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# The effectiveness of apologies and thanks in favor asking messages: A cross-cultural comparison between Korea and the United States<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Three studies investigated whether apologies and/or thanks in a favor asking email message increase normality of the message, positive attitude about the message, sender credibility and willingness to give the favor in the U.S. and Korea. Participants as the Sender in study 1 ( $N=521$ ) and as the Receiver in study 2 ( $N=386$ ) completed one of four versions of a questionnaire regarding a prototype of a message for a given situation. Unlike study 1 using a single act of apology or thanks, repeated apologies and thanks were used in the messages of study 2. Study 3 ( $N=807$ ) used seven versions of a questionnaire for a situation different from the first two studies. An apology created some positive responses by Koreans in study 1, repeated apologies led to positive responses by Koreans in study 2, and repeated apologies for Koreans and thanks for Americans created positive responses in study 3. Implications and future research directions were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A speech act refers to a minimal unit of discourse that is transferable from language to language, and apologies and thanks are two extremely frequent and routine speech acts (Coulmas, 1981). Although they are universal across cultures, people's use of and responses to these speech acts are culturally varied (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Sugimoto, 1997; Tanaka, Spencer-Oatley, & Cray, 2008). Even when one knows how to say "I am sorry" and "thank you" in another language, if one does not know when or to whom one should say them, the Sender (S) may seem insincere, impolite, or incongruous.

Two distinct objectives of apologies and thanks are to express regret and gratitude, respectively, but both speech acts are also a gracious way of asking for favors (Coulmas, 1981; Ide, 1998; Lee & Park, 2011; Searle, 1976). In favor asking, if S focuses on the subsequent benefit to himself/herself, thanks will be used, but if indebtedness or imposition is salient, apologies will likely be expressed. Studies show that Koreans include apologies in their messages more than Americans while Americans' messages contained thanks more often than Koreans' (Lee & Park, 2011; Park & Lee, 2012; Park, Lee, & Song, 2005). Because culture determines which speech act is more common and favorable in a community, understanding the use and function of apologies and thanks in favor asking messages across cultures is important for effective intercultural communication.

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By comparing Koreans and Americans, the current study investigates whether favor asking messages with apologies are more normal, positive, credible and effective than messages with thanks or vice versa. For this, apologies and thanks as speech acts will be defined, and their similarities and differences will be addressed.

### 1.1. *Apology and thanks as speech acts*

Apology is a speech act that aims to provide support for a Receiver (R) who is actually or potentially offended by a violation (Olshtain, 1989) and to restore equilibrium between R and S (Leech, 1983). Kotani (2008) summarized the four main functions of apology. One is where people apologize to acknowledge the regretful offense and accept (partial) responsibility for it (Kramer-Moore & Moore, 2003). Admitting a speaker's own failure to meet an implicit or explicit obligation to other people is a genuine apology. This is the most well-known and popular function of apology. This kind of apology has been described by Goffman (1971) as a gesture through which an individual splits himself or herself into two parts: a bad self who commits the offense and a good self who recognizes the offense and implicitly or explicitly promises not to do it again. Goffman explained that apology serves in this way as "remedial work" (p. 113) to repair relationships after injury.

The other three functions are less common than this primary function. One function is where people say, "I am sorry," to express sympathy upon hearing of the other person's misfortune without taking any responsibility (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978). Apologies can also be used to remedy minor interaction offenses. To request repetition, to reject questions or answers, to announce interruptions (Tracy, 2011), or to refuse an offer are all examples of this function. Finally, people also say, "I am sorry," as a ritualistic remedy to simply fulfill expectations of others, as in when two people accidentally bump into each other in a crowded bar. Even when there is no serious offense, people apologize. This is considered to be a routine use of apologies. For instance, an apology may simply initiate a conversation or may be a gracious way of favor asking. This use is contrasted with a "genuine" apology (Fraser, 1981). This type of apology satisfies social needs of etiquette and does not necessarily convey genuine expressions of regret.

Expressions of gratitude such as, "thank you," are directed to some action(s) of a benefactor, as a result of the action or because of a beneficiary's belief that he or she will receive a benefit (Alaoui, 2011; Coulmas, 1981). Like apologies, there are four functions of thanks. First, people say, "thank you," to express their appreciation of a past act performed by R which benefits S or which S believes to have benefited him/her (Searle, 1976). This is the most common function of thanks. Second, thanks are used to signal the conclusion of a conversation, such as "that's all, thank you" (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, p. 168). Thanks can also be used to decline or accept an offer made by R. In the first function, S's "thank you" represents the psychological attitude of S, which is gratitude; however, saying, "thank you," in the second and third functions does not imply any emotional state of S. Finally, people say, "thank you," for the expected benefits they will receive when they make requests or ask favors (Coulmas, 1981; Searle, 1976). S may imply not only his/her appreciation for the future benefit but also pressure for H to comply with the request or to grant the favor.

Searle (1976) classifies apologies and thanks as expressive illocutionary acts because both speech acts express S's psychological state regarding the actions done by S or R. In general, apologies and thanks require responses under this classification, but they are sometimes self-contained discourse units, which do not require any response from R (Coulmas, 1981). This kind of single-unit pattern is frequently used in routine speech acts in various daily interactions where no actual major favor or offense calling for gratitude or apology is involved. Hence, apologies and thanks are used not only as expressions of S's psychological state of gratitude or apology but also as customary speech acts without any serious feelings of gratitude or regret.

When they are used to express genuine states, regret and gratitude are the two key components of apologies and thanks, respectively (Coulmas, 1981). Because it is sometimes difficult to keep regret and gratitude distinct from each other, a common domain is defined where thanks and apologies are both appropriate (Coulmas, 1981; Kumatoridani, 1999). A favor calling for verbal gratitude could be turned into an offense calling for verbal apology or vice versa by a slight shift in the interpretation of the situation (Coulmas, 1981). The objectives of regret and the objectives of gratitude are very similar to each other with regard to indebtedness. Thanks imply the indebtedness of S for his/her own benefit, and apologies indicate S's recognition of indebtedness to R. That is, apologies are performed based on the event S has brought about that was offensive to R, whereas thanks are performed based on the event R has brought or will bring about to please S. Because favor asking engenders perceptions of gratitude and indebtedness (cf. Goei, Roberto, Meyer, & Carlyle, 2007), if S assumes R will bring about the asked for state or event, favor asking is a common situation where either thanks or apologies can be used.

### 1.2. *Favor asking as a request*

Favor asking is a directive which, like the more prototypical request, indicates S's wish or need for R to bring about some desired state or event which would not be provided without being asked for (cf. Becker, 1982; Goldschmidt, 1998). Considering this definition, asking a favor is one type of request. Four features of favor asking differentiate favor asking from other types of requests such as enforcing obligations and giving unsolicited advice (cf. Goldschmidt, 1998; Wilson Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). First, favor asking assumes S is in need of something outside of S's daily routine. Second, favor asking requires for R to be willing and/or able to carry out some activities that require R's time, effort, or other resources. Third, favor asking does not assume that R is strictly obligated to provide the desired event. Fourth, favor asking presumes reciprocity. That is, there is an expectation of some sort of return favor.

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