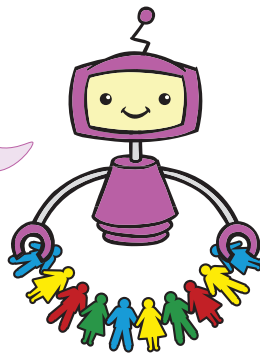


The hardest word

Do you know the song that goes 'sorry seems to be the hardest word'? Sometimes, apologising is very difficult, especially when a representative of one culture is apologising to someone from another culture. Let's learn more about what's involved in saying sorry ...



LINKS TO:

Stage 3, Module 15

Learning Object 4: *Write a farewell speech*

PRIOR LEARNING:

Stage 3

Module 6 Work Sheet 3: *The three musketeers*

Module 13 Work Sheet 6: *All for one*

1 Sorry days

You have already learned about various ways of saying sorry. But have you thought about the various things you might need to say sorry for, or the levels of formality, complexity and sincerity that apologies require in different circumstances?

The reasons for giving an apology, the level of detail you should include, and the level of formality with which you apologise, vary a great deal across different cultures as well as in different situations within a culture.

Oops!

In Australia, we often say sorry when we inconvenience another person in some small way. The apology we give in such a situation is a way of smoothing the edges of our interactions with others.

If you bump into someone while you are walking past them, or step on their toes while dancing, you probably say 'sorry'.

Your voicemail message might include an apology for not being available, saying something like, 'I'm sorry I missed your call'.

These kinds of apologies are simple social niceties and do not usually require a response.

My condolences

Sometimes, English speakers use 'sorry' as an expression of sympathy, such as when writing a condolence letter, or speaking with someone who has recently lost a loved one.



For example:

Turut berduka cita atas wafatnya kakek Anda.

I was so sorry to hear about your grandfather's passing.

This is a quite formal, and often formulaic, type of address. When offering a condolence, you should usually look the person in the eye, and have a serious expression on your face. Often, the person you have expressed your sympathy for will respond with a short, equally formal and formulaic statement of thanks.

Personal apologies

Another kind of apology is a personal apology — the kind you offer a friend, family member or acquaintance when you have done something that has hurt or upset them, even if the hurt was inflicted accidentally.

This kind of apology is usually more detailed, and personal, than a verbal condolence.

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➔ For example:

I'm sorry I ran over your suitcase. I didn't see it in my rearview mirror. I know that it meant a lot to you because your grandmother bought it for you. I do hope you can forgive me.

You might even add, 'What can I do to make it up to you?'

Formal public apologies

Another well-known, though relatively uncommon, form of apology in Australian culture is a formal public apology. A formal public apology is usually issued by a public figure, often on behalf of an organisation. Public apologies have been issued in Australia by large companies, by newspapers, and by both state and federal government representatives.

A formal public apology is usually quite detailed, and may be delivered across a range of formats.

For example, in 2009, both the Premier of New South Wales and the Prime Minister of Australia made formal public apologies to the 'Forgotten Australians'.

The 'Forgotten Australians' are children who suffered abuse and neglect while they were wards of the state, housed in government orphanages and foster homes. The apology made particular mention of the

experiences of about 7000 former British child migrants.

The apologies were delivered in the respective parliaments, as speeches, and published in written form on the governments' website.

Most of the time, when a representative of a group wants to deliver an apology to another group, it is delivered as a speech. Often, there are also letters and ceremonies to accompany the speech.

Political apologies share many of the features of apologies in other forms. They usually include the following features:

- a statement of what the wrongdoing involved
- an acknowledgment of the pain or suffering that was caused by the wrongdoing
- a statement of regret for the wrongdoing
- a statement of an ongoing commitment to a better relationship in the future.

An apology written by a representative of a group also has the following basic features:

- It is written in the collective first person (using 'we', as in 'we are sorry').
- It is written in the present tense, although it often includes sections in the past tense, as well as sections that use auxiliary verbs to indicate actions that will take place in the future.

2 *Saya minta maaf*

Even though *saya minta maaf* (I request your forgiveness) is a standard formal apology in Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesians very rarely express it in a straightforward manner. Because an apology carries the risk of losing one's face, or causing someone else to lose face, Indonesian apologies are usually phrased as a request for forgiveness, rather than statements of wrongdoing.

➔ For example:

Maafkan saya.

Forgive me.

Maafkan kesalahan saya.

Forgive my mistakes.

Whether or not the person committing the wrongdoing apologises, they will lose face: if they do apologise they admit wrongdoing, and if they don't apologise they lose honour. The person they have offended will also lose face if they do not receive an apology. So, the onus is on the recipient of the apology to take the next step and offer forgiveness to restore the relationship. Sometimes, the recipient of an apology will lose face also if they do not respond favourably to the apology.

In Indonesia, especially during *Lebaran* or *Idul Fitri* celebrations, after a month of fasting, people are considered born again and can therefore ask

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and give forgiveness to one another. On Java, and several other islands in Indonesia, these traditional requests for forgiveness are commonly accompanied a *sungkem*: kneeling and pressing one's face onto another's knees. During this gesture Indonesians say,

Maaf lahir bathin or the Arabic expression, *Minal 'aidin wal faizin*.

3 Not drowning, waving

As you have already learned, non-verbal language (such as body language and facial expressions) is a crucial element of communication.

The tone of voice, facial expressions and body language we use when offering an apology add clues about our feelings, and the level of sincerity with which an apology is offered.

The non-verbal language expected when offering an apology can vary a great deal between different cultures and, when used inappropriately, may lead to cultural misunderstandings.

Even when you use the correct words, if your body language does not support what you are saying, you may confuse your listener, or even offend them.

What kind of body language do you associate with being sorry in Australia?

Personal apologies in Australia

When offering a personal apology, most Australians use a low, soft tone of voice. They might sit or stand close to the person to whom they are apologising, and would generally look the other person in the eye while speaking. These non-verbal cues create a sense of intimacy and honesty.

Avoiding eye contact, in particular, is often understood as a sign of insincerity. In some cultures, however, a person offering an apology would bow their head and not meet the other person's eye as a way of indicating their sincerity and humility.

Personal apologies in Indonesia

In Indonesia, when a person is apologising to a friend or family member, they must show remorse. It does not matter whether you say *maaf* or *maafkan semua*

kesalahan saya, if the way you are saying it is not convincing then your apology will not be accepted. In Indonesia, when the friend or family member you apologise to is older than you or someone you respect, you must be careful to use the appropriate form of address, and avoid looking the person in the eye. Looking directly at the person to whom you are apologising is regarded as a sign of defiance. In Indonesia, children are encouraged to shake hands when they apologise to one another.

Public apologies in Australia

When offering a formal public apology, an Australian politician would be expected to address the camera directly, and speak clearly and forthrightly. They would be expected to speak quite formally. Ideally their speech would be moderately, but not overly, emotive. They would also dress formally, probably in a plain or dark suit, rather than in anything very colourful or 'splashy'.

Public apologies in Indonesia

In Indonesia, an apology can be expressed in writing, especially when it is public apology expressed by a government or a company. In this type of apology, elaborate language and formulaic expressions are commonly used. For example, at the beginning of 2012, Garuda Indonesia issued a public apology to its customers after a system upgrade caused an instability and unreliability of their Internet booking system. It is very rare for a government minister or a public figure to express an apology verbally. However, one such apology was issued by Soeharto's eldest daughter at the hospital where her father died in 2008. She offered an apology for what she called her father's mistakes while he was President.

1.2 Have you ever heard a formal public apology delivered by an Australian?

Describe the context and content of the apology, including any non-verbal communication, with particular attention to any features of the apology that you think are specifically Australian.

Hint! If you are not already aware of any formal public apologies delivered in Australia, do some research into apologies offered by state or federal governments.

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1.3 What values, attitudes or beliefs influence the content of the Australian apologies you have described, including the non-verbal communication?

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Exercise 2

Let's think a little more about apologising in Indonesia.

2.1 Describe what you know about the words a personal apology in Indonesia might include, as well as what facial expression or body language an Indonesian person might use while apologising.

2.2 Have you ever heard a formal public apology delivered by an Indonesian person?

Describe the context and content of the apology, including any non-verbal communication, with particular attention to any features of the apology that you think are specifically Indonesian.

Hint! If you are not already aware of any formal public apologies delivered in Indonesia, do some research. Two examples mentioned in this work sheet include Soeharto's daughter's apology of 2008, and an apology issued by Garuda Indonesia in 2012.

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2.3 What values, attitudes or beliefs influence the content of the Indonesian apologies you have described, including any non-verbal communication?

3.3 What cultural misunderstandings might occur because of the differences in expectations about when, why and how to apologise in these two different cultures?

Exercise 4

It is time to think about your personal ethics regarding apologising.

4.1 Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you deserved an apology from someone, but they didn't apologise to you? Describe the background to the situation.

Pay particular attention to why you thought the other person should apologise.

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4.2 What did you do to resolve the situation? Describe your actions or your thinking (if you decided not to take action).

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