The Perception of Social Power in Apologies and Compliments

Alethea Koh, Kongmeng Liew and Yukiko Uchida
(Kyoto University)

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Introduction

Apologies and compliments are social functions that convey intentions through verbal gestures or behavior (Ghanbaran, Rahimi & Rasekh, 2014). These verbal gestures function as actions in relational maintenance: apologies are (verbal) acts of reconciliation to compensate a wrong (Tavuchis, 1991), and compliments serve to perpetuate relationally beneficial deeds through verbal acknowledgement and approval (Seiter & Weger, 2010). In a social interaction, power varies according to a person’s relative perception of control over the situation (Guinote, 2017) and the affordances given to the person. This is especially relevant to apologies and compliments, as power imbalances may emerge due to relational dynamics. Given the transactional nature of verbal gestures, we expect differences in the perceived social power between the giver and receiver (of an apology/compliment), depending on the function of the verbal gesture. In addition, cultural differences exist in the expression and functions of these verbal gestures (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010), which may alter the social affordances and power dynamic (Ito, Gobel & Uchida, 2018). We expect perceived power to be based on verbal gestures more in the US than Japan. Hence, we conducted Study 1 to examine how social power is perceived in apologies and compliments across cultures (US, Japan) and Study 2 to replicate the results. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Study 1

Methods. Participants were sampled from US (N = 217, Mean age = 40.4, SD = 10.7, Males = 131) and Japan (N = 212, Mean age = 40.4, SD = 9.7, Males = 125) via online recruitment platforms. Participants were randomly assigned to a verbal gesture condition (apology or compliment) and read a short vignette depicting an interaction between two colleagues. According to the participant’s assigned condition, one colleague (giver) approached and either apologized or complimented the other colleague (receiver) for voluntarily working overtime. After which, they rated how powerful the giver and receiver seemed to be using a 10-point Likert scale, among other measures.

Results. A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with person rated as the within subject variable, verbal gesture condition and country as the between subject variable. The main effect of person rated was significant, F(1,433) = 146.50, p < .001, partial η² = 0.25, where the giver was perceived to be less powerful relative to the receiver in general. Moreover, this disparity in perceived power between the giver and receiver is more pronounced in US than in Japan, p < .001. Most importantly, the 3-way interaction was significant, F(1,433) = 6.37, p = .012, partial η² = 0.01. Post hoc tests revealed that for both the US and Japan, the apology giver was perceived to be significantly less powerful than the apology receiver, p < .001. However, only for the US, the compliment giver was perceived to be significantly less powerful than the compliment receiver, p < .001.

Study 2

Methods. Participants were sampled from US (N = 117, Mean age = 38.4, Males = 73) and Japan (N = 129, Mean age = 41.2, Males = 81) via online recruitment platforms. Participants went through the same procedure as in Study 1, but read and rated four vignettes for their assigned condition.

Results. A repeated-measures ANOVA similar to Study 1 was conducted. Only the two-way interaction between person rated and verbal gesture condition was significant, F(1,242) = 11.73, p < .001, partial η² = 0.05. Specifically, power was perceived to be lower only for an apology giver compared to an apology receiver, p < .001. There were no significant differences between compliment givers or receivers.

Discussion

Overall, the type of verbal gesture moderated the relationship between the giver or receiver and their perceived power, whereby the perceived power of an apology giver is consistently lower than an apology receiver. For compliments, there was no perceived power difference between givers and receivers of compliments. Apologies may function to repair social relationships by affording power to the receiver as momentary compensation for a previous transgression, while situations that involve compliments may not require such functions.