

Perception and Performance of Apology in Bengali

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Abstract

Apologies are expressive speech acts that serve to reestablish social harmony. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), such as "Excuse me" and "I'm sorry", is used for ritualistic apology in English. In this paper I first discuss what apologies mean cross-linguistically. Then by conducting a comparative study between monolingual speakers of Bengali and bilingual speakers of Bengali and English, I examine what the Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID) are for apologies in English and Bengali, focusing on ritualistic apologies. I also show the difference in both perception and performance of apologies between the monolingual speakers and the bilingual speakers. Finally, I discuss the reasons that lead to a difference in performance of ritualistic apologies between the monolingual speakers and the bilingual speakers and show that the difference is not the fact that the monolingual speakers apologize less than the bilingual speakers, but that their methods are different.

Key words: Bengali, Apology, Speech Act, Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), Ritualistic Apology

1.1 Introduction

When speaking, we must constantly make choices of many different kinds. How we say something is equally important to what we say. Each language has its own set of rules about what constitutes the correct way of speaking and every speaker is aware of the social norms of their language. This awareness can be shown through the general politeness with which we use language. According to Wardhaugh (2002), politeness itself is socially prescribed and impoliteness depends on the existence of norms of politeness. Apologies are politeness strategies used to remedy and reestablish social harmony. In English “excuse me” and “I’m sorry” are both used as remedies in what Goffman (1971) calls “remedial interchanges”. According to Borkin and Reinhart (1978):

A remedy...is the initial step in a remedial interchange, whereby the offender acknowledges an offense or a potential offense and attempts to make it acceptable, either by giving a mitigating account of his behavior, by apologizing for it, or by asking a potentially offended person permission to engage in what could be considered a violation of that person’s rights. (p.59)

Hence, what are the remedial expressions used in Bengali for the English equivalent of “excuse me” and “I’m sorry”? Could what constitutes an offense and the remedial expressions for that be culture specific? Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989) have commented, with specific reference to apologies, that

...a cross-linguistic study of apologies may well reveal that the notions of offense and obligation are culture specific and must, therefore, become an object of study in themselves. (p.180).

In this paper, I first discuss what apologies mean cross-linguistically. I then examine what the Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFID) are for apologies in English and Bengali. I also do a comparative study between two groups of people: one group

consisting of people who are monolingual Bengali speakers with no exposure to the English language or western culture¹, and another group consisting of people who are bilingual speakers of Bengali and English with varying degrees of exposure to western culture to see if there is a difference in both perception and performance of apologies. Finally, I explore which group, the monolinguals or the bilinguals, tend to use more IFIDs when performing the speech act of apologizing.

2.1 Apology

Apologies are expressive speech acts and like other speech acts of thanking, complementing and complaining, apologies also occur post-event. In apologies the speaker is the agent assuming responsibility for the event that requires the apology. According to Bergman and Kasper (1993), “apologies can be defined as compensatory action to an offense in the doing of which S was casually involved and which is costly to H.” (p.82). Holmes (1990), on the other hand, gives a broader definition:

An apology is a speech act addressed to B’s face-needs and intended to remedy an offense for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and B (where A is the apologizer, and B is the person offended). (p.159)

Thus, an apology is a remedial interchange that serves to reestablish social harmony.

2.1.1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)

According to Searle (1969), the utterances we use to perform different kinds of acts are locutions, and illocutionary acts are expressions of locutions. Apology is one kind of illocutionary act. All illocutionary acts have an illocutionary force. The words that are used to perform the illocutionary acts are known as Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID). The most common IFIDs used to perform the speech act of apologizing in English are: “excuse me”, “I’m

sorry”, “I apologize”, “forgive me”, “I regret”, “pardon me” and “I’m afraid that” (Holmes 1990).

2.1.2. Substantive Apologies vs. Ritualistic Apologies

Bergman and Kasper (1993) further categorize apologies into two types: substantive apologies and ritualistic apologies. According to them, substantive apologies are “those redressing actual damage inflicted on the addressee, sometimes including an offer of material compensation” (p.82). Examples of English IFIDs for substantive apology are “I’m sorry”, “I apologize”, “forgive me”, “I regret” (Holmes 1990). Bergman and Kasper define ritualistic apologies as “those redressing virtual offenses, which are remedied by the sole offering of an apologetic formula” (p.82). According to Borkin and Reinhart (1978) the function of “excuse me” is “a formula to remedy a past or immediately forthcoming breach of etiquette or other light infraction of a social rule” (p.61). Thus ritualistic apology is the usage of a certain word or phrase to remedy a situation caused by an offense of low severity, and in English, “excuse me” is an IFID used for ritualistic apology (Bergman & Kasper 1993; Borkin & Reinhart 1978; Holmes 1990).

“I’m sorry” is another IFID used in English for ritualistic apologies (Bergman & Kasper 1993; Borkin & Reinhart 1978; Holmes 1990). But in Borkin and Reinhart’s (1978) analysis “I’m sorry” is used in a wider range of contexts, especially “in remedial interchanges when a speaker’s main concern is about a violation of another person’s right or damage to another person’s feelings” (p.61). It is thus evident that though “excuse me” is used only for ritualistic apologies, “I’m sorry” can be used both for ritualistic and substantive apologies.

The question now arises, what words, or phrases, or formulae do Bengali speakers use when they want to use ritualistic apology terms, such as “excuse me” or “I’m sorry”? In this paper I intend to focus on the perception and performance of these ritualistic apologies in Bengali.

3.1. Methodology

To conduct a successful research, the informants were engaged in different types of questionnaires and conversations to elicit data.

3.1.1. Informants

Two groups of informants were selected. One group of monolingual speakers of Bengali (ML) consisted of fifteen males and fifteen females ranging from ages 15 to 75. They were mostly the uneducated people from the Lower Class of Bengali society who had little or no access to the English language. This group was chosen for their lack of knowledge of the English language as it was assumed that the data received from this group would show the perception and performance of apologies in Bengali without any influence from English. Thus, this group was selected to study how the lack of knowledge of English led to their perception and performance of apologies in Bengali.

The other group of bilingual speakers of Bengali and English (BL) consisted of fifteen males and fifteen females ranging from ages 25 to 61. They were educated² people from the Upper Middle and Upper Class of Bengali society who had either traveled or studied in an English speaking country. This group was selected to study whether their knowledge of English influenced their perception and performance of apologies in Bengali.

3.1.2. Instruments

Data were collected by means of three questionnaires. The Assessment questionnaire included 10 items, each of which specified a different offense context (refer to Appendix 1 for a sample). Informants were asked to rate these contexts on a 5-point rating scale for a variety of factors (severity of offense, offender's obligation to apologize, likelihood for the apology to be accepted, offender's face loss, social distance and dominance)³.

The informants were also given 10 Dialog Construction (DC) questionnaires which included the same offense contexts as the

Assessment questionnaire. Informants were asked to supply both the offender's and the offended person's turn (refer to Appendix 2 for a sample).

The two questionnaires included the following contexts:

1. A and B are friends. A has had an accident with the book borrowed from B. (Ruined Book)
2. A and B are friends. A borrowed a prayer mat from B and burnt a corner. (Burnt Prayer Mat)
3. At a staff meeting, teacher A corrects teacher B's grammar. (Correction)
4. At a staff meeting, teacher A accuses teacher B of being a poor teacher. (Poor Teacher)
5. At an office, a junior colleague forgets to pass on a message to a senior colleague. (Message Low-High)
6. At an office, a senior colleague forgets to pass on a message to a junior colleague. (Message High-Low)
7. At a restaurant, a customer changes his mind after the order has already been taken. (Order Change)
8. At a restaurant, a waiter brings the wrong order. (Wrong Order)
9. A professor miscalculates a student's final paper and fails the student. (Failed Student)
10. A student forgets a book he was supposed to return to his professor. (Borrowed Book)

The third questionnaire given to the informants consisted of five short questions which required them to answer from personal experience. They were given short scenarios (see Appendix 3 for sample) and asked how they would respond in the given situation. These questions were created to elicit what IFIDs the informants used in Bengali, whether there was a preference between Bengali and English IFIDs, and if they did not use IFIDs, what expressions did they use instead.

All three questionnaires given to the informants were in Bengali.

4.1. Data collection and analysis

The analysis, after reading through all the information gathered from the completed questionnaires, presented an overall picture of the perception of apology in Bengali and also the IFIDs that were most commonly used.

4.1.1. Data collected from the DC questionnaire and the short questions

Both the DC questionnaire and the short questions (please refer to Appendix 2 & 3) were given to the informants to test their production of apologies when the speakers were speaking in Bengali. The scenarios given in questions 1-3 in the short questions were to illicit the Bengali IFID for “excuse me”. Neither the MLs, nor the BLs used any particular word or phrase in Bengali to express “excuse me”. In situations that required “excuse me”, the MLs either used *bhai shoren* (“brother/sister, move” or “brother/sister, let me pass”), *ektu dekhi* (roughly translates to “a little space please”), and *eije shunen* (“listen to me”). As for the BLs, most of them used the English IFID “excuse me” in all three scenarios.

For the Bengali IFID for “I’m sorry”, after analyzing the data it seems that the phrase *kichhu mone niyen na* (“do not take it to heart”) is the nearest form of “I’m sorry” in Bengali for the MLs. The other forms that were also found are *maaf kore den* (“forgive me”) and *khoma kore den* (“forgive me”). Both the MLs and the BLs seem to make a distinction between *maaf* (“forgive me”) and *khoma* (“forgive me”). They seemed to use *khoma* only when they considered the offense to be severe.

One striking difference between the MLs and the BLs was in their choice of IFIDs. The MLs never used any English IFIDs and the BLs almost always used the English IFIDs.

4.1.2. Data collected from the Assessment questionnaire

The Assessment questionnaire (please refer to Appendix 1) was given to the informants to test their perception of apology as a speech act in Bengali. This questionnaire was used to understand how the MLs and the BLs viewed the offense contexts.

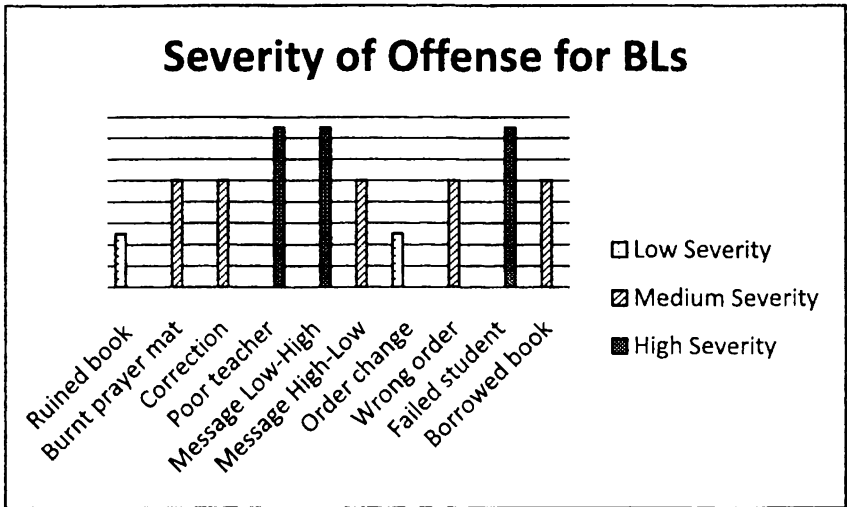


Fig.1: Severity of Offense for Monolingual Speakers of Bengali

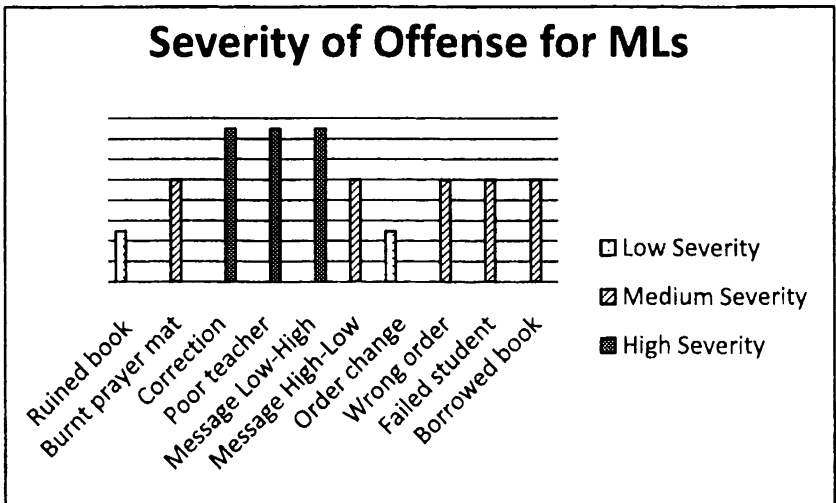


Fig.2: Severity of Offense for Bilingual Speakers of Bengali and English

4.1.3. Severity of offense for MLs and BLs

From the data collected through the Assessment questionnaire (see Fig. 1 and 2), it seemed that only Order Change and Ruined Book were perceived as light offenses by both the MLs and the BLs. Medium Severity was assigned by the MLs to offenses such as Borrowed Book, Burnt Prayer Mat, Wrong Order, Failed Student and Message Low-High. Whereas the BLs assigned Medium Severity to offenses such as Borrowed Book, Burnt Prayer Mat, Wrong Order, Correction and Message Low-High. The Severest offenses for both groups were Poor Teacher and Message High-Low. Even though for the BLs Failed Student was a High Severity offense, it was only of Medium Severity to the MLs. And where Correction was a High Severity offense for the MLs, it was only of Medium Severity for the BLs.

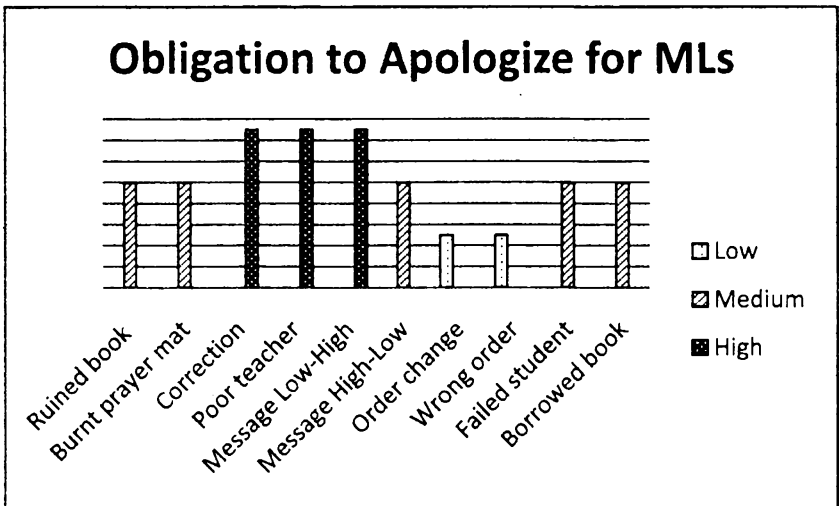


Fig.3: Obligation to Apologize for the Monolingual Speakers of Bengali

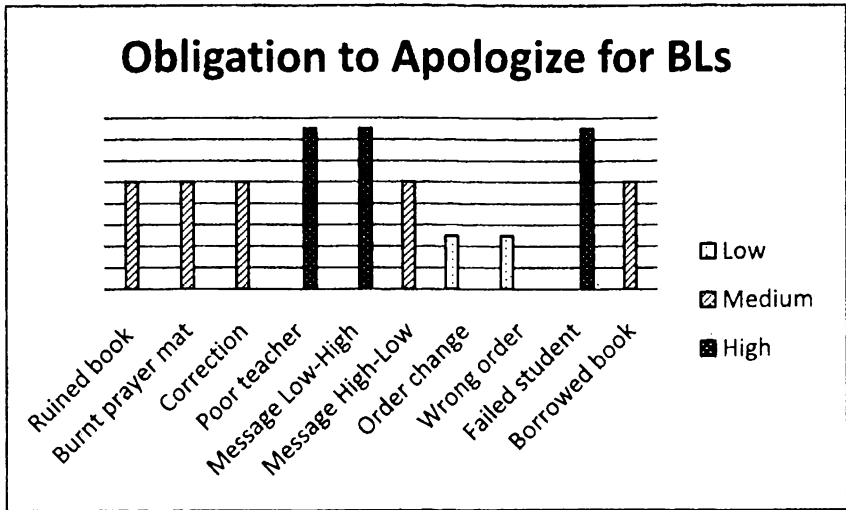


Fig.4: Obligation to Apologize for the Bilingual Speakers of Bengali and English

4.1.4. Obligation to apologize for the MLs and BLs

For both groups Order Change and Wrong Order were rated low on Obligation to apologize (see Fig. 3 and 4). A consistent relationship that was discernible between Obligation and Severity was the more severe the offense, the greater the obligation was to apologize. But overall for all informants the Obligation to apologize received a high rating irrespective of the Severity of the offense.

For all informants the Likelihood of apology Acceptance was also quite high. The only cases where it received a low rating was when there was a discernible social distance between the two interlocutors. This was found in Message Low-High and Borrowed Book, where the offender was perceived to be lower in status to the addressee. In cases such as these, the offender received a high rating on Obligation to apologize but a low rating on the Acceptance of the apology. Whereas in a situation that required a person of higher status to apologize to a person of lower status (e.g. Message High-Low, Failed Student) the Likelihood of the apology Acceptance was very high.

For both groups all offense contexts were perceived as involving medium or high damage to the offender's face. It was only the female BLs who found the offender to gain face by apologizing when the offenses were Ruined Book and Burnt Prayer Mat and for the informants these offenses were either of Medium or Low Severity (See Fig.2).

5.1. Findings and discussion of the study

The three questionnaires given to the two groups of informants were designed to illicit both the perception and the performance of ritualistic apology in Bengali. Below is a discussion of the findings.

5.1.1. Apology performance of the monolingual (ML) speakers of Bengali

The most common form of IFID used by the MLs was *kichhu mone niyen na* ("do not take it to heart") and the next most common form was *maaf kore diyen* ("forgive me"). *Khoma kore diyen* ("Forgive me") was found in only two instances: in case of offenses that were deemed highly severe. None of the MLs used the English IFIDs in any of the DCs.

One interesting fact was that the ML male informants tended to use more IFIDs when apologizing than the ML female informants. 75% of the ML female informants did not use any IFIDs in any of the DCs and the rest of the ML female informant also used it sparingly and only in a few of the instances. Those who did not use any IFIDs performed an apology by simply admitting their offense, or by self-blame. Even though the male informants used IFIDs 90% of the time, the times where they did not use any IFIDs (in case of low severity offenses), they also performed the apology by admitting their offense or by self-blame.

5.1.2. Apology performance of the bilingual speakers of Bengali and English

The most common form of IFID used by the BLs was the English IFIDs "I'm sorry" and "excuse me", and the second most common

forms were the Bengali IFIDs *kichhu mone niyen na* (“do not take it to heart”) and *maaf kore diyen* (“forgive me”).

All of the BL male informants used the English IFID “I’m sorry” much more so (90%) than they used either of the Bengali IFIDs *kichhu mone niyen na* (“do not take it to heart”) or *maaf kore diyen* (“forgive me”). One 37 year old male informant, who has a PhD from Oxford University and had had the most exposure to English, only used the English IFIDs “I’m sorry” and “excuse me” and never used any of the Bengali IFIDs. This was true even in the case of the female informants. Amongst the BL female informants a 25 year old BL female informant who had had the most exposure to English also used only the English IFIDs and never the Bengali ones and a 27 year old BL female informant who had had a much lesser degree of exposure to English, tended to use more Bengali IFIDs.

5.1.3. Perception and performance of apology in ML and BL

In the performance of apology in Bengali the most striking difference between the MLs and the BLs was the fact that the BLs used IFIDs, be it Bengali or English, in almost every performance of an apology, whereas the MLs hardly used any IFIDs at all. It seemed that to the MLs admitting to the fault or taking on self-blame was an adequate performance of an apology. This has led me to conclude that as the BLs had access to more types of IFIDs, i.e. both Bengali and English IFIDs, they tended to use them more often.

I then noticed that another discernible difference in the performance of the two groups was that the BLs almost always used English IFIDs and the MLs Bengali IFIDs. To understand this difference in the performance of the two groups, I looked at the data and found in the DC questionnaires the BLs using “I’m sorry” for offenses of low-medium severity, and *maaf kore diyen* or *khoma kore diyen* (“forgive me”) in only in a few cases when the offense was of high severity.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the MLs only used IFIDs when they considered an offense to be of high Severity. If the offense was of low severity, apology was expressed through self-blame. I have stated before that ritualistic apologies are used in situations where the

offenses are of low severity. From the performance of both the BLs and the MLs it is evident that there is no Bengali IFID for the ritualistic apology IFID “I’m sorry”. *kichhu mone niyen na* (“do not take it to heart”), *maaf kore den* (“forgive me”) and *khoma kore den* (“forgive me”) are all examples of substantive apology in Bengali.

It has been stated earlier that the first three questions in the short question answer (for the questions please refer to Appendix 3) were given to illicit the Bengali IFID for “excuse me”. The BLs speakers used the English IFID “excuse me” in answer to these questions. But none of the MLs used any English or Bengali IFIDs. In situations that required “excuse me”, the MLs either used *bhai shoren* (“brother/sister, move” or “brother/sister, let me pass”), *ektu dekhi* (roughly translates to “a little space please”), and *eije shunen* (“listen to me”). This indicates that there is no Bengali IFID for the ritualistic apology English IFID “excuse me”.

As mentioned earlier, “excuse me” is the IFID for ritualistic apology in English. Also, ritualistic apology is the usage of a certain term to remedy a situation caused by an offense of low severity (Bergman & Kasper 1993; Borkin & Reinhart 1978; Holmes 1990). But the findings for Bengali ritualistic IFIDs suggest that there are no set terms or phrases for the performance of ritualistic apologies in Bengali. This leads me to conclude that there are no ritualistic apology IFIDs in Bengali.

If the performance of the act of apology is measured by the presence of IFIDs then it would seem the MLs do not apologize, but the BLs do. Yet the high ratings on Obligation to apologize on the Assessment Questionnaire that were gathered from both the MLs and the BLs prove otherwise. The monolingual speakers also apologize; it is just that they use a different method as the variety of IFIDs that are at the disposal of the bilingual speakers is not available to the monolingual speakers. Hence, we can safely conclude that both the monolingual speakers and the bilingual speakers perform the same amount of the speech act of apologizing, the only difference being the different linguistic methods they use.

In terms of perception of apology in Bengali, I found no perceptible difference between the MLs and the BLs. The high ratings on Obligation to apologize on the Assessment Questionnaire that were gathered from both the MLs and the BLs show that both groups perceive the offense and the need for a remedy through an act of apology. Also, even though the MLs do not use IFIDs in most cases, admitting to the offense in itself is an act of apology.

6.1. Conclusion

Although there is much that needs to be answered about the apology system in Bengali, it is evident that both the monolingual speakers of Bengali and the bilingual speakers of Bengali and English perform equal amounts of the speech act of apologizing. It has also been shown that Bengali does not have any equivalent IFIDs, such as the English “excuse me” and “I’m sorry”, for performing ritualistic apology. Hence, the difference between the monolingual speakers of Bengali and the bilingual speakers of English is not the fact that the monolingual speakers apologize less than the bilingual speakers, but that they use different methods. As the bilingual speakers have access to the English IFIDs, they can choose to use them; whereas the monolinguals are forced to compensate the absence of Bengali IFIDs for ritualistic apology by resorting to self-blame.

¹ By exposure to the western culture I mean the informants’ knowledge about the norms and etiquettes followed by the majority of the people living in English speaking countries, such as, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and South Africa. This knowledge could have been gained through means of education, media, books etc.

² The minimum level of education was an Undergraduate degree.

³ The Assessment questionnaire and the Dialogue Construction were both structured according to the sample given in Appendix 1 and 2 on page 101-102 of Bergman and Kasper’s (1993) paper “Perception and Performance in Native and Nonnative Apology. (See Reference)

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Appendix 1

Sample item from the Assessment questionnaire

At a friend's home

Nadia and Rima are close friends. Rima had borrowed a book from Nadia. One day Rima was reading the book while eating her meal and the book accidentally fell into a bowl of lentil soup. She is now returning the book to Nadia.

(i) How close are Nadia and Rima in this situation?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 very close very distant

(ii) What is the status relationship between Nadia and Rima?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 Nadia is higher than Rima Nadia = Rima Nadia lower than Rima

(iii) How serious is Rima's offense?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 not serious at all very serious

(iv) Does Rima need to apologize?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 not at all absolutely

(v) How likely is Nadia to accept Rima's apology?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 very likely very unlikely

(vi) Does Rima gain or lose face in this situation?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
 gains face loses face

Appendix 2

Sample item from the Dialogue Construction questionnaire

At a friend's home

Nadia and Rima are close friends. Rima had borrowed a book from Nadia. One day Rima was reading the book while eating her meal and the book accidentally fell into a bowl of lentil soup. She is now returning the book to Nadia.

Nadia: Is everything okay?

Rima: _____

Nadia: _____

Appendix 3

The set of 5 short questions asking the informants to answer from personal experience.

1. Suppose you are walking down a busy street and the person before you suddenly stops in his tracks. How would you ask that person to move so that you may pass?
2. Suppose you went to a shop to buy something and the shop was full of customers and you had to call out to get the attention of the shopkeeper. How would you do it?
3. Suppose your friend is talking to her classmate but you need to get her attention as you have something important to tell her. How would you do that?
4. While walking on the street if you accidentally bump into someone, how would you respond?
5. Suppose you went to a store and bought something and the attendant was taking a lot of time to pack your merchandise, from your experience, in a situation like this would the attendant apologize to you for the delay? If he does, how would he do it? If he does not, then what does he say?