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Maintaining Harmony in L2 Oral Communication: An Islamic Perspective on Apologetic Expressions in High-Stake Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Any form of communication helps speakers to deliver their intended messages. Communication through oral interactions, however, has an additional purpose; to maintain harmony in interactions. In high-stake interactions such as job interviews, unfavourable elements such as misunderstanding or lack of clarity usually cause the candidates to seek assistance from the panellists such as repeating their sentences or providing clarifications. While this can be unpleasant to the panellists, the candidates usually try to tackle the situation by using apologetic expressions before revealing what they need the panellists to do. These expressions are seen from the Western perspective as strategic politeness markers while the Islamic perspective views them in relation of tawāḍu (humility) and 'izzah (dignity). Interestingly, despite these different views, both perspectives see politeness expressions as the tools to maintain harmony in communication. The current study is therefore significant since it is built on the two different views which share a similar function of apologetic expressions in communication. The study aims to examine the use of strategic politeness markers "sorry" and "pardon" by interview candidates, the reasons behind them and how they help to maintain interactional harmony. The data were obtained from real academic staff recruitment interviews conducted in English at three university campuses in Malaysia. The interview sessions involving 47 Malay candidates were observed and video-recorded before they were analysed with the help of NVivo software. There were 13 occurrences of apologetic expressions, mainly to request the panellists to repeat their questions. The expressions also reflect respect for the panellists and acknowledge the presence of power difference and social distance between speakers. While this resulted in positive responses by the panellists, it led to interactional harmony, defined in this study as a mutual comfort of both parties after a communication difficulty is addressed through speakers' the use of apologetic expressions that receives listeners' positive responses. Despite this however, speakers are cautioned not to apologise excessively as this can signal incompetency. Based on the results, the study offers effective ways of language teaching in order to produce competent English speakers with a good balance of tawāḍu and 'izzah.

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that communication takes place for the purpose of delivering intended messages. While this is achievable through various communication modes, oral interactions take more than just delivering messages since interactants should also aim for harmonious communication [20]. This is even so in high-stake interactions such as job interviews, where unfavourable elements such as misunderstanding or lack of clarity usually occur, causing the

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interview candidates to seek assistance from the interview panellists, usually to repeat their sentences or provide clarifications which can be unpleasant to the latter. In tackling this situation, it is natural that the speakers would try to be polite by using an apologetic expression as a strategic politeness marker before implicitly or explicitly telling what they actually need the listeners to do. Here, appropriate and respectful expressions can increase positivity in the interactions.

According to Gordon and Tannen [12], 'oral interactions' refers to the structured, turn-taking speech events where the speakers use linguistic forms, prosodic cues, and remedial speech acts such as apologies to meet their communicative goals. This is from the lens of socio-pragmatics that competent speakers should understand.

Socio-pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that examines how social factors such as status, power, social distance, institutional roles, and cultural norms influence the choice and interpretation of linguistic strategies in interactions [18]. Essentially, it focuses on the interface between pragmatics (how language is used in context) and sociolinguistics (how language functions within social structures). Rather than focusing merely on the abstract rules of language, socio-pragmatics analyses how speakers execute communicative acts (such as making requests, expressing disagreement, or issuing apologies) based on their social relationship with the listener and the high-stake demands of specific interactive contexts.

As research on socio-pragmatics has been recognised worldwide, its analysis comes from various perspectives. For instance, the Western perspective relates the socio-pragmatics concept with politeness strategies in oral communication as proposed by Brown and Levinson [8]. Meanwhile, from Islamic perspective, socio-pragmatic strategies encompass seeking apologies as a cooperative mechanism to maintain interpersonal harmony and adhere to moral codes such as humility [4] especially during intense communication. A high-stake context such as a job interview examined in the current study is one example of intense communication. In this context, rather than apologising for wrongdoings, the candidates uttered 'sorry' and 'pardon' to politely indicate that they were facing a communication problem including understanding difficulty or mishearing that requires the panellists' assistance to ensure continued interactions. Subsequent to the use of these words as a strategic politeness marker, the panellists generally responded by repeating, reformulating, clarifying, or confirming the preceding question, after which the interviews continued harmoniously. In this study, interactional harmony refers to a mutual comfort of both parties after a communication difficulty is addressed through speakers' use of apologetic expressions that receives listeners' positive response. Although apologetic expressions do not indicate the speakers' inner feelings, let alone establishing their intentions or moral conduct, from an Islamic perspective, this respectful conduct may be interpreted in relation to tawāḍuʿ (humility) and ʿizzah (dignity).

In sum, clear understanding of social pragmatics will result in speakers' polite expressions, suitable with the persons they speak to and the context they are in. When necessary, they would seek apologies which help to promote harmony in communication. This is made possible because apologetic expressions serve the role as strategic politeness markers in interactions.

1.1 Politeness and Face-Threatening Fact

"Politeness" in the field of socio-pragmatics studies is defined by Lakoff [17], as a kind of behaviour which has been developed in societies with the purpose of reducing friction in personal interaction. Another definition was offered by Mills [21] who sees politeness as "the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another". Referring to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework [8], "face" refers to one's dignity

while “face threatening acts” can be defined as any utterances, usually those that lack politeness, which can affect the listeners’ dignity.

In Malaysia, politeness has become part of the Malay culture. Omar [23] particularly asserted that politeness (*kesantunan*) in the Malaysian context is rooted in maintaining social harmony and preserving the dignity of the interactants. Since some acts can be face-threatening, gauging the right level of politeness is imperative to ensure smooth communication. For instance, when A makes a request to B but sounds like giving a tall order in a harsh language, B might feel embarrassed. A’s utterance in this case is a face-threatening act that could cause B to lose his or her dignity. Should A employ polite expressions in making the request, B’s dignity could be saved.

Among influencing scholars of politeness, Brown and Levinson [8] are commonly referred to due to their holistic politeness framework that takes into consideration the aspects of social power, social distance, and the degree of imposition of the act between the interactants within a given culture [9]. Additionally, their framework also offers various strategies speakers could use to create politeness namely Bald on-Record, Positive and Negative Politeness, Off-Record (indirect strategy) and Avoidance of FTA.

The least polite form is Bald on-Record which is frequently used when the speaker has a close relationship with the listener or in situations of urgency, hence resulting in utterances such as “Give your examples” or “Watch out!”. In Positive Politeness, the speaker shows an attempt to reduce threat to the listener by recognising the friendliness in the relationship. For instance, a speaker might say “Let’s start answering the exercises together” upon knowing that the listener is incapable of doing the activity alone. Negative Politeness, on the other hand, aims to avoid being seen as imposing others. It can be executed through distancing styles like apologies, using questions and hedges, and being pessimistic. One example is saying, “I’m sorry to bother you, but could you please turn on the fan?”. Off-record is an indirect strategy employed through connotations, hints and implicature instead of direct requests. An utterance “Wow, it is really hot here” implies the speaker’s request to the listener to turn on the air-conditioner or to switch on the fan. Finally, Avoidance of FTA occurs when a speaker feels uncomfortable to apply any of the above strategies to make a request, hence, would rather make neutral statements e.g. “There is a hammer right behind you” or simply says nothing to avoid the threat completely.

Based on the above categories, apologising is the type of politeness strategy that falls under Negative Politeness which is employed mainly to avoid the speakers from being seen as imposing others. The act can be carried out through various apologetic expressions such as “Sorry…”, “I’m sorry….but..”, “My apology..” and “Pardon,” to indicate that the speaker has no intention to impose any burden on the listener but still needs to get his or her message across or intention fulfilled. For the purpose of this study, the term “apologetic expressions” is seen similar to “politeness expressions” and is used interchangeably. Similarly, the terms “interactions” and “communication” are assumed to carry the same meaning and are also used interchangeably.

1.2 Past Studies on Acts of Apologies

A brief review on past literature shows that extensive studies have been conducted to examine apologetic expressions both from the Western and Islamic perspectives. The following review considers three studies that used Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework [9] to explain how social relationships and cultural expectations influence apology choices.

Behzadpoor [5] examined how well Brown and Levinson’s [9] politeness framework explains the request and apology choices of 20 Iranian university students studying English. The study used a multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and think-aloud protocols, in which participants

explained why they chose particular responses. The findings showed that power relations, social distance, and rank of imposition influenced their choices. In apology situations, participants tended to choose more formal responses when speaking to unfamiliar people or those of higher social status. They also considered the harm caused by an offence and whether compensation was needed. However, these factors did not fully explain why they were polite to strangers or higher-ranking individuals. Instead, politeness in such interactions was shaped by their intentions to be polite within a specific context. The study therefore supported the usefulness of Brown and Levinson's framework [9] while showing that politeness cannot be explained through a fixed combination of social factors. Instead, apology choices depend on how speakers understand and respond to a particular situation. Nevertheless, the small sample and use of predetermined scenarios limit how widely the findings can be applied, particularly to everyday conversations.

The importance of social relationships in apology choices was also highlighted by Al-Adaileh [2], who examined apology practices among Jordanian speakers of English and compared them with British patterns. The study aimed to investigate the socio-pragmatic and pragmatic-linguistic features of the speech act of apology and to compare these linguistic behaviours with those observed in other cultural contexts i.e. the British culture. The research data were collected using DCT whereby the participants were presented with various socially differentiated situations designed to simulate everyday events that required an apology. For the first research objective, the study explored how Jordanian speakers realized apologies across different social situations while examining the influence of contextual variables such as social power, social distance, and the severity of an offense on the selection of apology strategies. These situations were structured to vary systematically according to social power (the relative status of the interlocutors), social distance (the level of familiarity between participants) and severity of offence (the perceived gravity of the transgression). The responses were analysed using descriptive and comparative methods to categorize the apology strategies employed. The analysis was framed within the theoretical model of "politeness," specifically contrasting the notions of positive and negative face concept as defined by Brown and Levinson [4,9]. When comparison was made with the findings obtained from the British participants, the study concluded that Jordanian culture is primarily a positive politeness culture as opposed to the Western culture that might lean heavily on negative politeness. These positive politeness strategies among Jordanians were found to be strongly influenced by the contextual factors of social power and social distance and function as "remedial interchanges" designed to actively restore social harmony and relational balance. Meanwhile, the severity of the offense was also found to influence the speaker but the status relationship between the speaker and the listener is often a more decisive factor in how an apology is formulated. Social power and social distance strongly influenced the strategies used. Although the severity of the offence also affected apology choices, the status relationship between the speaker and the listener was reported to be more influential. These findings suggest that Jordanian apologies can serve to strengthen relationships as well as acknowledge an offence. They also challenge the view that apologies should be understood only as negative politeness strategies.

The studies by Behazdpoor [5] and Al-Adaileh [2] prove that in Muslim communities, religious values serve as vital tools to reduce interpersonal tension, save "face" for both parties, and restore social harmony. The findings also demonstrate apology choices are fairly influenced by the relationship between speakers and the listeners. The realization of apologies is not standardised but is influenced by external contextual variables which include social power and social distance while severity of offence was found to be less influencing. Interestingly, the research challenged some prominent politeness theories, arguing that Jordanian apologies do not conform to the claim that apologies are purely "negative politeness strategies." Instead, they are distinct cultural acts rooted

in the Jordanian social system, emphasizing interpersonal rapport and the restoration of social standing.

Extending the discussion to native English-speaking contexts, Kaloi *et al.,* [15] aimed to compare the frequency, contexts of use, and perceived politeness of "I'm sorry" and "My bad" among British and American speakers unlike the above two studies which involved non-native English speakers. The study also examined the reported influence of media and global trends on apology choices. It adopted a quantitative approach involving 200 native English speakers, comprising 100 British and 100 American participants. The researchers reported using stratified random sampling across age and occupational groups. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's [9] politeness theory and Leech's [19] account of politeness, the study used a structured questionnaire containing multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and short-answer questions. It also examined language data from the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The researchers reported using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and t-tests, alongside corpus analysis of expression frequency and contexts of use. The findings showed that both groups used "I'm sorry" more frequently, although its use was higher among British respondents (85%) than American respondents (65%). In comparison, "My bad" was used more frequently by American respondents (35%) than British respondents (15%). Both groups considered "I'm sorry" more polite, but American respondents rated "My bad" more favourably than British respondents. The corpus findings also showed that "I'm sorry" appeared mainly in formal situations, while "My bad" appeared mainly in informal situations. American respondents additionally reported greater influence from media and global trends on their language use. The study concluded that apology choices reflect cultural expectations and the formality of the situation and recommended that language teaching develop learners' awareness of these differences. This illustrates how cultural values regarding directness and formality influence the application of politeness frameworks.

When reviewed together, these three studies involving Iranian and Jordanian English speakers and English native speakers (British and Americans), show that apology choices depend on both social circumstances and cultural expectations. While Kaloi *et al.,* [15] showed differences in the use and perceived politeness of expressions in apologizing among native speakers, Al-Adaileh [2] highlighted on the importance of social relationships and restoring harmony and lastly, Behzadpoor [5] emphasized on how social relationships influence speakers' intentions and listeners' responses.

Supported by the above literature, it can be concluded that politeness acts are embraced and recognized by the people of different cultures across time. Referring to immediate context i.e. Malaysia, Omar [22], highlighted that politeness acts are in fact synonym in the Malay culture and are manifested through indirectness and tendency to 'beat-around- the bush' [22] before conveying intended messages so as not to incur an offense or any unpleasant feelings in the listeners, particularly when delivering unfavourable news. While 'beating-round-the-bush' is evident in oral communication, another form of indirectness among the Malays can be seen through the use of poems and metaphors [24] which have long existed in Malay society.

1.3 Islamic Perspectives on Apologies

From an Islamic perspective, respectful communication and repairing relationships are important ethical concerns. The Qur'an encourages good speech (Qur'an 17:53), forgiveness and control of anger (Qur'an 3:134), and reconciliation between believers (Qur'an 49:10). Warsah [27] similarly explains that Islam advocates forgiveness and values its role in maintaining relationships with humans as well as The Creator. She [27, pp 115-116] further asserted that in Islamic tradition, seeking apologies from others when a transgression occurs is a precursor to receiving divine forgiveness.

However, apologising politely may also be understood as expressing *tawāḍuʿ* (humility) [4] while preserving *ʿizzah* (dignity) [25]. Khalil [16] explains that Islamic humility means avoiding arrogance without belittling oneself. These teachings also provide an ethical background for examining apology practices among Malay Muslims. As stated earlier, the dynamic concept of politeness extends to other cultures and is manifested in various ways including the use of apologetic expressions as a strategic politeness marker rather than acknowledging any wrongdoings. In a job interview, candidates may recognise that the panellists hold a higher position and therefore speak to them respectfully. However, this does not mean that the candidates view themselves as inferior. From an Islamic perspective, their respectful expressions may be understood as being consistent with tawāḍuʿ (humility), while openly asking for repetition or clarification allows them to maintain their ʿizzah (dignity). Nevertheless, these expressions alone cannot prove the candidates' intentions or moral qualities.

Also from Islamic perspective, apologies are not seen solely as admissions of mistakes or wrong doings. Past studies analysing Arabic discourse highlighted that speakers frequently employ humility-based formulaic expressions, or IFIDs [6], such as *Afwan* (pardoning/grace), as strategic politeness markers [3] which help to mitigate face-threatening situations aside from displaying respect and maintaining interpersonal rapport [9]. While the expressions also help to re-establish social harmony, they are indeed a linguistic habit that is heavily influenced by broader Islamic ethical values regarding humility and mutual forgiveness [4]. Also, being used as strategic politeness markers in interactions rather than simple admissions of failure, the phrases become indispensable tools for social harmony [11]. Since polite apologetic expressions reflect the speaker's *tawāḍuʿ* (humility) while remaining compatible with *ʿizzah* (dignity), the speakers can avoid both arrogance and self-denigration [16]. This offers a way of understanding how speakers may acknowledge a difficulty or request assistance respectfully while preserving their dignity. According to Afandi [1], such apologetic expressions help to soften the impact on the listener, hence, mitigating face-threatening acts. This is the similar point highlighted by Brown and Levinson [9] about the use of politeness strategies.

Drawing from the above discussion, apologetic expressions can be examined through both sociopragmatic and Islamic ethical perspectives. The framework by Brown and Levinson [8] explains how these expressions help manage face and reduce imposition, while *tawāḍuʿ* and *ʿizzah* provide an ethical perspective on humility and dignity. Together, these perspectives inform the present study's examination of how interview candidates use 'sorry' and 'pardon' to request assistance respectfully and maintain harmonious interactions. Technically, the current study is significant as it investigated politeness and apologetic expressions from two different perspectives which agree that apologetic expressions help to maintain harmony in communication. Despite the Westerners' view that apologetic expressions are 'face' saving tools for the listener and the Muslims see them as a sign of *tawāḍu* (humility), these two perspectives are not exclusively held by these respective two groups of people. In reality, many Muslims also use apologies to save 'face'. Similarly, the Westerners might use the expressions out of genuine humility.

The present study therefore brings together a socio pragmatic framework by Brown and Levinson and an Islamic ethical lens. Brown and Levinson's framework [4,9] explains how expressions can manage face, power differences, social distance, and imposition. The concepts of tawāḍuʿ and ʿizzah offer a cautious ethical interpretation of respectful conduct that combines humility with dignity. In this study, "interactional harmony" is defined in observable terms: after a candidate signals a communication problem, the panellist provides repetition, clarification, reformulation, or confirmation, and the interview proceeds without an extended breakdown. This definition does not claim that mutual comfort or inner harmony was measured.

From past studies, it is concluded that the elements of social power, social distance and the status relationship determine the choice of apologetic expressions [2]. One research context characterised by these elements is a real job interview which is considered as a high-stake interaction context. Active oral interactions between candidates and panellists make job interviews a fertile ground for researchers to examine the use of apologetic expressions in the interactions, hence, was chosen as the context of the current study. Since positive behaviour has always been part of the evaluation criteria, it would be interesting to see how the candidates tackle the situation through their apologetic expressions using the phrase 'sorry' and 'pardon' that reflects their politeness and *tawāḍu* (humility).

While past studies on politeness mainly examine the words used in apologetic expressions from social and cultural perspectives, the current study deviates from these studies by examining the data through Islamic ethical lens. The data analysis was extended to examine the reasons for carrying out this speech act and how these expressions help in maintaining interactional harmony in one high stake interaction context, i.e job interviews. Specifically, the current study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

i. to identify the occurrences of apologetic expressions based on the words "sorry" and "pardon" as a strategic politeness marker in oral interactions;
ii. to examine the reasons for uttering these apologetic expressions;
iii. to examine how these expressions help in maintaining harmony in oral interactions.

The results from this study are hoped to shed light on what language teaching should focus on to produce competent L2 speakers that can function in the real world.

2. Methodology

In order to achieve its research objectives, this qualitative study focused on oral communication involving interactants of different social power and obvious social distance i.e. interview candidates and the panellists. The data were obtained from observations made on real interviews conducted to select new academic staff for various faculties for one public university in Malaysia. Conducted in English, the interviews took place at three different campuses; one in the north and two in the east coast of Malaysia. Using convenience sampling, a total of 47 Malay candidates were screened either individually, in pairs, or in groups for the Faculty of Art and Design (FSSR), the Faculty of Information Management (IM), and the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), the Faculty of Business and Management, the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management and Academy of Language Studies.

After research ethics approval and clearance from all three campuses were obtained from the respective authorities, arrangements were made for the campus technicians to video-record the interview sessions. The focus of data analysis was on the candidates' use of apologetic expressions remarked by the terms 'sorry' and 'pardon' during interactions with a total of five or six interview panellists in each session, depending on the faculties. It should be noted here that only the candidates' words "sorry" and "pardon" that served as politeness strategies were analysed. The occurrences of the same words but not used as a politeness strategy in the interactions were excluded from the analysis. For data confidentiality, all 47 Malay candidates examined in this study were given pseudo names while the interviewers were labelled with IP that stands for Interview Panellist. The participants were included because they took part in the recruitment interviews available to the researchers and met the study's focus on Malay L2 speakers. They were not selected according to their level of religiosity, knowledge of Islamic teachings, or practice of Islamic values. Therefore, their Muslim identity is not treated as evidence that their use of "sorry" and "pardon" was

motivated by Islamic teachings. While this becomes a limitation of the current study, the Malays in Malaysia are generally associated with Muslims by religion. Hence, to a certain extent, their moral conduct is seen to be relatable to Islamic values.

The oral data were firstly transcribed verbatim to ensure that the real messages were retained. However, in the case where the transcriptions were incomprehensible, they will be slightly amended to help readers' comprehension. Following Jefferson's convention [13], the amended transcriptions were put in square brackets.

2.1 Data Analysis

The main focus of data analysis was to examine the occurrences of apologetic expressions through the use of the words "sorry" and "pardon" by the candidates attending academic staff recruitment interviews conducted in English. Following the completion of the data collection process, the video recordings were analysed using NVivo software (version 12) whereby utterances containing the words "sorry" and "pardon" that served as politeness strategy markers were noted for further analysis. Although the software did not run data analysis for the researchers, it helped them to manage the data digitally and more systematically.

The analysis started with the coding process whereby the video data were imported into the NVivo software, followed by viewing the video recordings and identifying any occurrences of the words "sorry" and "pardon" as indicators of polite expressions. The use of digital recording helped the researchers to easily locate the occurrences of these words in the interactions. Once the words were identified, the oral data were transcribed for further analysis to examine the reasons for uttering such expressions. At this stage, each identified expression was analysed with its sequential context: (1) the panellist's preceding turn as the possible source of difficulty, (2) the candidate's expression and any accompanying explanation, and (3) the panellist's next response. An expression was coded as a request for repetition or clarification when the panellist responded by repeating, reformulating, clarifying, or confirming the preceding question. A hearing problem was coded only when the candidate explicitly stated that the question was not heard clearly. Mishearing was coded when the candidate proposed an alternative word that the panellist corrected. Where the transcript did not distinguish hearing difficulty, understanding difficulty, or loss of focus, the broader category "unspecified communication difficulty" was used. However, this last category was not reported here since the authors could not be certain of the root cause of the problem. Only those with clear categorizations were included in the analysis. Following these interactions, a smooth and harmonious communication continued to exist after the communication difficulty was addressed. This interpretation, however, was based on the researchers' observations since the study did not measure the participants' feelings, intentions, or moral character. Upon completion of this analysis, the researcher examined how the expressions help in maintaining harmony in communication from the lens of socio-pragmatics studies.

3. Results and Discussions

This section presents the results based on the research objectives which are to identify the occurrences of apologetic expressions in oral interactions and the reasons for doing so. Additionally, the study also aims to examine how these expressions help in maintaining harmony in communication.

Table 1 presents the candidates' apologetic expressions and the reasons for their use. The results show that apologetic expressions occurred 13 times in total, with the use of the word "sorry" (refer

Excerpts 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13) and "pardon" (refer Excerpts 4, 11) which occurred once in each excerpt. However, the case is different in Excerpt 1, whereby the speaker uttered "sorry" twice in two different phrases as shown below. This results in 10 occurrences of "sorry" in the interactions. The high occurrences of "sorry" is line with Kaloi *et al*., [15] who reported that "I'm sorry" occurred more frequently than "My bad" although its use was found to be higher among British respondents (85%) than American respondents (65%).

Excerpt 1

IP2 : Okay aaa both of you, I have one question. So if you are selected aaa become our lecturer, so what your plans aaa...to ensure aaa...to...to aaa...to ensure our university or maybe your department that you are going to attach to become well-known a global university? So, aaa...anyone can answer first

Nabiela : **Sorry** I mean aaa...mungkin I aaa...**sorry I didn't hear you actually.**

IP2 : Okay, I repeat, so that's a normal process

Based on a detailed examination on Excerpt 1 where the candidates were interviewed in pairs, it was found that the panellist asked about the candidates' plans if they were selected as lecturers at the university. In responding to the question, the candidate by the name Nabiela firstly uttered "sorry" as a strategic politeness marker before trying to answer the question. She somehow faced a halt in expressing herself ("I mean aaa...mungkin I aaa...") that she finally dropped her message and restarted her sentence. This time, she started with "sorry" again, but instead of giving her answer, she admitted that she did not focus on the conversation ("sorry I didn't hear you actually"). The panellist responded by repeating the question, providing observable evidence that the expression was understood as a repair request. The sequence then allowed the interview to continue. From an Islamic ethical perspective, acknowledging the difficulty respectfully may be interpreted as conduct consistent with tawāḍuʿ, while directly requesting the support needed to continue may be viewed as compatible with ʿizzah. The excerpt does not, however, establish Nabiela's inner intention, moral character, or the panellist's emotional state.

Aside from "sorry", another apologetic expression used by the candidates is "pardon" as seen in Excerpts 3, 4 and 11. Unlike "sorry" which could occur due to lack of understanding or lack of focus aside from inaudibility issue, "pardon" is likely to be uttered to indicate inaudibility issue alone.

Referring to the last column of Table 1, the word "sorry" was found to be uttered most possibly for the following reasons:

1. Audibility issue (Excerpts 1, 6)
   e.g Excerpt 6
   Avi : Aaa...**sorry** aaa...**Dr, I couldn't hear that clearly** "sorry aaa...Dr, I couldn't hear that clearly
2. Lack of understanding/focus/audibility issue (Excerpts 2, 3, 10, 12, 13)
   e.g. Excerpt 13
   IP1 : Which year are you now in your master's degree program?
   Shahrul: Yes, **sorry?**
   IP1 : Which year...which year are you now in master's degree program?
   Shahrul: Ohh...ohh.
3. Asking for panellist's help (Excerpt 5)
   Nabiela: So, I really hope they can produce one of the platform to get their emm...get their...**what we call it...sorry,** to get their design, their printing outside from
4. Mishearing (Excerpt 7,8)

e.g. Excerpt 7

IP1 : Err...let's err...see, whether you know since you have been teaching at UiTM okay for quite some time okay, how many erm...erm...erm branches or campus, state campus that **UiTM has?**

Dina : **I'm sorry, UMS?**

IP1 : [No, UiTM]

5. Checking accuracy of the question (Excerpt 9)

IP1 : Aaa...so err...last semester, you were teaching which course?

Aida : **Sorry? Last semester?**

IP1 : Yaa

Based on the above excerpts, it can be concluded that "sorry" serves as a strategic politeness marker in many situations and is uttered for various reasons. Interestingly, in this study, it received positive responses from the panellists, allowing the candidates to achieve their communicative goals. One of these is seen in Excerpt 5 whereby the panellist gave his affirmation to what was mentioned by the candidate.

Similar to "sorry", the word "pardon" is also uttered as a politeness marker. However, based on the examined data, this occurred only when the candidates faced audibility issues. As seen in Excerpts 3, 4 and 11 below, the panellists repeated their questions each time the candidates uttered "pardon".

Excerpt 3

IP3 : So, since aaa...aaa...you have experience with industry, can you tell me about your contact and networking with industry?

Faiz : **Sorry? Pardon?**

IP3 : [Your networking]

Excerpt 4

IP1 : Can you share a numbers of aaa...collaborators that you have from industry aaa...Miss Nurainatul?

Ainatul : **Pardon** Dr

IP1 : [Your collaborators]

Excerpt 11

IP3 : So, in which skill do you think you are going to use in MS team?

Faiz : Aaa...**pardon?** Err...

IP3 : Which skill that you think it is appropriate for you to use MS team?

The above findings on the use of the word "pardon" show that it occurred only three times, and far less frequently than "sorry" which occurred 10 times. One possibility is that "pardon" is used only when the speaker faced audibility issues as opposed to "sorry" which could be triggered by many reasons as explained above. Despite this, both words play their roles in incurring politeness in communication.

Table 1
Apologetic expressions and the reasons

No.	Excerpts	Reasons for apologising
1	IP2: Okay aaa both of you, I have one question. So if you are selected aaa become our lecturer, so what your plans aaa...to ensure aaa...to...to aaa...to ensure our university or maybe your department that you are going to attach to become well-known a global university? So, aaa...anyone can answer first Nabiela: **Sorry** I mean aaa...mungkin I aaa...**sorry I didn't hear you actually.** IP2: Okay, I repeat, so, that's a normal process	Inaudibility issue
2	IP4: You also have experience be a lecturer in graphic department right? So can be your...your specialization? Nabiela: **Sorry?** IP4: Can be...[what is] your specialization?	Lack of understanding/ focus/inaudibility issue
3	IP3: So, since aaa...aaa...you have experience with industry, can you tell me about your contact and networking with industry? Faiz: **Sorry? Pardon?** IP3: [Your networking]	Lack of understanding/ focus/ inaudibility issue
4	IP1: Can you share a numbers of aaa...collaborators that you have from industry aaa...Miss Nurainatul? Ainatul: **Pardon** Dr IP1: [Your collaborators]	Lack of understanding/ focus/ inaudibility issue
5	Nabiela: So, I really hope they can produce one of the platform to get their emm...get their...**what we call it...sorry,** to get their design, their printing outside from	Accompany direct appeal for help
6.	IP3: Okay, Avi Avi : Yes IP3: You said, err...you said that teaching is your pass...passion? Okay, what is your preferred teaching approaches? Avi : Aaa...**sorry** aaa...**Dr, I couldn't hear that clearly** IP3: Okay, err...you mentioned that teaching is your passion just now right? Avi : Yes IP3**: Okay, so what is your prefered teaching approaches in classroom?**	Inaudibility issue
7	IP1: Err...let's err...see, whether you know since you have been teaching at UiTM okay for quite some time okay, how many erm...erm...erm branches or campus, state campus that **UiTM has?** Dina: **I'm sorry, UMS?** IP1: [No, UiTM]	Mishearing 'UMS' instead of 'UiTM has'
8	IP1: Okay, i would like to ask about UiTM okay. Okay aaa...what is the vision of UiTM? Nurin Najwa: **Sorry, mission?** IP1: Vision...vision Nurin Najwa: Vision.	Mishearing
9	IP1 : Aaa...so err...last semester, you were teaching which course? Aida: **Sorry? Last semester?** IP1: Yaa Aida: I wasn't teaching last semester, but last two semester IP1: Okay, so last two semester, what were the courses that you err...you taught? Aida: I was teaching aaa...(she rolls her eyes upwards) ELC 3030, ELC 121 and ELC 231. IP1: Okay	Checking accuracy of question
10	IP2: Okay aaa...(stating the candidate's name), do you know any current news regarding education? Can you please share one with us? Rudy: Current education? Aaa...i mean **sorry?** IP3: Current issues on education IP2: Current issues on education sorry Rudy: Current edu...current issue on education okay	Asking for clarification of the question asked

Table 1 (***Continued***)

No.	Excerpts	Reasons for apologising
11	IP3: So, in which skill do you think you are going to use in MS team? Faiz: Aaa...**pardon?** Err... IP3: Which skill that you think it is appropriate for you to use MS team? Faiz: Which skill? meaning to say IP3: Reading, writing, speaking Faiz: Oh...oh. Aaa...i might...i might...i might be using speaking. I might aaa...use microsoft team aaa...to conduct speaking IP3: I see, okay	Lack of understanding/ focus/ inaudibility issue
12	IP2: Actually how do you...how much do you want to know about your students in order to be most helpful to them? Ira: **Sorry?** IP2: [How close are you with them?]	Lack of understanding/ focus/ inaudibility issue
13	IP1: Which year are you now in your master's degree program? Shahrul: Yes, **sorry?** IP1: Which year...which year are you now in master's degree program? Shahrul: Ohh...ohh.	Lack of understanding/ focus/ inaudibility issue

The next discussion is how the apologetic expressions help in maintaining harmony in communication which is the third objective of this study. As mentioned in the earlier part of this paper, Brown and Levinson's face concept [8,9] highlights how social power and social distance shapes language choices. In the context of the current study, the respondents were Malay ethics in a country where Islam holds the position of the official religion. While Islam could be embraced by any ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Malays are generally regarded as Muslims. Under Article 160(2) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, the legal definition of a "Malay" requires three simultaneous conditions namely professing the religion of Islam, habitually speaking the Malay language and conforming to Malay custom. Since professing Islam is an explicit constitutional requirement for Malay status, an ethnic Malay is legally presumed to be Muslim from birth. Renouncing Islam legally strips a person of their constitutional classification as a Malay, which affects statutory rights tied to Malay status such as land ownership under state Malay Reservation Acts.

Being Malays, as asserted by Omar [23], the individuals are known for their polite disposition including their inherently appropriate and polite language use. In the current study, the use of the words "sorry" and "pardon" as strategic politeness markers appeared to be appropriate and acceptable by the panellists, evident by their positive responses to the candidates' implicit requests for repetitions, clarifications, affirmation and the like. Although this does not measure the candidates' *tawāḍu* (humility), this respectful act aligns with the etiquette of respectfully asking for the listeners' assistance for continued interactions that contribute to harmony in communication; defined in the current study as a mutual comfort of both parties after a communication difficulty is addressed through speakers' the use of apologetic expressions that receives listeners' positive response. Undeniably, the candidates' *tawāḍu* (humility) manifested in their polite utterances gave minimal face-threat to the panellists. This positivity has made both parties feel comfortable with each other, and hence, maintaining harmony in the interactions.

4. Conclusions

As seen in this study, apologetic expressions are performed not solely to admit mistakes but for other reasons such as requesting others to repeat their questions, to seek clarifications, to provide affirmation and the like. Brown and Levinson's framework [4,9] helps explain how the expressions

manage face and reduce the imposition of asking higher-status participants for assistance. Nevertheless, despite being useful politeness markers, apologetic expressions should not be uttered excessively. Researchers warn that although it signals empathetic concern and enhances perceived warmth [24], apologising excessively can backfire by signalling low self-efficacy and reducing perceived status, expertise, and competence [10,14,26]. In an interview context, this act could jeopardise the candidates' success of being hired. Hence, moderation is undeniably the key. From an Islamic ethical perspective, the same observable conduct may be interpreted in relation to tawāḍuʿ and ʿizzah: candidates communicated respectfully while continuing to express their communicative needs with dignity. This reflects the *akhlāq* or character traits essential to Muslim piety [16]. However, the study cannot determine their inner intentions, religious motivation, or moral character from these expressions alone. For language teaching, the findings suggest that L2 speakers should learn clear and respectful ways to request repetition and clarification in high-stakes interaction.

The study is limited to 47 Malay candidates from one public university and a small number of relevant excerpts. Its interpretation is also limited by the absence of participant interviews about intention and by the difficulty of distinguishing hearing, understanding, and attention problems in some sequences. Future research could combine interactional analysis with stimulated recall or participant interviews and an independent coding check. Such evidence would allow stronger conclusions about speakers' reasons while preserving the distinction between observable conduct and inward ethical disposition.

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