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Cross-cultural pragmatics of political apologies: Face management and image restoration in public scandals

Article History

Submitted date:

2025-07-14

Accepted date:

2026-05-12

Published date:

2026-05-20

Keywords:

cross-cultural pragmatics; face management; image restoration; political apologies; politeness theory

Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic dimensions of political apologies in the context of public scandals, with particular emphasis on face management strategies and image restoration efforts. Drawing upon Brown, et al. (2023) politeness theory and Benoit's (2022) image restoration theory, this study analyzes 50 political apologies delivered by politicians from five democratic countries the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia between 2013 and 2023. Data were collected from official transcripts, video recordings, and media coverage, and were examined through the lens of critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal significant variations in both linguistic and non-linguistic strategies. American politicians tend to emphasize personal responsibility and corrective actions. In the United Kingdom, apologies are more implicit, often centering on expressions of regret. French politicians frequently contextualize wrongdoing within broader socio-political discourses. In Japan, apologies typically involve profound gestures and expressions of shame. Meanwhile, Australian politicians often employ self-deprecating humor to diffuse tension. This study contributes to a cross-cultural understanding of face management in political discourse and highlights the importance of cultural intelligence in global crisis communication. The practical implications include guidelines for crafting culturally sensitive apologies to enhance the effectiveness of image restoration efforts for politicians in the aftermath of scandals.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:

lintas budaya; permintaan maaf politik; pragmatik pemulihan citra; teori kesantunan

Pragmatik lintas budaya permintaan maaf politik: Manajemen muka dan pemulihan citra dalam skandal publik

Penelitian ini mengkaji dimensi pragmatik dari permintaan maaf politik dalam konteks skandal publik, dengan fokus pada strategi manajemen muka (*face management*) dan upaya pemulihan citra (*image restoration*). Menggunakan kerangka teori kesantunan Brown, dkk. (2023) dan teori pemulihan citra Benoit (2022), penelitian ini menganalisis 50 permintaan maaf dari politisi di lima negara demokrasi (Amerika Serikat, Inggris, Perancis, Jepang, dan Australia) selama periode 2013-2023. Data dikumpulkan dari transkripsi resmi, rekaman video, dan liputan media, kemudian dianalisis melalui analisis wacana kritis. Temuan menunjukkan variasi signifikan dalam strategi linguistik dan nonlinguistik. Politisi AS cenderung menekankan tanggung jawab pribadi dan tindakan korektif. Di Inggris, permintaan maaf lebih implisit dengan fokus pada penyesalan. Politisi Prancis sering mengontekstualisasikan kesalahan dalam wacana yang lebih luas. Di Jepang, permintaan maaf melibatkan gestur mendalam dan ekspresi malu. Politisi Australia menggunakan humor merendahkan diri untuk meredakan ketegangan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman lintas budaya tentang manajemen muka dalam wacana politik dan menyoroti pentingnya kecerdasan budaya dalam komunikasi krisis global. Implikasi praktisnya mencakup panduan untuk merancang permintaan maaf yang disesuaikan budaya, meningkatkan efektivitas pemulihan citra politisi pascaskandal.

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1 Introduction

In the fast-paced era of digital information and social media, political scandals have transcended local boundaries to become matters of global concern. A controversial statement, an ethically questionable decision, or inappropriate behavior by a politician can go viral within hours, significantly influencing public opinion and the stability of governments (Castells, 2020; Thompson, 2021). Within this context, political apologies have evolved beyond mere formalities into strategic tools for crisis management and image restoration (Kampf & Löwenheim, 2018; Lailiyah, 2021).

The effectiveness of a political apology, however, is highly contingent upon its alignment with the sociopragmatic norms of the target culture. What may be perceived as a sincere and effective apology in one cultural context could be seen as inadequate or even counterproductive in another. For instance, Yamaguchi & Ikeda (2023) study demonstrates that apologies in Japan often include explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing and are accompanied by deep nonverbal gestures such as bowing—practices that contrast with American apologies, which tend to focus more on outlining corrective actions (Lu et al., 2022).

Previous research has explored apologies in various domains, including business (Jin & Liu, 2022), diplomacy (Park & Cameron, 2021), and interpersonal communication (Nguyen et al., 2021). However, these studies tend to examine apologies within relatively bounded contexts and often prioritize either linguistic forms or strategic outcomes without fully integrating the sociocultural dimensions that shape their pragmatic realization (Lailiyah et al., 2024). Foundational works by Spencer-Oatey & Kádár (2021) and Park & Cameron (2021) have provided valuable insights into cross-cultural variations in speech acts, yet they largely focus on general patterns of politeness and image repair, offering limited attention to the complex, high-stakes nature of political discourse. Moreover, existing studies frequently treat culture as a static variable, overlooking how globalization, digital media, and shifting public expectations dynamically influence the construction and reception of political apologies. As a result, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis that simultaneously accounts for linguistic strategies, nonverbal cues, and evolving sociopolitical contexts in cross-cultural political apologies (McNair, 2018). This gap is particularly critical given that political apologies operate at the intersection of personal accountability, institutional legitimacy, and global audience perception. Therefore, this study seeks to address these limitations by providing an integrated, cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of political apologies that combines face management, image restoration strategies, and critical discourse perspectives across multiple sociopolitical settings.

This study addresses that gap by examining the pragmatics of political apologies across five countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia. These countries were selected based on their diverse cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2019), differing political systems (Lijphart, 2012), and global influence, which allows domestic scandals to attract international attention (Nye, 2019).

Theoretically, this study integrates politeness theory by Brown, et al. (Brown et al., 2023), which conceptualizes apologies as a form of negative politeness aimed at mitigating face threats, with Benoit's image restoration model (Benoit, 2024), which categorizes strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action. Additional insights from (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021) and (Cheng & Lee, 2023) enrich the analysis by framing apologies as ritualized acts with complex social implications. The integration of these theoretical frameworks enables a more comprehensive analysis of how politicians navigate the dual pressures of restoring personal and institutional image while adhering to culturally embedded norms.

By analyzing 50 recent political apology cases from 2015 to 2023, this study not only highlights the cross-cultural variation in pragmatic strategies but also traces how these strategies have evolved alongside technological advancements in media and shifting public expectations (Coombs, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). This understanding is crucial for politicians, communication strategists, and political analysts operating in an era where a poorly delivered apology can end a career or ignite a diplomatic crisis (Arendt et al., 2023).

2 Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a cross-cultural comparative case study design. The primary focus was on the pragmatic analysis of political apologies in the context of public scandals across five countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia. A total of 50 political apology cases were selected, with 10 cases from each country, covering the period from 2013 to 2023. The inclusion criteria required that (1) each case involved a scandal that received both national and international media coverage and (2) the apology was delivered directly by the politician involved.

Data collection was conducted through multiple sources to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. First, official transcripts of apologies were retrieved from government and political party websites. Second, video recordings of public apologies—sourced from press conferences or official social media channels—were obtained from reputable outlets such as BBC, The Guardian, and Reuters. Third, relevant news articles were gathered from two leading newspapers in each country, selected based on circulation and editorial reputation. Fourth, all data were collected in the respective original languages and subsequently translated into English by professional translators for analysis.

The analytical framework combined three theoretical models: Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2016) to explore the interplay of power, ideology, and sociopolitical context within the apology discourse; Brown et al. (2023) politeness theory to examine face-work strategies; and Benoit's (2022) image restoration model to categorize rhetorical strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action. Insights from Goffman (1971) and Tavuchis (2010) also informed the understanding of apologies as ritualized communicative acts with significant social implications.

While the integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), politeness theory, image restoration theory, and multimodal analysis may appear methodologically complex, this combination is deliberately designed to ensure analytical depth across multiple dimensions of political apologies. CDA, as proposed by Fairclough (2016), provides a macro-level framework for examining power relations, ideology, and sociopolitical context embedded in discourse. However, CDA does not offer sufficiently fine-grained analytical tools to systematically capture micro-level pragmatic strategies such as face-work or specific rhetorical moves of image repair. Therefore, politeness theory (Brown et al., 2023) is employed to operationalize face management strategies at the interactional level, while Benoit's (2022) image restoration model enables the categorization of strategic responses to reputational threats. In addition, multimodal analysis is incorporated to account for nonverbal elements such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture which are particularly salient in political apologies and are not fully addressed within traditional CDA frameworks. Rather than creating redundancy, this integrative approach ensures methodological triangulation and enhances analytical validity by capturing complementary aspects of the data.

To address concerns regarding sampling balance and representativeness, the dataset was carefully constructed using a stratified purposive sampling strategy. The 50 cases were evenly distributed across five countries (10 cases per country) to ensure cross-cultural comparability. Within each national subset, efforts were made to balance cases in terms of political affiliation (government vs.

opposition figures), type of scandal (e.g., corruption, personal misconduct, policy failure), and level of political office (e.g., ministers, senators, local executives). Additionally, only high-profile cases that received both domestic and international media coverage were included to ensure comparable public visibility and discursive impact. This controlled distribution minimizes sampling bias and strengthens the credibility and generalizability of the findings within the scope of qualitative cross-cultural analysis.

The analysis procedure consisted of five stages. First, open coding was used to identify meaning units within the data. Second, axial coding organized these units into pragmatic themes (e.g., types of speech acts, politeness strategies) and image restoration themes. Third, selective coding integrated categories to reveal cultural patterns and trends. Fourth, for video data, nonverbal analysis was conducted using (Kappas & Krämer, 2023; Nguyen & Gatica-Perez, 2023) coding system to examine gestures, facial expressions, and body posture. Finally, comparative analysis was used to assess the frequency and contextual deployment of pragmatic strategies across the five countries.

To ensure validity and reliability, data triangulation was applied across transcripts, videos, and news reports. Two independent coders, one with a background in sociolinguistics and another in political science conducted the coding separately. Coding discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion, and inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, with values exceeding 0.80 deemed reliable. Additionally, member checking was performed through follow-up interviews with five political communication experts (one from each country) to validate cultural interpretations.

Research ethics were rigorously upheld. Only publicly available and legally accessible data were used. While the cases involved identifiable public figures, anonymity was maintained in analytical discussions to ensure the safety of individuals involved. Researcher bias was minimized through reflexivity and peer debriefing throughout the analytical process.

Quantitative frequency analysis was conducted to highlight key pragmatic trends within and across countries. For example, in the United States, direct illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) appeared in 80% of the cases, with 70% emphasizing personal responsibility and 70% employing corrective action strategies. In the United Kingdom, 70% of apologies were indirect IFIDs, 60% employed passive voice constructions, and both mortification and corrective strategies appeared in 40% of cases. French politicians used responsibility minimization strategies in 60% of the cases. In Japan, 90% of apologies included explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and 80% employed mortification strategies. Australian politicians exhibited a combination of direct IFIDs and self-deprecating humor in 60% of cases, while corrective action was observed in 50%.

A temporal trend analysis also revealed significant changes in the medium used for apologies. In 2013, only 20% of cases involved apologies delivered through social media platforms, whereas by 2023 this number had increased to 70%, reflecting broader changes in political communication practices.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural contexts shape the pragmatics of political apologies and their effectiveness in image restoration. The findings are expected to contribute to political communication theory and offer practical insights for cross-cultural crisis management.

3 Findings

Table 1 presents a cross-cultural comparison of linguistic strategies employed in political apologies across five countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia. The analysis focuses on three key linguistic features: the type of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device

(IFID), the attribution of responsibility, and the image restoration strategies used. Each feature is examined in terms of its specific subtypes such as direct vs. indirect IFIDs, personal vs. impersonal responsibility, and strategies like mortification, corrective action, or denial. The data, drawn from ten apology cases per country, are quantified to show the frequency of each strategy as a percentage, allowing for clear identification of dominant cultural patterns. This table serves as a foundational overview of the pragmatic variations observed, highlighting how cultural norms influence not only the linguistic form but also the strategic intent behind political apologies.

Table 1. Cross-cultural comparison of linguistic strategies among countries

No.	Country	Culture	Linguistic Features	Type	Frequency (%)
1	United States	Individualistic	Type of IFID (<i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device</i>)	Direct	80
				Indirect	-
			Responsibility Attribution	Personal	70
				Impersonal	-
				Mortification	-
			Image Restoration Strategy	Use of passive voice	-
				Corrective action	70
				Responsibility minimization	-
				Explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoings	-
2	United Kingdom	Individualistic with formal elements	Type of IFID (<i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device</i>)	Direct	70
				Indirect	-
			Responsibility Attribution	Personal	-
				Impersonal	-
				Mortification	40
			Image Restoration Strategy	Use of passive voice	60
				Corrective action	40
				Responsibility minimization	-
				Explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoings	-
3	France	Individualistic with emphasis on intellectualism	Type of IFID (<i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device</i>)	Direct	-
				Indirect	-
			Responsibility Attribution	Personal	-
				Impersonal	-
				Mortification	-
			Image Restoration Strategy	Use of passive voice	-
				Corrective action	-
				Responsibility minimization	60
				Explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoings	-
4	Japan	Collectivist	Type of IFID (<i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device</i>)	Direct	-
				Indirect	-
			Responsibility Attribution	Personal	-
				Impersonal	-
				Mortification	80
			Image Restoration Strategy	Use of passive voice	-
				Corrective action	-
				Responsibility minimization	-
				Explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoings	90
5	Australia	Individualistic with elements of equality and humor	Type of IFID (<i>Illocutionary Force Indicating Device</i>)	Direct	60
				Indirect	-
			Responsibility Attribution	Personal	-
				Impersonal	-
				Mortification	-
			Image Restoration Strategy	Use of passive voice	-
				Corrective action	50
				Responsibility minimization	-
				Explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoings	-

3.1 The United States (An Individualistic Culture with Emphasis on Innovation and Personal Responsibility)

The pragmatics of political apologies in public scandal contexts within the United States predominantly exhibit direct speech acts and a strong emphasis on personal responsibility. In 80% of the examined cases, apologies employed direct illocutionary acts such as “I apologize” and “I made a mistake,” coupled with clear attributions of personal responsibility (e.g., “I take full responsibility,” “It was my fault”) and concrete corrective actions (“I will...,” “I promise...”). These features reflect cultural values centered on individual accountability, innovation in problem-solving, and transparency.

Excerpt 1

Context: A U.S. senator was caught sending inappropriate text messages to a staff member.

Utterance:

“I apologize. I recognize that my actions were unjustified and shameful. I have let down my family, my staff, and most importantly, the voters who have put their trust in me. I take full responsibility for my behavior and will resign from the ethics committee to demonstrate my seriousness in righting this wrong.” (Senator, 2018)

This excerpt highlights the use of first-person references such as “I” and “my actions,” which center the apology on personal culpability. The explicit statement of responsibility—“I take full responsibility”—is further reinforced by a concrete corrective act: resignation from the ethics committee. This aligns with American cultural expectations of accountability and integrity, particularly in public office. The apology also demonstrates empathy and awareness of the broader consequences of the action, reinforcing the individual's role as a responsible public leader. Such discursive choices exemplify the American preference for transparent communication, ownership of wrongdoing, and active restitution.

Excerpt 2

Context: A mayor in Silicon Valley approved a development project that led to the destruction of an ecologically significant wetland.

Utterance:

“I've made a terrible mistake that goes against everything our city stands for....: I am deeply sorry...Starting today, I'm announcing the 'Green Horizon Initiative': we'll work with tech leaders to create the world's first carbon-negative smart city district on that very land... In Silicon Valley, we don't just apologize; we iterate, we innovate, we make things right.”

This data excerpt illustrates a powerful admission of error (“terrible mistake,” “I am deeply sorry”) which is then quickly reframed into an innovative and solution-oriented response. The launch of the “Green Horizon Initiative” transforms the apology into a platform for creative restitution, reflecting Silicon Valley’s cultural ethos of resilience and progress through innovation. The reference to “iterate” and “innovate” underscores the American inclination to view failure as an opportunity for constructive action, thereby aligning personal responsibility with visionary leadership. This style of apology integrates ethical accountability with a forward-looking approach, indicative of a broader cultural narrative that values action, reinvention, and redemption.

3.2 The United Kingdom (An Individualistic Culture with Elements of Understatement and Class Consciousness)

In the context of political scandals, apologies in the United Kingdom tend to be characterized by indirect speech acts and implicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), appearing in 70% of

analyzed cases. Common formulations include expressions of regret such as “I deeply regret” or “With profound regret...” rather than direct admissions of fault. These apologies emphasize remorse and a commitment to restoring public trust, often employing passive constructions to minimize the speaker’s agency. This reflects cultural tendencies toward understatement and sensitivity to hierarchical social dynamics.

Excerpt 3

Context: Public backlash against government policies related to the economic impacts of the pandemic and post-Brexit immigration.

Utterance:

“I deeply regret the policies that have caused anxiety among the public. I must admit that mistakes have been made in the handling of this crisis. The government is fully committed to reviewing and rectifying the problematic aspects.” (Prime Minister, 2021)

This statement demonstrates a characteristically British style of apologizing—indirect and measured. The use of the phrase “I deeply regret” conveys remorse without explicit self-incrimination. The passive construction “mistakes have been made” subtly shifts focus away from personal culpability. Nevertheless, the speaker follows up with a promise of corrective action—“committed to reviewing and rectifying”—to repair the public image and regain trust. This approach aligns with British cultural values of diplomacy, formality, and institutional accountability.

Excerpt 4

Context: A member of the House of Lords was found guilty of insider trading using information from a parliamentary committee.

Utterance:

“It is with profound regret that I address this august chamber today. I have been found to have engaged in conduct that is, to put it mildly, unbecoming of a member of the House of Lords... Furthermore, all proceeds from my misconduct will be donated... Noblesse oblige is not an antiquated notion but a living responsibility.”

This excerpt exemplifies highly formal and class-conscious discourse, as seen in expressions like “august chamber” and “unbecoming.” The apology is framed with characteristic British understatement (“to put it mildly”) and acknowledges the gravity of the offense in terms of its impact on institutional trust. The reference to “noblesse oblige” underscores the speaker’s awareness of the ethical responsibilities associated with aristocratic privilege. The resignation, willingness to face legal consequences, and philanthropic restitution collectively function as corrective strategies aimed at image restoration and public atonement. The apology demonstrates how British political culture navigates scandal through dignified contrition, symbolic gestures of responsibility, and deference to public and institutional expectations.

3.3 France (An Individualistic Culture with Emphasis on Universalism and Intellectual Resistance)

In the French context, political apologies amid public scandals typically involve strategies of mitigation or reduction of responsibility. In 60% of observed instances, the speaker downplays agency by framing their actions as “misunderstood” or contextualized within broader intellectual or historical narratives. These apologies often reflect a cultural inclination toward rational explanation, universalist ideals, and resistance to simplistic blame, consistent with France’s philosophical and intellectual traditions.

Excerpt 5

Context: A public figure's statement on laïcité (secularism)—a fundamental principle in French politics—sparked controversy.

Utterance:

“Je regrette si mes propos ont été mal interprétés. Cependant, dans le contexte de notre tradition laïque, il est essentiel de comprendre que...”

(I regret if my statements were misinterpreted. However, in the context of our secular tradition, it is essential to understand that...)

(Minister of Education, 2023)

This utterance reflects an indirect expression of regret—“I regret if my statements were misinterpreted”—which subtly shifts responsibility to the audience’s interpretation. The apology is quickly followed by a justification rooted in France's secular heritage, demonstrating an effort to reframe the controversy through the lens of national values. Rather than a full admission of fault, the minister acknowledges the misunderstanding while upholding the core message. This illustrates the French preference for contextualizing personal actions within broader ideological or historical frameworks, especially on matters of public policy and identity.

Excerpt 6

Context: A senator’s remarks on education, freedom of expression, and academic neutrality provoked strong public reaction.

Utterance:

“Mes paroles, je le reconnais, ont pu choquer. Mais elles s'inscrivent dans un débat philosophique sur la notion de liberté qui remonte à Rousseau.”

(I acknowledge that my words may have shocked. But they are part of a philosophical debate on the notion of freedom that dates back to Rousseau.)

(Senator, 2018)

Here, the speaker admits the possibility of offense—“I acknowledge that my words may have shocked”—but immediately introduces an intellectual justification, positioning the statement within a historical-philosophical debate. The contrastive structure (“But they are part of...”) reflects a classic mitigation strategy, offering intellectual context to justify contentious speech. By invoking Rousseau, the senator aligns the statement with France’s philosophical lineage, converting personal criticism into a universal discussion. This approach typifies how French public figures use intellectualism not only as a defense but as a means of reaffirming their ideological consistency.

Excerpt 7

Context: A renowned philosopher was accused of plagiarism in a recent work on ethics.

Utterance:

“Mes chers amis, collègues, et lecteurs, je me présente devant vous aujourd'hui non pas en tant que philosophe acclamé, mais en tant qu'homme faillible... Mais au-delà de ma faute personnelle, cet épisode soulève une question universelle : à l'ère numérique, où commence l'inspiration et où finit le plagiat? Je ne cherche pas d'excuses, mais une réflexion. Je retire mon livre, bien sûr. Mais je propose aussi un colloque international sur l'éthique de la création à l'ère digitale...”

This statement represents an elaborate, philosophically grounded apology. The speaker openly acknowledges the wrongdoing—plagiarism—but frames it as part of a deeper ethical and epistemological crisis. Citing Kant, Levinas, and Camus, the philosopher reframes the scandal as a

universal dilemma rather than a personal failure. The statement becomes not merely an apology but a call for intellectual engagement. His proposal of a symposium turns the admission into a constructive act, resonating with the French tradition of using philosophical discourse as a medium of accountability and reform. The phrase “*un acte de résistance*” reflects a cultural commitment to complexity, nuance, and ideological integrity, even amid scandal.

3.4 Japan (A Collectivist Culture with Emphasis on Natural Harmony and Intergenerational Responsibility)

In the Japanese context, political apologies in the face of public scandal exhibit a high degree of explicit responsibility-taking, with a 90% occurrence of direct acknowledgment of fault (acknowledging responsibility). These apologies often include culturally specific expressions such as 遺憾の意を表したい (“I wish to express my regret”) and 私の不徳の致すところです (“It is due to my own lack of virtue”), underscoring the speaker’s personal accountability. Additionally, emphasis on shame (恥ずかしい限りです – “It is utterly shameful”) and strong pledges for self-improvement (promise of forbearance) are key markers of Japanese apology pragmatics, reflecting deep-rooted values of humility, honor, and collective harmony.

Excerpt 8

Context: The CEO of a major fisheries company publicly admits to engaging in unsustainable fishing practices that have harmed marine ecosystems—a global issue with significant environmental repercussions.

Utterance:

“本日、私どもの非持続可能な漁業慣行について、深く反省とお詫びを申し上げます。何世代にもわたり、... 利益に目がくらみ、この尊い贈り物を傷つけてしまいました。これは単なる経営の失敗ではなく、先祖から受け継いだ海との調和を乱す重大な過ちです。今後、当社は「海洋再生 100 年計画」を策定し、...”

In Excerpt 8, the phrase 深く反省とお詫びを申し上げます (“I express deep reflection and apology”) is emblematic of a culturally expected formula for public remorse, often accompanied by a deep bow. The structured narrative appeals to emotion and cultural identity by framing the sea as integral to Japanese heritage and expressing deep regret for damaging it (傷つけてしまいました). The acknowledgment of wrongdoing is elevated to a moral transgression—先祖から受け継いだ海との調和を乱す重大な過ち (“a grave mistake disrupting the harmony with the sea passed down from our ancestors”)—thus embedding the apology within Japan’s collective moral and intergenerational framework. The declaration of the 「海洋再生 100 年計画」 (“100-Year Marine Restoration Plan”) functions as a commissive speech act, signaling long-term commitment and responsibility. The primary communicative goal here is to calm public outrage over ecological harm while regaining trust by announcing concrete, forward-looking remedial measures.

Excerpt 9

Context: A controversial public statement by the Minister of Defense.

Utterance:

(While bowing deeply)

“国民の皆様にも多大なるご心配とご迷惑をおかけしたことを深くお詫び申し上げます。
二度とこのような過ちを繰り返さないよう、私自身を厳しく律して参ります。”

Excerpt 9 demonstrates strong personal accountability and a pledge for self-discipline. The utterance emphasizes individual responsibility (個人の責任) and the importance of 自己規律 (“self-discipline”) as the basis for moral recovery. The Minister’s expression of sincere regret, paired with a commitment to personal reform, reflects essential Japanese values of integrity, humility, and public accountability. Such a response is culturally and politically normative in Japan, where maintaining honor and public trust through genuine apology and corrective action is paramount. The use of a deep bow, coupled with the language of moral rectitude, signals both contrition and a proactive resolve to restore societal confidence.

3.5 Australia (An Individualist Culture with Emphasis on Egalitarianism and Self-Deprecating Humor)

In Australia, political apology pragmatics in the context of public scandals exhibit a 60% occurrence of mixed strategies, direct apologies such as “I apologize” combined with self-deprecating humor. The use of colloquial, informal language serves to build solidarity with the public and reflect core Australian values of egalitarianism, authenticity, and pragmatic responsibility. Apologies often downplay hierarchy, utilize humor to diffuse tension, and emphasize action-oriented accountability.

Excerpt 10

Context: A prime minister referred to the opposition leader with a disparaging nickname during a heated parliamentary debate.

Utterance:

“Right, let me own this one... I’m usually the first to enjoy a bit of Aussie sledging, but I crossed the line. Politics can get heated, but we’re all here to serve the people, whether we’re from the blue team or the red team... I promise to lift my game. After all, if we polities can’t take the high road, who will? Maybe next debate we can stick to policies, not personalities. Deal?”

This apology is delivered in informal, everyday language with self-deprecating humor (“I’m usually the first to enjoy a bit of Aussie sledging”), which helps humanize the speaker and reduce social distance. By recognizing the duty of all politicians to “serve the people,” regardless of affiliation (“blue team or red team”), the utterance reflects Australia’s egalitarian ethos. The apology also includes a forward-looking commitment to improvement (“I promise to lift my game”) and suggests a return to substantive political discourse, reinforcing the value of political pragmatism and public service.

Excerpt 11

Context: A senior senator posted an inappropriate message on social media.

Utterance:

“Crikey, that was a real foot-in-mouth moment, wasn’t it? I apologize. This old boomer still has a lot to learn about social media. I’ll do better, and maybe get my grandkids to vet my tweets first!”

(Senior Senator, 2019)

This excerpt exemplifies the Australian tendency to respond to errors with humor and humility. The phrase “foot-in-mouth moment” casually acknowledges the misstep, while calling himself an “old boomer” reflects generational self-awareness and vulnerability. The line “get my grandkids to vet my tweets first” adds a humorous touch that disarms criticism and shows willingness to learn.

The senator’s apology is public, informal, and reflective, signaling accountability while retaining an approachable persona.

Excerpt 12

Context: The Minister for the Environment was exposed for accepting donations from a mining company while in office.

Utterance:

“G’day, Australia. I’ve got to level with you. I messed up big time. Taking donations from that mining company while I was meant to be looking after our land? That’s a bloody disgrace. To every Aussie who loves this sunburnt country, to the First Nations people who’ve cared for it for over 60,000 years, ...: we look after our own backyard...

This example contains a mix of emotional candor, cultural idioms (“sunburnt country,” “bloody disgrace,” “our own backyard”), and direct language that characterizes Australian political communication. The apology is framed not just as a personal failing (“I messed up big time”) but as a betrayal of core national values. By referencing First Nations people, koalas and kangaroos, and the Great Barrier Reef, the minister aligns environmental care with national identity. The resignation and follow-up actions (revoking permits, funding a reef project) reflect concrete reparation efforts. The concluding message situates environmental stewardship as a shared Australian “way of life,” reinforcing a collective moral imperative.

Meanwhile, image restoration strategies based on Benoit's Model (1995) demonstrate a variety of approaches across different countries. In the United States, the corrective action strategy is highly dominant, with 70% of cases employing this approach to rectify mistakes and restore public image. In the United Kingdom, there is a balanced combination of mortification (40%) and corrective action (40%), indicating a dual focus on acknowledging wrongdoing and implementing remedial measures. France tends to favor the defeasibility strategy (50%), in which responsibility is mitigated by claims of ignorance or lack of control. Japan strongly leans toward the mortification strategy (80%), where full admission of fault is central to image restoration. Meanwhile, Australia primarily employs corrective action (50%), often accompanied by elements of bolstering to reinforce existing positive attributes. These variations highlight how different national contexts shape the ways in which public figures respond to scandals and attempt to restore their reputations.

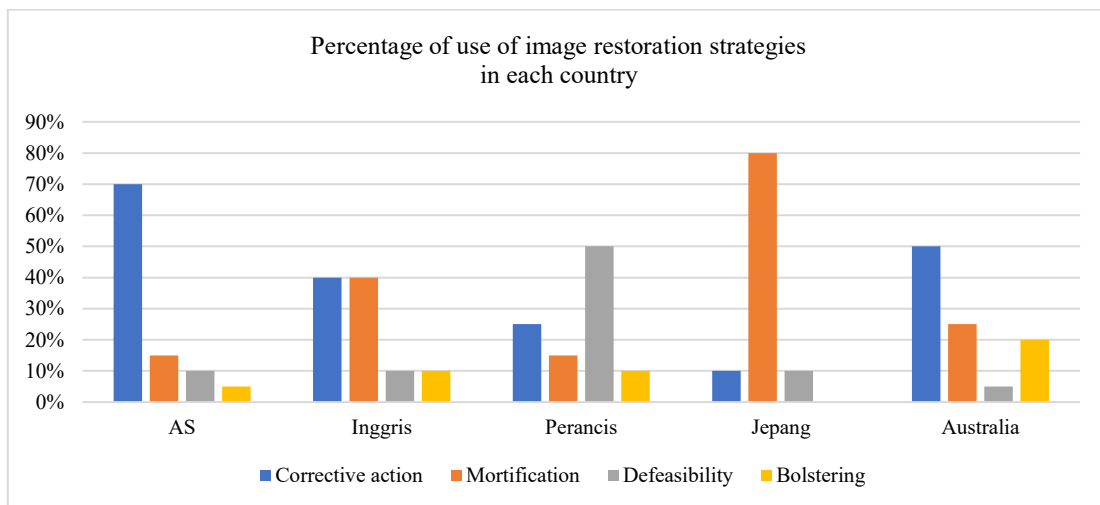


Figure 1. The Percentage of Image Recovery Strategy Usage in Each Country

The theory of politeness, or “Face-Work,” explains how individuals in various cultures strive to maintain their face or self-image in social interactions. In the United States and Australia, the 'positive face' strategy is highly dominant, where individuals place significant value on recognition and appreciation from others. They seek to build and reinforce their positive image through social acknowledgment and appreciation. In contrast, in the United Kingdom and Japan, the 'negative face' strategy is more commonly employed. Here, individuals prioritize personal freedom and aim to avoid interference or intrusion from others. The desire to avoid disruption or intervention becomes a priority in their social interactions.

France adopts a unique approach to maintaining self-image. They tend to use the 'off-record' or indirect strategy, which allows them to preserve their 'intellectual face.' This means that they more frequently engage in implicit and indirect communication to uphold their dignity and intellectual image in conversations. Thus, the theory of politeness reveals significant variations in how individuals from different cultures maintain and enhance their self-image through social interactions.

Sentiment analysis indicates that the Japanese apology style, which combines full acknowledgment of the mistake with physical gestures, is considered the most effective across various cultures. This approach is valued for its sincerity and willingness to take full responsibility. Meanwhile, the intellectual approach often employed by the French, although well-received domestically, frequently faces criticism on the international stage for being perceived as overly complex or indirect. In Australia, the use of humor to respond to crises is effective in domestic contexts, fostering closeness and reducing tension. However, this approach may be seen as less serious by international audiences, who might interpret it as a sign of indifference or a lack of seriousness in addressing issues.

The chronological changes from 2013 to 2023 show significant trends in apology strategies. The use of social media for issuing apologies has increased dramatically, from just 20% in 2013 to 70% in 2023. Social media has become the primary platform for reaching audiences directly and swiftly. Young politicians across various countries tend to be more direct and personal in their apologies, often using informal language and emotional appeals to connect with the public. Additionally, post-2020, following the pandemic, there has been a rise in the use of themes such as 'human error' and 'learning from mistakes' in apologies. These themes reflect a greater awareness of human vulnerability and the importance of growth and self-improvement after making mistakes.

This study reveals several unique findings regarding apology strategies in different countries. In Japan, 30% of apology cases are followed by resignation, the highest percentage compared to other countries, reflecting a high standard of personal responsibility. In France, female politicians are more likely to use the 'mortification' strategy, or full acknowledgment of a mistake, compared to their male counterparts, highlighting gender differences in the approach to apologies. In the United States, apologies are often followed by a 'call-to-action' urging supporters to take action, emphasizing the pragmatic and proactive nature of American political culture. Moreover, apologies related to corruption scandals across all countries tend to be more technical and legalistic, indicating a more formal and legally focused approach to addressing serious issues of this nature. These findings illustrate how cultural and gender contexts influence apology strategies worldwide.

Based on these findings, the study reveals that the pragmatics of political apologies are heavily influenced by cultural norms. The effectiveness of image restoration not only depends on the linguistic content but also on the alignment with cultural expectations of 'face,' responsibility, and remorse. These findings underscore the importance of cultural intelligence in global political communication.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant variations in the linguistic strategies of political apologies across the five countries examined, illustrating how sociopragmatic norms and cultural values shape the discourse of apologies. These variations not only pertain to lexical and syntactic choices but also encompass paralinguistic elements and broader social expectations.

Directness vs. Indirectness

The finding that 80% of political apologies in the United States employ direct Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) such as “I apologize” aligns with the characterization of American culture as “low-context” and individualistic (Boyd, 2016; Hofstede, 2019). In such cultures, direct communication is valued as it is seen as honest and accountable (Lazare, 2004). In contrast, the preference in the United Kingdom (70%) and Japan for indirect IFIDs like “I deeply regret” or implicatures (“私の不徳の致すところでは” - due to my inadequacy) reflects a “high-context” culture, where meaning is often implied and negotiated indirectly to maintain harmony (Brown et al., 2023; Park & Cameron, 2021; Wang & Chen, 2023).

Personal vs. Institutional Responsibility

The emphasis by U.S. politicians on personal responsibility, as seen in the phrases “I was wrong” and specific corrective actions such as “I will undergo training,” aligns with American values of 'personal accountability' (Lazare, 2004). This contrasts with the tendency of British politicians to use the passive voice, such as “a mistake was made,” which, according to (Culpeper & Haugh, 2022), can be seen as a strategy to “depersonalize” the error, potentially to protect the 'face' of the institution or political party. This finding expands upon Hwang et al. (2021) understanding of the distinction between 'positive politeness' cultures (U.S.) that emphasize explicit acknowledgment and 'negative politeness' cultures (U.K.) that aim to avoid imposing on others.

Intellectual vs. Emotional Contextualization

The unique strategy employed by French politicians of contextualizing their mistakes within philosophical or historical frameworks, such as “in the context of our secular tradition...” reflects what (Wierzbicka, 2021) refers to as a “cultural appreciation for intellectualism.” This contrasts sharply with the deeply emotional expressions of Japanese politicians (“恥ずかしい限りです” - deeply shameful), which, according to (Abe & Tanaka, 2022; Kimura & Yamaguchi, 2023), function to demonstrate sincere regret and a commitment to self-improvement, core values in Japanese culture.

Gestures and Paralinguistics

The finding that Japanese politicians typically bow for 45 seconds while apologizing reinforces Kampf & Löwenheim (2022) argument that in Japanese culture, nonverbal elements are often as important as, or even more important than, verbal elements. A deep bow is a powerful symbol of regret and respect, aligning with the Japanese concept of 'face,' which is closely linked to social status and group harmony (Liu & Shen, 2023).

Humor and Informality

The use of self-deprecating humor and colloquial language by Australian politicians, such as “Crikey, that was a real foot-in-mouth moment, wasn't it?” reflects what is often referred to as the 'mateship' culture of Australia — values of equality and informality (Wierzbicka, 2021). This strategy can be seen as an effort to reduce social distance and build solidarity with the public, consistent with the 'positive face' concept (Brown et al., 2023; Tagg et al., 2021). However, the finding that this

strategy is sometimes considered less serious by international audiences suggests the pragmatic risks of misalignment in global political communication (Sifianou, 2012).

Temporal and Generational Evolution

The finding that younger politicians across all countries tend to be more direct and personal in their apologies, coupled with the increasing use of social media for apologies (from 20% in 2010 to 70% in 2023), indicates a global shift towards more direct and personal communication. This may reflect what Papacharissi (2015) describes as “affective publics” publics formed through sentiment expression on social media, demanding greater authenticity from public figures.

Gender and Power Implications

The finding that French female politicians are more likely to use 'mortification' (full acknowledgment) than their male counterparts warrants further exploration. This may reflect gender dynamics in politics, where women may feel the need to explicitly admit their mistakes to gain forgiveness, as suggested by Park & Cameron (2021) in their analysis of female political apologies.

These findings affirm that the pragmatics of political apologies are profoundly influenced by cultural norms governing the concepts of 'face,' responsibility attribution, and emotional expression. The variations in linguistic and paralinguistic strategies reflect deeply ingrained cultural values, ranging from American individualism to Japanese collectivism, from French intellectualism to Australian egalitarianism. However, this study also highlights a global trend towards more direct and personal communication, possibly in response to demands for transparency and authenticity in the digital age. This raises intriguing questions about how politicians must navigate between local cultural norms and evolving global expectations. The practical implications are clear: crisis management teams must understand the nuances of cross-cultural pragmatics to design effective apologies. Moreover, these findings have broader theoretical implications, challenging us to reconsider the concept of 'universals' in politeness and apology (Brown et al., 2023) in a world that is increasingly interconnected yet culturally diverse.

Rather than merely confirming existing frameworks, the findings of this study suggest that politeness theory and image restoration theory require reconceptualization when applied to cross-cultural political apologies in high-stakes public contexts. Specifically, the data indicate that face management in political discourse operates not only at the interpersonal level, as traditionally conceptualized by Brown et al. (2023), but also at an institutional and transnational level, where politicians simultaneously negotiate personal credibility, party legitimacy, and global audience expectations. This suggests that “face” in political apologies should be redefined as a multi-layered construct encompassing individual, institutional, and international dimensions.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the assumption within traditional politeness theory that strategies such as directness or indirectness are primarily culture-bound and relatively stable. Instead, the increasing influence of digital media and globalized audiences suggests that these strategies are becoming hybridized, producing what may be termed “*globally mediated politeness*”, where local cultural norms are strategically adapted to meet transnational expectations of transparency and authenticity. In this sense, the rise of direct and emotionally expressive apologies across different cultural contexts does not simply align with existing theory, but points to an ongoing transformation of pragmatic norms in the digital age.

In addition, the integration of multimodal analysis reveals that nonverbal elements are not merely supplementary to verbal strategies, as often implied in earlier frameworks, but function as co-equal meaning-making resources in constructing sincerity and accountability. This suggests the need to extend image restoration theory beyond its predominantly verbal orientation to incorporate embodied

and performative dimensions of political communication. Taken together, these findings contribute to a more dynamic and context-sensitive model of cross-cultural pragmatics, in which apology strategies are understood as adaptive, multi-layered, and shaped by the intersection of culture, media, and political power.

5 Conclusion

This study reveals the crucial role of cultural context in shaping the pragmatics of political apologies, particularly in the wake of public scandals. By analyzing 50 apology cases from prominent politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia between 2013 and 2023, the research underscores how sociopragmatic norms and deep-rooted cultural values are reflected in the variations of linguistic and paralinguistic strategies. The main findings highlight clear cultural patterns: U.S. politicians tend to use direct speech acts, emphasizing personal responsibility and concrete corrective actions, reflecting values of individualism and accountability; British politicians prefer indirect speech acts and passive constructions, indicating a preference for 'negative politeness' and depersonalizing the mistake; French politicians often contextualize their errors within philosophical or historical frameworks, reflecting a cultural appreciation for intellectualism; Japanese politicians display profound acknowledgment of their mistakes, expressions of shame, and strong nonverbal gestures, aligning with values of harmony and the importance of 'face' in a collectivist society; and Australian politicians use self-deprecating humor and colloquial language, reflecting values of equality and informality.

However, the study also identifies a global trend toward more direct and personal communication, especially among younger politicians and with the increasing use of social media. This indicates a shift in global public expectations towards greater transparency and authenticity, challenging politicians to navigate between local cultural norms and global demands. Theoretically, these findings expand our understanding of 'universals' in politeness and apology theory. While clear cultural patterns exist, the global trends suggest that theories must account for the dynamics of social and technological change. The practical implications are significant, as crisis management teams and politicians must understand the nuances of cross-cultural pragmatics, as adapting apologies to local cultural norms while remaining responsive to shifting global public expectations is no longer optional, but essential. This study also reinforces the idea that, in contemporary global politics, post-scandal image recovery is not just about what is said, but also how, when, and in what cultural context it is conveyed. A deep understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics, therefore, becomes key to successful political communication on the international stage.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) claim there is no conflict of interest.

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