

---

# **A Study of Apology Strategies used by Customer Service Officers in Telkomsel Surabaya**

Nadia Narulita Belfas  
Lilla Musyahda

*English Department, Universitas Airlangga*

---

## **Abstract**

Apology is necessary in the public service. Commonly, in the public service, there are customer service officers that have a duty to solve a customer's complaint. Therefore, apology strategies are needed in the public services to face a customer's complaint. This study attempts to analyze the most common type of apology strategies that used by customer service officers of Telkomsel. The objective of this study is to reveal what type of apology strategies that mostly occurs in conversation. This study can contribute further knowledge about apology strategies in public services. This study applies qualitative research method approach. In analyzing the data, the writer uses apology strategies theory that proposed by Trosborg (1995). From the analysis, it was found that the customer service officers in Telkomsel mostly use explanation or account with occurrences 50% in responding customer's complaints. The customer service officers frequently use explanation or account because explanation or account could satisfy the customers and to soften the customer's feelings.

**Keywords:** apology strategies, customer service officers, politeness strategies

---

## **Introduction**

Particular groups of people have different ways of speaking. In social settings, most people usually use various expressions to show politeness and deference to those they know well or even to colleagues they are familiar with. In having conversation with others, people should involve the term Politeness. There are many interactions that should involve the term politeness such as requesting, apology, offering, and many more. One of the interactions that should be paid attention is Apology. People do not easily make apology about something that he or she has done to the others because people should be really careful in apologizing in order to keep the relation between the speaker and the hearer. Apologizing, which is a classic form of politeness, is an obvious conflict avoider as would be such expressions as **you're right, please forgive me, and I was wrong**. In apologizing, people should be polite in order to maintain the hearer's negative face. Apologizing has an important role in the social practice of politeness. According to Watts (2003,p.169) linguistic politeness may be realized by means of both formulaic and semi formulaic utterances. Apologizing is one of the commonly used linguistic and formulaic expressions which carry out indirect and appropriate speech acts on the politic behavior of a social situation. In performing an apology, the speaker acknowledges the addressee's face want not to be offended. Apologizing is face threatening for the speaker and face saving for the addressee. In an everyday life, apology is an important aspect in life to create good communication between people and others. Apologizing is used to appreciate people as well as ourselves. According to Trosborg (1995, p. 375) apology is an action or an utterance which an apologizer can rehabilitate his or her own existence in society. When someone asks for an apology, they can use many ways to express an apology. Apology strategies according to Trosborg (1995,p. 375) are the methods used by individuals to perform the speech act of apology such as statement of remorse and reparation.

Apology is also necessary in the public service. In the public service, complaint is an important for customer service and they must understand with the impact of the customer's perception. Tax et.al (1998) stated that dissatisfied customers can be encouraged to complaint because if a customer feel do not satisfy with the services they will complaint. When the customers start to complaint then the company will

guarantee the risk of losing the customers. The customer service officers in responding the complaint may be performed directly with explicit apology. According to Trosborg (1995) explicit apology it means that the complainees used one of the words that directly shows an apology such as; apologize, sorry, excuse. Moreover, a complainees can respond a complaint indirectly by taking on responsibility or giving explanation. Also, a complainees may find a reason to minimize the degree of the offence. Therefore if the offence is a grave one, a verbal apology may be does not enough to restore the damaged relationship among the customers and customer service officers. According to Goffman (1971) the apologizer's response has a twofold aim; she or he must placate the complainer to restore social harmony and she or he must restore her or his own social status. If the offence is the grave one, a verbal apology may be does not enough to restore the damaged relationship among the customers and customer service officers. Thus apologies are offered to express regret for having offended someone.

In this research the writer used Trosborg (1995) theory that also made a research on politeness strategy particularly the apology strategies. There are eight apology strategies that consist of: Rejection, Minimizing, Explanation or account, Acknowledgment of responsibilities, Expression of Apology, Expression Concern for Hearer, Promise of Forbearance and Offer of Repair. In this study the writer wants to find out what the most common type of apology strategies is delivered by the customer service officers, and to find out why the strategy is used frequently by Telkomsel customer service officers.

The writer also used politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987) because apology included in the negative politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson (1978) sum up human politeness behavior in four strategies such as; bald-on record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off- record.

Research questions:

1. What types of apology strategies used by the customer service officers of *Telkomsel*?
2. Which apology strategy that is mostly used by the customer service officers of *Telkomsel*?

## Method

The method of this study use qualitative method. According to Punch (1998) that qualitative approach is appropriate to be used in conducting research which the object come out naturally in real life. Qualitative as the name indicates, are methods that do not involve measurement or statistics. Participant observation often requires months or years of intensive often requires months or years of intensive work because the researcher need to become accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to assure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon.

In this study, the writer chooses descriptive qualitative method to find out in which apology strategies that the mostly used by customer service officer in *Telkomsel*. The writer chooses to use descriptive qualitative method because in analyzing the apology strategies first the writer collect the data based on apology strategies theory proposed by Trosborg (1995) and then the writer tries to interpret the data in apologizing. *Telkomsel* Surabaya is the location of this research. It is because *Telkomsel* is a reputable company of provider in Indonesia with many customers which have a various complaints. So, it is expected to be an appropriate place in searching and analyzing the problem.

The population of this study is a male customer service officer in *Telkomsel*, the customer service has the same age of 22 years old and the same background of education. The background education of the customer service officers in *Telkomsel* is diploma.

Before recording the data, the writer asks permission to the customer service officer in *Telkomsel* to record their conversation. After asking permission, the writer began recording the data. The writer comes to the *Telkomsel* then immediately recording the conversation between customer service and customer service officer.

After the writer collecting the data of apologizing from 1-26 June 2013, the writer got thirty five conversations. Therefore, the writer would like to analyze the data in apologizing by conducting several steps. First, the writer transcribing the conversation and underline the conversations that contain apologizing. Second, the writer classifying the data in apologizing based on apology strategies proposed by Trosborg (1995).

Thirdly, after classifying the data in apologizing by using Trosborg theory (1995) the writer interpreting the data in apologizing. Fourth, after interpreting the data based on Trosborg (1995) the writer tabulating the data that contain apology strategies used by customer service officers in Telkomsel. The last, the writer counts the number of apology strategies that used and the ones which mostly used by customer service officers of Telkomsel.

## **Result and Discussion**

The writer used this chapter to explain the analysis of the data in details. The analysis is divided into two parts; the findings and the discussion of the findings. The writer put a table of findings that shows the results of customer service officers serves responding complaint by using apology strategies. Thus, by reading the table, the reader can easily figure out the types of apology strategies used by customer service officers. Therefore they can see the frequencies of each type of the strategies used by Telkomsel customer service officers.

All of the eight strategies formulated by Anna Trosborg are used for classifying the data. In order to make the writer easier to analyze, the writer provided the tables below to show the types of apology strategies, which are used by Telkomsel customer service officer. Furthermore, the frequencies of apology strategies occurring in the conversations between the customer service officer and customer are also stated. The findings on the table show apology strategies that the most used by Telkomsel customer service officers. Part of the responses given by customer service officers is presented in bold italic and they are all presented in the context of their respective preceding complaining from the customers.

| No. | Types of Apology Strategies       | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1.  | Rejection                         | 3         | 10%        |
| 2.  | Minimizing the degree of offence  | -         | -          |
| 3.  | Acknowledgement of responsibility | 1         | 3.33%      |
| 4.  | Explanation or account            | 15        | 50%        |
| 5.  | Expression of apology             | 9         | 31%        |
| 6.  | Expression concern for hearer     | -         | -          |
| 7.  | Promise of forbearance            | -         | -          |
| 8.  | Offer of repair                   | 2         | 6.9%       |
|     | Total                             | 30        | 100%       |

From the table, we can see that Explanation or account is the most frequently used strategy by customer service officers in Telkomsel which is 15 or 50% data are identified applying the strategy. Then, the occurrences of rejection strategy is identified three times (3) or 10%, acknowledgement of responsibility that occurs one times (1) or 3.33%, expression of apology that occurs nine times (9) or 31%, and offer of repair that occurs two (2) times or 6.9%. The detail explanation about those apology strategies are presented and discussed in the next subchapter. Then, it is analyzed and interpreted based on Trosborg theory.

### **Explanation or Account**

Data 1:

Cu: “Sekarang kok trouble banget ya kalo telkomsel di daerah barat ini? Kenapa ya? Padahal dulu lumayan lho, paling lumayan di daerah sini gitu lho”

**CSO: “Iya, kami lagi dalam perbaikan soalnya bu, jadi ditunggu aja”**

Conversation above is including implicit explanation, because the customer service officer explains the situation implicitly. The sentence “Iya, kami lagi dalam perbaikan soalnya bu, jadi ditunggu aja” was uttered by customer service officer to show that he did not want to explain more about the problem and he prefers to tell the customer to wait until a problem about repairing the signal is finish.

Data 2:

### **Rejection**

Data 2

Cu: “Kartu saya Halo kok ga bisa buat telpon ya? Apa di blokir?”

CSO: “**Tidak apa-apa Mbak, tidak ada gangguan kok**”

The data above shows that the Cu complaints to the CSO *Telkomsel* provider that her card could not be used. She thinks that her card has been blocked by *Telkomsel*. However, the CSO tells to the Cu that the card works as usual and does not be blocked.

From the data 2 that presented above, the writer identified that the apology strategy used by the CSO is **explicit denial of responsibility strategy**. The identified strategy can be seen from the utterances that utter by the CSO that is “*tidak apa apa mbak, tidak ada gangguan kok*”. In this utterances, we can see that the CSO is explicitly stated that there is no problem with the card. He also stated that he, on *Telkomsel* behalf, do not block the card which means that the card still can be used as usual. Therefore, explicit denial of responsibility strategy suits to this utterance

### Offer of Repair

In some encounters, customer service officers gave more than explanations to solve the adult customers. Therefore the customer service officers used offer of repair.

#### Data 3

Cu: “Sudah 2 minggu speedy saya ga bisa konek. Saya juga sudah lapor, tapi kok tetep ga diperbaiki?”

CSO: “**Nanti kami akan kirim teknisi ke rumah mbak**”

From the finding explain that the most strategies used by *Telkomsel* customer service officer is strategy three (explanation or account). Strategy three is the mostly used because the customer service officer seemed to want to restore all unpleasant situations that happened on them. Therefore, giving explanation and acknowledge responsibility apparently were used in most situations of responding to a complaints.

### Offer of Apology

Cu: “Iya Mbak, tapi saya masih kepikiran. *Telkomsel* membuat saya harus membayar sesuatu yang tidak saya lakukan dan untuk menutupinya disediakan alasan pemaaf berupa diskon besar-besaran”

CSO: “**Iya dengan ini saya mohon maaf ya Pak, karena hal ini diluar kendali saya, jadi saya hanya bisa buat laporan pengaduan untuk Bapak**”

The data above shows that the Cu has a problem with the billing. His billing is up to a billion even though he feels that he seldom uses the internet. He is upset because he should pay a lot of money even though he has never done and then *Telkomsel* prepare a discount for repaying it. In responding the Cu's complaint, the CSO make a complaint report for the Cu. In this situation, the Cu still can not accept the mistake that *Telkomsel* makes. Eventually, the CSO hereby apologize for the mistake that caused by the company.

### Conclusion

People have many activities in their social life. They communicate with each other in their activities. Moreover, communication is also used to greet the customers. Misunderstanding sometimes occurs in the communication among people. When misunderstanding occurs, people have to restore the condition with apology. Apology occurs when the speaker has committed an offense to the hearer. Apology is the acknowledgement by the speaker that he or she has committed an offense to the hearer. People have their own ways in apologizing. From the phenomenon, the writer analyzes apology strategy used by the *Telkomsel* customer service officers. The writer uses the apology strategy proposed by Trosborg (1995). There are thirty five data that have been collected by the writer for one month, from June 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 to June 26<sup>th</sup> 2013. The writer uses qualitative approach in conducting this study. The writer chooses qualitative approach because the data that have been collected is in the form of word or sentences. In addition, the writer chooses qualitative approach because qualitative method discusses about social life. The writer conducts this study in the pragmatic field connected to social life. Therefore, the writer chooses qualitative approach.

From the analysis that has been done by the writer, there are thirty utterances that contain apologizing. First, the writer tries to answer the first statement of the problem about what type of apology strategies

that is used by the customer service officers of Telkomsel. In the data, the writer found that the CSO of Telkomsel use six strategies, there are; Rejection, Acknowledgement of Responsibility, Explanation or Account, Expression of Apology, and Offer of Repair.

Secondly, the writer tries to answer the second statement of the problem about which type of apology strategy that is mostly used by the customer service officers of Telkomsel. In the data, the writer found that apology strategy that is mostly used by the customer service officers is explanation or account. The customer service officers of Telkomsel frequently used explanation or account because an explanation or account could satisfy as an 'excuse' for a committed offence and often be enough to restore the complainer's face and to soften the customer's feelings. The aim of explanation or account is for admitting a mistake made by the company and giving explanation of the situation that happened so that the customers will not take further action. The writer concluded that the customer service officers is mostly using explanation or account because the customer service officers want to have a good relationship with the customers.

The writer hopes this research can attract researchers to conduct further study in apologizing in the pragmatic field because pragmatic field is rarely chosen by the researchers. The writer wishes this study may contribute towards the knowledge about apology strategy for other researchers who are interesting in conduct deep analysis about apologizing especially in the pragmatics field. Furthermore, the writer hopes the next writer can develop this research any further with other politeness strategies

## References

- Austin, J. L. 1970. *A Plea for Excuses*. In *Philosophical Papers*. James Opie Urmson and Geoffrey James Warnock (eds), 175-204. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berg, B. L. (1989). *Qualitative Research Methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bergman, M. and G. Kasper. (1993). *Perception and Performance in native and Nonnative apology* in: Gabrielle Kasper and Shonana Blum Kulka. *Interlanguage Pragmatics*, 82-117, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blum-Kulka, S., J. House, & G. Kasper. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Blum-Kulka, S., and G. Kasper. (1993). *Interlanguage Pragmatics*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). *Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena*. In E. Goody, *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-310). Cambridge: University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some language universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, R. (2000). *Introduction to Research Methods*. London: Sage
- Edmondson, W. & J. House. (1981). *Let's talk and talk about it*. München: Urban and Schwarzenberg.
- Ermawati, D. (2010). *Apology Strategies Used by the English Department Students of Airlangga University*. Undergraduate Thesis. Surabaya: Airlangga University.
- Goffman, E. (1971). *Remedial interchanges: Relations in public* (pp. 95-187). New York: Basic
- Julia, F. (2007). *A study of Apology Strategies Used on Telephone Conversation by Male and Female Call Center Agents in Telkom 147*. Undergraduate Thesis. Surabaya: Petra Christian University.
- Punch, K. (1998). *Introduction to Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: Sage.
- Rust, R. (1993). *Customer Satisfaction, Customer Retention, and Market Share*. *Journal of Retailing* Summer 145-146.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge
- Tax, S. S., S. W. Brown, and M. Chandrashekar (1998), *Customer Evaluations of Service Complaint Experiences: Implications for Relationship Marketing*: *Journal of Marketing*, 62 (2), 60-76.
- Trosborg, A. (1995). *Interlanguage Pragmatics. Requests, Complaints and Apologies*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Trosborg, A. and P. Shaw. (1996). *The Handling of complaints in everyday interaction*. Berlin.
- Walliman, N. (2006). *Social Research Method*. London: Sage Publication Ltd.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.