unintentionally	S0655: *sorry it fell off (.) this – UNCLEARWORD is taking ages (…) see if I can get – UNCLEARWORD yay* S0653: >> *well I hope you're going to be cleaning that up*
Social gaffe	Accidental socially unacceptable behaviour such as coughing, burping or hiccupping.	S0618: *yeah sorry sorry for yawning* S0619: *yeah*

To facilitate the subsequent investigation, we grouped the 660 apology-response sequences according to the type of offence that triggered each apology (as listed in Table 4). The quantitative information for each category is given in Table 5. We will return to this when we discuss the gender differences in ARs.

Table 5. Apology types and their frequencies in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Apology type	Frequency
Apology for lack of consideration	253
Apology for talk offence	193
Apology for mistake & misunderstanding	102
Apology for breach of expectation	88
Apology for social gaffe	12
Apology for accident	12
Total	**660**

4.   Towards a refined taxonomy of ARs

We carefully examined all the apology-response sequences identified, which led to a slightly adjusted taxonomy of ARs consisting of five main categories and a few sub-categories (Table 6).

The major response strategies identified in the present study are: 'Acceptance', 'Rejection', 'Evasion', 'Acknowledgement', and 'Lack of response', which are similar to those identified in previous studies (e.g. Holmes 1989, 1995; Robinson 2004). However, the corpus investigation suggests some sub-categories. Among the five sub-categories, three (i.e. 'Comforting the apologiser', 'Complaint', and 'Doubting sincerity') are newly proposed, whereas the other two ('Absolution' and 'Disagreeing with the need to have apologised') are borrowed from Robinson (2004). The proposed (sub)categories are discussed in more detail below.

'Acceptance' refers to ARs in which the recipient appreciates the apologiser's effort in remedying the claimed offence and attempts to restore interpersonal harmony by minimising the offence. It has three sub-categories: 'Absolution', 'Disagreeing with the need to have apologised', and 'Comforting the apologiser'. Following Robinson (2004, 302–307), "Absolution" refers to a response strategy which acknowledges a possible offence yet claims that no offence is actually taken, and "Disagreeing with the need to have apologised" refers to cases in which the recipient asserts the lack of relevance for an apology, as illustrated in Examples (1) and (2), respectively. The sub-category 'Comforting the apologiser' was proposed

Table 6. An adjusted taxonomy of ARs

Response type	Sub-type		Explanation
Acceptance	1.	Absolution	The recipient simultaneously acknowledges the claimed offence yet indicates that no offence is actually taken (Robinson 2004, 303).
	2.	Disagreeing with the need to have apologised	The recipient expresses disagreement with the need to have apologised, or simply denies the claimed offence.
	3.	Comforting the apologiser	The recipient comforts the apologiser by expressing empathy or giving a positive evaluation of the offence.
Rejection	1.	Complaint	The recipient complains about the offence or blames the apologiser, indicating that s/he is not satisfied.
	2.	Doubting sincerity	The recipient doubts the apologiser's sincerity in making an apology.
Evasion			The recipient avoids directly responding to an apology.
Acknowledgement			The recipient acknowledges the receipt of an apology without indicating whether s/he is satisfied or not.
Lack of response			The recipient makes no response to an apology, which seems to be dismissed as the offence is minimal and thus not worth mentioning.

on the observation that, in some cases, the addressee comforts the apologiser by showing empathy to him/her or by giving a positive evaluation of the event/action being apologised for, as shown in Example (3). These three response strategies were grouped into 'Acceptance' because they generally indicate acceptance of an apology.

(1) S0618: –UNCLEARWORD a wipe there (…) shall we turn that off and have a bit of
S0619: >> yeah
S0618: peace?
S0619: sorry – UNCLEARWORD
S0618: >> *that's alright*[3]

(2) S0509: >> sorry for my failure of a birthday present then
S0510: *no it wasn't at all* I mean I still enjoyed it

(3) S0618: bye (.) sorry love to stay and wave but have to go now (.) yeah
S0619: *oh it's just the greatest*
S0618: yeah

3. Speakers' responses to apologies are marked in bold italics in all examples.

'Rejection' means that the recipient negatively comments on the offence or on the speaker's apologising behaviour, indicating his/her unwillingness to absolve the offender from the responsibility. It comprises two sub-categories: 'Complaint' and 'Doubting sincerity'. 'Complaint' refers to cases in which the recipient complains about the offence or blames the offender, displaying his/her displeasure, as illustrated in Example (4). 'Doubting sincerity' refers to cases in which the recipient doubts the apologiser's sincerity in making an apology, as shown in Example (5).

(4) S0589: then like when you do that you just talk to it and not to me
     S0588: yeah sorry darling
     S0589: *it's like your great big monologue about the library*

(5) S0689: I'm sorry – ANONnameM
     S0690: *no you're not you just want pizza*

Following Holmes (1995) and Adrefiza and Jones (2013), 'Evasion' accounts for responses in which the speaker avoids directly responding to an apology, as illustrated in Example (6). To some extent, a rejection threatens the apologiser's face as it shows disregard for his/her efforts in remedying the transgression and restoring social harmony (Goffman 1971). On the other hand, an acceptance may be perceived as a threat to the speaker's negative face, since "the acceptance implicitly confirms that the offender has imposed on the speaker" (Holmes 1995, 183). Evasion may be used as a strategy to avoid the dilemma (as is the case with compliment response, see Pomerantz 1978) and gives the recipient a way out.

(6) S0589: and B this is well outside his normal roaming territory
     S0588: it is if he lived here he 'd quite enjoy it and he would enjoy looking at the ducks (...) careful (.) wha- er what is wrong with using your fucking bell? sorry darling
     S0589: *I think you 're a bit tipsy*
     S0588: yes
     S0588: sorry darling half a pint and I 'm fucking shouting at cyclists...

In addition, the category of 'Acknowledgement' refers to ARs in which the respondent merely acknowledges the receipt of an apology without indicating his or her attitude. This is illustrated in Example (7).

(7) S0605: >> sorry are you speaking English now?
     S0603: no I am yes sorry
     S0605: >> *okay*

Finally, 'Lack of response' means that no response was made to an apology. It seems to be dismissed by the recipient as the offence is minimal and thus not

worth mentioning. The recipient, therefore, may either reply with comments irrelevant to an apology, or simply say nothing, as in Example (8).

(8) S0642:   and we 've got a new cinema
     S0486:   oh gosh yes
     S0642:   >> yes
     S0486:   I 've just noticed that wow
     S0642:   well sorry not a new cinema
     S0486:   >> right
     S0642:   we 've got a new
     S0486:   >> screen
     S0642:   huge screen
     S0486:   a huge screen?
     S0642:   yes
     S0486:   oh wow

Note, however, that the distinction between 'Evasion' and 'Lack of response' is not always clear-cut as the above discussion suggests. In some cases, for example, it is difficult to decide whether the recipient's lack of response to an apology is intended as an evasion or as a genuine 'no response'. This makes the categorisation of apology responses very challenging. In the present study, the suggested solution is that, when the offence triggering an apology is relatively severe (e.g. hurting someone's feelings, failing to keep an appointment), cases in which no response is presented to that apology were considered 'Evasion'. This is because, an apology produced after a relatively severe offence can be regarded as taking responsibility for the transgression and showing regret, which makes a response relevant. No response to such apologies is a manifestation of the respondent's displeasure and thus should be perceived as an evasion. For example, in Example (9), the speaker apologises for going to a friend's house without telling his/her mother last time (i.e. *I am really sorry about that*). This makes his/her mother worried and annoyed, and is thus a relatively serious offence. Seen in this light, it is reasonable to regard the mother's no response to the apology as an evasion.

(9) S0416:   am I allowed to go over to – ANONnameM's house?
     S0417:   erm
     S0416:   I know what it is
     S0417:   that's in town can't you just start with the people round here? because last time you went to – ANONnameM's house you didn't phone you didn't contact me didn't know where you were – UNCLEARWORD
     S0416:   I am really sorry about that
     S0417:   *I know but start why don't you start with the people round here? you could actually walk to other than all the fact that like I can't pick you*

> *up* – UNCLEARWORD picking you back up and all that kind of stuff
> okay? (.) start with – ANONnameM and – ANONnameM or –
> ANONnameM (.) – UNCLEARWORD see what they want to do

On the other hand, when the offence triggering an apology is minimal (e.g. coughing, slip of the tongue) and poses no threat to the recipient's face, cases in which no response is presented were considered 'Lack of response'. This is illustrated in Example (10), where the transgression leading to the apology is merely a slip of the tongue, which does not constitute a face threat. In such cases, apology is largely a matter of routine or self-repair (Deutschmann 2003, 46), and thus does not warrant a relevant response. As a result, the addressee's change of topic is classified as 'Lack of response'. This would hopefully be useful to distinguish 'Evasion' from 'Lack of response'.

(10) S0671: yeah (.) I am not getting the hang of this at all (.) come on fella come
              on erm (.) oh – ANONnameF had her last exam today oh no not
              sorry her first exam
      S0678: *oh (.) when does she finish?*
      S0671: erm June or something

Since the proposed (sub-)categories are based on analyses of a relatively large set of authentic data, it is arguable that this adjusted taxonomy would to a large extent be reliable and robust to account for ARs in naturally occurring discourse. Based on the adjusted taxonomy of ARs, we further calculated the frequency of each response type in the Spoken BNC2015-2016, as shown in Table 7 and Figure 1.

Table 7. Types and distribution of ARs in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

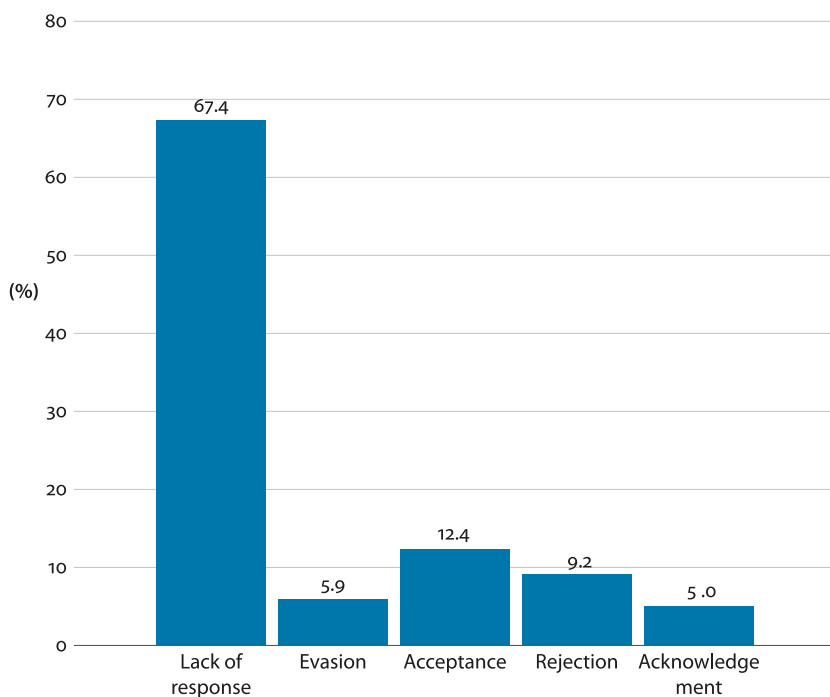| Response type	No.	%
Lack of response	445	67.4
Acceptance	82	12.4
1. Absolution	38	5.8
2. Disagreeing with the need to have apologised	34	5.2
3. Comforting the apologiser	10	1.5
Rejection	61	9.2
1. Complaint	55	8.3
2. Doubting sincerity	6	0.9
Evasion	39	5.9
Acknowledgement	33	5.0
Total	**660**	**100**

Figure 1. Proportion of ARs in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Table 7 and Figure 1 show that 'Lack of response' is the most frequent form of ARs (67.4%). The other four response types, ranked in a descending order, are: 'Acceptance' (12.4%), 'Rejection' (9.2%), 'Evasion' (5.9%), and 'Acknowledgment' (5.0%). This suggests that the absence of a response to an apology is unmarked in spoken British English and, when a response is produced, 'Acceptance' is a more likely choice, whereas 'Acknowledgment' is disfavoured by most interlocutors.

The results seem to contrast with the observations drawn in previous studies. Most notably, 'Lack of response' occupies the largest proportion of ARs in the present study, while previous research has reported that the most frequent response was 'Acceptance' (e.g. Holmes 1989, 1995; Adrefiza and Jones 2013) but 'Lack of response' occupies only a small proportion. This contrast may be attributed to differences in data used: the current study used authentic data, whereas Holmes (1989, 1995) and Adrefiza and Jones (2013) relied on second-hand reports and DCTs, respectively. Deutschmann (2003, 52) similarly cautioned that Holmes' study may have overlooked many apologies for minor offences as it was not based on authentic data, which may also be true for Adrefiza and Jones (2013). This is supported by the low frequencies of apologies for talk offences and social gaffes in Holmes (1989, 1995). We would thus concur with Deutschmann's (2003, 85) argu-

ment that "[s]tudies based on elicited data or second-hand reports probably give a false picture of general apologetic behaviour since they ignore trivial offences". This could also be true for AR studies not using authentic data, in which responses to apologies triggered by minor offences may be underrepresented.

Nevertheless, the results of the present study are largely consistent with those of Murphy (2016) who noted that 'Lack of response' occurred very frequently in the Leveson Inquiry. Murphy argued that this might be due to the fact that many of the offences in the Inquiry were interactional in nature (e.g. misspeak, talking too fast) rather than tangible transgressions, as noted earlier; in such cases, the action of apologising did not warrant a relevant response. Similarly, Aijmer (1996) observed 45.4%, and Deutschmann (2003) reported 41.3%, of the apologies were triggered by minor offences such as talk offence and slip of the tongue.

This further aligns with the general observation that apology tokens may have become more routinised, losing their apologetic force (e.g. Deutschmann 2003; Murphy 2016). Particularly noteworthy is that of Jucker (2019) who, investigating the diachronic development of apologies from Old English up to present-day English, notes that,

> [A]pologies have undergone, and are still in the process of undergoing, a process of attenuation. What used to be a weighty and sincere act of admitting guilt and expressing remorse in a religious context has, via a series of steps, been weakened into a token acknowledgement of a minor mishap, such as, for instance, accidentally bumping into somebody on a crowded platform of a railway station. The older type of apologies still exists but the new types of fleeting and sometimes non-serious uses of apologies have been added, and they significantly increase the overall frequency of apologies.   (Jucker 2019, 2)

It has thus been argued that the pragmaticalisation of apologies in English has contributed to their change from an appeal for forgiveness to a token acknowledgement of minor infractions. Although apologies serving as requests for forgiveness still exist, attenuated apologies merely acknowledging some trivial offences have increased considerably in present-day English (Deutschmann 2003; Murphy 2016; Jucker 2019). In a similar vein, Williams (2018) argues that:

> Present-day English-speaking culture is extensively apologetic, and we use apologies for the most minor of everyday social infractions (e.g. if one accidentally bumps into a stranger on the train) as well as for more serious wrongs committed against those closest to us (e.g. forgetting a spouse's birthday).
> (Williams 2018, 121–122)

These observations may provide an explanation as to why 'Lack of response' occupies a relatively larger proportion of ARs in the current study. That is, this is

because, in present-day English, many apologies are used and perceived as mere token acknowledgements of minor infractions, which are extremely formulaic and the display of regret is minimal; and, in consequence, they may not require any specific response. To illustrate this point, Example (11) is given below.

(11) S0426: what about your internal sorry your external examiner for for the programme
      S0427: er well that would have been an obvious choice I don't know whether that's allowed or not I don't know erm anyway that's passed that's passed out of my hands now to the likes of – ANONnameF and and – ANONnameM who who know more about the field
      S0426: right

In Example (11), the speaker S0426 made a slip of the tongue, which was only a trivial transgression and nobody's face was threatened. The apology might result more from an attempt to maintain sociability than from the need to redress face threats. The recipient's no response to the apology indicates that s/he simply interprets it as a token acknowledgement of the minor infraction. On the other hand, "to provide an explicit response would be to make the offence into too much of an issue: the strategy seems to be that the offence is best ignored" (Owen 1983, 102).

To further investigate the association between offences and apology responses, the proportional distribution of response choices across offence types are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Proportional distribution of ARs across offence types in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Offence type	Acceptance %	Rejection %	Evasion %	Acknowledgement %	None %	Total
			Response			
Accident	33.3	8.3	8.3	0.0	50.0	$N=12$
Breach of expectation	20.5	11.4	14.8	8.0	45.5	$N=88$
Lack of consideration	21.3	18.2	7.1	4.7	48.6	$N=253$
Mistake & Misunderstanding	2.9	2.0	4.9	10.8	79.4	$N=102$
Social gaffe	16.7	8.3	16.7	0.0	58.3	$N=12$
Talk offence	0.5	0.5	0.0	1.6	97.4	$N=193$

When the most frequently chosen strategy (see Table 8), 'Lack of response', is examined, we observe higher rates in apologies made because of talk offence (97.4%), mistake and misunderstanding (79.4%), and social gaffe (58.3%). This indicates that these apologies are most formulaic and most likely to be dismissed. 'Lack of response' rates are lower for apologies made because of lack of consideration (48.6%) and breach of expectation (45.5%). In addition, 'Rejection' rates are much higher for apologies made because of lack of consideration (18.2%) and breach of expectation (11.4%) than for those made because of mistake & misunderstanding (2.0%) and talk offence (0.5%). This observation in turn suggests that lack of consideration and breach of expectation are more face-threatening than mistake, misunderstanding, and talk offence.

In response to apologies triggered by talk offence, ''Evasion'' strategy was rarely activated, only one apology for talk offence was rejected, one accepted, and three acknowledged. This further suggests that interlocutors usually do not respond to such apologies. Similarly, apologies triggered by mistake & misunderstanding produced significantly higher rates of 'Lack of response' (79.4%) than others: 'Acceptance' (2.9%), 'Rejection' (2.0%), 'Evasion' (4.9%), and 'Acknowledge' (10.8%). This is also true for social gaffe. The high rates of no response to apologies made because of talk offence, mistake & misunderstanding, and social gaffe may suggest that they are highly conventionalised and not recognised as genuine apologies. Finally, of all 'Lack of response', 62.4% were triggered by apologies for minor offences (e.g. talk offence, social gaffe, mistake & misunderstanding). This lends further support to our argument that the large proportion of 'Lack of response' in all the ARs in the corpus can be attributed to the frequent use of attenuated apologies.

Bringing together all the observations and arguments made above, it can be argued that the ongoing pragmaticalisation of apology in English has affected the way people respond to apology. In earlier periods when apologies were primarily used to redress real offences and/or seek for absolution, face and/or politeness was a central concern when the recipient was responding to an apology. For example, the strategy of acceptance is used to preserve the face of the apologiser, the strategy rejection is employed to maintain the recipient's own face, and evasion is chosen to minimise threats to both interlocutors' face. However, in present-day English, as speakers frequently apologise for minor social infractions, which seems to have become a routine, face is not highly relevant, especially when recipients respond to apologies triggered by trivial offences. This may explain why 'Lack of response' is the most frequently activated apology response in the present study.

Moreover, previous research has suggested that there are gender differences in apology behaviour (e.g. Holmes 1989, 1995; Schumann and Ross 2010), which

in turn raises the question as to whether gender differences in ARs exist. In the following section we aim to seek answers to this question.

5.   Gender differences in apology responses

The Spoken BNC2014 provides metainformation about speakers such as gender, age, and social status, which enables us to identify the gender of the recipient and to further compare how male and female speakers respond to apologies. We manually examined the gender of the speakers who receive and respond to the apologies identified in the corpus and divided all instances of ARs into two groups, i.e. responses by females and responses by males. The quantitative information on ARs across genders in the Spoken BNC2015-2016 is provided in Table 9 and Figure 2.

Table 9. Distribution of ARs across genders in the Spoken BNC2015-2016 (normalised per million words)

	Female		Male	
Response type	Raw	Normed	Raw	Normed
Lack of response	287	73.90	158	71.58
Acceptance	58	14.93	24	10.87
1. Absolution	25	6.44	13	5.89
2. Disagreeing with the need to have apologised	27	6.95	7	3.17
3. Comforting the apologiser	6	1.54	4	1.81
Rejection	45	11.59	16	7.25
1. Complaint	44	11.33	11	4.98
2. Doubting sincerity	1	0.26	5	2.27
Evasion	23	5.92	16	7.25
Acknowledgement	22	5.66	11	4.98
Total	**435**	**112.01**	**225**	**101.93**

The analyses of the five major response strategies, i.e. 'Lack of response', 'Acceptance', 'Rejection', 'Evasion', and 'Acknowledgment', do not suggest much significant gender difference. The results are generally compatible with Adrefiza and Jones (2013) which shows that women do not respond to apologies differently from men. However, this study differs from Adrefiza and Jones (2013) in that the most favoured AR strategy of both genders is 'Lack of response'. It is not surprising that 'Lack of response' is the most common response employed by both gen-
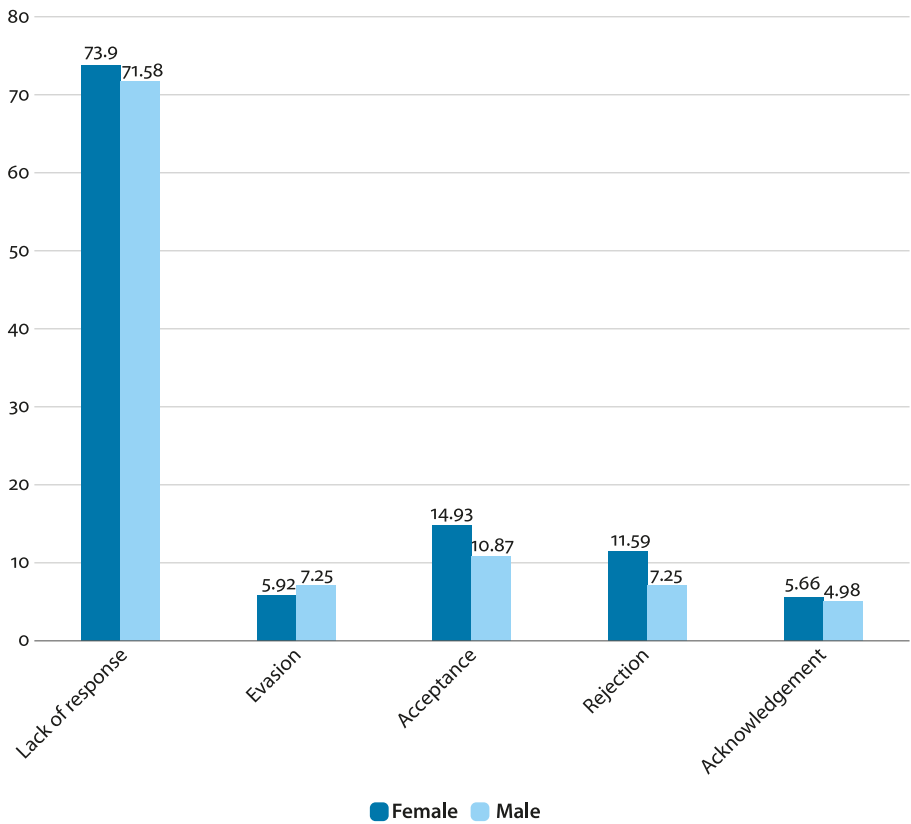
Figure 2. Distribution of ARs across genders in the Spoken BNC2015-2016 (normalised per million words)

ders, because both women's and men's use of, and response to, apologies may have equally contributed to the ongoing pragmaticalisation of apology behaviours. An additional observation is drawn with regard to 'Acknowledgement'. As shown in Figure 2, 'Acknowledgement' seems to be the least favoured response strategy by both genders, as the frequency of which is even lower than that of 'Rejection' (5.0% vs. 9.2%). This might be attributed to the face-threatening nature of a mere acknowledgment of an apology. An acknowledgment is typically realised by items such as *mm, yeah* and *okay*,[4] which are also referred to as 'minimal responses' (Coates 2013, 87). Studies on minimal responses in conversation suggest that they normally indicate the listener's positive attention to and/or support

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4. Mere acknowledgements may also be signalled by intonation or nonverbal behaviour such as shrugging (Robinson 2004, 319). We, however, are unable to consider such non-linguistic realisations of acknowledgements because they were not recorded in the Spoken BNC2014.

for the speaker (see Coates (2013) for more discussion). However, when used as a response to an apology, minimal responses do not express support or solidarity. As noted in Robinson (2004, 303), a mere acknowledgment of an apology confirms "the commission of a possible offense (which is claimed by the apology)". That is, it admits that the recipient has been impeded on by the apologiser, which constitutes a threat to the recipient's negative face. Adrefiza and Jones (2013, 83) similarly argue that an acknowledgement signals "a feeling of reluctance to let the offender completely off the hook". In other words, 'Acknowledgement' may indicate the receiver's displeasure, thus threatening the apologiser's face. Seen in this light, 'Acknowledgment' threatens both the recipient's and the apologiser's face, which may explain why this strategy is rarely used by both genders.

In addition to examining the normalised frequency, we further explored gender differences in ARs by looking at the proportional distribution of each response type across genders, which generally confirms the observations discussed above (see Figure 3). However, it reveals some subtle yet interesting differences that are less obvious in the frequency analysis. While the second most frequent response from both genders is 'Acceptance', women show a stronger preference for this strategy than men. This is largely consistent with the findings of Holmes (1995). One possible explanation is that women and men have different orientations in response to apologies. Since an apology admits that the apologiser is at fault and responsible for a transgression (Deutschmann 2003), it damages the apologiser's positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987). An acceptance reduces the asymmetry introduced by the apology, thus preserving the apologiser's face (but may simultaneously threaten the victim's face); in contrast, a rejection preserves the asymmetry and thus threatens the apologiser's face. Seen in this light, women's more frequent use of 'Acceptance' suggests that they tend to be other-oriented (i.e. attentive to others' face needs) in restoring social harmony, while men's less frequent use of this strategy indicates they are more self-oriented (Holmes 1995, 183).

Furthermore, Figure 3 shows that women's 'Rejection' rate is slightly higher than that of men, which is again somewhat unexpected and challenges the established stereotype that women are more polite than men (e.g. Brown 1980; Holmes 1989, 1995; Coates 2013). Nevertheless, a caveat should be mentioned, i.e. neither the gender differences found in this study nor those reported in Holmes (1995) are statistically significant. Consequently, the results about gender differences in the ways in which male and female speakers respond to apologies are not conclusive and may not be generalised to involve the whole English-speaking population. Alternatively, there is a possibility that the lack of significant differences may suggest that males and females' linguistic behaviours are becoming more similar to each other (see also Bing and Bergvall 1996; Johnson and Meinhof 1997; Fuchs 2017).
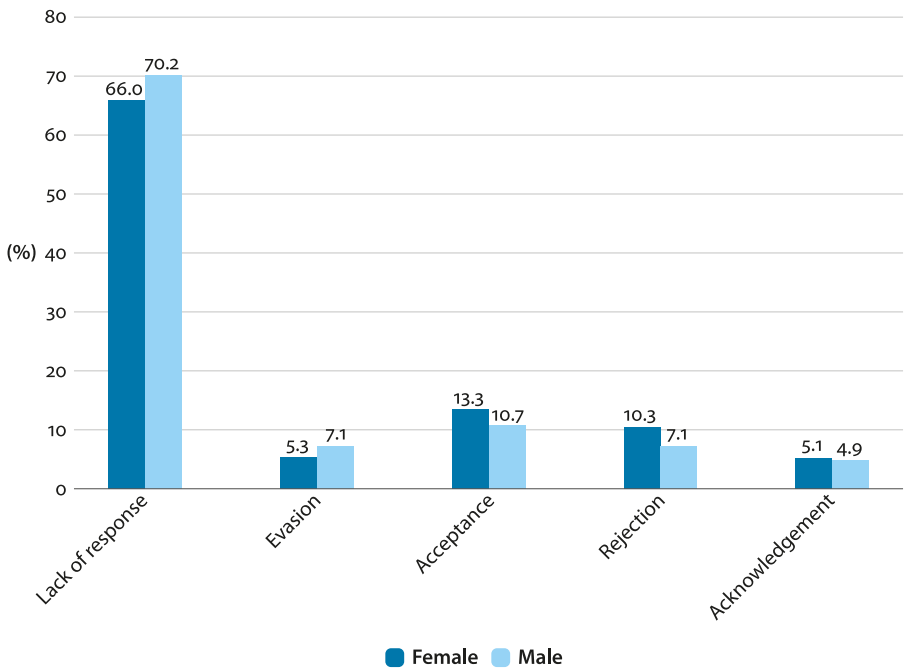
Figure 3. Proportional distribution of ARs across genders in the Spoken BNC2015-2016

Additionally, we also observed some differences when the sub-categories of ARs are examined. For example, there is no overall gender difference in the 'Rejection' category, but looking closely at the sub-categories reveals a different distribution: 4.9% of men's but 10.1% of women's responses fall under 'Complaint', which suggests that women are more likely to express rejection by means of complaining. Similarly, while 'Acceptance' shows no overall differences, 6.2% of women's but only 3.1% of men's responses fall under the sub-category 'Disagreeing with the need to have apologised'. This suggests that women are more likely to absolve completely the apologisers of offences, as 'Disagreeing with the need to have apologised' denies the claimed offence while the other two accepting sub-categories (i.e. Absolution and Comforting the apologiser) acknowledge it.

When investigating the response patterns in a dualistic framework (men–women, women–women, men–men, women–men), some interesting observations concerning men's and women's choices of ARs can be further drawn. As shown in Table 10, 'Acceptance' was a more likely choice when the apology was made by women (11% and 19.1%) than by men (10.3% and 6.5%), and its rate was the highest in women–women apologies (19.1%). However, 'Rejection' was more likely when the apology was made by men (9.3% and 18.1%) compared to that by women (5.1% and 3.8%). In addition, 'Evasion' was more likely in

inter-gender apologies (8.5% men–women; 8% women–men; compared to 3.0% women–women and 5.6% men–men). Similarly, 'Acknowledgement' rates were notably lower in inter-gender apologies (4.2% women–women; 0 men–men) than in inter-gender apologies (9.3% men–women; 6% women–men).

Table 10. ARs in a dualistic gender pattern

	Male–Female	Female–Female	Male–Male	Female–Male
Response type	%	%	%	%
Lack of response	66.1	69.9	74.8	61.3
Acceptance	11.0	19.1	10.3	6.5
Rejection	5.1	3.8	9.3	18.1
Evasion	8.5	3.0	5.6	8.0
Acknowledgement	9.3	4.2	0.0	6.0
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Overall, the observations discussed above suggest that gender does have an impact on ARs and that the gender of the apologiser has a greater impact on response choices than the gender of the receiver of an apology in spoken British English. Specifically, speakers are more attentive to the face needs of females in that apologies made by women are more likely to be accepted than those by men, and that apologies made by men are more likely to be rejected than those by women. Moreover, speakers tend to minimise face threats to both interlocutors in mixed-gender interactions, which is supported by the relatively higher rates of 'Evasion' and lower rates of 'Acknowledgement' in inter-gender apologies.

6.   Conclusion

This study has reported on a relatively large-scale corpus-based sociopragmatic investigation into apology responses and gender differences in spoken British English. The investigation allows us to propose a slightly adjusted taxonomy of ARs, comprising five major categories (i.e. 'Acceptance', 'Rejection', 'Evasion', 'Acknowledgement', and 'Lack of response') and several sub-categories (e.g. complaint, doubting sincerity). Since this adjusted taxonomy of ARs is proposed based on an investigation into naturally occurring discourse, we argue that it is valid and would be robust and useful to account adequately for ARs across contexts, as demonstrated in the subsequent investigation into gender differences in ARs.

The investigation shows that the most common AR in present-day spoken British English is 'Lack of response' rather than 'Acceptance' (cf. Holmes 1989, 1995). We suggest that this may be due to the pragmaticalisation of apologies over time. Studies on the devolvement of apologies in the history of the English language have shown that they have undergone a process of attenuation (Jucker 2018, 2019), which has led to a significant growth in the number of attenuated apologies in present-day English (Murphy 2016; Jucker 2019). The frequent use of 'Lack of response' can be considered one consequence of the ubiquity of attenuated apologies.

The study has also investigated the relationship between gender and apology response. Overall, there appears to be no significant gender difference with respect to ARs. 'Lack of response' is the most common response strategy used by both men and women, and 'Acknowledgement' is the least favoured one by both genders. However, a more thorough investigation into the sub-categories of ARs revealed some subtle yet interesting differences. For instance, women prefer the strategy 'Complaint' when rejecting an apology and 'Disagreeing with the need to have apologised' when accepting it. Moreover, it is further observed that, although the recipient's gender does not have a significant impact on ARs, the apologiser's gender seems to do. When an apology is made by a woman, it is more likely to be accepted, whereas when an apology is made by a man, rejection is a more likely choice. Additionally, 'Evasion' and 'Acknowledgement' are used more frequently in mixed-gender interactions.

Overall, the study investigated apology responses and their gender differences, thereby contributing to pragmatic studies of apologies. The study could also have some pedagogical applications. The pragmatic competence to produce and respond to apologies requires both appropriate pragmalinguistic knowledge and sociocultural sensitivity, which is a challenge that language learners often face, EFL learners in particular (Limberg 2015). There is evidence that learners' transfer of pragmatic resources from their mother tongue to the target language might result in communication problems, as discussed by Golato (2002). The wide range of (sub-)categories of ARs identified in this study would usefully enrich the repertoire of strategies that can be employed by (EFL) learners to respond to apologies. Furthermore, the quantitative information obtained via corpus investigation can be used to inform EFL learners of the typicality of each response strategy. This would at least to some extent contribute to improving EFL learners' pragmatic competence of using and responding to apologies appropriately. It is in these respects that we argue that the present study could have potentially valuable pedagogical applications.

Finally, there are some directions worthy of future investigation. For example, since language use in general varies according to contexts, the perceived gender

differences may as well be a consequence of, for example, differences in power and social status between interactants (Aries 1996; Weatherall 2002). This suggests that studies on ARs which take into account social and situational factors, such as class, power and social distance, would be desirable and valuable. It would also be useful to further explore the correlation between types of offences and apology responses. In addition, since this study has focused specifically on apology behaviour in spoken British English, another direction worthy of further investigation is whether ARs differ across different varieties of English, or even more broadly, across different languages. Such investigations would offer important insights into cross-cultural communication, variational pragmatics, and the association between the pragmatics of language in use and society.

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