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# “This apology doesn't seem sincere at all” (Meta)discourses around Will Smith's apology in English and Japanese YouTube comments

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates cultural variation in the reception and evaluation of the same apology event. More specifically, it looks at how Will Smith's apology for slapping Chris Rock has been metadiscursively constructed in two sets of YouTube comments (310,998 tokens): the English comments to the original apology video and the Japanese comments to a second video, which is addressed to a Japanese audience and reports and translates the apology. Corpus(-assisted) methods are employed to examine the Meta-Illocutionary Expressions (MIEs) *apolog\** and 謝罪 *shazai* 'apology'/謝 *ayama\** 'apologise' in context and, more specifically: (1) their function; (2) the underlying evaluations they convey; and (3) the moral orders they appeal to.

The reading of concordances showed that the MIEs are used to problematise or endorse the apology and that negative evaluations of Smith and his apology are more prominent in English. A closer look at the collocates revealed that *apolog\** typically co-occurs with *sincere* to challenge the sincerity of the act. Conversely, *shazai/ayama\** is associated with お互いに (*o-*)*tagai* (*ni*) 'reciprocal(ly)' to indicate that a reciprocal apology from Rock would be appropriate. This suggests that culture-specific moral orders play a role in the negotiation of what is (im)polite.

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## 1. Introduction

On March 27th, 2022, during the Academy Awards, the American actor Will Smith walked on stage and slapped comedian Chris Rock in response to a joke about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith's shaved head. The actor apologised a first time later that evening, and a second time on his social media the day after. A third public apology followed a month later. This study looks at Will Smith's third apology, focusing on how it has been metadiscursively constructed and evaluated in (Tokyo-standard) Japanese and (standard American) English YouTube comments.

In Section 2, I introduce the theoretical framing of the study, which is anchored in metapragmatics and (im)politeness theory, and discuss how this research adds to the literature on the topic. In Section 3, drawing from seminal works on speech acts, three different but related definitions of apology are proposed; I then briefly outline a more recent body of research that focuses specifically on public and/or online apologies, before introducing the contrastive nature of the analysis. Section 4

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presents the research questions and the data and methods employed for the study. The main findings are illustrated in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper by elucidating some recurrent patterns.

## 2. Metapragmatics, metadiscourse and the role of corpus linguistics for uncovering evaluation

This study is grounded in metapragmatics, where the prefix *meta-* (from the Greek μετά *meta* ‘above’ or ‘beyond’) indicates a focus on a more abstract level of meaning people draw from when communicating – and when communicating about communication. Metapragmatics is in fact concerned “with the study of reflexive awareness on the part of participants in interactions, and observers of interactions, about the language that is being used in those interactions” (Haugh 2018, 619). It involves analysing the language interactants use to talk (or write) about language and language use. I will refer to stretches of text where language is used to talk about itself as *metadiscourse* (among others, Culpeper 2011; Hyland 2017; Kádár and Ran 2019), which is here taken to be a proxy for the beliefs and expectations that guide interactants’ communicative behaviour. Other (overlapping) terms used in the field of linguistics at large are: *meta-talk* (Schiffrin, 1980), *metacommunication* (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951), *metapragmatic discourse* (Silverstein, 1993), and *meta-discussion* (Wang and Taylor, 2019). I favour the term *metadiscourse* for two main reasons. First, because in the literature *metadiscourse* is often referred to as *(im)politeness metadiscourse* (Culpeper 2011) or *metadiscourses on (im)politeness* (Kádár and Ran 2019), and apologies, as we will see in the next section, are a manifestation of *(im)politeness*. Second, because it nicely links reflexive usages of language with a *functional* approach to discourse as “language that is doing some job in some context” (Halliday, 1985, 19; cited in Partington and Marchi, 2015, 216).

Metadiscourse often (albeit not necessarily) recontextualises and evaluates a preceding interaction. For example, the expression *In what have I offended you?* (from *Henry VIII*; cited in Oliver 2022) (negatively) evaluates a preceding speech act produced by the speaker. Or, we may also evaluate a speech act produced by someone else, as in *Is that a threat?* (Schneider 2017), or *Tom complimented me today* (Lucy 1993, 10). These examples show that metadiscourse can be a way of framing a previous act and attributing a specific meaning to it, which can be either positive (compliment: good) or negative (offend/threat: negative). Metadiscourse, then, is closely linked to *evaluation*, in the Hunston and Thompson’s (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Hunston 2004, 157) sense of the word as the appraisal of an entity as good or bad. Good and bad come of course in a variety of forms and nuances (threatening and offending someone are both negative, yet are two very different types of speech acts, with very different effects on the extra-linguistic reality), but I believe that, for the scope of this study, the writer’s attitude or stance towards someone or something can be seen essentially in terms of positive and negative (more on this in Section 4.3.2).

Corpus linguistics has proven to be a valuable tool for the study of metadiscourse and evaluation. Culpeper (2011, 79–88) investigates the collocational behaviour of *rude* and *impolite* in the Oxford English Corpus to uncover prescriptive rules concerning how one should behave. Taylor (2015, 182–87) analyses and compares the meanings of *ironic*/IRONIC and *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO in British English and Italian forum data, showing both similarities and differences in the evaluative usage of the labels across the two languages. Haugh (2018, 624) notes that a key focus of research in corpus-based metapragmatics has been the evaluative dimension of metapragmatic labels. Both Taylor and Haugh argue that the field tends to be anglocentric and there is a pressing need for studies across different languages and varieties. The study of Meta-Illocutionary Expressions (MIEs), i.e. specific forms “used to talk about verbal communicative acts in spoken or written discourse” (Schneider 2017, 229) and, more specifically, employed to label speech acts (examples in English include *promise*, *tease* and, indeed, *apologise*), nicely lend themselves to corpus methods where, generally, we need a form as our entry point into the data.

The current study advances our understanding of speech acts across languages by contrasting and comparing the metadiscourses around apologies in English and Japanese empirical data. The use of corpus tools is expected to enable us to see recurrent patterns around MIEs that may elude the naked eye. Conversely, a corpus(-assisted) approach to apologies responds to the long-standing need in pragmatics to devote greater attention to participants’ lay understandings of *(im)politeness* as they arise in everyday interaction (Eelen 2001; Watts 2003).

Having established all the above, it is now time to take a closer look at the speech act of apologising.

## 3. Apologies

### 3.1. What an apology is and what it does

Apologies are multifunctional and multifaceted speech acts that have been defined in a multitude of ways. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, 12) define an apology as:

an attempt by the speaker to make up for some previous action that interfered with the hearer’s interests ... [b]y apologizing, the speaker acknowledges that a violation of a social norm has been committed and admits to the fact that he or she is at least partially involved in this cause.

This conceptualisation of apologies makes clear that they are redressive devices that attempt to counterbalance a previous act face-threatening (Brown and Levinson 1987), hence negative, for the recipient. By defining apologies in relation to social norms, Blum-Kulka and colleagues also frame the act as a way of acknowledging the violation of expected and normative practices. Finally, the link between the speaker’s behaviour and the violation hints at the role that the notion of responsibility plays in the production and evaluation of apologies. This is more explicitly stated in the definition proposed by Holmes (1990, 159):

An apology is a speech act addressed to B's face-needs and intended to remedy an offense for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and B (where A is the apologizer, and B is the person offended).

As we will see, however, an admission of responsibility can be downgraded to varying degrees: admitting responsibility is face-threatening for the speaker who, in the attempt to save their own face, may opt for a non-prototypical apology (Deutschmann 2003, 36; Jaworski 1994, 186) that diverts from the view of apologies outlined in traditional speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). This discursive struggle over the speaker's degree of responsibility for the act affects the perceived (in)sincerity level of the apology, i.e., whether the receiver perceives them to be *really* sorry for what happened. The affective dimension of apologies is apparent in the third and last definition I propose:

to apologize is to do two things: take responsibility for the offensive act, and express regret for the offense committed. (Fraser 1981, 262)

Again, we have the idea that a (prototypical) apology implies an admission of responsibility. This, however, is not sufficient for the act to be felicitous (Austin 1962), as the speaker needs to express regret (we may add, *sincere* regret) for their past actions. The notion of (in)sincerity is very problematic because we cannot access the speaker's internal state, but only its linguistic traces. Nonetheless, perceptions of (in)sincerity play a key role in the evaluation of both the apology and the apologiser. Hence, the *perceived* (in)sincerity of the utterance is a variable that cannot be overlooked.

For the scope of the present paper, I loosely adopt Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989, 12) definition of apology, which allows me to have a point of reference without superimposing too strict conditions on what the speech act should look like. Nonetheless, specific attention will also be paid to the notions of responsibility and perceived (in)sincerity.

### 3.2. Public and online apologies across linguacultures

In the previous section, we have seen that the definition of apology is not as straightforward as it may seem and that many factors are at play in its production and reception. When the object of the study is *online* apologies,<sup>1</sup> intertextuality and their public availability further complicate the matter. Intertextuality is “the way in which texts and utterances are shaped by prior texts they are ‘responding’ to and subsequent texts that they ‘anticipate’” (Fairclough, 1992, 270). It applies to Will Smith's apology because the discursive unit where the apology was originally performed was reported on different media, each of them reflexively interacting with the others. Since the apology is available online, the role of the audience also needs to be accounted for (Partington 2003, 48–53). Building on these considerations, this section proposes a brief outline of public and/or online apologies and presents theoretical and methodological concepts that will be relevant to the analysis that follows.

Components of public apologies can differ from those typically found in dyadic and interpersonal settings. For instance, House and Kádár (2021, 113) note that in the highly sensitive context of war crimes explicit admissions of responsibility are a mandatory component of public apologies, while Kampf (2013, 7) stresses that public apologies are a type of ritual that is highly structured and staged. These and similar works (Glinert 2010; Kampf 2009; Kampf and Löwenheim 2012; McAlinden 2022), however, tend to focus on apologies made by governments, whilst public apologies made by individuals with no institutional role are largely unexplored (but see Okano and Brown 2018). Online apologies can vary substantially depending on the medium or platform in question: ritual apologies remedying trivial violations in email discussions (Harrison and Allton 2013) are very different from corporate apologies posted on Twitter (Page 2014) or TripAdvisor (Morrow and Yamanouchi 2020) – for one thing, the former are private, whilst the latter are publicly available. The type of apology the present study deals with can be located in the intersection between the public and the private sphere: it concerns an apology performed by an individual and warranted by their behaviour (something very different from corporate or government apologies), yet “publicness” is a very important factor.

In addition to contributing to the study of public and/or online apologies, the current analysis is anchored in contrastive pragmatics (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Baumgarten 2022; Aijmer 2011), as it explores and compares Meta-Illocutionary Expressions (MIEs, see Section 2) drawn from two typologically different linguacultures, namely, American English and Japanese.

## 4. Aims, data and methods

In this section, I first present the three research questions that guide my analysis, and then move on to the methods and tools employed for addressing them.

### 4.1. Research questions

The main aims of the paper can be broken down into three interrelated research questions (RQs):

<sup>1</sup> The use of the terminology *online apologies* should not be taken as an attempt to argue that there are speech acts which only exist in cyberspace. Although contextual features of online settings necessarily affect communication, online data can still be approached by using a rigorous and finite system of speech acts (House and Kádár, 2022).

- RQ1: What functions do MIEs serve in the comments?  
 RQ2: How do the two communities metadiscursively evaluate the apology?  
 RQ3: What are the moral orders such metadiscourses appeal to?

These three RQs, which will be further broken down in Section 4.3.1, make apparent that my focus is on the *receptive* (rather than productive) and *evaluative* dimension of language. Although Will Smith's apology and the pragmatic strategies employed therein will be briefly discussed by way of necessary background, the analysis focuses on the comments to two YouTube videos reporting the apology, with the aim to access people's evaluations and the moral orders that motivate them. The underlying assumption is that (im)politeness-related behaviours are dynamically co-constructed and co-negotiated in interaction (Locher 2006; Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003) through metadiscourse (see Section 2). The data source was chosen accordingly: online platforms both provide direct access to people's metadiscourses and contribute to shaping them.

#### 4.2. The data source: YouTube

The choice of YouTube is motivated by its overwhelming popularity (according to <https://blog.youtube/press/>, it has over 2 billion monthly active users) and the comparative nature of the analysis (YouTube is present both in the US and in Japan). YouTube is a multi-authored and multimediotic online video-sharing platform that contains many diverse types of videos, created both by ordinary users and professional accounts (Johansson 2017, 176; Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2016, 356). Among these, there is a video of Will Smith's apology for slapping Chris Rock, which was initially posted on the actor's social media on 29/07/2022 and then reported on YouTube by the American news source ABC7 channel.<sup>2</sup> The comments to this first YouTube video will serve as the English data.

The Japanese data are extracted from the comments to a second YouTube video, posted by the channel BrooklynTokyo<sup>3</sup> and addressed to a Japanese audience. In it, the YouTuber, who calls himself Kyou, reports, translates (the video is in English with subtitles in Japanese) and briefly discusses the apology. It may be argued that the comments to this second video, and the evaluations they convey, are affected by how Kyou himself frames and recontextualises the apology – but about 6 out of 9 min of the video simply reports Will Smith's apology as posted by the ABC7 Channel. In the remaining 3 min, the YouTuber comments on Will Smith's apology, focusing on three main points: Will Smith did well to apologise and his apology is “decent”, but “it should have been done a little bit earlier”; his wife “caused [him] to act a certain way”; Chris Rock is not to blame because the joke was written by the Academy and “is part of American culture to insult people”. He concludes by reminding the audience that actions have long-lasting consequences and expressing the wish that Will Smith and Chris Rock can move on. As will be seen in Section 5, the way he frames the apology does not seem to affect the Japanese comments in a significant way.

An additional factor that may hinder comparability is that the audiences of the two videos are also relatively different, with at the time of writing the ABC7 YouTube channel having over one million subscribers, against the 211,000 of BrooklynTokyo. It follows that the audience of the Japanese video is a much narrower subgroup of general YouTube viewers than that of the American video, with consequences also in terms of the size of the two samples (see next section). This is a recurrent issue in contrastive linguistics, because a lot of information produced in English is often localised in very specific ways in other languages. Despite these important limitations, the two data sets selected for the analysis are deemed to have the highest level of manifest similarity available at the time of writing and given the scope of the study, as they share a number of important features, or *tertia comparationis* (Chesterman 1998, 29) that make the comparison meaningful.

#### 4.3. Data collection and analysis

Scripts in Python were used to collect the comments to the YouTube videos (collectively amounting to 310,998 tokens, of which 272,363 in English and 39,635 in Japanese). Note that the material is publicly available online, no password is required to access it and no personal data were collected (all data were fully anonymised at the data collection stage), hence the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is not applicable (European Commission 2021). The selection of stretches of text that contained the two MIEs *apology* and *shazai* was then carried out through the concordance tool in AntConc (Anthony, 2022). The extended concordance lines surrounding the MIEs were annotated according to a variety of functional parameters. Finally, the most frequent collocates employed in the co-text (span L5-R5) of the two lemmas were analysed. For reasons of transparency, the annotated concordance corpus is available online (see the Data Availability Statement).

An important limitation of the study is that the English corpus is considerably larger than the Japanese one. This is most likely because, Will Smith being a US citizen, the Will Smith/Chris Rock slapping incident gained relatively more visibility in the US than in Japan. Moreover, as already mentioned in the previous section, the YouTube channel from which the comments in English are extracted has a much wider audience than the Japanese account. This has obvious consequences not only for the analysis of collocates (a type of statistical analysis whose effectiveness varies with the amount of data), but also for the extraction of concordances. 14,142 occurrences of *apology* and related MIEs (*apologise*, *apologies*, *apologetic*, etc.) were found

<sup>2</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XyNqHalkMw>.

<sup>3</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSTgjwNQxBI&list=PLhrjNO-q16fL0sb9RZh8ZQZIG0vQH2a9Q&index=9>.

in the English comments, against only 76 occurrences of *shazai* ‘apology’ and related MIEs (謝る *ayamaru* ‘apologise’, 謝り *ayamari* ‘apologise’, 謝った *ayamatta* ‘apologised’, etc.). This variety of MIEs observed in the data is worth noting. For reasons of comparability and simplicity of analysis, however, the collocational analysis focused on the nouns *apology* and *shazai* ‘apology’. Consequently, the number of concordance lines in Japanese that were eventually coded drops to 53.

All 53 instances of *shazai* were coded whilst, based on previous research (Kádár and House 2020), I selected the first 200 instances of *apology* (out of 1155). I chose not to collect a random sample of concordances featuring the MIE *apology* because in YouTube comments people often reply to other users’ previous messages. It follows that the analysis of contextual features vital for assessing evaluative and functional meanings can benefit from looking at longer stretches of comments in the order they were produced, rather than random, hence to some degree decontextualised, batches.

#### 4.3.1. Data annotation

As a preliminary step, I segmented and annotated Will Smith’s apology following the apology strategy types proposed in the CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984). These are as follows: an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device or IFID; an explanation of the violation; an expression of the producer’s responsibility for the violation; an offer of repair; and, finally, a promise of forbearance (adapted from Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, 21). Then, I moved to the focus of the study, namely how the apology was received and commented on by the YouTube community.

All comments were coded according to the same categories, which can be summarised by the following three questions, and overlap with my three RQs:

- (a) What functions do MIEs serve in the data?
- (b) Is the apology positively or negatively evaluated?
- (c) Is the apologist (i.e. Will Smith) positively or negatively evaluated?

To address (a), which corresponds to RQ1, I draw from the communicative functions of MIEs identified by Schneider (2017, 2022), i.e. *reporting*, *problematizing*, *performing* and *commenting*. In the reporting function, “MIEs are used in assertive acts to inform hearers or readers that a particular speech act was performed” (Schneider 2017, 232). In the problematizing function, MIEs “challenge th[e] illocution or, more precisely, the interlocutor’s right to perform the speech act identified in the given situation” (Schneider 2017, 235). The commenting function “is a retrospective comment by a speaker on a previous act by this same speaker” (Schneider 2017, 233). The performing function realises a speech act by naming it (Schneider 2017, 230–236). The performing function is not further discussed here because, as will be further explained in Section 5.2., it is implausible in the data at hand. These functions were modified to better accommodate for my data and the aims of the study in five main ways.

First, although reporting MIEs “are prototypically verbs in their simple past tense form, used in indirect speech” (Schneider 2017, 232), I considered as such also instances in the present tense, such as *Will is over here making an apology*. Second, the problematizing function, as intended here, encompasses a variety of utterances that goes well beyond the prototypical patterning *Is/was this/that an X?* (Schneider 2017, 235) and gets to include any discourse units where one or more felicity conditions of the apology are challenged. Third, the commenting function is not limited to first-person singular progressive forms used to comment on an act by the same speaker, but comprises all instances that are elsewhere referred to as explicit metapragmatic comments (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014, 239) and “broadly relates to interlocutors’ perceptions of appropriateness as well as the illocutions’ overall nature” (Schoppa, 2022, 72). Fourth, in the attempt to account for as many examples as possible, I added a fifth category to the four proposed by Schneider (2017, 2022), i.e. *endorsing*. The endorsing function is meant to be the counterpart of problematizing: if the latter refers to constructions that challenge an illocution, the former covers instances that support or approve of a speech act uttered by a third party. Finally, those instances that did not fit into any of these categories were labelled “Other”.

Going back to the questions (a)–(c) listed above, just as (a) operationalises RQ1, (b) and (c) operationalise RQ2, but add a layer of meaning that makes explicit the object(s) of evaluation, namely the apology, Will Smith, or both.

#### 4.3.2. Evaluation and morality

As we have seen in Section 2, the most basic evaluative parameter seems to be the good–bad parameter. The use of the adverbs *positively* and *negatively* in points (b) and (c) is meant to illustrate this. The annotation of concordances according to this variable was based on specific linguistic choices that suggest an overall positive or negative stance or attitude on the part of the producer towards Will Smith and/or the apology. Positive and negative come of course in a variety of forms and can be located in a continuum ranging from explicit (i.e. inherently evaluative lexical item, such as the noun *joy* [positive] and the adjective *excruciating* [negative] in English) to implicit (e.g. less explicitly evaluative lexical items, such as *deliberately* [negative], and longer constructions where the evaluative polarity has to be inferred from the context). More specific examples are illustrated in the results section.

Positive evaluations of the apology overlap with the endorsing function, and negative ones with problematizing. The close reading of concordances also made apparent that people often abstract from Will Smith’s apology to convey more general considerations on the act of apologising, or on the moral order (i.e. “a culture-specific ideology about what counts as right or wrong” [Culpeper and Tantucci 2021, 148]) perceived as the normal course of action and on which such considerations are

based. These could be helpful to address RQ3. However, since the concordance analysis also showed a significant degree of individual variability (Haugh and Chang 2019), I found it easier to access general considerations on how people *should* behave, and the moral orders that motivated them in my samples, through the analysis of collocates (illustrated in Section 5.4).

Co(n)textual information is vital to access the evaluative dimension of the text and the moral orders behind it. AntConc provides a maximum of 25 tokens on each side of the node (i.e. the word under investigation), but when the texts are collected by the researcher, as it is here, it is easy to access the whole discourse from which the single illocution is taken. This allowed me to code my data with a high level of precision.

## 5. Results

This section briefly illustrates selected parts from Will Smith's apology to Chris Rock (and, as will be seen, to many others), before moving on to how the apology was evaluated by the Japanese and American YouTube communities.

### 5.1. Will Smith's apology strategies

The apology video made available by the ABC7 YouTube channel lasts more than 5 min, during which Will Smith apologises multiple times, to many people, employing a variety of strategies. Table 1 illustrates those parts that, I believe, are more salient.

**Table 1**  
Will Smith's apology, coded following Blum-Kulka and colleagues' (1984, 1989) apology strategy types.

	Min.	Apology strategy	Apology strategy type
1	1:00–1:04	<i>Chris, I apologise to you</i>	IFID
2	1:05–1:08	<i>my behaviour was unacceptable</i>	Admission of responsibility
3	1:09–1:13	<i>and I'm here whenever you are ready to talk</i>	Offer of repair
4	1:17–1:19	<i>I want to apologise to Chris's mother</i>	IFID
5	1:30–1:34	<i>I wasn't thinking about how many people got hurt</i>	Explanation of the violation
6	1:38–1:41	<i>I want to apologise to Chris's family</i>	IFID
7	2:22–2:30	<i>there is no part of me that thinks that was the right way to behave</i>	Admission of responsibility
8	3:07–3:08	<i>I'm sorry babe</i>	IFID
9	3:09–3:14	<i>I'm saying sorry to my kids and my family</i>	IFID
10	3:16–3:19	<i>for the heat that I brought on all of us</i>	Admission of responsibility
11	4:47–4:50	<i>I am deeply remorseful</i>	IFID
12	5:00–5:03	<i>I am human and I made a mistake</i>	Explanation of the violation + Admission of responsibility

Three points are, in my view, theoretically relevant and practically helpful to contextualise the analysis that will follow. First, the apology strategy types proposed by Blum-Kulka and colleagues (1984, 1989), although extremely helpful, cannot fully account for the range of qualitative nuanced options that people have at their disposal in real interactions. For instance, lines 2 and 12 have been both coded as “Admission of responsibility”, but it is reasonable to assume they have very different pragmatic effects: whilst the former is a construction prototypically associated with presumed sincere apologies, the latter is somewhat downgraded by the immediately preceding explanation/excuse, hence the illocutionary force of the act is watered down. More specifically, by saying *I am human*, he seems to be normalising his actions (which is an act very different from taking full responsibility), while at the same time creating common ground with the audience – an act that boosts his affective face (Partington 2006, 97, 98). Another interesting point is that he apologises to Chris Rock only once, in the first minute of the video, then moves on to apologise to a variety of third parties (Chris's family, his own family, his fellow nominees, the people watching the video, etc.). This is a discursive and highly contextual way of downgrading the actual apology to Chris Rock, which is skillfully moved to the background. Last but not least, although we do have a number of admissions of responsibility, there is no explicit mention of the act he is apologising for, i.e. slapping Chris Rock. This delegitimises the apology (Farrelly and Bartlett, 2022), providing a departure from the prototypical apology outlined by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). These factors can at least partly motivate the overall negative evaluation associated with the apology, further discussed in the next sections.

### 5.2. Functions of MIEs in the comments

The focus now shifts to how people interpreted and evaluated Will Smith's apology. This approach is in line with two key assumptions: first, “in everyday practice im/politeness occurs not so much when the speaker produces behaviour but rather when the hearer evaluates that behaviour” (Eelen 2001, 109); second, “[im/]politeness is crucially dependent on the understanding of the participants themselves” (Kádár and Haugh 2013, 57).

The questions that guided the coding process are illustrated in Section 4.3.1. Each concordance line may potentially be annotated according to all three variables, but does not necessarily need to. In other words, while a specific communicative function was attributed to each MIE (Schneider 2017, 2022), what is evaluated in the discourse unit the MIE is part of can be

Will Smith, the apology, both, or neither of the two. The last case is relatively more common when the MIE is used to reflexively comment on the speech act of apologising, or the societal and cultural norms associated with it, because the topic has moved to more general issues.

Table 2 illustrates the findings related to RQ1 *What functions do MIEs serve in the comments?* It gives the figures associated with each communicative function in the two data sets and provides one example each (underlined). Since the two data sets are different in size, the figures are given in percentages too.

**Table 2**  
Communicative functions of MIEs.

Communicative function	ENG		JP	
	#	Example	#	Example
Problematising	72%	<u>This is not an</u>	25%	殴るのは数秒、でもそれを修
	(n=143)	<u>apology lol</u> 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 🤡 He doesn't mean it.	(n=13)	復するのは何年かかるかわか らない。 自分だけで謝罪を 終わるのは・・・それは謝罪 <u>とはいわない</u> 。ただのエゴじ ゃないかな？ <i>Jibun dake shazai o oeru no</i> <i>wa...sore wa shazai towa</i> <i>iwantai. Tada no ego ja nai</i> <i>kana?</i> 'To finalise an apology by yourself... <u>That is not an</u> <u>apology</u> . Isn't it just ego?'
Endorsing	14%	I think <u>the</u>	19%	<u>ウイルスミスの謝罪の言葉や</u>
	(n=29)	<u>apology was</u> <u>sincere</u>	(n=10)	<u>態度は立派だと思います。</u> <i>Uiru sumisu no shazai no</i> <i>kotoba ya taido wa rippa da to</i> <i>omoimasu.</i> 'I think <u>Will Smith's apology</u> <u>and attitude are honorable.</u> '

Reporting	1% (n=2)	Ppl are haters cuz they got no lives <u>Will is over here</u> <u>making an</u> <u>apology</u> but what is Jada doing?	6% (n=3)	こうやって <u>ウィル・スミス</u> <u>さんは謝罪</u> しましたがあの司会 者の人はウィル・スミスさん と奥様に謝罪したのでしょう か。 <i>Kō yatte <u>uiru sumisu san wa</u></i> <i><u>shazai shimashita ga ano</u></i> <i>shikaisha no hito wa uiru</i> <i>sumisu san to okusan ni shazai</i> <i>shita no deshō ka.</i> ' <u>Will Smith made an apology,</u> but did that presenter apologise to Will Smith and his wife?'
Performing	//	//	2% (n=1)	ほかの皆様にご不快な気持ち を与えてしまったのであれば 深く <u>謝罪</u> いたします。申し訳 ございませんでした。 <i>Hoka no minasama ni go-</i> <i>fukaina kimochi o ataete-</i> <i>shimatta no deareba <u>fukaku</u></i> <i><u>shazai itashimasu.</u> Mōshiwake</i> <i>gozaimasen deshita.</i> 'If I made you feel unpleasant I <u>deeply apologise.</u> I'm really sorry.'



Commenting	10% (n=18)	<u>If your apology is sincere and from the heart then move on . It doesn;t matter if anyone accepts it . it only matters that you meant [it].</u>	38% (n=20)	ウィルが謝罪したなら、 <u>クリスも謝罪するべきだ</u> と思う。  <i>Uiru ga shazai shita nara, kurisu mo shazai su beki da to omou.</i>  'If Will apologised, I think <u>Chris should apologise too</u> '
Other	4% (n=8)	<u>This apology video needs another ANDREW TATE MUSLIM REVIEW 😊</u>	11% (n=6)	<u>謝罪動画</u> みたら、ウィル・スミスが責められてるみたいで腹が立つ！  <i>Shazai dōga mitara Uiru Sumisu ga semerareteiru mitai de hara ga tatsu</i>  ' <u>When I watched the apology video</u> , I got the impression that Will Smith alone was blamed, I'm pissed

For ease of comparison, these findings are visualised in Fig. 1.

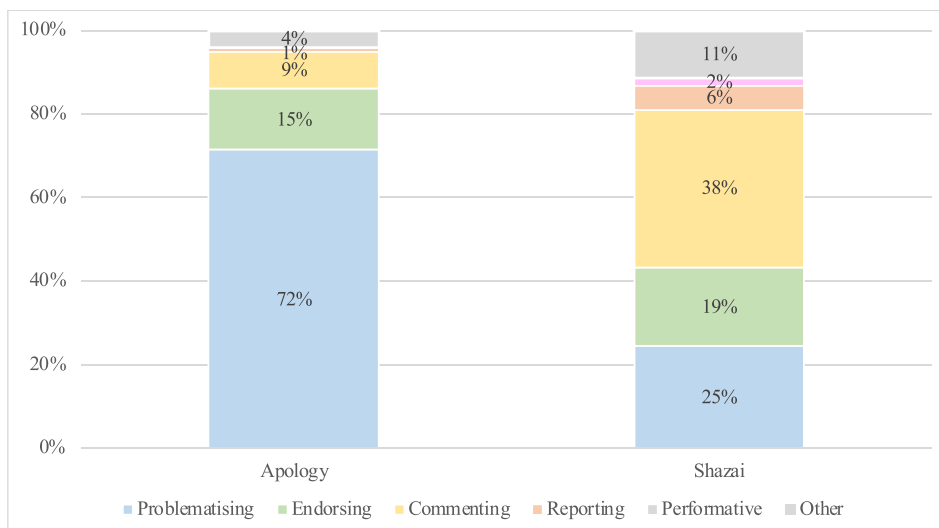


Fig. 1. Communicative functions of apology and shazai.

The findings, although quantitatively limited and hence preliminary, show that in my sample problematising is the function most typically associated with MIEs (72 % and 25 % of total instances in English and Japanese respectively), followed by endorsing (15 % and 19 %). Differences between the two data sets are also apparent, with the problematising function being relatively more frequent in English than in Japanese. Conversely, Japanese users focus on norms of behaviour in 38 % of instances of *shazai*, often commenting on intercultural differences between the US and Japan and/or the moral need to reciprocate apologies – something I will go back to in Section 5.4. Only one performative MIE was observed in the two corpora, simply because people are *talking* (typing?) *about* a speech act by a third party (i.e. Will Smith), hence the performing function, which is prototypically expressed by verbs in the first-person singular, is unlikely in the data at hand.

### 5.3. Evaluations of the apology

Moving to the categories relevant to RQ2 *How do the two communities metadiscursively evaluate the apology and the apologiser?*, below I provide a few examples evaluating the apology and/or Will Smith. WS stands for Will Smith, A for apology, + for positive evaluation and - for negative evaluation. The codes are located after the linguistic chunk that motivated that specific classification. All examples are reported faithfully to the original, including non-standard forms, punctuation, and so on. Their wider co-text is made available in the additional materials.

- (1) ウィルスミスは真摯に謝罪してると受け取った。自分としてはウィルスミスの謝罪を尊重したい。  
*Uiru sumisu wa shinshi-ni shazai shiteru to uketotta. Jibun toshite wa uiru sumisu no shazai o sonchō shitai.*  
'To me it looks like will Smith is apologising sincerely [W+]. Personally, I respect will Smith's apology [A+].'
- (2) Mr. Smith would be to leave that blood sucking mosquito of a wife he has. Another great step would be to make a sincere apology [A-]. I do feel he regrets what he did [WS+] but this apology was bland and robotic [A-]
- (3) 謝罪の動画としては、日本人の自分としては良かったと思う。  
*Shazai no dōga to shite wa, nihonjin no jibun to shite wa yokatta to omou.*  
'As a Japanese, I think the apology video was good [A+].'
- (4) 日本の事しか知らないけど、謝罪ってグダグダ講釈たれる事が欧米式の謝り方なのかな？  
*Nihon no koto shika shiranai kedo, shazai tte gudaguda koshaku tareru koto ga obeishiki no ayamarikata no kana?*  
'I'm familiar only with Japan, but maybe the Western way to apologise is to give a dull explanation? [A-]'
- (5) 自分だけで謝罪を終えるのは・・・それは謝罪とはいわない。ただのエゴじゃないかな？  
*Jibun dake de shazai o oeru no wa ... Sore wa shazai towa iwanai. Tada no ego ja nai kana?*  
'He wrapped up the apology all by himself ... That's not an apology [A-]. Isn't it just ego [WS-]?'
- (6) A fan of your works for most part. But dude, grow a spine and a pair. A sincere apology don't take months [A-]. Your non-action till now proves there's much air in your head than anywhere else [WS-].

Note that in Example (6) the first half of the message is also explicitly evaluative, and may be annotated as:

- (6a) A fan of your works for most part [WS+]. But dude, grow a spine and a pair [WS-].

However, the surrounding co-text shows that the initial positive evaluation of Will Smith is embedded within a larger segment of text that is overall negative. It is reasonable to assume that it is this overall negative evaluation (Partington, 2017, 196–198) that reflects the producer's main communicative aim, which justifies the choice in Example (6) to annotate this excerpt as [WS-].

Figs. 2 and 3 illustrate the quantitative trends observed in the sample.

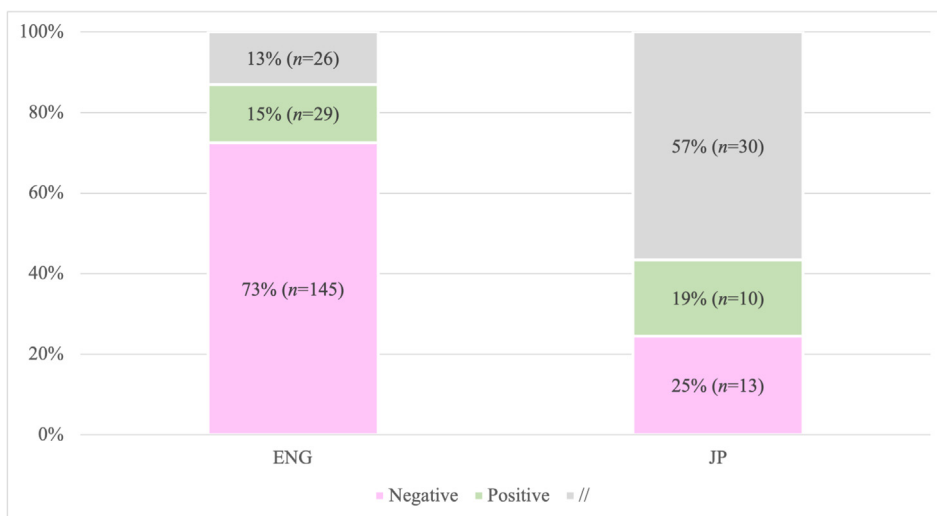


Fig. 2. Evaluations of the apology.

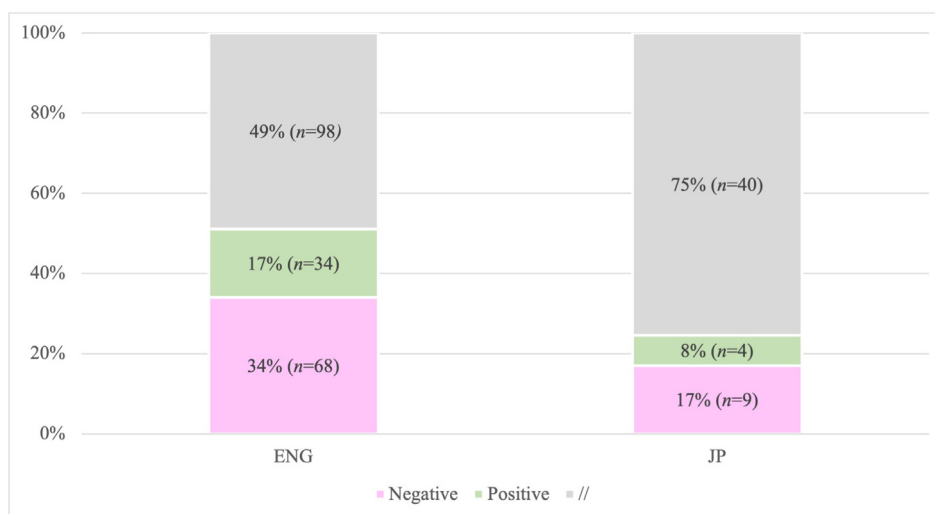


Fig. 3. Evaluations of Will Smith.

Again, figures are not large and any conclusions drawn can only be tentative pointers to possible patterns of difference. Nonetheless, a number of assumptions can be made. The figures show that negative evaluations of both the apology and Will Smith tend to be relatively more frequent than positive ones in both samples. However, the negative evaluation is more prominent in English than in Japanese. This is particularly evident if we look at the high frequency of negative evaluations of the apology. Table 2 reflects the same tendency, as it illustrates that the problematising function (the functional counterpart of negative evaluations of the apology) is much more common in English than in Japanese.<sup>4</sup>

A note of caution, however, is in order. As we have seen in Section 4.2, the Japanese YouTuber BrooklynTokyo frames Will Smith's apology as "decent", albeit late, and shifts the blame onto his wife. I cannot rule out that this may have partly contributed to the relatively more positive evaluation of the Japanese audience. Of note is also that, whilst in Japanese evaluations of the apology are generally in line with evaluations of the apologiser (i.e. if the apology is negatively evaluated, so is Will Smith, and vice versa), in English negative evaluations are more typically associated with the apology than with Will Smith. This suggests that, among English-speaking users, even those who do not appear to be hostile towards the actor or have positively evaluated him as a moral persona did not approve of his apology.

#### 5.4. Moral orders

To access the moral orders based on which people produce evaluations in terms of (im)politeness/(in)appropriateness, I relied mainly on the analysis of collocates. Collocation is "the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text" (Sinclair 1991, 170), such short space here corresponding to five words on either side of the node (L5-R5). The analysis of collocates was carried out as a way to integrate the close reading of the texts with a more quantitative approach. Again, however, caution is required. Whilst the English data set is large enough to allow a relatively robust collocational analysis, that is not the case for the Japanese sample. It follows that if the results related to English are fairly solid, further research is needed to corroborate, or eventually falsify, those related to Japanese. In an attempt to at least mitigate this limitation, the analysis of collocates was carried out on *apolog\** for English and 謝\* to extend the analysis to words that share with *apology* a common root (e.g. *apologies*, *apologise*, etc.) and with *shazai* the apologetic character 謝 (e.g. 謝る *ayamaru* 'apologise' and its inflected forms). Although I am well aware that "conflation often disguises collocational patterns" (Hoey 2005, 5), here I find it useful to work with lemmas (for English) and semantically loaded characters (for Japanese), mainly to retrieve from the admittedly very restricted Japanese corpus as many instances of the search item as possible.

Table 3 illustrates up to 10 most frequent lexically rich collocates of *apolog\** and *shazai/ayama\**, with a threshold of minimum frequency of 5 co-occurrences. Frequency was favoured over statistically based and more significant measures because of the limited size of the Japanese corpus.

<sup>4</sup> If we compare the percentages illustrated in Table 2 with the first column in Fig. 1, a slight difference in frequencies between negative evaluation and problematising on the one hand, and positive evaluation and endorsing on the other is apparent. This difference is due to three instances whose communicative function is rather clear, but where the wider co-text presents somewhat inconsistent evaluations whose ambiguity could not be resolved. In all remaining examples, negative and positive evaluations of the apology are persistently associated with the problematising and endorsing functions respectively.

**Table 3**  
Lexically reach collocates of *apolog\** and *shazai/ayama\** (span L5–R5; ordered by frequency).

<i>Apolog*</i>			<i>Shazai/ayama*</i>		
Rank	Collocate	FreqLR	Rank	Collocate	FreqLR
6	chris	298	1	クリス <i>kurisu</i> 'Chris'	12
16	sincere	111	2	動画 <i>dōga</i> 'video'	10
18	video	93	5	互い <i>tagai</i> 'reciprocal(ly)'	6
19	rock	92	6	べき <i>beki</i> 'should'	5
21	accept	85			
23	months	79			
27	fake	58			
29	people	49			
33	public	30			
34	accepted	30			

These frequencies uncover interesting differences. *Apolog\** typically co-occurs with *sincere*, usually to challenge the sincerity of the act (e.g., *This apology doesn't seem sincere at all*). To test whether (in)sincerity comes up at all in the Japanese data, I looked in the Japanese corpus for the Japanese translations for *sincere*, as found in the Taishukan's Genius English–Japanese Dictionary, 6th edition (2022–2023), i.e. 心から *kokoro kara* 'from the heart' ( $n = 2$ ), 偽りのない *itsuwari no nai* 'genuine' ( $n=0$ ), 誠実な *seijitsu-na* 'sincere' ( $n=0$ ). The analysis is far from comprehensive, but these low frequencies strengthen the claim that (in)sincerity is much more relevant in the American English sample than in the Japanese one.

Conversely *shazai/ayama\** is commonly associated in the Japanese comments with お互いに (*o-tagai-(ni)* 'reciprocal(ly)') to suggest that a reciprocal apology from Chris Rock would be appropriate, as in:

(7) ウィルだけを責めずにお互いに謝罪して欲しい。  
*Uiru dake o semezu ni o-tagai ni shazai shite hoshii.*  
 'Without blaming only Will, I wish they both [lit. reciprocally] apologised.'

(8) ウィルが謝罪したなら、クリスも謝罪するべきだと思う。  
*Uiru ga shazai shita nara, kurisu mo shazai suru beki da to omou.*  
 'If Will apologised, I think Chris should apologise too.'

The collocational analysis of 互いに *tagai-(ni)* (span L5–R5, minimum frequency 3) in turn revealed only two items it tends to occur with: the honorific prefix *o-* and *shazai* 'apology'. This suggests that *tagai* and *shazai* appear in the data almost exclusively in each other's company, corroborating the assumption that these two words are strongly associated.

Note that there is no reference to the need to reciprocate polite behaviour in the original apology video, nor the one posted by BrooklynTokyo, hence we can rule out the possibility that reciprocity is mentioned as a reaction to the Japanese YouTuber's way of framing the apology, or to the apology video itself. Japanese-speaking users interacting in the comment section spontaneously bring reciprocity up, framing it as a moral obligation. These findings are in line with the assumption that "wrong and right are socially defined" (Bedford and Hwang 2003, 133; original emphasis). With regards to Japan as opposed to the US specifically,

apologies demonstrate not so much a feeling of culpability (that is irrelevant) but the public acknowledgement of submission and willingness to cooperate in the future. In contrast to the situation in Western culture, *honne* and *tatemae* need not be congruent for the apology to be "genuine" (Raz 2002, 146–47).

In other words, according to Raz, in Japan the internal state of the producer (*honne*) does not need to match the way such feelings are expressed in public (*tatemae*, which overlaps with the illocution) for an apology to be effective. This, I believe, applies to Western contexts as well, and we should be cautious of simply accepting as a normative fact any statement that contrast "Eastern" with "Western" cultures as if they were static and internally homogeneous realities. Nonetheless, my data suggests that the perceived sincerity of the utterance may be more important in the US than in Japan. Conversely, once an apology is uttered, the moral obligation to reciprocate (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021) seems to be relatively stronger in the Japanese context than in the American one.

## 6. Conclusion

The discursive turn in (im)politeness research recognised that participants' evaluations of (im)politeness are fundamental for meaning inferencing. The present analysis intended to capture precisely this lay perspective on (im)polite behaviour, and more specifically apologies in Japanese and American English online communication. The study focused on the receptive dimension of communication across the two linguacultures and showed a significant degree of inter-linguistic variability in perceptions of (im)politeness and (in)appropriateness. The categorisation of pragmatic functions of MIEs (Table 2) revealed that the problematising function is prominent in English. Conversely, the endorsing function is relatively more common in Japanese. These findings closely align with the evaluations expressed by the users, with negative evaluations being more prominent in English than in Japanese (Figs. 2 and 3) – especially when we look at evaluations of the apology. These

differences can be explained in terms of culture-specific moral orders, which were accessed through a language-anchored, bottom-up analysis of collocates. Judgements about how people should behave seem to play a role in the negotiation of what is (in)appropriate/(im)polite: while in the English data (in)sincerity is the single most important factor when evaluating the apology, Japanese users seem to prioritise reciprocity. This should not be taken as an attempt to suggest that speakers of the same language are unanimous in their judgements: considerable intra-cultural variation was also observed. Nonetheless, the analysis demonstrates that cultural perceptions of (im)politeness guide interactants' evaluations – at least to some degree. This is in line with the assumption that “polite behaviour, including polite language [...] has been acquired. Politeness is not something we are born with, but something we have to learn and be socialised into” (Watts 2003, 9).

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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### Data availability statement

The two corpora and the annotated concordance lines are available on the author's Open Science Framework page at [https://osf.io/bve8s/?view\\_only=3805c714fbbb4345870275285c374ced](https://osf.io/bve8s/?view_only=3805c714fbbb4345870275285c374ced).

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