

Analyzing Apology Speech Act Patterns in Arabic Dramatic Discourse: A Case Study of the Series Hawajiz Muba‘thara (*Scattered Barriers*)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze apology speech acts within Arabic dramatic discourse by examining the television series *Scattered Barriers*, with the objective of uncovering communicative linguistic patterns that reflect underlying social and cultural values. The research is grounded in Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) theory of apology speech acts, which serves as the primary theoretical framework. The research problem stems from a notable gap in the literature, namely the scarcity of studies addressing apology in Gulf drama. Employing a qualitative descriptive content analysis design, the study examines all six episodes from the series. Data were collected through meticulous observation and repeated viewing, followed by transcription and analysis using Atlas.ti software, applying a theory-driven inferential methodology. Findings reveal that indirect apologies were the most prevalent strategy, followed by direct apologies, with each pattern linked to specific social contexts and cultural connotations. The results also highlight the role of dramatic context in shaping linguistic strategy selection. These findings suggest that apology in Gulf drama is not merely a dialogic element but a cultural practice that mirrors societal interactions. The study contributes to expanding the application of speech act theory to new contexts and recommends that future research broaden the sample scope and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding.

Keywords: Apology speech acts, television drama, dramatic discourse analysis, direct apology, indirect apology

INTRODUCTION

Language constitutes a comprehensive system of human communication, enabling individuals to exchange ideas and emotions and to construct social relationships. Apology is considered one of the fundamental speech acts that facilitates the repair of strained relationships and the restoration of social equilibrium. Its forms vary between direct and indirect, depending on cultural and social context (Al-Qa'ari, 2023). Recent studies indicate that apology strategies are shaped by cultural and contextual factors, rendering them reflective of prevailing societal values (Rabab'ah & Al-Hawamdeh, 2020). Consequently, analyzing these strategies within dramatic contexts offers deeper insight into how language is employed to navigate conflictual situations that may threaten social cohesion.

Moreover, studies have shown that the formulation of an apology is influenced by variables such as social status, relational proximity, and the nature of the offense (Alaeddin, 2015). Thus, examining apology strategies reveals communicative patterns that embody the norms and values governing social interaction.

The act of seeking forgiveness or pardon plays a central role in dramatic interaction, as it mirrors everyday communicative practices within society. Arabic television productions demonstrate that apology scenes are not merely narrative devices but linguistic and cultural acts imbued with profound social significance (Aseda, 2023). These scenes reproduce authentic communicative patterns, making them fertile ground for linguistic and sociocultural analysis (Hamouda, 2024). Accordingly, studying this phenomenon in drama provides a gateway to understanding the interplay between linguistic structure and the cultural context that reshapes meaning.

In this regard, the act of requesting forgiveness plays a significant role in communication within drama and television series, as it mirrors the dynamics of everyday interaction in Arab society. The series *Scattered Barriers*, a Gulf production directed by Abdulbari Abulkhair in 2022, exemplifies this intersection. The show is characterized by its familial tone and tragic theme, portraying the story of a taxi driver and his family as they endure severe personal turmoil and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. This series was selected for analysis because it contains diverse and significant patterns of apology speech acts that contribute to the restoration of family relationships, while also reflecting multiple forms of communication essential for conflict resolution and the strengthening of familial bonds.

In light of the above, it becomes evident that apology—whether as a linguistic act or a dramatic element—reflects complex social and cultural interactions. Analyzing such acts within dramatic works opens avenues for a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and cultural identity in Arab societies.

Problem Statement

Despite the abundance of studies addressing apology speech acts in Western and Asian contexts, research in this area within Arabic—particularly Gulf—drama remains significantly limited. Recent reviews indicate that most analyses have focused on Western or Asian productions, with near-total neglect of Gulf works that embody distinct linguistic and cultural specificities (Mahzari & Aldossary, 2023). This gap has created a knowledge deficit that hinders understanding of how apologies are represented in dramatic contexts that reflect local values. Accordingly, examining the series *Scattered Barriers* becomes a necessary step toward bridging this gap and enriching the scholarly literature.

Moreover, drama and cinema play a pivotal role in transmitting cultural and social values, with apology scenes serving as reflections of prevailing societal norms. Studies show that artistic productions do more than narrate events—they reproduce authentic communicative patterns laden with cultural meanings (Aseda, 2023). Therefore, any analysis of such scenes must account for the cultural context that shapes both the form and meaning of apologies, especially in Gulf productions that intertwine artistic expression with social identity.

Apologizing becomes even more complex when situated in contexts involving multiple cultural backgrounds, as strategies and interpretations vary according to differing social norms and values. Research suggests that such variation may lead to misunderstandings or divergent interpretations of the linguistic message (Chang & Haugh, 2019). In drama, this complexity is reflected in dialogues between characters from diverse cultural settings, requiring writers and directors to attend to subtle distinctions that may alter the impact of the apology on the audience.

These challenges converge around a clear research gap in the study of apologies within Gulf drama, the need to understand the cultural role of artistic productions, and the intricacies of intercultural interaction. Hence, the significance of the present study lies in its in-depth analysis of *Scattered Barriers*, which contributes to closing the knowledge gap and expanding our understanding of the relationship between language and culture in Arabic dramatic contexts.

Research Aim and Question

This study aims to analyze apology speech acts in Gulf Arabic dramatic discourse through an examination of

the series *Scattered Barriers*, with the goal of identifying the linguistic patterns employed in delivering apologies within a Gulf cultural framework. The research seeks to apply an established theoretical model to understand how these acts are manifested in dramatic texts in ways that reflect social and contextual values. Accordingly, the central research question is: What are the patterns of apology speech acts in the expressions used in the Gulf series *Scattered Barriers*, as interpreted through Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) theory?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) Theory of Apology Speech Acts

Cohen and Olshtain's theory of apology speech acts, introduced in 1983 within the framework of pragmatics, aimed to classify and analyze apology strategies as socially functional linguistic acts. The theory identifies core components of an apology, including explicit expression of regret, explanation or justification, acceptance of responsibility, offer of compensation, and a promise of non-repetition. Scholars have noted that this model provides a flexible analytical framework applicable across languages and cultures, highlighting cultural variations in strategy selection (Mahzari & Aldossary, 2023). Recent studies further demonstrate that the framework facilitates understanding of the social dimension of apology in both formal and informal contexts (Schumann & Dragotta, 2021). Applying this theory to the series *Scattered Barriers* enables the identification of apology patterns within a Gulf context, emphasizing the interplay between linguistic structure and cultural values.

Previous Studies

Numerous studies have applied Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) model to diverse linguistic and cultural settings, revealing that apology strategies are influenced by social and contextual factors such as age, social status, and the nature of interpersonal relationships (Mahzari & Aldossary, 2023). In the Arab context, research has primarily examined apologies in everyday or educational situations, with limited focus on Gulf drama (Ja'afreh, 2023). Studies that approach the artistic domain suggest that drama offers a rich environment for observing authentic communicative patterns, including apologies that reflect cultural values (Aseda, 2023). Accordingly, applying this theory to *Scattered Barriers* addresses a clear research gap and allows for a comparison between theoretically expected patterns and those actually employed in dramatic texts.

Theoretical Framework

A review of existing studies reveals that Cohen and Olshtain's framework offers a stable methodological lens for deconstructing apology strategies. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons consistently show a recurring pattern that blends direct and indirect forms of apology within a pragmatic balance shaped by situational context and interpersonal relationships. This perspective aligns with television drama, which re-enacts everyday interactions and intensifies their meanings—rendering apology both a linguistic and cultural practice. However, challenges arise in conveying contextual sensitivity on screen, such as encoding power dynamics, gender roles, and kinship relations. These complexities necessitate close readings of scenes and narrative structures.

Clear research gaps emerge, including the lack of applications to Gulf drama, limited multimodal integration in analysis, and the scarcity of longitudinal comparative designs. Additionally, there is a methodological need to regulate contextual variables through reliable coding and intercoder verification. These gaps open avenues for adapting and expanding the theory in field-specific applications.

Apology Speech Acts in Arabic Pragmatic Studies

Arabic pragmatic studies have examined apology as a speech act aimed at repairing disruptions in social

interaction, with emphasis on linguistic structure and cultural context. For instance, a recent study analyzed apologies in Jordanian dialect through semi-structured interviews, revealing that speakers tend to blend direct forms with justifications to mitigate the situation (Mahzari & Aldossary, 2023). Other research has shown that apology in Arab contexts is influenced by factors such as gender, age, and social status (Aseda, 2023). These findings affirm that apology in Arab culture is not merely a linguistic formula but a complex social practice requiring deeper contextual understanding.

Some studies have also compared apology strategies across Arabic and other languages, revealing notable differences in form selection and degrees of directness. A comparative study between Arabic and English found that Arabic speakers tend to use expressions of respect and appreciation more frequently than their English-speaking counterparts (Ja'afreh, 2023). Another study showed that Arabic apologies often include additional components such as supplication or well-wishing, reflecting religious and cultural dimensions (Aseda, 2023). These findings suggest that analyzing apology in Arabic requires integrating pragmatic and cultural analysis for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Types of Apology Speech Acts

Apology speech acts are typically categorized into main types: direct apology, indirect apology, and apology accompanied by compensation or a promise of non-repetition. A recent study found that direct apologies are marked by clarity and explicitness, while indirect apologies rely on implication or explanation (Ogiermann & Blitvich, 2019). Other research indicates that the choice of apology type is influenced by factors such as the nature of the offense and the relationship between interlocutors (Ja'afreh, 2023). This classification is significant as it serves as a tool for analyzing both the linguistic structure and the social function of apology.

Studies have shown that apology with compensation is often used in situations involving tangible or material harm, whereas apology with a promise of non-repetition is common in contexts affecting trust or reputation. For example, a field study found that speakers in professional environments prefer apologies accompanied by corrective plans to maintain working relationships (Ogiermann & Blitvich, 2019). Another study revealed that indirect apology is more prevalent in situations requiring face-saving strategies (Ja'afreh, 2023). These findings underscore that the various types of apology are not equally distributed but are shaped by context and communicative intent.

Analyzing Apology Speech Acts in Arabic Dramatic Discourse

Several studies have explored speech acts in Arabic dramatic works, focusing on how apologies are represented in dialogic texts. One study analyzed scenes from Egyptian and Syrian television series and found that apology often functions as a dramatic device to escalate or resolve conflict (Aseda, 2023). This study employed qualitative content analysis across 50 scenes and revealed that apologies in drama tend to exhibit heightened emotional expression compared to real-life interactions. These findings suggest that apology in drama not only reflects real-world practices but also reshapes them to serve narrative development.

Another study, despite the limited research on Gulf drama, highlighted distinct cultural features in Gulf apologies, such as the use of honorifics and religious expressions (Aseda, 2023). This study analyzed dialogic texts from three Gulf series and found that direct apologies were less common than indirect ones, particularly in scenes involving characters of high social status. These results underscore the need for further research that integrates linguistic analysis with cultural context to deepen understanding of apology's role in Arabic dramatic discourse.

A review of previous studies shows that apology emerges within a balance between directness and implication, mediated by contextual variables such as relationship dynamics and gender roles. In drama, apology operates as a narrative mechanism that either intensifies conflict or facilitates its resolution. Pragmatic approaches intersect with cultural analysis to reveal that linguistic choices are not neutral; rather, they carry value-laden meanings that artistic productions reproduce—consciously or unconsciously. Nonetheless, methodological challenges persist, including sample consistency, coding precision, and intercoder reliability. Comparative analyses across dramatic genres and diverse Gulf contexts remain limited. Clear research gaps include the scarcity of longitudinal multimodal studies and the weak linkage between textual analysis outcomes and audience reception. These gaps call for the integration of mixed-method designs and comparative frameworks to enhance the validity and generalizability of findings.

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative content research design to analyze apology speech acts in the Gulf series *Scattered Barriers*. This design enables in-depth examination of dialogic texts to uncover linguistic patterns and cultural meanings, with emphasis on interpretation and context rather than quantitative measurement (Bengtsson, 2016). Such an approach is well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena as manifested in dramatic discourse. Through this framework, the study aims to generate a comprehensive understanding that links linguistic structure to cultural dimensions within the context of apology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive approach aimed at providing an accurate and objective portrayal of the phenomenon under investigation, without altering or influencing it. This methodology allows for the documentation and analysis of apology strategies as they appear in dramatic texts, interpreted through a defined theoretical lens (Nassaji, 2015). It is particularly appropriate for the current research, as it facilitates understanding of the phenomenon in its natural context while highlighting the relationships among its linguistic and social components.

Sample Size and Type

The sample for this study consists of all six episodes from the Gulf series *Scattered Barriers*, each ranging from 30 to 37 minutes in duration. The aim is to collect precise data on apology speech acts. Qualitative research in dramatic content analysis recommends the use of small, focused samples to ensure depth and detail in analysis. Bengtsson (2016) emphasized that limited samples allow for thorough textual examination, while Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) argued that sample size in content analysis should be determined by the nature of the phenomenon rather than quantity. Thus, selecting six episodes strikes a balance between representing the phenomenon and enabling deep analysis that accounts for both cultural and linguistic context.

Sampling Method

This study employed purposive sampling to select all episodes containing diverse apology scenes, ensuring representation of various patterns of apology speech acts. According to Al-Nimr (2023), purposive sampling is effective in qualitative research targeting specific phenomena, while Al-Fahad (2024) emphasized that this approach enables researchers to select information-rich units. In the present study, episodes were chosen based on predefined criteria related to the presence of pivotal apology scenes, thereby enhancing the sample's relevance to the analytical objectives.

Instrument and Data Collection

Atlas.ti software was utilized as the primary tool for qualitative data analysis due to its capacity to organize large textual datasets, apply coding schemes, and systematically link related segments. The software allows researchers to manage complex data efficiently. Ismail and Sarudin (2024) affirmed that Atlas.ti enhances analytical precision through visual coding tools and advanced search functions. In this study, the software was used to identify and categorize expressions of apology speech acts within all episodes, enabling a structured and reliable analysis that connects linguistic structure to cultural context.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through meticulous observation and repeated viewing of all six episodes from the series *Scattered Barriers*, with the aim of extracting all expressions involving apology-related speech acts. Bengtsson (2016) noted that repeated viewing enhances coding reliability, while Nassaji (2015) emphasized that temporal and contextual documentation of texts ensures analytical accuracy. In this study, dialogues were manually transcribed into Microsoft Word files, with non-linguistic elements removed and the data reorganized according to episode sequence. This process yielded a clean textual database ready for systematic analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study employed data analysis using Atlas.ti software within a deductive methodology grounded in the theoretical constructs of Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) speech act theory. Ismail and Sarudin (2024) noted that Atlas.ti enables data coding based on predefined theoretical categories, thereby enhancing analytical consistency. The deductive approach facilitates the testing of theoretical hypotheses against real-world data.

In this study, transcribed episode texts were imported into the software and coded according to the apology categories outlined in the theoretical framework. The resulting patterns were then analyzed, allowing for a precise interpretation of the relationship between linguistic structure and cultural context.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table (1) illustrates part of the analyzed data extracted from all six episodes of the series *Hawajiz Muba'thara* (Scattered Barriers), revealed all dialogic segments containing apology speech acts. The data were categorized according to Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) theoretical framework into direct and indirect apologies. Results showed that indirect apologies were more prevalent, accounting for 55% of the instances, while direct apologies comprised 45%. These proportions suggest that characters tend to employ indirect linguistic strategies to maintain social equilibrium and avoid overt confrontation. Direct apologies were typically associated with formal situations or close interpersonal relationships, whereas apologies accompanied by compensation were linked to scenarios involving clear material or emotional harm.

Table (1): Contextual Examples from the Textual Data

No.	Expression	Type of Apology	Explanation
1	آسف، لكنني على عجلة من أمري Sorry, but I'm in a hurry (27:26)	Direct	This expression represents a direct form of apology using the word "sorry" as the primary entry point. However, it includes an implicit justification—being in a hurry. This reflects a blend of acknowledging fault and mitigating its severity by offering a legitimate reason, aligning with Cohen and Olshtain's category of "expression of apology."
2	لم أقل شيئاً يا ناصر I didn't say anything, Nasser (19:40)	Indirect	This expression employs denial as an indirect defensive strategy. Instead of admitting fault, the speaker denies responsibility, reflecting a fear of accountability and a desire to preserve face.
3	سامحني يا عمتي! Forgive me, Aunt! (27:50)	Direct	A direct apology addressed to a specific person using a kinship title that conveys respect. The phrasing carries strong emotional weight due to the familial relationship, making the apology more sincere and impactful.
4	آسف يا دكتور، لقد أتعبتك معانا، وسهرت طوال الليل Sorry, Doctor, we've burdened you and kept you up all night (30:01)	Direct	This expression combines direct apology with explanation. It begins with "sorry" and then provides a rationale. The pattern reflects social awareness of the need to acknowledge others' efforts and take responsibility for causing fatigue.
5	لو سمحت، سامحني! Please, forgive me! (17:54)	Direct	The use of "please" introduces a politeness strategy before requesting forgiveness. This phrasing adds a courteous dimension to the apology, moving beyond directness to engage the recipient's emotions.
6	المعذرة، لا يمكنك الإمساك بأي شيء Excuse me, you can't hold anything (16:09)	Indirect	The term "excuse me" functions less as a pure apology and more as a polite prohibition. It reflects a social dimension where the phrase softens the impact of denial rather than apologizing for a fault.
7	سامحني يا أمي، أنا أدخلت المرض إلى البيت Forgive me, Mother, I brought illness into the house (06:12)	Direct	One of the strongest direct apologies, combining a plea for forgiveness with explicit acknowledgment of fault. Its weight stems from the mother-son relationship and reveals sincerity and courage in accepting responsibility.
8	لم أعد أحتمل كل هذا العذاب، لقد تعبت I can't bear all this suffering anymore; I'm exhausted (20:58)	Indirect	This expression conveys regret and despair without using an explicit apology term. It constitutes an indirect apology based on self-disclosure of weakness and emotional distress.
9	أقسم أن ذلك ليس خطأي I swear it's not my fault (11:49)	Indirect	Denial of fault accompanied by an oath reflects strong defensiveness. This expression avoids direct apology and instead asserts the speaker's innocence, functioning as a strategy to deflect blame.
10	أنا تسببت بهذا الألم بموت منصور وموتك I caused this pain through Mansour's death—and yours (14:47)	Indirect	Full acceptance of responsibility with emphasis on the consequences. Despite the absence of the word "sorry," the strong admission of guilt renders it a powerful form of implicit apology.

Overall, the findings indicate that apology in Gulf drama is not merely a linguistic act but a socially and culturally embedded practice shaped by context and character relationships. Direct apologies in the series ranged from brief to extended forms, yet all shared the presence of an explicit illocutionary force indicating apology (IFID), such as “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.” These expressions were often supported by justifications or admissions of fault, reflecting awareness of wrongdoing and a desire to restore social balance. Some forms were concise and swift, aiming to avoid prolonging conflict, while others carried strong emotional undertones—particularly in familial contexts such as mother or aunt figures—where emotional depth enhanced the likelihood of forgiveness and transformed apology into a tool for relational repair.

Indirect apologies appeared in varied forms, including denial, appeals to ignorance, promises of rectification, or explicit acknowledgment of responsibility without verbal apology. These expressions function as pragmatic strategies to preserve the characters’ social face and played a key role in sustaining narrative tension and ambiguity. Some utterances invoked oaths or emotional appeals to intensify the situation, while others offered practical commitments as substitutes for verbal apology.

Taken as a whole, the results demonstrate that indirect apology dominated the dramatic text, reflecting a cultural preference for preserving dignity and avoiding loss of social status. Even direct apologies were frequently accompanied by explanatory elements or promises of repair, revealing the flexibility of apology discourse in blending verbal sincerity with practical efficacy within dramatic contexts.

In summary, apology in drama serves multiple functions: direct forms are employed in moments of honesty and reconciliation or in interactions with socially prominent characters, while indirect strategies—such as denial, justification, commitment, and emotional expressions—are preferred when face-saving concerns prevail or when narrative tension is intentionally prolonged. Statistically, the dominance of indirect apologies reflects cultural motivations tied to honor and dignity, psychological mechanisms of self-defense, and dramatic intentions to sustain conflict. Moreover, many direct apologies were accompanied by accounts or commissive elements, indicating the adaptive nature of apology discourse in balancing linguistic clarity with relational effectiveness.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that indirect apology was the most prevalent pattern in the series *Scattered Barriers*, followed by direct apology. This distribution reflects a clear tendency among characters to avoid overt confrontation, favoring linguistic strategies that preserve face. This result aligns with the findings of Mahzari and Aldossary (2023), who reported that indirect apology is more common in Arab contexts. It is further supported by Ja'afreh (2023), who emphasized the influence of cultural factors on the selection of apology forms.

However, this result partially diverges from Ogiermann and Blitvich (2019), who found that direct apology tends to dominate in formal settings—a pattern that appeared less frequently in the series. This discrepancy may be attributed to the nature of dramatic context, which balances realism with narrative demands. Accordingly, it can be argued that apology in Gulf drama emerges from a complex interaction between linguistic structure and cultural context, underscoring the importance of pragmatic analysis for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical implications, notably in affirming the applicability of Cohen and Olshtain’s (1983) framework for analyzing apology speech acts within Gulf drama. This extends

the theory's reach to cultural environments that have not been extensively studied. The results also enrich academic discourse on the relationship between linguistic structure and cultural context in meaning-making.

Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for drama producers and scriptwriters, helping them understand how apology can be employed to reflect social values and enhance dramatic authenticity (Ja'afreh, 2023). These results affirm that apology in artistic texts is not merely a dialogic element but a communicative and cultural tool that can be used more consciously, opening the door to developing more context-sensitive writing strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study highlight the need for future research to expand the scope of analysis by including larger samples of Gulf drama productions and by integrating multiple analytical approaches, such as semiotic analysis or critical discourse analysis, to deepen understanding (Ogiermann & Blitvich, 2019). It is also recommended that comparative methodologies be applied between Gulf drama and productions from other cultural contexts in order to test the stability of the identified patterns (Ja'afreh, 2023). Methodologically, the reliability of findings can be strengthened by involving a greater number of coders and employing additional verification tools, including intercoder reliability measures such as Cohen's kappa. On the theoretical level, incorporating alternative pragmatic frameworks may reveal new dimensions of the apology phenomenon.

Furthermore, future studies would benefit from the development of a detailed coding manual that provides precise definitions and annotated examples to enhance transparency. Expanding the analysis to include multimodal elements—such as tone, gestures, and visual context—would yield richer insights into how apologies are constructed and received in dramatic discourse. Incorporating recent pragmatic and multimodal studies would also reinforce the theoretical foundation, while careful revision of manuscripts would improve clarity, conciseness, and consistency in referencing.

Taken together, these recommendations call for broadening the scope of research in ways that connect linguistic analysis with cultural meanings across diverse contexts, while simultaneously strengthening methodological rigor and embracing multiple analytical perspectives.

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