

# Politeness Strategies

## Apology Strategies by Japanese College Students

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An experiment was conducted with Japanese college students to analyze the strategies of apologies. This was to examine negative aspects of face threatening acts identified by Brown and Levinson. It is also to compare with the results of research investigated by Janet Holmes, mainly focusing on apology strategies in gender differences from New Zealand corpus. Questionnaires were distributed to ask how to apologize when they were thirty minutes late meeting someone. Three variables were designed in the procedures: gender difference (male vs. female), interaction (with same sex vs. with opposite sex), and relative power (student vs. professor). Four typical patterns were identified in the results - explicit expression of apology, explanation, acknowledgement of responsibility, and promise for forbearance. The use of some strategies indicates the significant implications of gender differences and culturally different views, though apparent gender differences were not clearly evident in apology strategies.

### 1. Introduction

Language goes with culture, and the one should be taught in the context of the others. It is, however, almost impossible for language teachers to grasp every cultural connotation of language without actual experiences of staying in the different cultures. More and more cultural empirical studies should be undertaken to enable language teachers to expand their perception of language in a cultural context. My series of

experiments with Japanese college students concerning politeness strategies demonstrates how speech acts such as compliments, invitations, and apologies interact with cultural norms and values in the target language country. This will hopefully help the purpose above.

We often hear the claim that women are more polite than men. To evaluate our response to this, we have to take account of what politeness is, which qualities we are comparing and in which context we are discussing. While many articles and books concerning gender differences in politeness have been published, I would like to discuss this problem, focusing on the definition and analysis of linguistic politeness. There are many linguistic features to compare the politeness in terms of gender differences such as the frequency of hedge expressions, hesitation markers, tag questions, adapting a gentle tone of voice, etc. Lakoff (1975, 1977, 1979) has claimed that women are more polite than men, using more tag questions, hesitation markers and 'trivializing' adjective, though Lakoff's views are criticized owing to the lack of empirical research.

Politeness originally indicates consideration to the hearer (henceforth referred to as H) that the speaker (henceforth referred to as S) shows in order to maintain smooth mutual communication. Not only message to be conveyed but also the way of expression is very important in daily communication. Brown and Levinson (1978) propose that politeness is universal in language usage, associated with assumptions about 'face'—the individual's self esteem. Positive face satisfies the positive desire to be appreciated and approved, while negative face is the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions. Strategies employed to avoid or minimize the face threatening acts (FTA) are described as politeness strategies (1978).

This paper, focusing on gender differences, demonstrates the strat-

egies Japanese college students employ when they apologize to others based on the weightiness of scale suggested by Brown and Levinson.

## **2. Politeness Strategies**

### **2.1. Positive Face and Negative Face**

The concept of politeness has attracted a lot of attention in sociolinguistics. Lakoff (1975), Brown & Levinson (1978), and Leech (1983) propose various politeness strategies assuming that politeness is universal in language. The politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson are accepted as the most comprehensive of the three.

As mentioned before, Brown and Levinson define 'face' as basic wants that everyone knows every other person's desires. It has two components: negative face and positive face. The former indicates the want of every member that his or her actions would not be impeded by others. For example, it indicates the desires that his or her territories are not impeded by others or his or her actions are not controlled by others' directions or orders. The latter indicates the want of every member that his or her wants would be desirable to at least some others. It includes the desire to be understood, approved, liked or admired. For example, their goals, possessions, and achievements are thought to be desirable by others. The acts that threaten the face (the FTA) can be potential offensiveness to impede mutual social interaction. In our daily life, the FTA is avoided or minimized at least, even if it happens.

Brown and Levinson suggest positive politeness is directed toward the positive face of H, the positive self-image that he or she claims. Potential FTA is minimized by assuring that S wants at least some of H's wants. Negative politeness is oriented toward redressing H's negative face, using

avoidance-based strategies such as formality and restraint. The potential FTA is minimized by assuring that S will not interfere with H's freedom of action.

## 2.2. Social Distance and Power

Brown and Levinson (1978) attempt to measure the weightiness of the offense in their assessment of an FTA as follows: i. The 'social distance' (henceforth referred to as D) of S and H ii. The relative 'power' (henceforth referred to as P) of H and S iii. The absolute ranking (henceforth referred to as R) referring to the relation of the particular culture.

Brown and Levinson's model suggests that social distance is the social dimension of similarity and difference within which S and H stand, based on an assessment of the frequency of interaction and the reflex of social closeness. The increase in social distance between H and S will be assessed heavily in FTA. Wolfson (1988) maintains that the two extremes of social distance—minimum and maximum—seem to show very similar behavior. This signifies that compliments, for example, happen between speakers who are neither strangers nor intimates because they need solidarity to support each other.

Brown and Levinson's model defines  $P(H, S)$  as the degree to which H can impose his own plan and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and his own self-evaluation. It signifies that greater power differences between speaker and hearer will show more serious FTA. Though the social distance and relative power are both important sociological variables that interact with each other in the assessment of an FTA, cultural dimension also plays an important role in the assessment. Cross-cultural data should be analyzed from a variety of situations, for social and contextual factors like distance, power and ranking. Tanaka and

Tanaka (1996) suggest that in Japan, where lateral relationships are valued highly, many strategies and rules are employed to keep a distance with higher P. On the other hand, in the U. S. A., where equal relationships are more respected, a lot of strategies are employed to shorten mutual distance.

### **2. 3. Apologies and Gender Differences**

Apologies are mainly negative politeness to remedy the offense to H'S FTA by S. It is also simultaneously positive politeness to remedy the loss of S's positive face by the act of apology to H. Goffman (1971) referred to apology as a remedy, the essential element in remedial interchange. Holmes (1995) also describes the function of apologies as providing a remedy for an offense and restore social equilibrium or harmony (cf. Edmondson 1981, Leech 1983).

In addition to the weighting factors proposed by Brown and Levinson —S, P and R, Holmes (1995) suggests gender differences would also be a crucial factor to analyze the types and seriousness of politeness. She summarizes that women and men may regard apologies differently. Her research suggests that women tend to use apology strategies that focus on the harmony of the relationship, while men tend to use strategies that focus on the apologisee's loss of face and the resulting status imbalance. Women employ most apologies to female friends, while men employ apologies to most socially distant woman and least to equals of the same sex. Though Holmes cites extensive data from her New Zealand corpus, there were statistically insufficient results to prove gender differences in politeness strategies.

The following research questions will be investigated relating to apology strategies :

- a. What are characteristic features of apology strategies in Japanese

male and female college students?

- b. Are there any differences identified in gender difference (male vs. and female) and relative power (student vs. professor)?
- c. Are there any cultural differences identified, compared with Holmes' research in New Zealand?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Subjects**

The subjects comprised of 180 students (84 male, 96 female) who were randomly selected from undergraduates at a private university in Ehime Prefecture. They ranged in age from 18 to 20 years old. Their majors are English literature, business administration, economics and law. Most of the students come from the same prefecture or neighboring prefectures. The city with a population of approximately 470,000 has a rather conservative atmosphere in politics and education.

#### **3.2. Procedure**

Questionnaires written in Japanese concerning apologies are distributed to the subjects in four classes. The questionnaires have two forms: one for male students, the other for female students. For male respondents, a male name is given to the apologizer, while for female respondents a female name is given to the apologizer.

The subjects were given about ten minutes to answer the questions in Japanese. Prior to this, pre-questionnaires had been conducted on 120 students to determine which situation is the most appropriate for the subjects. The most popular situation selected for apologizing was time: the speaker arrives at the appointed time thirty minutes late. Three variables are included in the design: sex (male vs. female), relationship

between the apologizer and the person who was offended (same sex vs. opposite sex), relationship between the apologizer and the person who was offended (student vs. professor), making a total of eight combinations (2x2x2). A discourse completion system was adopted in the questionnaires. The respondents were asked to write freely how they would apologize after reaching a restaurant thirty minutes late.

### 3.3. Results

Four typical apology strategies were identified from the respondents' answers regardless of the gender differences: A. Explicit expression of apology B. Explanation C. Acknowledgement of responsibility D. Promise of forbearance

Table 1 The Analysis of Apology Strategies and Percentages

<b>A. Explicit Expression of Apology</b>				
1. An expression of regret: e.g. I am sorry (gomennasai). I am very sorry (hontouni gomen). Sorry, sorry (gomen, gomen).				
Male respondents	to male friend: 47.8	to female friend: 47.9	to male professor: 63.1	to female professor: 74.0
Female respondents	to male friend: 58.8	to female friend: 51.8	to male professor: 61.1	to female professor: 62.9
2. A request for forgiveness: e.g. Forgive me (yurushite).				
Male respondents	to male friend: 4.5	to female friend: 5.6	to male professor: 0.8	to female professor: 0
Female respondents	to male friend: 1.4	to female friend: 1.8	to male professor: 0	to female professor: 0
<b>B. Explanation: e.g. I overslept. Traffic was heavy. I lost my way. I remembered a wrong time (place).</b>				
Male respondents	to male friend: 32.1	to female friend: 25.0	to male professor: 28.7	to female professor: 29.8
Female respondents	to male friend: 35.8	to female friend: 38.1	to male professor: 33.6	to female professor: 32.2
<b>C. Acknowledgement of Responsibility</b>				
1. Accepting the blame: e.g. It's my fault (watashino fuchui deshita). I was wrong (warukatta). I didn't mean to (konna hazudewa).				
Male respondents	to male friend: 5.2	to female friend: 2.8	to male professor: 1.6	to female professor: 1.8
Female respondents	to male friend: 0	to female friend: 0	to male professor: 0	to female professor: 0
2. An offer of repair/redress: e.g. The dinner's my treat (ogoruyo). I will make it up for you (kariwo kaesu).				
Male respondents	to male friend: 9.0	to female friend: 15.3	to male professor: 1.6	to female professor: 0
Female respondents	to male friend: 2.0	to female friend: 6.5	to male professor: 0	to female professor: 0
<b>D. Promise of Forbearance: e.g. I promise it won't happen again (kondokara kiwo-</b>				

tsukemasu). I promise I won't be late next time (tsugikara okurenaiyou ni kiwotsukemasu).

Male respondents      to male friend: 1.5   to female friend: 3.5   to male professor: 4.1   to female professor: 3.5  
 Female respondents   to male friend: 2.0   to female friend: 1.8   to male professor: 5.4   to female professor: 4.9

As shown in Table 1, the majority of both male and female respondents used expressions of regret, 'gomennasai' or 'suimasen' to their friends, or the more polite 'moushiwakearimasen' (literally unexcusable) to their professors. Very few requests of forgiveness such as 'kanbenshite', 'yurushite' were used, especially to professors. The repetition of the word of 'sorry' was frequently found in female respondents. There were various reasons given for being late (B). The explanation of unavoidable situations such as 'because of my family', 'because of my poor physical conditions' were peculiar to the answers to professors. As for the acknowledgement of responsibility (C), this demonstrated the greatest difference between male and female respondents. A promise of forbearance (D) indicates that respondents would never repeat the same mistake again.

Table 2 indicates the results analyzed in apology strategies. Both

**Table 2 The Percentage of Apology Strategies**

		The Number of A Strategies				The Number of B Strategies			
S \ H		Friends (M)	Friends (F)	Prof. (M)	Prof. (F)	Friends (M)	Friends (F)	Prof. (M)	Prof. (F)
Male		70(52.3%)	77(53.5%)	78(63.9%)	74(64.9%)	43(31.1%)	36(25.0%)	35(28.7%)	34(29.8%)
Female		89(60.2%)	90(53.7%)	91(61.1%)	90(62.9%)	53(35.8%)	64(38.1%)	50(33.6%)	46(32.2%)
Total		159	167	169	164	96	100	85	80

		The Number of C Strategies				The Number of D Strategies			
S \ H		Friends (M)	Friends (F)	Prof. (M)	Prof. (F)	Friends (M)	Friends (F)	Prof. (M)	Prof. (F)
Male		19(14.2%)	26(18.1%)	4( 3.2%)	2( 1.8%)	2( 1.5%)	5( 3.5%)	5( 4.1%)	4( 3.5%)
Female		3( 2.0%)	11( 6.5%)	0( 0%)	0( 0 %)	3( 2.0%)	3( 1.8%)	8( 5.4%)	7( 4.9%)
Total		22	37	4	2	5	8	13	11

male students and female students employed almost similar strategies. Both direct (A) and indirect (B, C, D) strategies are considered to be important functions in apology strategies. According to Holmes (1995), A Strategies are the simplest and least heavily assessed devices, while C and D Strategies are more elaborated, heavily assessed devices. The remarkable feature of both male and female respondents is predominance of their use of A and B Strategies (approximately over 80% in any interaction with P). D Strategies accounts for the lowest number of devices.

In same sex friend to friend relationships, male respondents employed A, and B less than female respondents, though the difference is not outstanding. In male to female friend to friend relationships, male respondents employed B far less than female respondents to male friends. In other words, female respondents to female friends employed B Strategies far more than male respondents to female friends. The most significant differences between male and female respondents are found in the results of C Strategies. The number of female students who employed C Strategies (Acknowledgement of Responsibility) was extremely small —almost none, while the number of male respondents employing thus was comparatively large. It is also worth noticing that there were no female respondents who employed the strategy of 'accepting blame'. In any relationship, male respondents apologized i. e. 'It's my fault.', 'I was wrong.', 'I didn't mean to.', though the number is not large. D Strategies were employed least by both male and female respondents.

In the relationship to the higher P, male and female respondents demonstrated almost the same strategies in interaction with male and female professor. Male and female respondents employed Strategies A and D higher than to friends.

Table 3 Commonly Used Combination of Strategies

Male Students					
(to Male Friends)			(to Female Friends)		
Strategies	Number	%	Strategies	Number	%
A	20	24.4	A	19	22.4
A-A	7	8.5	A-A	8	9.4
A-B	14	17.1	A-B	10	11.8
A-C	4	4.9	A-C	8	9.4
			A-C-A	4	4.7
Others	12	14.6	Others	16	18.8
Subtotal	57	69.5	Subtotal	65	76.5
B	8	9.8	B	6	7.1
B-A	7	8.5	B-A	7	8.2
Others	2	2.4	Others	3	3.5
Subtotal	17	20.7	Subtotal	16	18.8
C	2	2.4	C	1	1.2
C-C	2	2.4	C-C-A	1	1.2
Others	4	5.0	Others	2	2.4
Subtotal	8	9.8	Subtotal	4	4.8
Total	82	100	Total	85	100.1
(to Male Professor)			(to Female Professor)		
Strategy	Number	%	Strategy	Number	%
A	35	42.2	A	37	45.7
A-A	5	6.0	A-A	5	6.2
A-B	13	15.7	A-D	3	3.7
A-B-A	8	9.6			
Others	11	13.2	Others	22	27.1
Subtotal	72	86.7	Subtotal	67	82.7
B	4	4.8	B	6	7.4
B-A	7	8.4	B-A	7	8.6
Subtotal	11	13.3	Subtotal	13	16.0
			C	1	1.2
			Subtotal	1	1.2
Total	83	100	Total	81	99.9

Female Students					
(to Female Friend)			(to Male Friend)		
Strategy	Number	%	Strategy	Number	%
A	23	23.7	A	32	33.0
A-B	22	22.7	A-A	6	6.2
A-B-A	11	11.3	A-B	17	17.5
A-C	4	4.1	A-B-A	11	11.3
Others	14	14.5	Others	11	11.4
Subtotal	74	76.3	Subtotal	77	79.4
B	6	6.2	B	7	7.2
B-A	12	12.4	B-A	12	12.4
Others	4	4.1			
Subtotal	22	22.7	Subtotal	19	19.6
C	1	1.0			
Subtotal	1	1.0			
			D	1	1.0
			Subtotal	1	1.0
Total	97	100	Total	97	100
(to Female Professor)			(to Male Professor)		
Strategy	Number	%	Strategy	Number	%
A	38	40	A	36	37.9
A-A	4	4.2			
A-B	22	23.2	A-B	23	24.6
A-B-A	8	8.4	A-B-A	11	11.6
A-D	4	4.2	A-D	5	5.3
Others	5	5.3	Others	6	6.0
Subtotal	81	85.3	Subtotal	81	85.4
B	5	5.3	B	4	4.2
B-A	8	8.4	B-A	9	9.5
Others	1	1.0	Others	1	1.0
Subtotal	14	14.7	Subtotal	14	14.7
Total	95	100	Total	95	100.1

Table 3 indicates the commonly used combination of each strategy (approximately over 4 percents). However, C and D Strategies are not in

the case because of the low percentage. The data indicates that both male and female respondents employed similar combinations of strategies. The strategies of A and C may be repeated, while B and D occur only once. The predominance of A and B Strategies is remarkable. The repetition of A is frequently found especially in female students. In terms of the order of strategies, the position of A might be used in any position, while D only occurs at initial position.

#### 4. Discussion

As mentioned before, both male and female respondents employed a similar percentage of each apology strategies and the combination of strategies. A and B Strategies are most predominant strategies in any situation of 'time' (thirty minutes late meeting someone). In equal relationship, male respondents to male friends employed fewer A Strategies than female respondents to male friends. It is worth noticing that female students to female friends employed B Strategies much more often than male respondents especially to female friends. Male respondents employed C Strategies much more than female respondents especially to their equals. Various factors might account for those differences. The reason why male respondents might feel unnecessary to apologize well to their same sex is that men think the same sex might understand and accept it. They feel more relaxed and close to the same sex than the opposite sex. Or men might not want their positive face damaged by making their position subordinate to the same sex. Men might feel themselves powerless and self-deprecating especially to the same sex by making apparent apology. However, compensation such as treating dinner saves their positive face. On the other hand, women might think that explicit apology and explana-

tion help mutual relationships effective and smooth. Such acts are not considered to be the FTA. In addition, women might think lateral relationship with female equals is very important to them.

Both male and female respondents showed few differences in interaction with male and female professors in any situation. It indicates that power overrides gender difference: sex differences in professor do not influence them in their perception. In terms of A Strategies, both respondents employed A Strategies to both professors more than their friends. Especially the percentage of male respondents to both professors is a little higher than that of female respondents. It is speculated that A Strategies might be considered highly assessed devices in apology unlike the assumption of Holmes (1995), who suggests that the combination of strategies with explicit apology is heavily measured strategies from the weightiness of scale proposed by Brown and Levinson. However, here in Japan, the apologizer's explanation for the offense may sound like a kind of excuse. Justifying oneself is not considered to be a sincere attitude in most cases. Simple apology, admitting responsibility without making excuse may be considered a faithful attitude especially to P—their seniors. It also helps maintain positive politeness to remedy the loss of the apologizer's face. The higher percentage of A and C Strategies in male respondents might be accounted for by this different cultural dimension. In terms of B Strategies, female respondents employed B Strategies more than male respondents to both professors, though the differences are small. It indicates that the tendency mentioned above is less obvious in female respondents.

## 5. Conclusion

The apology strategies identified in Japanese college students demon-

strated almost the same results as those analyzed from her New Zealand corpus by Holmes. Both male and female respondents basically employed almost the same strategies—A and B predominate. Slight differences between men and women, however, suggest that the perception of apologies might be seen differently between the two, though more statistically significant evidence is needed. While the similar results indicate that politeness is a linguistic universal in language as Brown and Levinson suggest, there were certain clear differences in the data, specifically in relation to apologies to a higher P. This was interpreted as a culturally different view of reducing the FTA of being late. This is a reminder to us, language teachers, that in our study of politeness we cannot ignore cultural norms and values.

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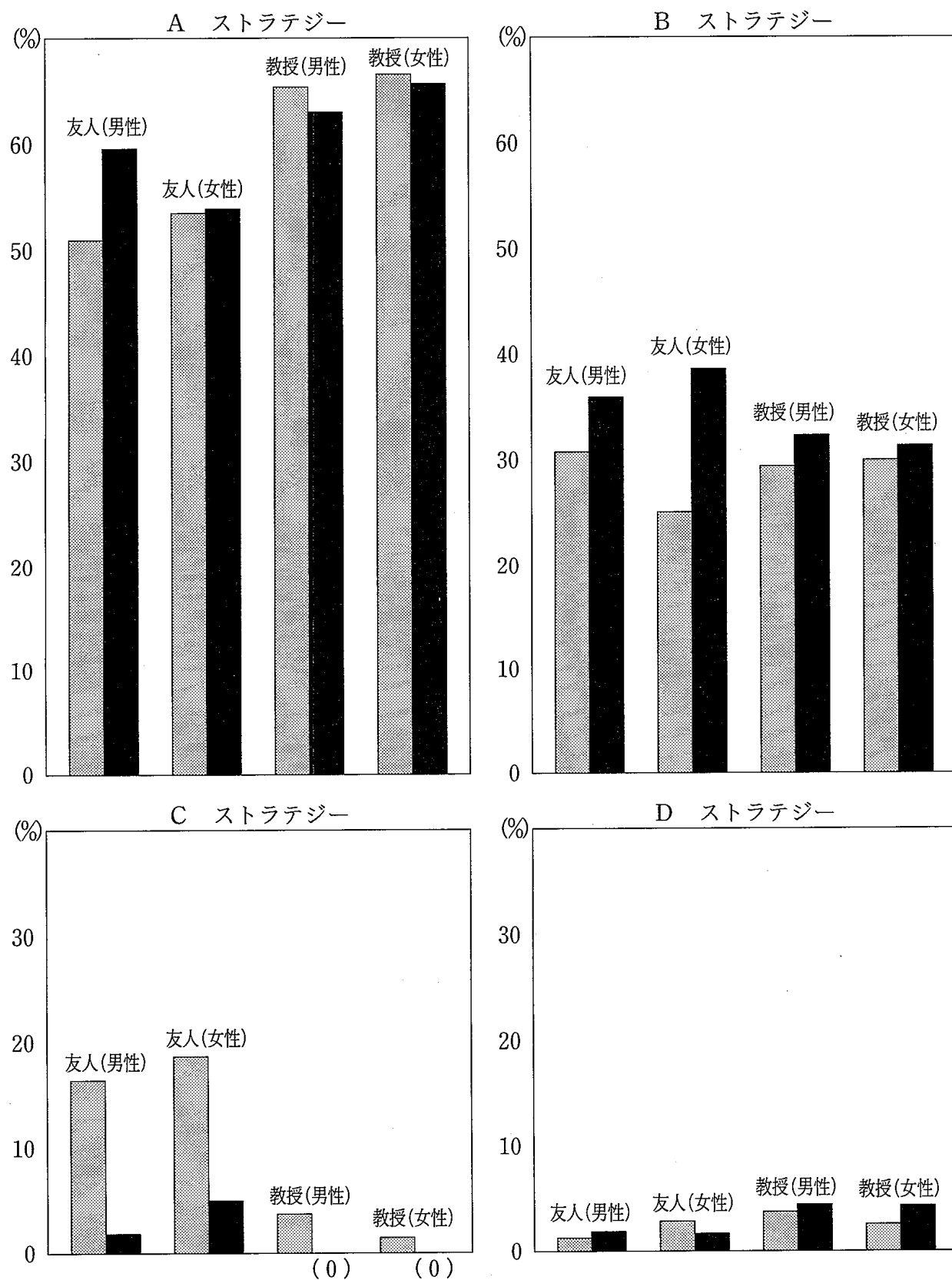
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## Appendix :

## 〈各ストラテジーの分布〉

■ 男性 ■ 女性



## アンケート

## (男子学生用)

1. 山口君は、友達の木村君と土曜日の夕方に、一緒に食事をする約束をしました。ところが、山口君は、約束の時間になってもなかなか現れず、30分遅れてやっと約束の場所に現れました。

(質問) 山口君は、木村君に何と言って謝ると思いますか。自分が山口君になったつもりで、具体的に書いてください。

2. 町田君は、友達の子田みゆきさんと土曜日の夕方に、一緒に食事をする約束をしました。ところが、町田君は、約束の時間になっても、なかなか現れず、30分遅れてやっと約束の場所に現れました。

(質問) 町田君は、みゆきさんに何と言って謝ると思いますか。自分が町田君になったつもりで、具体的に書いてください。

3. 佐々木君は、他のゼミ仲間と一緒にゼミの指導教授山形健太郎教授と一緒に土曜日の夕方に食事をする約束をしました。ところが佐々木君は、約束の時間になってもなかなか現れず、30分遅れてやっと約束の場所に現れました。

(質問) 佐々木君は、山形教授に何と書いて謝ると思いますか。自分が佐々木君になったつもりで、具体的に書いて下さい。

4. 中田君は、他のゼミ仲間と一緒に、ゼミの指導教授光田裕子教授と、土曜日の夕方に食事をする約束をしました。ところが、中田君は、約束の時間になってもなかなか現れず、30分遅れてやっと約束の場所に現れました。

(質問) 中田君は、光田教授に何と言って謝ると思いますか。自分が中田君になった気持ちで、具体的に書いてください。

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