

Reframing Apology Across Cultures: Conceptual Metaphors in Taiwanese Mandarin and Japanese and Implications for AI-Mediated Language Education

Research Overview

This study reanalyzes and reveals apology discourse in Taiwanese Mandarin and Japanese by means of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, reframing AI-generated responses as pedagogical tools for developing learners' metapragmatic awareness via contrastive analysis.

Purpose of Study

Apology is a culturally embedded speech act whose surface forms mask fundamentally different conceptual structures across linguistic communities. While contrastive pragmatics has documented systematic variation in apology strategies, it has largely treated these as surface-level choices rather than reflections of deeper cognitive organization. As AI-generated language increasingly enters educational contexts, this gap becomes consequential: learners may encounter input that appears pragmatically appropriate but lacks culturally grounded conceptual structure that native speakers rely on to interpret sincerity, deference, and relational intent.

Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005) and Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2017), this study reexamines existing discourse completion task (DCT) data collected from native speakers of Taiwanese Mandarin (TM) and Japanese, as well as AI-generated responses from ChatGPT. Cultural schemas such as *wa* 'harmony' in Japanese and *mien-tzu* 'face' in TM do not merely influence politeness preferences—they organize the conceptual structure through which speakers understand what an apology is and what it should accomplish.

Three interrelated questions guide the analysis: (1) What conceptual metaphors organize apology behavior in each cultural context? (2) Do ChatGPT responses reflect culturally grounded metaphorical reasoning or default to metaphorically inert politeness formulae? (3) What pedagogical implications follow for cross-cultural communicative competence and AI-assisted language learning?

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative reanalysis design. The original dataset comprised structured DCT responses from 30 native TM speakers and 30 native Japanese speakers across three informal and three formal apology scenarios, designed to vary systematically in power distance and social

familiarity—for instance, apologizing to a close friend versus a workplace superior. AI-generated responses were elicited from OpenAI’s GPT-4 (March 2024) via zero-shot prompting in Mandarin, Japanese, and English without role-specific framing. All responses were re-coded through a CMT lens, with linguistic indicators—including lexical choices, syntactic constructions, honorific patterning, and discourse-level elaboration—examined for evidence of underlying source-target mappings. Coding categories were theoretically derived from Kövecses (2005) and cross-referenced with cultural schema literature on *wa* and *mien-tzu*, applied in parallel across all three speaker types to enable systematic comparison of metaphorical instantiation across human and AI-generated discourse.

Results and Discussion

Analysis identifies two culturally distinct conceptual metaphors structuring apology behavior. In Japanese, the target domain APOLOGY maps onto the source domain of PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL DIMINISHMENT: the apologizer is construed as an entity that must reduce itself in size and status, with the apology act functioning as a gesture of self-lowering rather than relational negotiation. This mapping is linguistically instantiated through honorific degradation—as in (Ex. 1) “申し訳ございません,” whose semantic content literally encodes the speaker’s inability to justify their existence before the offended party—alongside the systematic suppression of personal explanation and the use of fixed, context-independent formulae.

In TM, the target domain APOLOGY maps onto RELATIONAL REPAIR: the relationship between speaker and hearer is construed as a damaged object, and the apology functions as a repair tool whose effectiveness depends on the quality of materials deployed—namely, contextual elaboration, emotional transparency, and forward-looking commitments. Expressions such as (Ex. 2) “我不是故意的” ‘I did not mean it’ and (Ex. 3) “我會負責到底” ‘I will take full responsibility’ instantiate the mapping between repair materials and apologetic sincerity.

ChatGPT responses remain lexically polite but metaphorically inert across all three languages and both formality levels. The model replicates surface politeness markers without instantiating the source-target mappings that give those markers cultural meaning. These patterns reveal that current large language models operate at the level of linguistic form rather than conceptual structure. As such, they cannot serve as reliable models of culturally situated pragmatic behavior.

These findings speak directly to the conference theme of bridging cultures and co-creating knowledge in education. The culturally grounded logics uncovered here—*wa*-driven self-diminishment in Japanese and *mien-tzu*-driven relational repair in TM—represent forms of local knowledge that risk being flattened when learners rely primarily on AI tools that prioritize surface fluency over conceptual depth. Rather than positioning AI as a provider of cultural knowledge, pedagogical design might reframe it as a contrastive instrument: teachers can design tasks in which learners compare AI-generated apologies side by side with native speaker responses, identifying where the AI output feels polite yet hollow and articulating why. This process of guided metapragmatic reflection makes cultural conceptual metaphors explicit and discussable, transforming AI's limitations into a pedagogical resource. Future research might examine how CMT-informed contrastive instruction can support learners' pragmatic sensitivity across professional and intercultural contexts, contributing to the integration of local cultural knowledge into global educational design.

Keywords

conceptual metaphor, apology strategies, cross-cultural pragmatics, AI language education, discourse completion task