

## Politeness norms: A pilot study on the accomplishment of apologies by learners of Italian<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** In the increasingly globalised world, intercultural and cross-cultural relations are becoming ever more frequent and significant. Within this diverse cultural space, miscommunications tend to arise and have the ability to significantly impact upon intercultural interactions. Thus, this paper explores the use of politeness strategies by learners of Italian during the performance of the speech act of *apology*. Specifically, the paper examines the presence of Italian and Australian English politeness norms in the realisation of these apologies, focussing on three principle areas of investigation: (i) the way in which the social variables of the scenario were evaluated by participants, (ii) the participants' use of formal terms of address, and (iii) the modification of explicit expressions of apology. It was found that although tendencies of both Italian politeness and Australian English politeness were demonstrated by participants, the latter was more prominent, thus suggesting L1 influence on L2 realisation and some difficulty in the negotiation of the intercultural space.

**Key words:** APOLOGIES, LANGUAGE LEARNERS, ITALIAN L2, POLITENESS

**ES** En un mundo cada vez más globalizado, las relaciones interculturales e interculturales van cobrando relevancia y son cada vez más frecuentes. Dentro de este diverso espacio cultural, los problemas de comunicación van en aumento e impactan de forma significativa sobre las interacciones interculturales. Bajo este marco, el presente trabajo explora el uso de estrategias de cortesía por parte de aprendientes de italiano durante el acto de habla de la *disculpa*. Concretamente, se examina la presencia de normas de cortesía de la lengua italiana y del inglés australiano al efectuarse estas disculpas, centrándose la investigación en tres áreas principales: (i) la forma en que las variables sociales del escenario fueron evaluadas por los participantes, (ii) el empleo de fórmulas de tratamiento formales por parte de los participantes, y (iii) la modificación de expresiones explícitas de disculpa. Se descubrió que, aunque los participantes mostraron tendencias propias de la cortesía en italiano y de la cortesía en inglés australiano, esta última resultó más prominente, lo que sugiere una influencia de la L1 en la realización de la L2 y una cierta dificultad en la negociación del espacio intercultural.

**Palabras clave:** DISCULPAS, APRENDIENTES DE LENGUA, ITALIANO COMO L2, CORTESÍA

**IT** In un mondo sempre più globalizzato, le relazioni interculturali e multiculturali diventano vieppiù frequenti e importanti. All'interno di questo spazio culturale variegato, tendono a verificarsi cattive comunicazioni che influiscono significativamente sulle interazioni interculturali. In questo studio si analizza l'uso delle strategie di cortesía da parte degli apprendenti di italiano durante l'enunciazione dell'atto linguistico della *scusa*. Nello specifico, lo studio prende in esame la presenza di regole di cortesía nell'italiano e nell'inglese australiano nella realizzazione di tali scuse, concentrandosi su tre aree di ricerca principali: (i) come i partecipanti hanno valutato le variabili sociali dello scenario, (ii) l'uso da parte dei partecipanti di termini formali e (iii) la modificazione di espressioni di scuse esplicite. Anche se la tendenza alle formule di cortesía nei partecipanti è stata dimostrata sia in italiano sia nell'inglese australiano, i risultati ci dicono che è stata più spiccata in quest'ultimo, indicando l'influsso della L1 sulla comprensione della L2 e una certa difficoltà nella negoziazione dello spazio interculturale.

**Parole chiave:** SCUSE, APPRENDENTI DI LINGUA, ITALIANO L2, CORTESIA

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the performance of apologies as accomplished by learners of Italian in a university context in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Although the apology is a face-threatening speech act (FTA) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206), it has not been investigated extensively in relation to the Italian language and from the perspective of language acquisition (Nuzzo, 2007).

Austin (1975 [1962]) recognised that the intended meanings conveyed through speech acts are intimately connected with the situational context in which utterances are produced. Variations in speech act realisation signify that individuals may have diverse expectations of the same interaction and thus miscommunications may arise. Such variations are often caused by personal or cultural factors; both the performance of and response to apologies can vary across cultures (Park, Lee & Song 2005, p. 365). Although speakers may produce any number of utterances, successful communication is conditioned by norms arising from habit and general usage (Bettoni, 2006, p. 71) and all speech sequences are embedded with cultural information (Wolfson, 1988, p. 24). In fact, apologies are one of the most culturally sensitive speech acts (Suszczyńska, 1999, p. 1053) and thus offer rich units of pragmatic analysis, as will be evidenced in the present paper.

The data analysed here are part of a larger project<sup>2</sup> in which learners of Italian at different proficiency levels were asked to complete a written Discourse Completion Task (henceforth DCT)<sup>3</sup>. In this task, participants were presented with four scenarios to which they could respond with an apology formulated in an email. They were also asked to evaluate each scenario in relation to three variables: the social distance between the participant and the interlocutor, the status of the interlocutor in relation to the participant, and the degree of severity of the offence for which the apology was being offered.

This paper will specifically focus upon one of the four scenarios: accidental theft after having stayed with the family of a friend in Italy. This scenario was chosen as the participants' responses demonstrated a great degree of variation and were rich in intercultural phenomena.

The following analysis explores the impact of Australian English politeness norms on the participants' realisation of apologies in Italian, taking into account the whole apology act sequence. As will be shown, Australian English social norms were prevalent in the participants' responses, specifically in the way in which they perceived the relationships between themselves and their Italian interlocutors. This in turn impacted upon their formulation of apologies in Italian, including the way in which formality and apology modification were used.

As I will argue, this paper confirms the difficulty which language learners may face when navigating the intercultural space (Cheng, 2013; Formentelli & Hajek, 2013; Trosborg, 1987, 1995) and thus, by implication, evidences the necessity of a pedagogical approach to language teaching which incorporates pragmatics and cultural awareness.

## 2. Theoretical framework: Politeness

In an intercultural communicative context, and in the process of language acquisition specifically, familiarity with the pragmatic rules and norms of a culture and language are vital for ensuring successful communication (Schauer, 2009, p. 13). Languages and cultures involve varying degrees of collaboration and some are more conflictual than others (Rubino, 2011, p. 12; Rubino & Bettoni, 2006), a reality that may not align with the expectations of language learners.

Theories of politeness are thus essential to discussions of intercultural speech act realisation, as politeness norms can have a significant impact upon both the production and understanding of utterances. For example, a particularly influential model of cooperative communication is Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims, although it is not the theoretical framework upon which the present work is based. This paper draws upon the foundations of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) in order to explore the apologies of language learners. A pertinent concept in understanding politeness, particularly when investigating culturally-salient phenomena such as speech acts, is that of *face*, the "social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular

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<sup>2</sup> This paper arises from an Honours thesis project conducted at the University of Sydney under the supervision of Associate Professors Antonia Rubino and Ahmar Mahboob.

<sup>3</sup> In some literature, DCT is identified as 'Discourse Completion Test'; however, 'Discourse Completion Task' was used in this paper as it is the more common term.

contact" (Goffman, 2003, p. 7). Politeness Theory identifies two types of face: *negative face* refers to the desire to be free from the imposition of others, while *positive face* entails the desire to be appreciated and approved by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 65-67). FTAs are speech acts which in some way pose a threat to the face wants of any interlocutor (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 65). Such acts include *complaints, requests* and *apologies*.

As has been widely recognised, interactional understandings can vary vastly across cultures and languages (Bettoni, 2006; Clyne, 1994; di Luzio, 2003; Gumperz, 1982; Kecskes, 2012; Kiesling, 2015; Leech, 1983; Peeters, 2013; Wierzbicka, 2005, 2010; Yates, 2010); hence, Brown and Levinson's politeness framework is relevant only when the cultural assumptions and presuppositions made by all participants in an interaction align. As politeness is relative, it is intrinsically linked to the social and cultural context of the interaction and the personal context of each individual. However, despite the impossibility of a homogenous population, cultural tendencies do permeate communication and are reflected in speech practices and conversational routines (Meier, 1995, p. 352; Wierzbicka, 2005, 2008). Taking these discussions into consideration, this paper approaches politeness as that which is deemed to be socially acceptable behaviour within a given interaction, as determined by social and contextual variables. The phrase 'politeness norms' therefore refers to these appropriate behaviours.

Communication in a foreign language is a constant learning process and regardless of linguistic competence, cultural differentiation in the contextualisation and enactment of communication can cause language learners to unintentionally act inappropriately (Blum-Kulka, 1983; Kiesling, 2015, p. 628; Scarcella & Brunak, 1981). Learner awareness of cultural pragmatic differences is therefore very valuable, particularly in terms of the necessity of understanding why certain speech conventions are appropriate while others are not (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006, p. 1922; Coulmas, 1981b, pp. 69-70); however, this has not been extensively investigated in Italian-Australian intercultural contexts.

### 3. Background to the study

The apology is identified by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 206) as a post-event FTA which recognises the violation of social norms and acknowledges the speaker's involvement in this violation. The apology is thus a transaction which aims to restore the relationship between the offending and the offended parties (Edmondson, 1981, p. 274; Leech, 1983, p. 125; Robinson, 2004, p. 292) as well as the image of the offender (Benoit, 1995, p. 35). Taking these definitions as a basis, this paper investigates apologies as expressions whereby the speaker or writer communicates remorse for having violated social norms and offended the interlocutor, and thereby attempts to restore harmony within the interaction.

Although *culture* has been widely acknowledged to be a vast and challenging concept (Baker, 2015, pp. 45-46; Duranti, 1997, pp. 7-8; Knoblauch, 2001; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 17), the significance placed upon the social sphere consistently emerges in the diverse definitions of culture offered by scholars. In this paper, Kiesling's (2015, p. 621) conceptualisation of culture as group practice – rather than as an innate attribute of a group – is adopted. As culture is variable and can develop over time, it is seen by Kiesling as encapsulating the collective actions of a group of people, rather than being an inherent trait of the group. This pragmatic approach thus entails a focus upon actions as performed through language, which corresponds with the speech act theory framework of this paper.

Numerous cross-cultural and intercultural studies have evidenced the vast differentiation in apology performance across cultures (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Chang, 2010; Jebahi, 2011; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Suszczyńska, 1999). For example, the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realisation Patterns (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989a) evidenced that the variation of social distance and power between participants was of importance in the participants' choices of apology strategies and that the relative weight of these factors was subject both to situational and cultural variation (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989b, p. 3). These findings are well-supported, for example by Trosborg's studies of the performance of requests, complaints and apologies among Danish learners of English (1987; 1995), and by Cheng's (2013) investigation of the strategies used by learners of English in both spoken and emailed apologies. The former discovered that different interactions between the factors of dominance and social distance in role-play situations resulted in demand for varying levels of politeness (Trosborg, 1995, p. 148). Similarly, Cheng (2013, p. 102) found that variables such as the mode of communication, severity of the situation and relationships between interlocutors were formative in the construction of learners' apologies.

Scholars have also noted differences in apology modification among learners and native speakers of English. While the Uruguayan participants in Márquez Reiter's (2000, p. 147) study demonstrated a preference for non-intensification, the British participants intensified apologies in all situations, for example, through the use of adverbs such as *very* or *so* prior to the use of the direct apology *sorry*. Similarly, Suszczyńska (1999, pp. 1060-1061) found that explicit apologies produced by native English speakers were intensified more frequently than explicit apologies performed by native Polish and Hungarian speakers. These results indicate "a ritualised Anglo-Saxon conflict avoidance strategy aimed at redressing the hearer's 'negative' face" (Márquez Reiter, 2000, p. 167), which may have significant implications for intercultural politeness. Additionally, Trosborg (1987, p. 162) found that learners of English often appeared to be less polite than the native speakers, as they were unable to modulate their apologies in accordance with English norms. Apology frequency may also be influenced by cultural factors, as Australian and British English speakers tend to apologise more frequently compared with other cultural groups (Clyne, 1994, p. 179; Márquez Reiter, 2000, p. 168).

In investigating the Italian and English languages, Lipson (1994) asked ten native Italian university students to transcribe apology scenes from American sitcoms in Italian and adapt them to the Italian cultural context. Relationships of unequal status and authority were subject to more restricted forms of apologies in the participants' representations than those in the American sitcoms and textual differentiation was attributed to the participants' perceptions of status, role and authority (Lipson, 1994, p. 27). When addressing friends, students rejected the need to apologise (Lipson, 1994, p. 31) and jokes, insults and teasing were incorporated more frequently as moves to minimise the offence and restore balance (Lipson, 1994, p. 25). Conversely, these strategies were not used when addressing individuals of a higher status. Evidently, the students' understandings of interpersonal relationships significantly impacted their formulation of apologies. Similarly, Nuzzo (2007, p. 178) found that among native Italian speakers, situations of high social distance resulted in a more frequent use of intensifiers than in situations of low social distance. This suggests that native speakers tend to use strong expressions of regret with strangers, though are more comfortable in denying responsibility when the interlocutor is well-known to them (Nuzzo, 2007, p. 179). Nuzzo also notes that, when modifying their apologies, Italian native speakers display a preference for mitigating strategies – that is, lexical elements which alleviate the offender's responsibility in causing the offence.

Although apologies performed in Italian have not been explored within the Australian context, some studies have been conducted which focus on other FTAs (Bettoni & Rubino, 2007; Rubino, 2011; Rubino & Bettoni, 2006). In investigating complaints, Rubino and Bettoni (2006, p. 355) concluded that Italians and Anglo-Australians differed both in their perceptions of the offence and how this was to be redressed. Additionally, Bettoni and Rubino (2007, p. 491) observed that when responding to complaints, Anglo-Australians tended to use variations of the same formulaic expression, *I'm sorry*, and intensifiers such as *so* and *awfully* were often included. Conversely, native Italians alternated between *mi dispiace* ('I'm sorry') and *mi scusi* ('excuse me'), rarely using more elaborate expressions. These strong linguistic differences have implications for intercultural communication and foreign language use, and thus will be investigated in this paper.

#### **4. Methodology of the study**

As mentioned above, this paper presents data from a larger project which investigated the politeness strategies used by learners of Italian when performing apologies. A written DCT was used to collect a series of email responses which were then analysed in regards to apology structure and the three variables under investigation.

##### **4.1. The DCT**

The data collection for the project involved the application of a written DCT whereby participants were asked to respond to four scenarios in the form of an email.

In completing the DCT, participants were presented with the same situation twice, but were required to direct their responses to two different interlocutors, so as to investigate the possible impact of social variables on speech act performance. The format of the DCT involved a short description of the scenario, followed by a space in which students were able to provide a response, as shown in Figure 1.

You have just returned to Sydney after visiting a friend and his mother for several months in Verona. When unpacking, you discover two of their chargers caught up amongst your own.

If you were to write an email to your friend, what would you write?

Please write your email below, using as little or as much space as you feel to be necessary:

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Figure 1. Format of the DCT

The task was completed on campus under exam conditions without the use of linguistic aids such as dictionaries or electronics.

Special care was taken in formulating scenarios that were relevant to the student context, such as a student exchange situation or an intercultural encounter in Italy. All scenarios were set in Italy, implying that students should engage with Italian politeness strategies and apology constructions, and this was emphasised by the fact that the DCT was written in Italian with only potentially challenging terms provided in English. The explicit construction of this Italian setting therefore placed the participants in the context of the Italian language and culture.

Identifying email communication as the modality of the DCT also eliminated the possibility that variations in text type across the scenarios could influence the learners' construction of apologies. The specification that responses should be written in email form was thereby an important controlled variable in ensuring data consistency.

Participants were also given the opportunity to opt out of responding to the scenarios. It is understood that, for any number of reasons, an individual may not apologise in all situations in which another individual may deem an apology to be necessary. Opting out of speech act performance is in fact quite common (Kuchuk, 2012, p. 128) and has been identified as a possible response to FTAs in particular (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). Hence, at the end of each scenario description, the option to refuse to answer was offered to participants.

Drawing upon other studies (e.g. Lipson, 1994; Márquez Reiter, 2000; and Rubino & Bettoni, 2006, among others), participants were also asked to evaluate each scenario in relation to three variables – namely, the social distance between the participant and the interlocutor, the status of the interlocutor in relation to the participant, and the degree of severity of the offence for which the apology was being offered. Participants were required to rate the impact of each of these variables on a scale of one (Low) to five (High), as shown below in Figure 2.

These three variables were defined for the students in the following way, and these definitions were also included on the DCT itself so as to avoid ambiguity:

*Social distance*: how well known the participants are to each other, ranging from strangers to intimates

*Status of interlocutor*: the degree of power held by the interlocutor, i.e. if their social position within the interaction is higher, equal to, or lower than the speaker

*Severity of offence*: the 'seriousness' of and extent of damage caused by the offence for which the apology is being offered.

Would you rate the severity of your offence as:				
1	2	3	4	5
Low				High

Figure 2. Likert scale from the DCT

The participants' emails and variable ratings then provided the data set for this paper.

#### 4.2. Participants

The participants were students enrolled in one of four Italian Studies courses at a large public university in Australia and with of proficiency levels ranging from B1 to C1<sup>4</sup>, based on student grading conducted by the Department of Italian Studies.

The four classes and their assumed proficiency levels were:

- Intermediate Italian 4 (B1)
- Senior Italian 4 (B1/B2)
- Senior Italian 6 (B1/B2)
- Honours cohort (B2/C1)

Despite differences in the proficiency levels of the students, it was expected that all participants had been instructed in the differences between Italian and English politeness strategies, and this was supported by syllabus documents (Department of Italian Studies, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Although some participants who were attending higher language classes were more successful in formulating their apologies than those in lower classes, this was not always the case; thus, differentiation in student proficiency was not considered in this study.

Demographic questionnaires (included in the Appendix) were also completed by participants in order to ascertain whether such factors impacted upon the responses provided. However, few conclusions could be drawn from these demographic details. Neither did cultural background appear to be a meaningful factor in explaining participants' linguistic choices. Hence, the demographic factors did not form part of the data analysis for this paper.

Any problematic transcripts - in that they were incomplete or had been incorrectly completed - were removed from the data set and therefore had no bearing on the results presented in this paper.

#### 4.3. Data for this paper

The data presented in this paper arises from one of the four scenarios in the DCT, available in the Appendix both in the original Italian (as provided to participants) and in English. As the data set was too narrow to provide an effective statistical analysis, a descriptive analytical framework was used. This descriptive method arose from the data itself, thus was more revealing than an imposed framework arising from another project, and also allowed for a detailed consideration of the whole complex apology act sequence.

The chosen scenario specified that upon unpacking their luggage after staying with a friend and his mother in Verona, the participant discovered that they had accidentally taken two phone chargers that did not belong to them. In completing the DCT, participants were required to write to both the mother and the friend in response to the situation.

The scenario discussed in this paper is the email to the mother, which was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the two alternations of the scenario demonstrated high degrees of variance in regards to the rating of the social variables, indicating that many participants recognised social distinctions between the two

<sup>4</sup> According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

addressees. As this scenario is quite different from many scenarios used or undertaken in previous DCTs and role-play tasks conducted by other scholars (e.g. Chang, 2009; Márquez-Reiter, 2000; Suszczyńska, 1999; Trosborg, 1995), in terms of both the offence and the interlocutor stipulated, it provides a particularly intriguing analytical focus. While most data arising from the scenario incorporated Australian English norms, participants did attempt to engage with Italian pragmatics; thus, this scenario offers insights into the interplay of the two languages in the intercultural context of language acquisition.

As five of the 42 participants opted out of responding to this scenario, the following analysis arises from the responses of 37 participants.

All examples quoted in this paper have been transcribed exactly as they were written by participants, including grammatical and lexical errors. These errors have not been represented in the English translations. However, in some translations, English grammatical correctness has been compromised in order to more accurately communicate the meaning of the original Italian.

## 5. Analysis

Based on comparisons with previous literature already discussed in this paper, the analysis of the data revealed the frequent use of Australian English terms of address and apology structures, rather than the consistent use of Italian norms usually required in the scenarios presented to participants. The prevalence of these features of Australian English suggests the application of L1 (Australian English) knowledge to the L2 (Italian). There are three principle areas in which this intercultural negotiation was evidenced: (i) the way in which the social variables within the scenarios were evaluated by participants, (ii) the participants' use of formal terms of address, and (iii) the modification of explicit expressions of apology. These findings will now be detailed.

### 5.1. The social variables

As outlined previously, following each scenario, participants were asked to evaluate the social distance between the interlocutor and themselves, the status of the interlocutor in relation to their own, and the severity of the offence hypothetically committed. The three variables were clarified to the students in the DCT, as mentioned above.

The number of participants who chose each of the five ratings of the three variables in the chosen scenario are demonstrated in the table and graph below:

Table 1  
*Participants' ratings of variables in email to friend's mother*

Variables	Rating of the variables				
	1 (Low)	2	3	4	5 (High)
Social distance	2	<b>14</b>	<b>18</b>	7	1
Status of interlocutor	1	1	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>	0
Severity of offence	8	17	13	4	0

It is notable that the two social variables (distance and status) as rated by participants were not always interdependent. Most participants' perceptions of the social distance between themselves and their friend's mother were concentrated around the 2 – 3 rating on the scale (demonstrated in bold), whereas all but two ratings for the status of the mother in relation to the participant were between the higher 3 – 4 range. In fact, in assessing the individual responses of participants, it emerged that many participants reported a relationship in which the status of the mother was higher than their own, but the social distance between them was low or average. Specifically, 12 participants gave equal ratings to the social distance between the mother and themselves and to the status of the mother, 27 gauged the social distance as being lower than the status of the mother, and only 3 participants rated the status of the mother as being lower than the social distance.

That 27 participants (over 64%) reported low social distance with respect to the mother's status (1 – 2 on the scale) aligns with the Australian principles of equality and mateship, even in socially imbalanced interactions (Dyrenfurth, 2015; Formentelli & Hajek, 2013; Sinkeviciute, 2014). One can therefore gather that the participants tend to adhere to an Australian understanding of this relationship.

However, it should also be acknowledged that this familiarity between the participants and the interlocutor may be a situational effect of having lived together (as it was specified in the scenario description that the participant was a guest in the mother's home) or may be influenced by participants' experiences with their own friends' families in Australia.

## 5.2. The use of formal terms of address

Italian has two principle formal personal pronouns, *Lei* and *Loro*, which are used when addressing individuals who are not well-known to the speaker, or are of higher status or hold greater power than the speaker. For example, individuals who possess titles such as *Doctor* or *Professor* should always be addressed using these forms (Musumeci, 1991, p. 445), and titles are often used in addressing such individuals. However, today *Loro* is rarely used. These choices of terms of address also impact upon one's verbal conjugation, whereby the verbs adopt the conjugation of the third person rather than the second person in order to achieve grammatical agreement.

In contrast, formal terms of address are uncommon in Australian English, while solidarity pronouns of address and the use of first names are conventional and expected (Brick, 2004, p. 39; Clyne, 2003, p. 217). Thus, engagement with grammatical formality has been previously evidenced as an element of politeness with which Australian learners of Italian experience difficulty (Formentelli & Hajek, 2013), a finding which was also evidenced in the present study.

While some participants did attempt to adapt their level of grammatical formality to the Italian context of the interactions presented in the DCT scenarios, there was at times a lack of consistency in the use of formal terms of address. Some students were able to use these terms without issue, while others did not engage with them, and others still made attempts to use the forms but made errors when doing so. This variability thus provides a salient area of investigation in the intercultural context of the study.

In the specified scenario investigated in this paper, 35.14% of all responses provided made use of the formal pronouns and related verbal conjugations, which are fundamental elements of Italian politeness (Musumeci, 1991; Nuzzo & Rastelli, 2009). The social variables of the interaction – specifically, the social distance and status differentiation between the participant and their interlocutor – seemed to impact upon the use of these polite terms of address.

When participants judged their interlocutor (the mother) to be of an equal or higher status than their own (4 – 5 on the scale), formal Italian terms of address were used more frequently. This is demonstrated in bold in the table below: when responses were allocated higher ratings, particularly 4, they included a higher number of formal pronouns and verbal conjugations.

Table 2  
*Use of formal Italian terms of address in relation to ratings of the mother's status*

Rating of status of the interlocutor	Total responses	Responses using formal terms of address	Percentage (%) <sup>5</sup>
1 (Low)	0	0	-
2	1	0	0.00
3	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14.29</b>
4	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>50.00</b>
5 (High)	0	0	-

This trend was echoed in the results for the social distance of the interlocutor. As demonstrated in bold in Table 3, the percentage of responses which included formal Italian terms of address rose in correspondence with an increase in the social distance between the participant and their interlocutor. Evidently, participants' recognition of the social distance between themselves and their friend's mother influenced their choice of formal pronouns and verbal conjugations.

<sup>5</sup> The percentage of responses in which formal terms of address were used.



Table 3  
Use of formal Italian terms of address in relation to ratings of the mother's social distance

Rating of social distance	Total responses	Responses using	
		formal terms of address	Percentage (%)
1 (Low)	2	0	0.00
2	10	2	20.00
3	18	7	38.89
4	7	4	57.14
5 (High)	0	0	-

Hence, similarly to the association between social distance and the use of formal Italian, there is a connection between the participants' perceptions of status and their choices of formal Italian forms of address. This thus follows Italian norms and evidences an awareness on the part of participants of the Italian cultural context in which they were writing.

However, while some participants used formal *Lei* pronouns and conjugations, most participants gravitated towards informal grammar and terms of address. It was also more common for participants to use formal pronouns than formal verbal conjugations and the use of either was not always accurate throughout their responses. This variability may be attributed to factors both internal and external to the Italian language. For example, there is at times a lack of distinction between the use of formal and informal terms of address even in Italian contexts, and this can cause difficulty in ascertaining how to appropriately use these forms (Fivela & Bazzanella, 2014, p. 114; Nuzzo & Rastelli, 2009, p. 22; Rebelos & Strambi, 2009, p. 61).

This uncertainty was evidenced by the fact that some participants' conjugations of the verb *scusare* did not seem to relate to their use of formal address. The verb should be conjugated as *scusi* when using formal Italian, while *scusa* is reserved for informal situations. However, some participants confused the conjugated forms, using informal conjugations of *scusare* while using formal Italian pronouns and vice versa, as in the following example:

- (i) **Scusa** ma penso che ho messo la sua caricabatteria nella mia valigia (2632.6)<sup>6</sup>  
**Sorry** (informal) but I think that I put your (formal) charger in my luggage

Although it is not possible to ascertain whether a participant's use of informal terms of address was due to their conscious choice to do so or due to an inability to use formal terms of address, the use of both informal and formal forms within the one response—particularly within the same sentence—is grammatically incorrect. These observations hence suggest learner difficulty in distinguishing formal and informal grammatical forms. This is reminiscent of what has been reported by previous scholars, in that learners of Italian are often uncertain as to how to accurately construct and use polite forms of address (Nuzzo & Rastelli, 2009; Rebelos & Strambi, 2009).

As previously mentioned, all students who participated in the study were enrolled in levels at which they should have been aware of how to correctly use formal terms of address. Thus, one possible reason for the lack of proficiency in these forms may be the infrequent use of formal Italian within the foreign language classroom, particularly in Australian university contexts (Formentelli & Hajek, 2013). In fact, upon completing the DCT, one participant of the present study expressed difficulty in remembering when to use the formal *Lei* as "it's not something that's really drilled into us much, because we don't have a *Lei* form in Australia" (personal communication, 8 August, 2016). Hence, lack of practice during language instruction may account for the difficulty experienced by participants in using formal Italian forms, thus encouraging them to gravitate – intentionally or unintentionally – towards the less grammatically marked formal Australian norms with which they are familiar.

Another trend which emerged from the data was the common use of first names when greeting the interlocutor. 12 participants addressed the interlocutor by a first name, such as in the following examples:

<sup>6</sup> The numbers in the brackets correspond to each participants' unique identification code. For analytical purposes, each participant was assigned an identification number comprising of the unit of study code of the Italian class followed by a numeral. For example, the code 2632.3 refers to the third student in class ITLN2632 (Senior Italian 4) to submit their completed DCT. These numbers were used to identify the authors of the examples included in this paper.

- i) Ciao Alessia (3612.8)  
Hi Alessia
- iii) Ciao Maria! (2632.4)  
Hi Maria!
- iv) Cara Maia (2612.3)  
Dear Maia

This informal means of address is characteristic of Australian communicative norms (Brick, 2004, p. 39; Clyne, 2003, p. 217). The use of first names expresses a fellowship between interlocutors (Clyne, Norrby & Warren, 2009, p. 69) and this aligns with the high Australian regard for mateship. Traditionally in Italian, the use of first names is a sign of solidarity and intimacy reserved for interlocutors with whom you are familiar, rather than an expected communicative norm to be used with all interlocutors.

Informal greetings such as those evidenced above contrast against the more formal terms of address chosen by other participants:

- v) Cara signora (2632.1)  
Dear madam
- vi) Cara Signora Ambrogio (H.3)  
Dear Mrs Ambrogio

These formal terms of address are more appropriate in Italian for this communicative situation. However, the use of titles and formal greetings did not always correspond with the use of formal verbal conjugations. For example:

- vii) Buongiorno signora!  
Come **stai**? (2612.3)  
Good morning madam!  
How are **you** (informal)?

These tendencies – specifically, the use of first names and inconsistencies in formal terms of address – are at odds with the rigid realisations of social distance and status which characterise formal Italian language use (Formentelli & Hajek, 2013), thus indicating a pragmatic transfer of Australian norms to the Italian context. Such adaptation of L1 norms to L2 language realisation is quite common among learners, as has been evidenced in previous studies (Keshavarz, Eslami, & Ghahraman, 2006; Žegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 167). The inconsistencies in participants' responses also indicate a lack of competence in using the linguistic forms necessary for expressing formality, which may have caused this reliance upon Australian English norms.

### 5.3. The explicit expressions of apology

Explicit expressions of apology are those which use routine formula such as *I'm sorry*, *I apologise* or *excuse me*. The most common explicit expression of apology in the data was *mi dispiace* ('I'm sorry') (37 instances in total across 28 responses). Several different forms of the verb *scusare* ('to excuse' or 'to apologise') were also used (5 instances) and two explicit apologies involved the adjective *spiacente* ('sorry'). When *scusare* was used, it was usually conjugated informally (*scusa*) and in some instances were accompanied by modifiers. *Chiedo i suoi scusi* ('I ask your (formal pronoun) pardon') was also used by one participant as a very formal expression of apology. Examples of these apology forms include:

- viii) **Mi dispiace** tanto (2632.9)  
**I am very sorry**
- ix) **Mi scusi** (H3)  
**Excuse me** (formal)
- x) Sono molto **spiacente** (3612.14)  
I am very **sorry**

Native Italian speakers generally prefer to use explicit apologies which are expressed through conjugations of the verb *scusare* ('to excuse') (Lipson, 1994, p. 25; Nuzzo, 2007). In my data, participants instead clearly favoured *mi dispiace* over other forms. *I'm sorry* has been previously recognised as the most common explicit expression of apology in English (Lipson, 1994, p. 25; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, p. 22; Owen, 1983, p. 65; Robinson, 2004, p. 322); thus, it seems that the prevalence of *mi dispiace* in the data is a product of the participants' English-language background and that the tendency of English speakers to use this expression has been incorporated into their Italian language use.

In the intercultural context of the investigation, the participants' modification of these apology structures was also salient.

Two types of modification were identified in the data:

- Intensification – achieved by the use of adjectives and adverbs which strengthen the force of the apology;
- Reiteration – achieved by a phrase whereby the repetition of the apology is made explicit.

In the data collected from the specified scenario, 54.05% of the explicit apologies were modified with intensifying or reiterating adverbs.

As it was by far the most commonly used explicit expression of apology, the phrase *mi dispiace* in particular experienced frequent modification, as shown in the table below:

Table 4  
*Modifiers of mi dispiace ('I'm sorry') used in this scenario*

Modifiers	Gloss	Frequency
molto	much	4
moltissimo	very much	3
tanto	much	3
tantissimo	very much	1
di nuovo	once again	1
ancora	again	4
ancora & tanto	again & much	1
troppo	too much	1
un sacco	a lot (colloquial)	2

Examples of modified explicit expressions of apology include:

- xi) Mi dispiace tantissimo! (3612.9)  
I am very very sorry!
- xii) Mi dispiace ancora *per il disagio* (3612.9)  
Again, I am sorry *for the inconvenience*
- xiii) Scusami tanto (3612.8)  
Excuse me very much
- xiv) Sono molto spiacente (3612.14)  
I am very sorry

The first of the above explicit apologies involves a particularly strong intensifier, *tantissimo*, and the exclamation mark emphasises the force of the modifier. In the second example, the apology is strengthened with a marker of reiteration. This participant also added the phrase *per il disagio* ('for the inconvenience') as a means of increasing the force and specificity of the apology. The other two examples both use intensifiers – *tanto* and *molto* – which have the effect of increasing the force of the apology.

The participants' ratings of social distance and severity of offence did not seem to connect to their use of modifiers. However, all participants who included modifiers in their explicit expressions of apology identified the status of the interlocutor as a 3 or 4 on the scale. Although these ratings were also used in

responses which did not include modifiers, no responses which identified the status of the interlocutor as 2 included modified explicit apologies.

Thus, it emerged that the modification of apologies was perceived by many participants to be appropriate and necessary despite the fact that they perceived the social distance between themselves and the interlocutor to be low, a trend common in Australian English. This appears to align with the findings of previous scholars who evidenced the relatively high levels of apology modification with which native English speakers engage and the orientation of this trend towards appeasing the negative face of the interlocutor (Bettoni and Rubino, 2007, p. 491; Márquez Reiter, 2000, p. 147; Suszczyńska, 1999, pp. 1060-1061).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

### 6.1. Main findings

This paper has explored the politeness strategies used by learners of Italian while performing apologies. These apologies were accomplished in the defined context of an Australian visitor to Italy who had accidentally packed and taken away with them two chargers which belonged to their host family.

As previously mentioned, all participants in this study were enrolled in levels at which they had already studied formal and informal Italian forms of address. However, it is possible that the results of this study were impacted by a lack of competence, particularly pragmatic competence, on the part of the participants, and that this possibly influenced their responses.

While some participants engaged well with Italian pragmatic norms, Australian English politeness norms were evidenced in the apology performance of the participants. This suggests an interaction of the Italian and Australian English linguistic systems, thus indicating a negotiation of the intercultural context and transfer of linguistic features of the L1 into the L2 (Blum-Kulka, 1983; Koike, 1989; Trosborg, 1995). There were three principle areas in which this negotiation was demonstrated, as presented below.

Firstly, the way in which participants responded to the social variables of the scenario reflected the Australian tendency towards egalitarianism and mateship, as social distance was often evaluated as being low even when the status of the interlocutor was recognised as being higher than that of the participant.

Secondly, despite the fact that the formal *Lei* pronouns and verbal conjugations were used by some participants in situations in which they would be required of a native Italian speaker, this use was not always consistent, and most participants gravitated towards informal terms of address and verbal conjugations. This reflects the informality of Australian English, rather than the linguistic realisation of social constructs expected of native Italian speakers. However, as mentioned above, the limited competence of the students may have contributed to this trend.

Finally, the modification of apology strategies, particularly intensification, was frequent across the data. As such apology intensification is a feature of English varieties (Bettoni & Rubino, 2007, p. 491; Márquez Reiter, 2000, p. 147; Suszczyńska, 1999, pp. 1060-1061), it suggests that Australian English politeness structures were incorporated into the participants' performance of Italian apologies.

### 6.2. Limitations

Such findings, however, must be taken with caution due to the limitations of this study. Indeed, this is quite a small study, with only 42 participants. A reduplication of the present study with a higher number of participants would thus be beneficial and provide more reliable data. Furthermore, due to time and space constraints, an Italian control group was not used and the DCT was administered only to Australian students studying Italian, although the data was compared to findings of previous studies.

Another limitation is that although the three variables that were considered were clearly explained to participants and definitions of the phrases *social distance*, *status of the interlocutor* and *severity of offence* were provided, participants may still have varying perceptions of the situations of the DCT. For example, some participants may have considered the "several months" specified in the scenario presented in this paper as a sufficient period of time to become familiar with the interlocutor and thus use informal terms of address. On the other hand, other participants may have felt it more appropriate to continue to use formal terms of address as the interlocutor was an older adult.

Finally, individuals may gravitate towards certain apology strategies regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, and a possible criticism of this study is that the analysis does not account for the possible influence of personal preference upon one's realisation of speech acts. Both Cheng (2013) and Lipson (1994) held interviews with participants following data collection in order to explore their linguistic

choices. Applied to this study, post-task interviews would be an insightful element of analysis which could provide an enhanced understanding of participants' linguistic awareness and allow for the individuation of idiosyncratic trends.

### 6.3. Conclusions

In spite of such limitations, overall, the data presented in this paper does point to the influence of Australian English norms in the accomplishment of apologies by Australian learners of Italian. This in turn suggests that this may be an area of pragmatics in which students require further support. Numerous scholars have expressed the need for more explicit instruction of speech acts and intercultural communication within the language classroom, as well as a change in how these phenomena are presented in textbooks (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 75; Nguyen, 2011, pp. 26-27; Vaezi, Tabatabaei & Bakhtiarvand, 2014, pp. 171-172). As discussed previously, lack of practice during language instruction was nominated by a participant as a point of difficulty; this may unintentionally encourage students to continue to use more familiar but less formal Australian English constructions. Therefore, the use of polite forms in the Australian Italian language classroom may be another way to aid students to understand not only the application of the Italian grammatical forms which communicate politeness, but also Italian interpersonal norms and cultural understandings of social distance and status.

Further studies specifically targeted towards understanding the negotiation of politeness norms while apologising would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how language learners linguistically navigate intercultural contexts. Specifically, further investigation of apology modification and the introduction of an Italian control group would indicate the extent to which the presence these structures in participants' responses are in fact an impact of the L1. Such investigations would allow an enhanced understanding of how it is that the L1 impacts upon speech act performance when using an L2, a consideration which is quite important when discussing a speech act which is as culturally complex as the apology.

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## Appendix A

### The DCT

#### **DISCOURSE COMPLETION TASK**

In this task, you will be asked to respond to four different situations via email. In each situation, there will be two versions of the situation. You are asked to complete both versions, totalling eight responses.

All scenarios are set in Italy.

The following task is written in Italian and challenging terms will also be provided in English.

At the end of each, you will be asked to rate the scenario in regards to the *social distance* between yourself and your interlocutor, your interlocutor's *status* in relation to your own and the *severity* of your offence.

In this task, the italicised terms are defined in the following ways:

*Social distance*: how well known the participants are to each other, ranging from strangers to intimates

*Status of interlocutor*: the degree of power held by the interlocutor, i.e. if their social position within the interaction is higher, equal to, or lower than the speaker

*Severity of offence*: the 'seriousness' of and extent of damage caused by the offence for which the apology is being offered

You should respond to the eight scenarios as per the example below:

#### **Example Scenario:**

*You are not feeling well and so you will be absent from today's lecture. You know that the student who sits beside you will be attending and that she always takes detailed notes.*

*If you were to write an email to her, what would you write?*

#### **Example Response:**

*Hi Elena,*

*Sorry to be a bother, but I wanted to ask you a favour. I won't be in class today because I'm sick, so I was wondering if you could send me your notes from today's lecture?*

*Thank you so much!*

*Jessica*



Appendix B

Demographic questionnaire

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

Age:

Gender:

Degree:

Unit of Study in the Department of Italian (language):

Other Italian units studied at the University of Sydney, if any (either course name or course code):

Have you studied Italian prior to commencing Italian Studies at university?  
If so, what level of Italian did you study and where did you study?

Which cultural background(s) do you identify as?

If you identify as Italian or as Italo-Australian, please specify your generation:

- Born in Italy
- Parent(s) born in Italy
- Grandparent(s) born in Italy

Do you rate your ability to read in Italian as				
excellent	very good	good	average	basic

Do you rate your ability to write in Italian as				
excellent	very good	good	average	basic

Do you rate your ability to understand spoken Italian as				
excellent	very good	good	average	basic

Do you rate your ability to speak in Italian as				
excellent	very good	good	average	basic

Have you ever spent time in Italy?  
If so, how long were you there?

**Talia Walker**, University of Sydney  
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- EN** **Talia Walker** is an English language teacher and Italian language teacher, and has also worked as a research assistant on a number of linguistic and sociology projects. She completed her Honours thesis at the University of Sydney and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Languages) (Honours) in 2016. Her field of interest is sociolinguistics, specifically, intercultural and cross-cultural communication. In 2018, she will commence her Doctoral project in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney.
- ES** **Talia Walker** es profesora de lengua inglesa e italiana, y también ha trabajado como ayudante de investigación en una serie de proyectos de lingüística y sociología. Presentó su trabajo fin de grado en la Universidad de Sídney, con el que obtuvo el grado con mención en idiomas en 2016. Su campo de interés es la sociolingüística (específicamente, la comunicación intercultural y transcultural). En 2018, comenzará su proyecto de doctorado en el Departamento de Estudios Italianos de la University of Sydney .
- IT** **Talia Walker** Talia Walker è insegnante di inglese e italiano, e ha collaborato in diversi progetti di ricerca in linguistica e sociologia. Ha scritto la sua tesi all'Università di Sydney e nel 2016 si è laureata col massimo dei voti in Discipline Umanistiche (Lingue). Il suo campo di ricerca è la sociolinguistica, in particolare la comunicazione interculturale e multiculturale. Nel 2018 inizierà un dottorato di ricerca presso il Dipartimento di Studi Italiani della University of Sydney.