



A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTION AND LEXICAL CHOICES IN CUSTOMER SERVICE APOLOGY AND COMPLAINT IN TELKOMSEL RESPONSES

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Abstract In the public service sector, issuing an apology is essential. Customer service representatives, particularly in public services, are typically tasked with handling client complaints. Therefore, public service institutions require effective apology strategies to address these concerns appropriately. This study aims to explore the most commonly used apology strategies by Telkomsel's customer service personnel. The research focuses on identifying which types of apology approaches are more frequently used in everyday interactions. This study may also contribute to a broader understanding of how public services utilize apology strategies. A qualitative research approach is applied in this investigation. The analysis is based on Trosborg's (1995) framework of apology strategies. Findings indicate that Telkomsel customer service representatives predominantly use explanations or accounts in 50% of the cases when dealing with customer complaints. This approach is often employed to calm customers and ease emotional tension.

Keywords: Apology Strategies, Customer Service Representatives, Politeness Strategies

Abstrak

Di sektor layanan publik, menyampaikan permohonan maaf sangatlah penting. Petugas layanan pelanggan, terutama di sektor layanan publik, biasanya bertugas menangani keluhan pelanggan. Oleh karena itu, lembaga layanan publik memerlukan strategi permohonan maaf yang efektif untuk menangani keluhan tersebut dengan tepat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi strategi permohonan maaf yang paling sering digunakan oleh petugas layanan pelanggan Telkomsel. Penelitian ini berfokus pada identifikasi jenis pendekatan permohonan maaf yang lebih sering digunakan dalam interaksi sehari-hari. Penelitian ini juga dapat berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang bagaimana layanan publik memanfaatkan strategi permohonan maaf. Pendekatan penelitian kualitatif diterapkan dalam penyelidikan ini. Analisis didasarkan pada kerangka kerja strategi permintaan maaf yang dikembangkan oleh Trosborg (1995). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa petugas layanan pelanggan Telkomsel sebagian besar menggunakan penjelasan atau narasi dalam 50% kasus saat menangani keluhan pelanggan. Pendekatan ini sering digunakan untuk menenangkan pelanggan dan meredakan ketegangan emosional.

Kata Kunci: Strategi Permintaan Maaf, Perwakilan Layanan Pelanggan, Strategi Kesopanan

INTRODUCTION

Individuals from different social backgrounds often exhibit distinct communication styles. In various social settings, people tend to use specific linguistic strategies to express politeness and respect—not only toward close friends and family but also in interactions with colleagues and professionals. Among these strategies, politeness plays a crucial role in shaping communication acts like making requests, offering assistance, and especially apologizing. Apologies are significant speech acts that demand careful consideration, as they can impact the speaker-listener relationship. Common

phrases such as “You’re right,” “Please forgive me,” or “I was wrong” are typically used to ease tension. However, apologizing is not always a simple task; it can pose a threat to the speaker’s face while simultaneously acting as a face-saving gesture for the listener. Watts (2003, p. 169) notes that politeness can be conveyed through both fixed and semi-fixed expressions, with apologies being a central method for executing speech acts in a respectful and indirect manner.

Apologies serve not only as tools for social repair but also as means of preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships. Trosborg (1995, p. 375) cited in Sabilla & Jusmaya (2020), describes an apology as a verbal or behavioral attempt by the speaker to regain social acceptability after a wrongdoing. Apology strategies are the techniques used to perform this act, such as showing remorse, offering redress, or acknowledging fault. In the public service domain, particularly within customer service, apologies are especially important. Responding appropriately to customer complaints can significantly influence satisfaction and loyalty. Tax et al. (1998) cited in Dadie (2023), emphasize that customers tend to express dissatisfaction when service expectations are unmet, and unresolved complaints often result in losing clients. As a result, service personnel frequently use either direct or indirect forms of apology. According to Trosborg (1995), direct apologies may include explicit expressions like “sorry,” “apologize,” or “excuse me,” while indirect approaches might involve explanations, admissions of fault, or attempts to downplay the issue.

In more severe cases, a verbal apology alone might not be sufficient to mend a strained relationship. As Goffman (1971) suggests, apologies serve a dual purpose: they both pacify the offended party and help the apologizer regain social respect. This study applies Trosborg’s (1995) cited in Albadri (2020), taxonomy of apology strategies, which consists of eight types: rejection, minimization, explanation or justification, acknowledgment of responsibility, expression of apology, expression of concern for the hearer, promise of forbearance, and offer of repair. The research aims to determine which of these strategies are most commonly used by Telkomsel customer service staff and explore the reasons behind their preferences. Additionally, the study incorporates Brown and Levinson’s (1987) cited in Sadeghoghli & Niroomand (2016), politeness theory, which categorizes apologies as forms of negative politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1978) cited in Okta (2023), politeness strategies can be grouped into four

categories: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record. This framework helps explain how Telkomsel representatives maintain politeness while resolving customer issues.

Research questions:

1. What types of apology strategies used by the customer service officers of Telkomsel?
2. Which apology strategy that is mostly used by the customer service officers of Telkomsel?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In exchanges between service providers and customers, the act of apologizing plays a vital role in sustaining positive social relationships. An apology is more than just an admission of fault—it serves as a deliberate means of maintaining interpersonal harmony and safeguarding the speaker’s reputation in the eyes of the listener. Trosborg (1995) defines an apology as a spoken or behavioral effort aimed at rectifying an offense in a social context. He outlines eight specific strategies for apologizing: rejection, minimization, explanation or justification, acknowledgment of responsibility, expression of regret, concern for the hearer, promise of future restraint, and offer of compensation. The choice of strategy typically depends on the seriousness of the offense and the nature of the speaker-hearer relationship.

Goffman (1971) cited in Shei & Rasmussen (2023), underscores that, especially in public service settings, apologies fulfill two essential purposes: calming the emotional response of the offended party and reestablishing social equilibrium, while also restoring the speaker’s social identity. This illustrates that a sincere apology entails more than simply saying "sorry"—it is a socially complex act shaped by cultural and relational expectations. From the perspective of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, apologizing is considered a form of negative politeness, which respects the hearer’s desire for autonomy and non-imposition. Therefore, a well-crafted apology must express regret while simultaneously minimizing any intrusion on the listener's personal space.

Within the realm of customer service, Tax et al. (1998) note that customers are more inclined to file complaints when service outcomes fall short of expectations. Failure to address these complaints effectively can damage customer relationships and erode

brand loyalty. As such, the way service personnel respond—particularly through the use of appropriate apology strategies—plays a key role in service recovery and customer retention.

This study investigates how Telkomsel customer service agents utilize different apology strategies when handling consumer complaints. Drawing on the frameworks proposed by Trosborg (1995) and Brown and Levinson (1987) cited in Syting Gildore (2022), the research aims to identify the most frequently employed strategies and examine the factors contributing to their widespread use.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the realm of customer service, particularly within major companies like Telkomsel, an apology goes beyond simply saying “sorry.” It is a crucial element of courteous and professional communication. When customers raise complaints, the manner in which service representatives respond significantly influences customer satisfaction. This research examines the use of various apology strategies employed by Telkomsel’s customer service representatives in addressing consumer complaints. The central issue explored in this study is: what kinds of apology strategies are utilized, and which ones are most frequently observed in interactions between customers and service agents?

The study is driven by the recognition that apology strategies play a vital role in fostering and maintaining positive relationships between service staff and customers. The research focuses on two main questions:

1. What types of apology strategies are employed by Telkomsel customer service representatives?
2. Which apology strategy is most frequently used in their responses to customer complaints?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research method. According to Punch (1998), a qualitative approach is suitable for research where the subject naturally emerges from

real-life contexts. As the name suggests, qualitative methods do not involve statistical measurements. Participant observation, for example, often requires months or even years of intensive work, as the researcher needs to be accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to ensure that the observations reflect natural phenomena. In this study, the researcher adopts a descriptive qualitative method to identify the most frequently used apology strategies by Telkomsel customer service representatives. This method is chosen because it allows the researcher to first collect data based on the apology strategies theory by Trosborg (1995) and then interpret the data in the context of apologies.

The research is conducted at Telkomsel in Surabaya, a prominent telecommunications provider in Indonesia with a large customer base and a wide range of customer complaints, making it an ideal setting for this study. The participants in this study are male customer service officers at Telkomsel, all of whom are 22 years old and have similar educational backgrounds, holding diplomas. Prior to recording the conversations, the researcher requests permission from the customer service officers at Telkomsel. Once permission is granted, the researcher begins recording the interactions between the customer service representatives and customers.

Data collection took place from June 1 to June 26, 2013, during which the researcher gathered thirty-five recorded conversations. The following steps were then taken to analyze the apology data: First, the researcher transcribed the conversations and highlighted those that contained apologies. Second, the apology data was classified according to the apology strategies outlined by Trosborg (1995). Third, the researcher interpreted the classified data based on Trosborg's framework. Fourth, after interpreting the data, the researcher tabulated the apology strategies used by the customer service representatives. Finally, the researcher counted the frequency of each strategy and identified which strategy was most commonly used by Telkomsel's customer service officers.

RESULT AND DISSCUSION

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the data, which is divided into two main sections: the findings and their discussion. A table is provided to display the results, illustrating how Telkomsel's customer service representatives respond to complaints

using various apology strategies. This format allows readers to easily identify which types of strategies are used and how frequently each one appears in customer interactions.

Table 1. Types of apology Strategies

| No | Types of apology Strategies | Frequency | Percentage |
|----|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Rejection | 3 | 10% |
| 2 | Minimizing the degree of offence | - | - |
| 3 | Acknowledgement of responsibility | 1 | 3,33% |
| 4 | Explanation or account | 15 | 50% |
| 5 | Expression of apology | 9 | 31% |
| 6 | Expression concern for hearer | - | - |
| 7 | Promise of forbearance | - | - |
| 8 | Offer of repair | 2 | 6,9% |
| | Total | 30 | 100% |

From the table above, it is evident that the **Explanation or Account** strategy is the most commonly used by Telkomsel's customer service officers, accounting for 50% of the data. Other notable strategies include the **Expression of Apology** (31%) and **Rejection** (10%). The least used strategies are **Acknowledgement of Responsibility** (3.33%) and **Offer of Repair** (6.9%). Several strategies, such as Minimizing the Offense, Expression of Concern, and Promise of Forbearance, were not observed in the data.

Each strategy is further explained and discussed using examples below, all analyzed through Trosborg's (1995) framework.

1. Explanation or Account

Data Example:

Customer: "Kenapa Telkomsel sekarang sering trouble ya di daerah barat? Padahal dulu bagus lho."

CSO: "Iya, kami lagi dalam perbaikan soalnya bu, jadi ditunggu aja."

In this instance, the customer service officer provides an **implicit explanation** by informing the customer that a repair is ongoing without delving into technical details. This serves to acknowledge the issue while calming the customer's concerns.

2. Rejection

Data Example:

Customer: “Kartu Halo saya kok tidak bisa digunakan untuk telepon? Apa diblokir?”

CSO: “*Tidak apa-apa Mbak, tidak ada gangguan kok.*”

Here, the CSO explicitly **denies any problem**, indicating that the issue does not originate from the provider. This is classified under the **rejection** strategy, specifically as a denial of responsibility.

3. Offer of Repair

Data Example:

Customer: “Speedy saya sudah dua minggu tidak konek. Padahal saya sudah lapor, tapi belum diperbaiki.”

CSO: “*Nanti kami akan kirim teknisi ke rumah Mbak.*”

In this response, the CSO goes beyond providing an explanation and offers a **solution** by promising technician support. This falls under the **Offer of Repair** strategy.

4. Expression of Apology

Data Example:

Customer: “Saya kecewa, saya harus membayar sesuatu yang tidak saya lakukan. Telkomsel hanya beri diskon sebagai kompensasi.”

CSO: “*Iya dengan ini saya mohon maaf ya Pak, karena hal ini di luar kendali saya. Saya hanya bisa buat laporan pengaduan.*”

This statement includes a **direct expression of apology**, recognizing the customer’s frustration and offering a formal acknowledgment of the issue.

CONCLUSION

Communication is a fundamental part of human social activity, and misunderstandings are a natural outcome of interaction. When misunderstandings occur, people often rely on **apologies** as a way to repair social harmony. An apology signifies

that the speaker acknowledges having offended the listener, and each person may express it differently.

This study explores the **apology strategies** used by Telkomsel's customer service officers, based on the theoretical framework proposed by Trosborg (1995). Data was collected over the course of one month, from June 1 to June 26, 2013, resulting in **35 recorded interactions**. Out of those, **30 conversations** contained apology strategies and were analyzed using a **qualitative method**, as the data consisted of spoken sentences and reflected social interaction—making it suitable for a **pragmatic study**.

The findings reveal that Telkomsel customer service representatives employed **six of Trosborg's eight strategies**, namely: Rejection, Acknowledgement of Responsibility, Explanation or Account, Expression of Apology, and Offer of Repair. Among these, the most frequently used was **Explanation or Account**, as it allows the service officers to justify an issue without directly admitting fault, helping to restore the customer's trust and calm dissatisfaction.

In conclusion, the **Explanation or Account** strategy is preferred because it serves as a form of excuse that helps maintain the company's image while addressing customer concerns effectively. This reflects the company's intent to preserve **positive relationships** with its customers.

The researcher hopes this study encourages further investigation into apology strategies, especially in the field of **pragmatics**, which is often overlooked. This study may contribute to a deeper understanding of apology in customer service contexts and inspire future researchers to explore other aspects of **politeness strategies** in communication.

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