

# Gender Variation in Cameroon French Apologies

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**Abstract:** This study examines the influence of gender on apology realization by Cameroon French speakers. It is based on data provided by 40 University students (20 males and 20 females) in an apology-provoking situation involving friends. The examples were analyzed according to the types of direct and indirect apology strategies as well as types of external modifiers found. The results reveal differences across both groups regarding choices and realizations of direct and indirect apologies as well as types of external modifiers used. The paper is a call for more studies on gender pragmatic variation in Cameroon French.

**Keywords:** apologies, peer equality, gender variation, Cameroon French, variational and postcolonial pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Many studies have analyzed apology strategies in and across different languages and cultures and from many different perspectives, using cross-cultural, interlanguage, variational pragmatic approaches. There are still very few studies on apologies in French (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998, 2005), and even fewer in other varieties of French (cf. Schölmberger, 2008; Mulo Farenkia, 2018, 2022). The present study contributes to this literature on apology in French by providing a corpus-based examination of apologies to friends made by Cameroon French speakers. It has been established that language use and rapport management can be analyzed with respect to macro-social factors such as age, gender, region, ethnic identity, etc. and sociocultural constraints. Based on this premise, the present study seeks to investigate gender differences in apologizing in Cameroon French and it is a continuation of our research on gender pragmatic variation (cf. Mulo Farenkia, 2023). The following research questions will be addressed:

- 1) How do male and female Cameroon French speakers apologize to their friends?
- 2) What type of differences are attested in the use of apology strategies by both groups?
- 3) What aspect of the apology act does gender pragmatic variation<sup>1</sup> affect?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of the study, with a brief definition of apologies from the perspectives of speech act and politeness theories. The section also offers a brief literature review and outlines variational pragmatics and postcolonial pragmatics, the two frameworks used in this study. Section 3 presents the data. Section 4 discusses the findings of the study and section 5 summarizes the main outcomes of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the variable “gender variation” or “gender-based difference” is used to examine the production of apologies by female and male respondents in a specific situation presented in the Discourse Completion Task questionnaire.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section provides a definition of the apology communicative act in relation to face-work and gender variation (2.1) and variational and postcolonial pragmatics (2.2), the frameworks within which this study is being conducted.

### 2.1 Apology, politeness, and gender

An apology can be defined as an expressive speech act by which a speaker responds to a complaint and attempts to remedy an offense for which s/he takes responsibility, in order to restore social equilibrium between him/her and the addressee, i.e. the apology recipient (cf. Holmes, 1995: 155). From this point of view, an apology is considered as an aspect of “remedial work”. According to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, apologies can be described as face-threatening and/or face-flattering acts. An apology is a face-threatening act for the speaker since it could be perceived as a self-demeaning act: the person who apologizes is admitting, directly or indirectly, responsibility for the offence (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68). On the other hand, the apologizer indirectly displays humility and the endeavour to “set things right” with the goal of restoring a strained relationship with the offended person (social harmony) (cf. Trosborg 1995:373). In other words: apologies pose a threat to the transgressor’s face, they can undermine his or her face/image of by projecting him or her as a person who failed to conform to a social norm. Apologies can also restore the image of the transgressor. These opposing perceptions of the act of apologizing also influence the way in which apologies are realized and negotiated in verbal exchanges.

Many studies have shown that the communicative act of apologizing may be performed by means of a single speech act or a combination of several speech acts, resulting into a speech act set, an apology event or a communicative act (Trosborg, 1995). In an apology event, for instance, the first apology act constitutes the core unit of the communicative act and the other speech acts function as secondary units or modification devices. According to Obeng Gyasi (1999:717), the role of the secondary units is to reinforce the central unit of apology and to mitigate the face-threat associated with the core apology. The communicative act of apologizing can also be made up of the apology acts proper and different types of speech acts with various pragmatic functions. Additional acts are used in apology events because “despite the fact that apologies could provide costs and benefits to addressees or speakers, it is still possible to reinforce an apology if the offense is considerable, and more especially if apologizers want to show that offenses were not committed intentionally, or that they are truly sorry for their actions” (Gyasi Obeng, 1999:717).

Apologies have been extensively examined, using cross-cultural pragmatics (cf. Grossmann and Krzyżanowska, 2018), interlanguage pragmatics (cf. Trosborg, 1995), and variational pragmatics, corpus pragmatics (cf. Degenhardt and Bernaisch, 2022) perspectives. There are many studies on apologies in individual languages (cf. Rieger (2017: 558 – 562) for an overview of studies on apologies in and across languages and cultures). Overall the research on apologies has demonstrated that multiple factors impact on the choice of apology realization patterns. Obeng (1999: 731), for instance, stressed the fact “that the use of the various apology strategies (...) is to some extent related to social distance and social power between the apologizer and the apology recipient as well as to the severity of the offense.” Ogiermann (2009, 261–262) believes that “the potential of a particular strategy to serve as an apology is culture-specific.” Moreover, empirical research has identified gender differences in the realization of apologies (e.g. Holmes, 1989, 1995, Gonzales et. al, 1990, Ogiermann, 2007, 2008<sup>2</sup>; An

<sup>2</sup> Ogiermann (2008: 262-263) offers a review of studies on gender and apologies.

et al, 2022)<sup>3</sup>. With regard to this last point, i.e. gender differences in apologizing, the present study examines apologies made by Cameroon French speakers in a situation involving friends, with focus on the gender of the transgressor. It is important to recall that studies on apologies in French largely focus on strategies used by speakers of French varieties spoken in European or North American contexts (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1988, Schoelmlberger, 2008). Studies on apology strategies in African varieties of French are still lacking. The present study, which is conducted within the framework of variational pragmatics and postcolonial pragmatics, is an attempt to fill this research gap.

## 2.2 Variational and postcolonial pragmatics

Variational pragmatics was developed by Schneider and Barron (2008) as a discipline at the interface of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Examining intralingual pragmatic variation according to macro-social factors, such as region, gender, social class, age and ethnic identity (Barron and Schneider 2009; Schneider and Barron 2008), research in variational pragmatics highlights pragmatic variation on the formal (linguistic forms), the actional (speech act realizations), the interactive (sequential patterns), the topic (content), and the organizational (turn-taking) levels (cf. Barron 2015, Schneider and Barron 2008; Schneider 2010). In the current study, the focus is on the actional level, namely the realization of apologies by Cameroon French speakers and on the influence of gender in the use of apology strategies.

While stressing the impact of gender on the use of apology strategies, this study also factors in the postcolonial context in which the act of apologizing takes place. This postcolonial pragmatic approach was conceptualized by Anchimbe and Janney (2011), as a sub-field of pragmatics that focuses on the “experiences, interactions, challenges, and communicative strategies of members of postcolonial communities using ex-colonial languages, non-colonial languages, pidgins and creoles in their activities” (Anchimbe 2011: 421–422).<sup>4</sup> The analysis of pragmatic aspects of a postcolonial variety of French seeks to showcase the influence of indigenous cultural patterns and aspects of the multilingual setting on the pragmatic features of this French variety. In Cameroon, French is an official language alongside English. These official languages are permanently in contact with more than 250 native languages so that the setting is clearly multilingual. With regard to the cultural context, Cameroonian society has been described as collectivist in nature. In the present study for instance, the types of apologies and their linguistic manifestations, the types of preparatory acts (attention getters and address terms) in apology utterances, etc. are, to some extent, reflections of norms governing verbal exchanges in Cameroon.

## 3. Methodology

The data used for this study were obtained through an elicitation test. More precisely, a Free Discourse Completion (FDCT) task questionnaire was administered to 40 students (20 males and 20 females) at the University of Maroua in Cameroon. Of the 20 male participants 19 (95%) were in the age range between 17 and 23 years and only one (5%) was older than 23 years. Of the 20 female participants, 17 (85%) were in the age range between 17 and 23 years and three (15%) were older than 23 years. The questionnaire comprised several situations in which the participants had to construct dialogues in which they were expected to realize different speech acts. Some of the tasks were designed to elicit dialogs in which complaints and apologies were realized in symmetrical interactions (with friends, strangers,

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<sup>3</sup> An et al. (2022: 32) offer a review of studies on gender differences in language use.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the scope, aims, and goals of postcolonial pragmatics, see Janney (2009), Anchimbe and Janney (2011).

acquaintances), and asymmetrical interactions (with superiors). One of these situations is the focus of the present study. The scenario was described as follows:

Situation : *Vous arrivez chez votre ami(e) et en enlevant votre manteau vous renversez un de ses vases qui se brise en plusieurs morceaux. Construisez un court échange entre votre ami(e) et vous.* [You arrive at your friend's place and you accidentally break one of your friend's vases while taking off your jacket. Construct a short exchange between your friend and you].

In this situation the transgressor and the offended are equal in social status and they know each other very well: the relationship is close.

The participants produced 40 short dialogs (20 by the males and 20 by the females), consisting of two or four turns each. These examples were analyzed as follows. First, the dialogs were examined with respect to the number of constitutive turns used, the types of turn organization, the type of speech act realized (i.e. complaints and apologies) and the type of sequential organization. The adjacency pair "complaint – response to complaint" is built as follows: the complaint represents the first turn of the dialog and the response (an apology in many cases), is the second turn. The reaction to the complaint response (apology or another type of speech act) is the third turn of the dialog, and it is followed by the fourth turn which is another reaction by the person who committed the offence. From the point of view of rapport management, the dialogs represent three types of complaint – complaint response exchanges. The first group is that of convivial exchanges.

### *Convivial exchanges*

In convivial or positive exchanges, there is compliance with the expectations of the complainer or apologizer: these responses (e.g. apologies to complaints, apology acceptances) were considered as positive because they indicated the speaker's willingness to save face and preserve the relationship. Example (1) is an illustration of a convivial exchange: the transgressor politely responds to the complaint, with a compound apology (line 2) and the complainer accepts the apology by expressing empathy and downplaying the offence (line 3). The transgressor finally expresses their gratitude for A's understanding (line 4).

#### Example 1

1A : *Oh lala! Regarde ce que tu as fait.*

'Oh lala! Look what you have done.'

2 B : *Ouais! Excuse-moi! Je l'ai fait par inadvertance.*

'Oh dear, excuse me. I did it by accident.'

3 A : *De toute façon, ce sont les choses qui arrivent. C'est pas grave.*

'Anyways, these things happen. It's not serious.'

4 B : *Merci pour ta bonne compréhension.* [FR-5]<sup>5</sup>

'Thank you for your understanding.'

<sup>5</sup> In the examples used, A stands the complainer and B stands for the apologizer. The turn numbers are indicated accordingly. The examples are also coded according to gender of the respondents. This example was produced by a female respondent (FR). Responses by male participants are coded as (MR).

### ***Confrontational exchanges***

In such exchanges the offender can reject the complaint, by downplaying the offence committed, reprimanding the complainer, or by indicating unwillingness to accept the blame. An illustration is given in example (2). The reprimand is expressed in line 4 in reaction to A's warning in line 3.

#### Example 2

- 1 A: *Mince! T'es malade ou quoi?*  
'Hey! Are you sick or what?'
- 2 B: *Désolé ma chérie j'ai pas fait attention.*  
'Sorry, my dear. I didn't pay attention.'
- 3 A: *Rassure-toi tu auras affaire à ma mère.*  
'Know that you will have a query with my mother.'
- 4 B: *Va là-bas dis-donc, c'est un vase en or ou quoi?* [FR-7]  
'Get out of here man, is it a golden vase or what?'

### ***Combinations of confrontational and convivial moves***

Some respondents provided exchanges with a mixture of confrontational and convivial moves, in which there is potential for face loss and continuation of confrontation, with the result that it puts a pressure on the interlocutors to choose additional speech moves that would help to restore the strained relationship as in (3).

#### Example 3

- 1 A: *Hée la fille ci chaque temps ?*  
'Hée this girl, every time [Do you have to do this every time?]
- 2 B: *Toi aussi n'exagère pas c'est un vieux truc.*  
'Don't exaggerate too, it is an old thing.'
- 3 A: *C'était le vase de ma mère, je fais comment alors?*  
It was my mom's vase, what do I do now?'
- 4 B: *Désolée coucou je vais alors remplacer ça.* [FR-1]  
'Sorry my dear I will replace it, if that's the case.'

The examples were also examined according to the types of apology utterances (in terms of simple or complex apologies) used, the types of apology strategies, the types of external modifications performed and the impact of the transgressor's gender on the choice of these strategies. To address these questions, we considered each turn of the dialogs produced as realizations of either complaints (first and third turns) or apologies (second and fourth turn). The apology data were analyzed based on the schemes used in previous studies (cf. Olshtain and Cohen, 1983, Blum-Kulka et. al, 1989, Trosborg 1995, Marquez Reiter, 2000), in which apologies are examined with respect to the level of directness of an apology act, the number of moves employed in an apology utterance and the types of additional moves used to modify an apology act. These studies show that when a speaker opts to apologize for an offense they committed, they may select one of the following strategies or combine many of them. These are: (a) Direct apology strategies (*expression of regret, offer of apology, request for forgiveness*) (see section 4.3.1); (b) Indirect apology strategies (*Acknowledgement of responsibility, Explanation or account, Offer of repair, Promise of forbearance*) (see section 4.3.2). The data also show that some participants choose to use additional speech moves to intensify or mitigate aspects of their apologies.

In this case, the apologies are realized in the form of complex utterances in which the apology act (head act) is preceded and/or followed by external modifiers (see sections 4.1 and 4.4). After segmenting all the apology utterances in head acts and external modifiers, these acts were classified as *direct apologies*, *indirect apologies* or *external modifications*, and these strategies were further divided in sub-categories. Secondly, the realization types, linguistic forms and pragmatic functions of these three pragmatic categories were analyzed. The results are discussed in the next section.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section begins with a presentation of the interactional structures of apology utterances in the data (4.1), followed by the overall distribution of strategies (4.2), a discussion of the apology strategies attested (4.3), external modifiers (4.4) and address terms (4.5).

### 4.1 Interactional structures of apology utterances

In the turn in which an apology is realized, it occurs either as a single head act (head act only) (e.g., *Je viens de renverser ton vase*. ‘I just broke your vase.’ *Je m’excuse alors*. ‘I apologize then / if that’s the case.’), as a combination of two or more head acts as in (e.g., *Désolé. Je m’excuse*. ‘Sorry. I apologize.’; *Gars, je suis vraiment désolée dès que possible je vais payer*. ‘Man, I am really sorry I will pay as soon as possible.’), or as a combination of head acts and external modifiers (e.g., *Assia. Excuse-moi mon cher. Je n’ai pas vu*. ‘Assia (Sorry). Excuse me my dear. I did not see it.’; *Mince! Je ne l’ai même pas vu. On fait comment alors?* ‘Hey! I did not see it at all. What do we do then?’)

External modifiers such as thanks, suggestions, etc. also appear in the second turn produced by the apologizers (e.g., *Merci gars, excuse quand même ma maladresse*. ‘Thanks man, excuse my clumsiness anyway.’). It should be noted here that the respondents of both groups tended to use more multiple-move apology utterances than single-move ones.

### 4.2 Overall distribution of strategies

The overall distribution of the three strategies mentioned above is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overall distribution of strategies used by males and females

	Males	Females	Total
Apology head acts	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
1. Direct apologies	28 (37.8%)	25 (33.3%)	53 (35.5%)
2. Indirect apologies	12 (16.2%)	17 (22.7%)	29 (19.5%)
External modifiers	34 (46%)	33 (44%)	67 (45%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>74 (100%)</b>	<b>75 (100%)</b>	<b>149 (100%)</b>

It shows that a total of 149 strategies were used by both groups to construct apology utterances, that external modifiers were, with 45%, the most preferred strategies, followed by direct apologies (35.5%). Overall, the number of strategies is equally distributed in the two data sets. We also notice that the males made more use of direct apologies (males: 37.8% vs. females: 33.3%) and external modifiers (males: 46% vs. females: 44%) than the female participants did. By contrast, the females produced more indirect apologies than their male counterparts (females: 22.7% vs. males: 16.2%). Differences and similarities were also documented with respect to the realizations of the individual strategies used in apology utterances.

### 4.3 Realizations of apology strategies

Section 4.3.1 presents the realization types of direct apologies while section 4.3.2 discusses the realization types of indirect apologies found in the data.

#### 4.3.1 Direct apology strategies

Although the subjects participating in this study used three major types of direct apologies, namely *expressions of regret*, *offers of apologies*, and *requests for forgiveness* and one *minor type*, each group exhibited specific preferences for a direct apology strategy, as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution of direct apologies by males and females

Direct apology strategies	Males	Females	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Expressions of regret	9 (32.1%)	18 (72%)	27 (51%)
Offers of apology	8 (28.6%)	5 (20%)	13 (24.5%)
Requests for forgiveness	10 (35.7%)	1 (4%)	11 (20.7%)
Other	1 (3.6%)	1 (4%)	2 (3.8%)
Total	28 (100%)	25 (100%)	53 (100%)

First of all, Table 2 shows that the male participants produced slightly more direct apologies (28 tokens) than the female respondents (25 instances). Secondly, it indicates that expressions of regrets were, with 51% by far the most frequently used direct apology. The second most common direct apology strategy was to offer apologies (24.5%), followed by requests for forgiveness (20.7%). The least employed were the other types. Third, the female informants displayed a very strong preference for expressions of regret, with 18 tokens (72%), followed by offers of apology with 5 occurrences (20%). In the male data, requests for forgiveness were the most common type, with 10 examples (35.7%), followed by expressions of regrets (32.1%) and offers of apology (28.6%). This difference may be due to the perception of the degree to which these direct apologies threaten both interlocutors' faces. Ogiermann (2008: 266) observes that "in requesting forgiveness, the offender not only places her- or himself at the hearer's mercy, but also threatens the hearer's negative face by assigning her or him an active role in the process of forgiving. The expression of regret, on the other hand, implies a much lower degree of face-threat for both parties involved." According to this viewpoint, the focus on expressions of regret seems to reflect the preference for negative politeness, whereas the frequent use of requests for forgiveness would reflect a positive politeness-oriented culture. This aspect needs to be researched further using a larger corpus and retrospective interviews with the participants.

The linguistic realizations of these direct apology strategies also showed some differences and similarities between both groups.

#### *Expressions of regret*

The male respondents expressed regret using constructions such as *Je suis (vraiment) désolé* (three times), *Désolé* (Sorry) (one token), *Wéh wéh / Ouais, je suis désolé* (I am sorry) (3 tokens), and *Désolé mon ami*. (Sorry my friend) (two tokens). The female group used constructions such as *Désolé* (one time), *Vraiment désolée!* (Really sorry) (one token), *Désolé coucou / ma personne / ma chérie* (Sorry coucou / my friend / my darling) (three tokens), *Oh! Non! Désolée ma chérie* (Oh no. Sorry my darling)

(one token), *Sorry sister* (one token), *I am sorry coucou* (one token), *Je suis désolé / navré* (I am sorry) (three tokens), (*Gars / Oulala*) *je suis vraiment désolée* (Man / Oulala, I am really sorry) (seven tokens).

### ***Offers of apologies***

In the male data set, this direct apology type was realized as *Je m'excuse* (I apologize) / *Wéh je m'excuse gars* (Weh, I apologize man/buddy); *Je m'excuse alors* (I apologize then) (7 times) and *Je vous présente mes excuses* (I apologize) (one instance). The female group used constructions such as *Je m'excuse* and *Je m'excuse dis-donc / encore*. (I apologize buddy / again.)

### ***Requests for forgiveness***

They were realized by the male informants using constructions like *Excusez-moi (s'il te plait)*. (Forgive me (please)); *Excuse quand même ma maladresse*. 'Excuse my clumsiness anyway.'; *Ayayaï excuse-moi bro*. 'Ayayaï (Oups), forgive me bro.'). *Excuse-moi mon cher*. 'Excuse me my dear.'; *Veillez m'excuser*. 'Please forgive me.' There was only one request for forgiveness in the female data and it was realized as *Ouais! Excuse-moi!*

Finally, one participant from each group apologized using *Assia* or *Assiya*<sup>6</sup>, an expression which is borrowed from Cameroon Pidgin English and Camfranglais, where it functions as an expression of sympathy or apology. In Cameroon French, this expression has the same pragmatic function and it is prevalent in informal contexts where it can appear with other apology strategies as in *Assiya, je m'excuse disdonc*. 'Assiya, I apologize buddy.' *Assia, excusez-moi mon cher je n'ai pas vu*. 'Assia, forgive me my dear I did not see it'. This strategy of codeswitching in apology events has a persuasive function. According to Anchimbe (2018: 191), "codeswitching in postcolonial societies has complex pragmatic functions which include indexing social relationships, accommodating speaker competences, closing group boundaries, indicating closeness or distance and adapting to contextual requirements". The term *assia* is used to highlight the close relationship between the interlocutors. By doing so, the offenders in both examples attempt to make their apologies more acceptable.

### **Intensification and mitigation of direct apologies**

Expressions of regret and offers of apologies were intensified while requests for forgiveness were mitigated. The male participants used 14 intensifiers and 6 mitigators. The female subjects used 15 intensifiers and only one mitigator. The intensifiers used in the male examples include adverbials, such as *vraiment* (really) and *alors* (then/so), interjections, such as *Oulala!*, *Oh non* (Oh no), and address terms, such as *gars* (buddy/man) *mon ami* (my friend), while the mitigators used were politeness and supplication markers, such as *s'il te plait* (please), *ouaiiais*<sup>7</sup> (forgive me), the adverbial *quand même* (anyway), and terms of address, such as *bro*, *mon cher* (my dear). The intensifiers found in the female examples include adverbials, such as *vraiment* (really), *encore* (again), terms of address, such as *gars*, and interjections, such as *Oulala*, *Oh non*. The mitigator identified was the supplication marker *ouaiiais*. Overall, adverbials and address terms were more frequent in the female examples, whereas interjections were used much more frequently by the male participants.

<sup>6</sup> This term is also written 'Assiah'.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, this interjection functions as a request for forgiveness.

### 4.3.2 Indirect apology strategies

There are 29 indirect apologies in the data (cf. Table 3). The female group used more tokens than the male participants. Three types of indirect apologies were identified: *taking responsibility*, *explanation*, and *promise/offer of repair*. Giving an account or an explanation and accepting responsibility were the two most commonly used types of indirect apologies and these strategies were distributed differently across the two groups. The third strategy, offer or promise of repair, was employed much more frequently by the female respondents.

**Table 3.** Distribution of indirect apologies by males and females

Indirect apology strategies	Males	Females	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Responsibility	5 (41.7%)	5 (29.4%)	10 (34.5%)
Account / Explanation	5 (41.7%)	6 (35.3%)	11 (38%)
Repair	2 (16.6%)	6 (35.3%)	8 (27.5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 (100%)</b>	<b>17 (100%)</b>	<b>29 (100%)</b>

It should be underlined that, while these indirect apology strategies can be used alone to apologize, the examples in the data show that the participants of both groups mostly combined them with either direct apologies and/or external modifiers.

#### *Accepting responsibility*

Accepting responsibility for the offence was produced 10 times (five tokens in each group). Three of the male participants expressed lack of intent for breaking the vase (e.g., *J'ai n'ai pas fait ça exprès/volontairement*. 'I did not do that on purpose.'). and two of them admitted or announced having caused the incident (e.g., *Mon frère, j'ai renversé le vase en enlevant mon manteau*. 'My brother, I broke your vase while taking off my jacket.'). Two female informants expressed lack of intent (e.g., *Je l'ai fait par inadvertance*. 'I did it accidentally.'). two others directly took responsibility for the incident (e.g., *Je viens de renverser ton vase*. 'I have just broken your vase.'). and one of them expressed self-deficiency (e.g., *Mais bien sûr que oui je suis aveugle*. 'Yes, obviously I am blind.')

#### *Account or explanation*

This apology type was used to refer to the circumstances which caused the accident. Explaining the reason functions as strategy to obtain forgiveness. There were six accounts in the female data and five in the male examples. The female participants indicated that they either did not see the vase (e.g., *Je ne savais pas qu'il avait un vase ici*. 'I did not know that there is a vase here.'). or they simply did not pay attention (e.g., *J'ai pas fait attention*. 'I did not pay attention.'). The male respondents also indicated that they did not see the vase in question (e.g., *Je n'ai pas vu frangin*. 'I did not see it bro.'). or that they did not know it was there (e.g., *Je ne savais pas*. 'I did not know.')

#### *Promise of repair*

The type of indirect apology occurred in the male data set in the form of constructions such as *Quand j'aurai l'argent je t'achèterai un autre*. 'When I have money, I will buy another one for you. '; *Quand j'aurai l'argent je te rembourserai*. 'When I have money, I will reimburse you.'). Contrary to their male counterparts who prefaced their promises with the expression *quand j'aurai de l'argent* (when I have money), the female participants preferred the expression *dès que possible* (as soon as possible)

(e.g., *Dès que possible je pourrais le remplacer*. 'I would be able to replace it as soon as possible.' ; *Dès que possible je vais payer*. 'I will pay as soon as possible.')

Some female participants used constructions like *Je vais alors remplacer ça*. (I will replace it then / if that's the case); *T'inquiète ma puce on va gérer*. (Don't worry my dear, I will take care of that). One female offered to help clean up the mess (*Laisse-moi t'aider à nettoyer*. (Let me help you to clean up).

#### 4.4 External modifiers

The distribution of external modifiers used by both groups is summarized in Table 4. These additional moves appeared either in the first or the second turn of the apologizer and they served either to intensify the apologies and save the relationship or to aggravate the situation. Of the 67 external modification performed, 33 instances were found in the female examples and 34 tokens in the male responses (cf. Table 4).

**Table 4.** Distribution of external modifiers by males and females

Type of external modifier	Males	Females	Total
<b>Preparatory acts / Initiators</b>	<b>No. (%)</b>	<b>No. (%)</b>	<b>No. (%)</b>
1. Interjections	12 (35.3%)	8 (24.3%)	20 (29.8%)
2. Pragmatic markers	5 (14.7%)	3 (9%)	8 (12%)
3. Address terms	0	1 (3%)	1 (1.5%)
Total (Initiators)	17 (50%)	12 (36.3%)	29 (43.3%)
<b>Supportive acts</b>			
1. Offence minimization	3 (8.9%)	2 (6.1%)	5 (7.4%)
2. Question	1 (2.9%)	1 (3%)	2 (3%)
3. Thanks	2 (5.8%)	9 (27.2%)	11 (16.4%)
4. Accepting to repair or replace	7 (20.7%)	4 (12.2%)	11 (16.4%)
5. Reprimanding	4 (11.7%)	4 (12.2%)	8 (12%)
6. Comment	0	1 (3%)	1 (1.5%)
Total (supportive acts)	17 (50%)	21 (63.7%)	38 (56.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>34 (100%)</b>	<b>33 (100%)</b>	<b>67 (100%)</b>

The results show that supportive acts are much more frequent than preparatory acts. However, the male participants used more preparatory acts than their female counterparts did, while external modifiers were much frequent in the female examples. The external modification was performed using interjections (20 times), thanks (11 tokens), acceptance to repair (11 times), reprimands (8 examples), pragmatic markers (8 tokens), and mitigation of offence (5 times). Questions, address terms and comments were the least employed additional moves. Also, Table 8 reveals many differences in the use of external modifiers by both groups. For instance, while interjections were more frequent in the male examples, thanks were used much more frequently by the female respondents. Reprimands were equally distributed across the two groups, whereas accepting to repair the damage caused was much more produced by the male participants. Differences were also found regarding the realization forms of external modifiers.

#### 4.4.1 Initiators

As already indicated, interjections were the most preferred preparatory acts by both groups. They were used to express surprise, supplication, disappointment, pain, etc. regarding the incident. These devices also served to intensify direct or indirect apologies. The interjections used by the male group include expressions such as *Wéh, ah, Non, Ayayäi, Mince, Ha*, etc. The males also used five pragmatic markers which took the form of expressions such as *Ouaiiais* (supplication), *Okay/Ok* (expressing agreement with the interlocutor's negative assessment of the incident and/or willingness to comply with a request for repair).

The interjections used by the female informants were *Oulala! Oh! Non, Weeh, Hahaha*. They used pragmatic markers such as *alors, aka, toi aussi* to preface their apologies. It is important to note that the pragmatic marker *aka* is used in the data to either reinforce an offence minimization or to reprimand the interlocutor for being too harsh in his or her negative evaluation of the incident. *Aka* is used alone or together with *toi aussi* as in example (4), in which, B uses *aka* (line 2) to express her disapproval of or disagreement with the complaint made by A in line 1 and to minimize the magnitude of the damage caused. This device is also used to reinforce B's attempt to downplay the damage (it just a vase, nothing more). There was one token of the discourse marker *okay*. One female participant used the address form *gars* as preparatory act as in *Gars je suis vraiment désolé dès que possible je vais payer* (Man/buddy I am really sorry I will pay as soon as possible).

##### Example 4

1 A : *Je savais! Toi la fille-ci tu veux quoi avec moi?*

'I knew it. This girl, what do you want from me?'

2 B : *Aka, toi aussi, ce n'est qu'un vase.*

'Aka! Come on, it is just a vase.'

3 A : *N'est-ce-pas? En tout cas ton Aka va payer ça.*

'Really? Anyways you are going to pay for it.'

4 B : *Hahaha, T'inquiète ma puce on va gérer. I am sorry coucou. [FR]*

'Hahaha, no worries honey, we will take care of it. I am sorry coucou.'

#### 4.4.2 Supportive acts

As already mentioned, different speech acts were used as post-modifiers of apologies. The first type is the expression of gratitude.

##### *Thanks*

This supportive move was much more used by the female group (9 of 11) and served to express the offender's gratitude in response to the interlocutor's acceptance of the apology. Two male participants expressed their gratitude using *Merci gars*. (Thank man) and *Ah! Merci bro*. (Ah Thanks bro.) Nine female participants expressed their gratitude, using the elliptical formula *merci*, the combination *merci* + discourse markers or address terms as in *Okay/D'accord merci, Merci bien sister*. (Thanks a lot sister), *Merci pour ta bonne compréhension*. (Thanks for your understanding) as well as an appreciation token *C'est gentil*. (That's kind of you).

##### *Accepting to comply with requests for repair*

This move was also used 11 times. Some participants accepted to comply with the complainer's request for replacement. This means that, in addition to apologizing, they accepted to replace the vase they inadvertently broke or to pay for it. This supportive move occurred four times in the male data set, where it was realized as *Ok, pas de soucis* (Okay, no worries); *Ok je n'ai pas assez d'argent pour le moment* (Okay, I don't have money right now); *Je veux te payer ça* (I want to pay for it), *Patiente, quand j'aurai de l'argent je vais te le rendre*. (Be patient, when I have money, I will replace it/reimburse you). Two females agreed to replace the vase saying *D'accord* (Okay) and *D'accord j'ai compris* (Okay I have heard (you)). This supportive move was also realized using expressions such as *Ne t'inquiète pas, T'inquiète* (Don't worry), *C'est pas grave* (It's not that serious / It's not a big deal), etc. to reassure the interlocutors that repair/replacement would follow (e.g., *Ne t'inquiète pas je vais payer* (Don't worry, I will pay); *C'est pas grave je vais te payer ça* (It's not a big deal, I will buy it for you)).

### **Reprimanding**

This external modifier was used to criticize the interlocutor for exaggerating their complaints: for overestimating the value of the vase or for being very harsh on the transgressor. The constructions used by the female group to reprimand were *Toi aussi n'exagère pas* (Come on, don't exaggerate); *Alors toi aussi; Aka ! Toi aussi* (Aka, come on ! It's not that serious); *Va là-bas dis-donc* (Get out man), *c'est un vase en or ou quoi ?* (Is it a golden vase or what?) The male respondents criticized their interlocutors for keeping the vase on the wrong spot. In doing so, they indirectly shifted the blame to the complainer. They made use of constructions such as *Mon frère, tu as d'abord mis ça ici pourquoi?* (My brother, why did you put it here in the first place?) *Ha! Toi aussi ce vase faisait quoi encore ici ?* (Ha! Come on, why did you put this vase here?) The males also criticized their friends for keeping an old vase using the rhetorical question *Que fais-tu avec ce vieux vase chez vous?* (What are you doing with this old vase at home?) or for pretending to be flawless using *Quoi, ça t'arrive pas souvent aussi?* (What, doesn't that often happen to you?)

### **Minimizing the offence**

This supportive act was used to minimize the loss caused by the accident. Coming from the offender, this strategy has the potential of creating more tension between the interlocutors as it suggests that the apologizer does not wholeheartedly feel sorry for wrong-doing. It also serves as an attempt to "force" the complainer to accept the apology. To achieve this, the male participants focused on the fact that the accident was not a serious issue (e.g., *Ok. C'est pas grave*. 'Okay, it is not serious.' *Ça va*. 'It's okay/fine'), whereas the females laid emphasis on the fact that the damaged property was old (e.g., *C'est un vieux truc*. 'It is an old stuff.') or that it was "just a vase" (e.g., *Aka<sup>8</sup>, ce n'est qu'un vase*. 'Aka (come on), it is just a vase.').

### **Other supportive moves**

The question used by a male informant was to know what to do in order to solve the problem caused by the accident (e.g., *On fait comment alors?* 'What do we do now?'), while the question used by a female informant was *Je fait quoi maintenant?* 'What do I do now?' A comment was used by a female participant to acknowledge the complainer's expression of understanding.

<sup>8</sup> *Aka* in this context means 'you are joking', 'you can't be serious'.

#### 4.5 Address terms in apologies

Apart from the address terms used as preparatory acts/attention getters, the respondents of both groups also employed terms of address in the middle or final segments of their apology utterances. The males employed nine address terms to soften their apologies. These include camaraderie / endearment terms such as *mon ami* (my friend) and *gars* (buddy), and *mon cher* (my dear) and kinship terms such as *mon frère* (my brother), *bro*. The female participants employed seven address terms, to signal camaraderie (*coucou*), endearment such as *ma chérie* (my darling), *ma personne* (my buddy/friend), and kinship (*sister*).

#### 5. Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this study was to shed some light on gender-based differences in the realization of apology acts in Cameroon French. The investigation was based on a corpus provided by 40 (20 male and 20 female) French-speaking University students in Maroua (Cameroon). Overall, the results reveal some similarities and differences in the way the male and female participants reacted to the apology-provoking situation in the Free Discourse Completion Task questionnaire used for data collection.

The findings indicate that the strategies used to construct apology utterances were equally distributed. Both groups used external modifiers much more frequently than head acts. By contrast, the frequency of indirect apologies was higher in the female examples. Gender-differences were also documented in the realization of direct apologies. For instance, the most preferred realization type by the male participants was ‘request for forgiveness’, followed by ‘expression of regret’. In the female data set, ‘expression of regret’ was the most frequently used type, followed by ‘offer of apology’. Regarding indirect apologies, we found that the two most common realization types in the male group were ‘taking responsibility’ and ‘explanation’, while the females mostly used ‘explanation’ and ‘offer/promise of repair’, with ‘taking responsibility’ occurring in the third position. Differences were also found in the choice of speech moves to preface and/or support apologies and types of internal modification.

It should be stated that the results of this study cannot be overgeneralized because of the size and nature of the material used here. It would be interesting to further explore the correlation between gender and choice of apology realizations in much larger data sets and in situations involving strangers, superiors, etc. and using, when possible, a combination of methods (e.g. DCT, naturally occurring exchanges, role-plays). Further research should factor in the results of previous work (for instance Atanga, 2012 and Anchimbe, 2018) on gender and language in Cameroon. In her study of gendered discourses in Cameroon, Atanga (2012) examines the discursive construction of a ‘model Cameroonian woman’ in the Cameroonian parliament. She highlights the following identities ascribed to women: *women as domestic*, *women as (family) carers*, *women as wives/mothers/Madonna*, *women as preservers of culture*. In his study, Anchimbe (2018) considers gender as one of the major postcolonial pragmatic components<sup>9</sup> “that interlocutors draw on in order to accomplish a given illocutionary intent.” In the analysis of the use of these components by Cameroon and Ghanaian English speakers to either upgrade offers or to justify offer refusals in a power asymmetrical situation (a senior colleague offers a drink to a junior colleague), Anchimbe (2018: 131) identifies gender differences at three levels: “(1) the way the different genders are addressed, i.e. choice of address forms by the respondents in the dialogues they constructed, (2) the objects (e.g. types of drinks) and activities identified with each of the genders, and (3) the behavioural traits society identifies with the genders.” With regard to social behavioural traits, he indicates that “women are thought of as being shy [...] while men are expected to be tough

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<sup>9</sup> The others are: address forms, social status, religion and collectivist cultural expectations (Anchimbe, 2018: 125).

and resistant, and any man who is not is mocked at as being a woman.” (Anchimbe, 2018: 133). Since such “gender stereotypes are easily transferred into social interaction in all contexts” (Anchimbe, 2018: 132), it would be interesting to undertake an in-depth analysis of how gender (in terms of representations and constructions, ascribed gender identities) impacts the apologetic speech behaviour of Cameroon French speakers. Consequently, the present study may be seen as a starting point in that effort. Another aspect worthy of investigation is the interplay of gender, social distance and power asymmetry in the act of apologizing.

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