

Research Article

A Contrastive Analysis of Common Apology Expressions in Chinese and Spanish and an Investigation of Learner Errors

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Abstract

This study conducts a contrastive analysis of apology expressions in Chinese and Spanish, focusing on expressions such as 对不起 (duì bu qǐ), 抱歉 (bào qiàn), 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si), 原谅 (yuán liàng), and 麻烦 (má fan), and their Spanish counterparts including *disculpa*, *perdón*, *lo siento*, and *perdonar*. Drawing upon practical learner examples and corpus observations, the paper identifies frequent error types among Spanish-speaking learners of Chinese, examining mismatches in semantic intensity, politeness strategies, and cultural expectations. The research is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Interlanguage Pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka), which explores pragmatic development in second language acquisition; Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson), which provides a model for understanding face-threatening acts like apologies; and Error Analysis (Corder), which enables the systematic identification and interpretation of learner errors. The study adopts a qualitative corpus-informed contrastive approach, analyzing illustrative learner expressions collected through classroom observation and written assignments, and comparing them with native Chinese usage. Findings reveal that pragmatic failures often arise from semantic transfer, sociocultural mismatches, and structural differences in apology realization. Learners struggle with calibrating the appropriate intensity of apology expressions, often overgeneralizing 对不起 and underusing culturally softer forms like 不好意思 or 抱歉 in minor situations. Additionally, the influence of Spanish honorific and remedial patterns leads to mismatches in politeness strategies and discourse coherence in Chinese. By highlighting these error patterns and their underlying causes, the paper contributes to the field of interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural language teaching. Pedagogical recommendations include raising learners' awareness of semantic nuance and politeness conventions in Chinese, using contextualized teaching, and explicitly addressing contrastive patterns in apology usage between Chinese and Spanish.

Keywords

Chinese, Spanish, Contrastive Analysis, Apology Expressions, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Apologies are central pragmatic acts in intercultural communication, occupying a key position in both Chinese and Spanish. However, due to differences in semantics, morpho-

syntax, and sociocultural background, the realization of apology speech acts in these languages exhibits significant variation. Spanish L1 learners of Chinese frequently transfer

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L1 semantic and pragmatic routines, resulting in negative transfer and pragmatic failure. Such errors not only affect communicative appropriateness but may also lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings. This paper employs con-

trastive analysis and corpus-based methods to categorize error types and their underlying causes, proposing targeted pedagogical interventions.

2. Shared Apology Expressions in Chinese and Spanish

2.1. 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and Disculpa, Perdón, Lo Siento

Table 1. 对不起(duì bu qǐ) and its Spanish equivalent.

Chinese	Spanish	Semantic Similarity	Usage scenarios
对不起 (duì bu qǐ)	disculpa	high	Polite and formal, or between strangers
	perdón	medium - high	Informal occasions, daily conversation
	lo siento	medium	Serious fault, express regret and comfort

In Spanish, *perdón*, *disculpa*, and *lo siento* can be used to correspond to 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) in Chinese, in specific contexts, forming a one-to-many semantic mapping. This semantic pairing involves cross-linguistic pragmatic mapping and is a common topic for comparative analyses of apologetic strategies in different cultural contexts. (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) [1]

The Chinese expression 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) is a commonly used apology, applicable across a range of illocutionary force from minor inconveniences to serious offenses. Its literal meaning, “I cannot face you,” implying that the speaker is ashamed of his/her faults (He Xiaomei, 2005) [2]. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) [3] politeness theory, apologies are face-threatening behaviours (FTAs) aimed at repairing social relationships damaged by the fault.

The semantic similarity between 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and ‘disculpa/ disculpe’ is high, and they are closer to each other in terms of semantic core, both reflecting the attitude and sincerity of the interlocutor to take responsibility for the mistake. They are also more compatible in terms of the solemnity of the expressions, and are suitable for classroom, workplace and other occasions that require the maintenance of social etiquette and status respect. Therefore, this group of expressions is highly substitutable in terms of semantic and pragmatic functions, e.g.

Chinese: 对不起, 老师, 我迟到了。(Sorry, teacher, I'm late.)

Spanish: Disculpe por llegar tarde, profesor.

The semantic similarity between 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and ‘perdón’ is moderately high, and in the case of minor faults, both take on the verbal behavioural functions of admitting fault and asking for forgiveness (Austin, 1975) [4], which are basically semantic equivalents. However, it should be noted that ‘perdón’ in Spanish is usually lighter in tone, and may not

seem serious enough in formal contexts, whereas 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) has a stronger sense of responsibility, which is in line with Benjamin's (1978) [5] view on the hierarchy of linguistic salutations. e.g.

Chinese: 对不起, 我没看到你。(Perdón, I didn't see you.)

Spanish: Perdón! No te vi.

对不起 (duì bu qǐ) has a medium semantic similarity to ‘lo siento’. It constitutes a high semantic consistency when expressing more serious or hurtful behaviour, but it is important to note that ‘lo siento’ has a stronger ‘inner sadness’ component, and should not be translated as simply ‘I'm sorry’ in some contexts, which is consistent with Lakoff's (1973) [6] analysis of semantic motivation. “This is in line with Lakoff's (1973) analysis of semantic motivation. e.g.

Chinese: 对不起, 我忘记了我们的约定。(Sorry, I forgot our agreement.)

Spanish: Lo siento mucho. He olvidado nuestra cita.

However, if the Spanish expression ‘Lo siento por tu pérdida’ is used for condolence, if it is directly translated as ‘I'm sorry that your father has passed away’, it will be inappropriate in Chinese culture, and expressions such as ‘I'm sorry to hear about your father's death’ (我很遗憾听到你父亲去世 wǒ hěn yí hàn tīng dào nǐ fù qīn qù shì) or ‘My condolences’ (节哀顺变 jié āi shùn biàn) should be used (Xiao Han, 2017) [7].

In actual discourse, the three types of apologetic expressions in Spanish are used in a wider range of contexts, containing not only apologies, but also functions such as expressing sympathy, drawing attention to the situation, and making polite enquiries (Holmes, 1990) [8], e.g.

Lo siento por tu pérdida. (Express sympathy)

Perdón, puedo pasar? (Draw attention to yourself)

Disculpa, ¿qu hora es? (Ask politely)

And in Chinese, 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) is mainly used to admit a mistake and ask for forgiveness.

2.2. 抱歉 (bào qiàn) and Disculpa/Disculpe

抱歉 (bào qiàn) means ‘to feel sorry’ or ‘to regret something’, it is a gentle, polite expression of apology, often used for inconvenience or minor faults caused by personal behaviour, and its tone is slightly lighter than that of 对不起 (duì bu qǐ). In the following occasions of small daily faults, minor interruptions or polite requests, the Chinese words 抱歉 (bào qiàn) and 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) are mostly interchangeable, expressing a similar degree of apology and a natural tone, which corres-

ponds to the Spanish words ‘perdón’ and ‘disculpa’, e.g.

Chinese: 抱歉, 我迟到了。/对不起, 我迟到了。(Sorry, I'm late.)

Spanish: Disculpa, llegué tarde./ Perdón por llegar tarde.

In formal, written or public announcements, apologies of a polite, official nature can only be expressed with the words 抱歉 (bào qiàn), which corresponds to the Spanish word ‘disculpe’, e.g.

Chinese: 给你带来不便, 抱歉。(Sorry for the inconvenience.)

Spanish: Disculpe las molestias.

2.3. 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) and Disculpa, Perdón, Lo Siento

Table 2. 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) and its Spanish equivalent.

Chinese	Spanish	Semantic Similarity	Usage scenarios
不好意思(bù hǎo yì si)	disculpa/disculpe	high	bother someone
	perdón	medium - high	minor misdemeanour
	lo siento	medium	tactful rejection

不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is formally an adjective phrase, but it does not actually mean the original meaning of ‘thin-skinned’. 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is used for apologies, expressing a slight sense of regret, mostly used in daily life due to minor faults, minor interruptions or requests for inconvenience or offence. Its tone is more relaxed and easy-going than 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and 抱歉 (bào qiàn), and it is commonly used in oral communication with a wide range of applications, corresponding to the Spanish words ‘perdón’, “disculpa” and “lo siento”, e.g.

Chinese: 不好意思, 能打扰您一下吗? (Excuse me, can I bother you for a moment?)

Spanish: Disculpe, puedo molestarlo un momento?

In this context, 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is not really an ‘apology’, but a discourse starter, used to elicit requests or questions between strangers or in formal situations. In Spanish, ‘disculpa / disculpe’ is often used to achieve the same discourse function, with the semantic meaning of ‘please forgive me for interrupting’. According to the Politeness Principle Theory, this usage reduces the threat of face in communication and represents an ‘indirect politeness strategy’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3]. However, ‘disculpe’ is more formal and structured as a verbal imperative, while 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is an emotional phrase with a softer tone. e.g.

Chinese: 不好意思, 我刚才不小心撞到你了。(Sorry, I accidentally bumped into you just now.)

Spanish: Perdón, te choqué sin querer.

Such situations are mildly unintentional behavioural faults that are neither formal nor involve strong liability. 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is used in this context to keep the tone light and avoid embarrassment; ‘perdón’ is commonly used in Spanish as one of the most succinct expressions of apology. The two are equivalent in terms of pragmatic function, but differ in terms of the way they express emotion: Chinese tends to be more indirect and implicit, whereas Spanish attaches more importance to behavioural responsibility. This is supported by the theory of ‘face restoration’ and the theory of fairness, where apologies help to restore balance and relative equality between the offending party and the injured party, e.g.

Chinese: 不好意思, 我今天可能去不了了。(Sorry, I may not be able to go today.)

Spanish: Lo siento, hoy no voy a poder ir.

In this kind of situation, 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is used for refusal with a tone of regret, which in Chinese can buffer the negative emotion caused by direct refusal. In Spanish, ‘lo siento’ (I feel sorry) is more commonly used to express this semantic meaning.

Although both express the idea of ‘not being able to meet the expectations of the other party’, ‘lo siento’ contains a stronger subjective emotional colouring, such as ‘I am really sad’. Whereas 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) maintains a face-saving distance. From the perspective of speech act the-

ory and cultural pragmatics (Searle, 1979) [9] (Holmes, 1989) [10], although they belong to the same kind of speech acts,

there are detailed differences in their culture, emotional expression patterns and politeness orientations.

2.4. 原谅 (yuán liàng) and Perdonar, Disculpar

Table 3. 原谅(yuán liàng) and its Spanish equivalent.

Chinese	Spanish	Semantic Similarity	Usage scenarios
原谅(yuán liàng)	perdonar	high	Formal or informal context
	disculpar	medium -high	Minor mistakes or occasions of everyday courtesy

原谅 (yuán liàng) means ‘to forgive a wrongdoer without reproach, to condone his or her faults’, and the semantic focus is on ‘forgiving someone for his or her faults’. It is usually used in apologies to ask for understanding. 原谅 (yuán liàng) is generally used in formal or written apologies, for serious letters of apology, official statements, dispute mediation; more serious faults or offenses, such as concealment, misunderstanding, major mistakes; intimate interpersonal relationships in the depth of the expression of apology; emphasis on the recognition of faults and responsibility for the sincerity of the apology to reflect the sincerity and earnestness, e.g.

- (1) 对不起，是我误会你了，请你原谅。(I'm sorry, I misunderstood you, please forgive me.)
- (2) 希望你能原谅我当时的不懂事。(I hope you can forgive me for my ignorance at that time.)
- (3) (信件结尾)再次向您致以诚挚的歉意，恳请原谅。(End of the letter) Once again, I sincerely apologise to you and ask for your forgiveness.

Linguistic pragmatics suggests that forgiveness and apology are highly interactive speech acts that are an important part of the reconciliation mechanism of social conflicts. According to Searle's Speech Act Theory [11], the nature of ‘forgiveness’ in discourse belongs to declarative acts, which change the social relationship between the communicating parties through explicit expressions. The nature of ‘forgiveness’ in discourse belongs to ‘declarative acts’, which change the social relationship between the two parties through explicit expressions. Brown and Levinson's politeness strategy theory also points out that apology and forgiveness involve the repair and coordination of face, and forgiveness is often a process of restoring the balance of communication in the form of forgiveness by the victim, which plays an important role in maintaining social harmony.

‘Perdonar’ is the most commonly used verb in Spanish for ‘forgive’, and is the closest semantic equivalent to the Chinese word ‘forgive’. It can be used in both formal and informal contexts, and covers a wide range of expressions, from minor offences to major injuries, with a strong emotional capacity,

e.g.

Perdóname por lo que hice, sé que te lastimé mucho.(请原谅我所做的，我知道我伤你很深。)

Espero que algún día puedas perdonarme.(希望有一天你能原谅我。)

In a systematic comparative study, it was pointed out that perdonar is used in actual Spanish communication both as an intimate personal request (to express repentance and self-reproach), and is also widely used in official or formal corpora, with a significant component of emotional persuasion.

‘Disculpar’ is usually used for minor mistakes or everyday politeness, and is sometimes used in formal written language, but is slightly less semantically strong than ‘perdonar’, focusing more on ‘asking not to be blamed’ than on ‘begging for forgiveness’. e.g.

Disculpame por llegar tarde, hubo mucho tráfico.(请原谅我迟到，路上堵车。)

Le pido disculpas por la confusión.(对于混淆之处，我请求您的原谅。)

3. Chinese-Specific Apology Expression: 麻烦 (má fán)

麻烦 (má fán) is one of the most frequently used words in modern Chinese, which not only refers to “problem” or ‘trouble’, but is also widely used in interpersonal communication to express various functions such as euphemism, politeness, thanks, apology and buffer. It is also widely used in interpersonal communication to express euphemistic request, politeness, thanks, apology, and other functions. In specific contexts, especially when the speaker needs to seek others' help, ask for tolerance, or express his/her apology, 麻烦 (má fán) can take on a certain degree of apologetic function. The Chinese word 麻烦 (má fán) is often used to ask for help or to bother the other party when expressing apologies, with a polite tone and apologies, e.g.

- (1) 给您添麻烦了！(I'm sorry to trouble you!)
- (2) 麻烦你帮我一下。(Please help me.)
- (3) 麻烦您让一让。(Please give way.)

In contrast, although there is no exact semantic equivalent of 麻烦 (*má fá n*) in Spanish, it is often expressed in terms of *molestar* (to disturb), *disculpa* (to excuse), *perdón* (to apologise) or in sentence structures such as ‘Te importaría...?’ etc. express the corresponding pragmatic intentions. There are differences between the two languages in terms of expression strategies, cultural notions of politeness and grammatical realization. According to Austin's (1975) [4] theory of speech acts and Searle's (1979) [9] expansion of indirect speech acts, Spanish euphemistically expresses requests through conditional invocations and sentence patterns with apologies, while utilising the verb *molestar* and the noun *molestia* to reflect knowledge of the other person's inconvenience and apologies. e.g.

Chinese: 麻烦你把门关一下。(Could you please close the door?)

Spanish: Podrías cerrar la puerta, por favour? or *Disculpa que te moleste, puedes cerrar la puerta?*

麻烦(*má fá n*) is used here to ask someone to perform a simple act, with the semantic emphasis on “bother” rather than ‘order’. In Spanish, *podrías...* is often used. (conditional) or *te importaría...?* (conditional), or *te importaría...?* to express a request euphemistically, or ‘*disculpa que te moleste*’ to introduce the act of requesting. The two have similar pragmatic functions and the same politeness strategy in the cultural context, the differences are mainly in the grammatical structure, e.g.

Chinese: 麻烦你久等了。(Trouble you to wait.)

Spanish: *Perdón por haberte hecho esperar tanto.* or *Disculpa por la molestia.*

In this context, 麻烦 (*má fá n*) appears as an apologetic term to express regret for the inconvenience experienced by others. In Spanish, ‘*perdón/disculpa*’ is often used with specific behaviours, e.g. ‘*hacer esperar*’; *molestia* can also be used to express ‘inconvenience’. This pairing reflects both the perceived consequences of behaviour and the principles of politeness, achieving communicative smoothness through the regulation of face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3].

Chinese: 真是麻烦你了，谢谢你帮我搬家。(Thank you for helping me move.)

Spanish: *Gracias, te has molestado mucho por ayudarme con la mudanza.* or *Ha sido mucha molestia para ti, gracias.*

麻烦 (*má fá n*) is used here in conjunction with ‘thank you’ to express a mixture of gratitude and apology for the efforts of others. In Spanish, the word ‘*molestarse*’ (to trouble oneself) or the noun ‘*molestia*’ (trouble, inconvenience) is often used to convey the idea of ‘effort’ or ‘hard work’. The content of the expression is similar, but the expression is more descriptive and emotionally identifiable, and the Spanish form is

longer and more grammatically complex, reflecting a more nuanced pattern of emotional identity and cultural politeness (Holmes, 1990) [8].

4. Learner Error Types and Analysis

Based on the author's years of practice in teaching Chinese as a foreign language and BCC (Beijing Language and Culture University 1.5 billion words balanced corpus), Typical errors in common polite expressions such as 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*), 不好意思 (*bù hǎo yì si*), 抱歉 (*bào qiàn*), 原谅 (*yú xián*), 麻烦 (*má fá n*) are analysed as follows:

4.1. Errors with 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*)

4.1.1. Semantic Transfer Leads to Overuse

The Spanish expression *disculpa* has a lighter tone in the native context, and is mostly used to lead a mild request or interrupt a dialogue, whereas the Chinese expression 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) has a heavier tone, and is usually used to formally admit a mistake or to apologise for an inconvenience caused by one's own fault. At the pragmatic level, the learners directly correspond *disculpa* to ‘sorry’, ignoring the differences between 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) and 不好意思 (*bù hǎo yì si*) in terms of semantic level and politeness strategy, which is a typical semantic transfer.

In the BCC, searching with the keyword 对不起, it can be seen that 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) mostly occurs in the situation of assuming responsibility or serious apology; searching with 不好意思, it focuses on the scene of mild request.

Learner expression: 对不起，可以借一下你的手机吗？(*Disculpa, puedo usar tu móvil?*)

Native expression: 不好意思，可以借一下你的手机吗？

4.1.2. Misuse of 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) When Expressing Mourning

Chinese 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) emphasises responsibility for behaviour and is often used in formal apologies for faults; Spanish *lo siento* focuses on expressing sympathy and consolation, and learners' use of 对不起 (*duì bu qǐ*) in a scene of mourning will make the context seem inappropriate.

In the BCC, Searching by 遗憾 听说 or 节哀顺变 will yield a large number of natural expressions of condolence; searching by 对不起, 去世 will yield very few.

Learner expression: 对不起你爷爷去世了。(Lo siento mucho por lo de tu abuelo.)

Native expression: 我很遗憾听说你爷爷去世了。/节哀顺变。

4.2. Errors with 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si)

4.2.1. Inappropriate Use of 对不起 (duì bu qǐ)

Instead of 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si)

When expressing daily interruptions, requests, or notifications, native Spanish speakers often tend to uniformly correspond to 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) due to the neutral tone of *perdón/disculpa* in their native language, failing to differentiate between 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) in Chinese. Chinese 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) is mostly used in formal occasions for serious apologies and responsibilities, with strong emotional overtones, while 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) has a softer tone and is more suitable for daily light interruptions or euphemistic requests, combining both apologies and politeness.

Learner expression: 对不起, 我先走了。(Lo siento, yo iré primero.)

Native expression: 不好意思, 我先走了。

4.2.2. The Omission of the Introductory Phrase Causes the Expression to Appear Abrupt

In Chinese polite expressions, guiding words such as 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) and 请问 (qǐng wèn) play an important role in easing the tone of requests and questions and conforming to the cultural norms of indirect expressions, but learners often omit guiding words due to the influence of direct expressions in Spanish. However, due to the influence of Spanish direct expression, learners often omit the lead-in phrases and go directly to the content of the request, which makes the expression seem hard or even rude.

In the BCC, Searching by 请问, 知道 yields a large number of interrogative questions; searching by 你知道, 老师 yields mostly direct inquiries that lack polite guidance.

Learner expression: 你知道老师在哪里吗? (Sabes dónde está el profesor?)

Native expression: 不好意思, 请问你知道老师在哪里吗?

4.3. Errors with 抱歉 (bào qiàn)

In Chinese, both 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) and 抱歉 (bào qiàn) can express apologies, but there are significant differences between them in terms of stylistic style and applicable contexts. 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) is mostly used in oral communication, with strong emotional colours and the implication of personal responsibility, and is suitable for informal scenarios such as admitting mistakes in daily life; whereas 抱歉 (bào qiàn) is more written and formal, and is mostly used in public statements, business dealings, or official communication to express rational and restrained apologies, and to weaken personal emotions. It expresses rational and restrained apologies, and weakens personal emotions. Under the influence of the general use of *perdón* and *lo siento* in Spanish, native Spanish learners tend to mechanically translate all apology

contexts as 对不起 (duì bu qǐ), ignoring the diversity of the Chinese language, resulting in inappropriate use of the language.

In the BCC business sub-corpus, a search for 抱歉, 来晚 reveals a large number of written formal apologies, while a search for 对不起, 来晚 focuses more on spoken scenarios.

Example 1 (business situation):

Learner expression: 对不起, 我来晚了。(Perdón por llegar tarde)

Native expression: 抱歉, 我来晚了。

Example 2 (written announcement):

Learner expression: 我们对此造成的不便深表对不起。(Rogamos disculpen las molestias ocasionadas.)

Native expression: 我们对此造成的不便深表抱歉。

4.4. Errors with 原谅 (yuán liàng)

4.4.1. 原谅 (yuán liàng) as a Self-Apology Expression

In Chinese, 原谅 (yuán liàng) is often used to ask for forgiveness and to seek emotional healing, and the tone is solemn, with a high emotional intensity and moral colour. However, 'perdonar' in Spanish can be used for formal forgiveness as well as apologies for everyday mistakes, which is often translated as 原谅 (yuán liàng) by learners, resulting in a biased tone.

In the BCC, a search for the keyword 原谅, 我没 shows that it is mostly used to ask for forgiveness in a formal statement, while a search for 对不起, 我没 focuses on self-apologising scenarios.

Learner expression: 请原谅, 我没交作业。(Disculpe, no entregué mi tarea.)

Native expression: 对不起, 我没交作业。

4.4.2. The Use of 原谅 (yuán liàng) in Minor Offences Is too Heavy

In Chinese, 原谅 (yuán liàng) is mostly used in the context of repairing a serious conflict or a major fault, expressing a more serious apology. The learners' incorrect use of 原谅 (yuán liàng) to deal with minor faults reflects the lack of awareness of the semantic scope of application in the cultural context. However, *perdonar* is widely used in Spanish, and learners are prone to transfer it directly, resulting in the use of 原谅 (yuán liàng) for minor misunderstandings in daily life appearing to be too heavy and unnatural.

In the BCC, the search for 生气 shows that there are mostly formal conflict contexts, while the search for 原谅 focuses on everyday spoken situations.

Learner expression: 你还没原谅我吗? (Aún no me has perdonado?)

Native expression: 你还生气我吗?

4.5. Errors with 麻烦 (má fán)

As an important politeness buffer in Chinese request discourse, 麻烦 (má fán) serves the function of weakening the tone of direct requests and lubricating social interactions. If native Spanish speakers neglect the use of 麻烦 (má fán), the request will be too straightforward and lack the necessary polite modification, which will easily lead to discomfort in the communication situation.

In the BCC, a search with the keyword 麻烦, 帮 yields a large number of request sentences with buffer words, while a search with 请, 帮 yields a large number of rigid requests with direct translations into foreign languages.

Learner expression: 请帮我复印一下这个文件。(Podrías ayudarme a sacar una copia, por favor?)

Native expression: 麻烦你帮我复印一下这个文件。

5. Causes of Learner Errors

5.1. Core Bias Due to Semantic Hierarchy Mismatch

The disparity in the intensity of apologies between Chinese and Western languages is manifested in the three-level system of apologies (Perdón-disculpa-lo siento), which is more strictly graded and clearly semantically differentiated in Spanish, whereas in modern Chinese, a vague two-level system of apologies, represented by the words ‘对不起-抱歉-不好意思’, This structural difference makes it difficult for learners to accurately match the intensity of apology required in a particular situation in Chinese-Spanish translation and communication practice, thus resulting in pragmatic bias. This is consistent with cross-cultural pragmatics and speech act theory’s description of a systematic hierarchy of polite behaviours such as ‘apologies’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3] (Holmes, 1990) [8].

Table 4. Comparison of Chinese Spanish Apology.

Spanish	Semantic strength	Chinese	Correct expression
disculpa	minor (unintentional disturbance)	不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si)	不好意思, 打断一下(Sorry to interrupt.)
perdón	moderate (negligent offence)	抱歉 (bào qiàn) / 对不起 (duì bu qǐ)	抱歉, 我来晚了(Sorry I'm late.)
lo siento	severe (emotional/material damage)	对不起 (duì bu qǐ)+ remediation	对不起, 我赔你一个的(I'm sorry. I'll give you a new one.)

Case 1: Mild Scenario Over-apologising

Scene: Lightly touching a stranger's arm in a lift

Wrong expression: 对不起! (Sorry!) (direct translation Perdón)

Native expression: 不好意思。(Sorry.)

In the Spanish context, physical contact tends to be perceived as a more serious threat to face, so the medium-intensity Perdón is often used to express an apology, whereas in the Chinese context, 不好意思 (bù hǎo yì si) is sufficiently polite and apologetic for the same scenario. The use of 对不起 (duì bu qǐ) would increase the tension in the communicative atmosphere and even lead to a misunderstanding of the ‘malicious behaviour’ of the other party. This reflects cultural differences in negative face, emotional distance and pragmatic adaptation (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3] (Holmes, 1990) [8].

Case 2: Insufficient Apology in Heavy Scene

Scene: Breaking a Friend's Laptop

Wrong expression: 抱歉啊, 我不是故意的。(I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it.)

Native expression: 实在对不起! 电脑修不好我赔你台新

的。(I'm really sorry! I'll pay for a new one if I can't fix it.)

Learners tend to understand ‘disculpa’ as an expression of ‘non-intentionality’, which is directly translated as 抱歉 (bào qiàn) in Chinese, ignoring the seriousness of the damage. In Chinese culture, apologising is not only an act of acknowledging responsibility, but also a social act of repairing relationships. Especially in the context of material damage or interpersonal injury, it is necessary to use high-intensity expressions such as “实在对不起” “真的很对不起” (I am really sorry), and to supplement them with a promise to remedy the damage, only then can it be considered sincere.

5.2. Formal Bias Triggered by Migration of Grammatical Structures

5.2.1. Lack of Verb Conjugation Leads to Mixing of Honorifics

Spanish accurately expresses social distance through person and verb conjugation. For example, ‘Discúlpame’ is used between friends or peers, while ‘Discúlpeme’ is used to ex-

press respect, for teachers, elders or strangers. In Chinese, there is no system of verb conjugation, and it is necessary to add honorific words to express social status and respect, such as “麻烦您” and “劳驾”. As a result, native Spanish speakers often ignore the honorific expression of the listener's social status when they express their request for an apology, resulting in discourse rudeness. E.g.

Wrong expression: 对不起帮我改论文。(I'm sorry to help me change my paper.)

Native expression: 麻烦您帮我修改论文。(Please help me revise my paper.)

Although the former is grammatically valid, the use of requests without honorific expressions to superiors such as professors is regarded as impolite or even abrupt in the Chinese context. This kind of bias reflects the learners' migratory blindness in the grammatical-pragmatic transfer of the ‘respect strategy’ and their failure to realise that Chinese requires explicit honorific vocabulary to encode social relations.

5.2.2. Differences in Remedial Action Binding Mechanisms

Another common bias is reflected in the formulation of the remedial act following an apology. Spanish usually uses parallel connectives ‘y’ to bind the act of apologising and the remedial action in a single syntactic unit, forming a logical unity. In Chinese, on the other hand, apologies and remedial actions are often connected through context or tone, and do not rely on explicit connectives, such as “我对不起你，我赔你一个新的。”(I am sorry, I will give you a new one.) to express the full intention.

However, due to the influence of the native language, learners often transfer Spanish connective structures directly to Chinese expressions, resulting in redundancy or unnaturalness. E.g.

Wrong expression: 对不起，然后我请你吃饭。(I'm sorry, then I'll buy you dinner.)

Native expression: 对不起，我请你吃饭补偿。(I'm sorry, I'll buy you dinner to make up for it.)

The word “然后” in spoken Chinese denotes temporal sequence or causal logic, but its use in the context of apology weakens the coherence and sincerity of the expression, and makes it seem rigid or even procedural, which is not in line with native Chinese speakers' expectation of natural apology expressions.

Negative transfer of grammatical structures can lead to imbalance in expression and communication barriers. In teaching, we should strengthen the training mechanism of ‘form contrast-function reconstruction’ to help learners identify and adapt to the Chinese expression of verb salutation and remedial conjugation mechanism, so as to improve their pragmatic adaptation ability.

5.3. Cultural Cognitive Conflict Exacerbates Pragmatic Failure

In cross-cultural communication, apologies are not only the result of linguistic expression, but also subject to the constraints of cultural values and norms of social interaction. There are significant differences between Chinese and Spanish in terms of responsibility attribution patterns and religious concepts, and this clash of cultural schemas leads to frequent pragmatic failures and semantic mismatches in Chinese apologies for native Spanish speakers, making it difficult to accurately convey apologies or to repair relationships appropriately. This phenomenon has been repeatedly discussed in studies such as cross-cultural pragmatics and historical semantics, and is strongly supported by speech act theory and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3] (Searle, 1979) [9]. According to politeness theory, apologising involves face maintenance and threat mitigation, and the degree of openness and expression of responsibility-taking varies significantly across cultures.

Table 5. Models of attribution of responsibility in Chinese and Spanish.

Culture type	Apology Logic	Language Performance	The nature of the bias
Spanish culture of guilt	Individual responsibility absolutised: ‘Fault = moral defects to be liquidated’	Compulsory subject (Yo lo siento) + immediate remedial binding	‘Aggressive’ in Chinese.
Chinese culture of shame	Relationalising Responsibility: ‘Fault = Relationship Imbalance Needs Repair’	Omission of subject (‘I'm sorry I'm late’) + vague attribution (‘I blame the traffic jam’)	Seen by Hispanics as ‘evasion of responsibility’

5.3.1. Over-Explicit Attribution of External Causes

In Spanish, apologists usually tend to explicitly admit fault, and sentences such as ‘Fue mi culpa’ (It's my fault) are widely used in everyday life to express direct acceptance of

the fault, and even further explanation of the context of the situation to show sincerity (Holmes, 1990) [8], e.g. 是我的错，水杯太滑了(It's my fault the glass of water was too slippery.) In Spanish-speaking cultures, not admitting fault or blurring responsibility is seen as avoidance and lack of

commitment.

In Chinese, the word 错 (cuò) has a strong colour of self-depreciation and shame, and saying “是我的错”(it's my fault) is easily interpreted as a denial of one's personality or ability. Therefore, native Chinese speakers tend to blur the attribution of responsibility, avoid the word 错 (cuò), and use more euphemistic and polite expressions, such as “哎呀，不好意思啊”(Oh, I'm sorry.) and use quick remedial behaviours (e.g. wiping up the water stains immediately and apologising) as the main way of taking responsibility. This ‘behavioural compensation’ is the main way to take responsibility. This strategy of ‘behavioural compensation’ over ‘linguistic acknowledgement’ reflects the logic of responsibility repair in Chinese culture, which emphasises action over language (Kadar, 2018) [12].

5.3.2. Failure of Secularisation of Religious Concepts

The Spanish expressions ‘perdón’ and ‘pedir perdón’ are derived from the Christian tradition of perdonar (forgiveness). The strategy of ‘secularised forgiveness’ has been widely and naturally applied by Spanish speakers in a wide range of contexts, from minor mistakes to serious transgressions (Medina López, 2023) [13]. For example, when a student says to his teacher: ‘Le pido perdón, profesor.’ (Teacher, I ask for your forgiveness.) he is merely apologising for a late assignment or a minor mistake.

In Chinese, however, the word 原谅 (yuán liàng) is used much less frequently than the Spanish word ‘perdón’, and mostly in literature, film and television, or in contexts of deep emotional conflict, such as asking for forgiveness after a conflict between a husband and wife, or after a betrayal (Song & Liu, 2002) [14]. 求原谅 (qiú yuán liàng) is extremely heavy, even absurd, in the context of an ordinary teacher, student or friend. In the example above, the student saying ‘ask the teacher for forgiveness’ could easily lead to embarrassment or misunderstanding of the teacher, and be seen as pretentious or dramatic. A more natural expression in Chinese would be “求老师原谅。”(Please understand.) or “请老师谅解。”(Teacher, I'm sorry I'm late in handing in my homework.), reflecting the differences in politeness strategies in language and culture (Guan, 2009) [15].

6. Conclusions

Taking apology as a starting point, this paper systematically analyses the similarities and differences in apology expressions between Chinese and Spanish from the perspectives of comparative linguistics and pragmatics. The analysis shows that although the two languages have correspondable linguistic units in terms of basic expression forms, there are obvious differences in terms of tone intensity, communicative function, and social context adaptation.

Taking native Spanish speakers as the object of study, this

paper summarises five types of typical biases. Further analyses show that the root causes of these blunders are mainly from three aspects: firstly, transfer mismatches triggered by inconsistencies in the semantic system of the language; secondly, copying of forms in the syntactic structure; and thirdly, cognitive differences between Chinese and Western cultures on the ways of expressing politeness, responsibility and emotion.

To sum up, the learning of apology language not only involves vocabulary mastery, but also relates to the construction of corpus perception, communication strategy and cultural awareness. This paper suggests introducing contextual difference comparison, functional transfer training and cross-cultural awareness cultivation in the teaching of apology language, so as to help learners to improve their pragmatic competence, reduce language errors, and truly achieve cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication integration.

Abbreviations

L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
ILP	Interlanguage Pragmatics
CA	Contrastive Analysis
EA	Error Analysis

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Author Contributions

Meiling Wu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including annotated learner error examples and contrastive language materials, has been reported in this manuscript. Additional anonymized learner data and survey results are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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Research Field

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