

# **APOLOGY STRATEGIES USED BY AIRLINE OFFICERS IN HANDLING PROBLEMS WITH PASSENGERS**

**Maitimu, N.<sup>1</sup> and Kuntjara, E.<sup>2</sup>**

English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, East Java, INDONESIA

## **ABSTRACT**

In this research, I discuss about types of apology strategies used by Lion Group officers in handling problems with passengers. It was triggered by the fact that this Airline Company still manages to have high number of passengers though many of its passengers have been disappointed because of the service given. Here, I used Apology Strategies theory proposed by Eva Ogierman (2009) which divided Apology Strategies into three main categories and each category has its own types. To get the data, I conducted an observation within two weeks in Pattimura Airport, Ambon. From this study I found out that there is a difference in the use of types of apology strategies when the officers had to deal with both calm and emotional passengers. The officers used types of IFIDs category more frequently in dealing with emotional passengers.

**Keywords:** Apology, Types of apology strategies, Airline officers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

To communicate bad news to customers is not as easy as to communicate the good ones. This strengthens the idea that communication does indeed play such an important role for a success of a service-company in business world. For Lion Group, a service-business in Airline Companies, an excellent communication skill is truly needed by the officers whose main job is to deal directly with passengers, especially in handling the passengers' problems. Problems happen within the operation of Airlines Company very often and are sometimes followed by complaints. Complaints are made when passengers notice the gap between what and how they think they should be served (customers' expectation) and how they feel after being served (customers' satisfaction). However, when a problem occurs and the complaint is made, it does not necessarily mean that the passengers will become lost passengers; on the contrary, "often when customers complain and have their problems solved, they become more loyal than if they never had a complaint (Forde, 2002, p.80)". Here, in Lion Group, the way the officers handle each and every problem with passengers will surely determine the longevity of company-passengers relationship.

In communicating their problem, passengers' attitude can vary. In one time they use a very polite intonation and appropriate words which finally make me classify them as calm passengers, but in other time, they show their disappointment by using high intonation and some inappropriate words while speaking which make me classify them as emotional passengers. One of the positive responses the passenger expect to get in the middle of a problematic situation is an apology. In general, apology is done when social norms have been violated (Trosborg, as cited in Apology Strategies, 1999). Within the operation of Airlines Company like Lion Group, apology is the first thing the officers are expected to do in order to reduce the offensiveness of the situation because of the problems.

The research is conducted to find out types of apology strategies that are mostly used by Lion Air officers in Pattimura, the International Airport of Ambon, in handling problems with passengers. In doing this research, I focused on these three basic questions;

1. What are the four types of apology strategies used more frequently by the officers in handling problems with calm passengers?
2. What are the four types of apology strategies used more frequently by the officers in handling problems with emotional passengers?
3. What are the similarities and/or differences of types of apology strategies used by the officers in handling problems with both calm and emotional passengers?

Eva Ogierman (2009) divided the apology strategies into three main categories; Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), Accounts, and Positive Politeness Apology Strategies (PPAS). IFIDs itself consists of 6 types which are Performative (Example: I apologize), Offer of apology (Example: please accept my apology), Request for forgiveness (Example: please forgive me), Expression of regret (Example: I am sorry), Conciliatory Expression (Example: I hope you are not angry), Disarming softener (Example: I'm afraid I do not bring the book). Accounts category consists of 11 types which are Opt out (Example: keep silent), Denial of responsibility (Example: it wasn't me), Acting innocently (example: I have no idea of what happen), Minimization (Example: well, it's a fate), Excuse (Example: I just got robbed), Admission of fact (Example: your fish died), Justification (Example: I was really busy), Lack of intent (Example: it was a genuine mistake), Expression of embarrassment (Example: this is really embarrassing), Acceptance of responsibility (Example: that was totally my fault), self-criticism (Example: I'm completely useless). Positive Politeness Apology Strategies (PPAS) consists of 5 types: Direct offer of repair (Example: I'm just about to get the hoover to tidy up), Indirect offer of repair (let me take them back), Intensification (Example: don't worry, I'll clean it up), Promise for forbearance (Example: have I hurt you?)

#### METHOD

Since I focus only at the officer's use of language, here, I use the qualitative approach. In getting the data, the respondents were all Lion Group officers who work in Pattimura International Airport in Ambon who got the chance to deal with passengers directly, especially those who were in charge of handling passengers problems. The data came from the officers' responses to the real problems faced by the officers during two weeks of observation. According to the permission given by the head of Lion Group in Pattimura Airport on August 18th, 2015, I was indeed permitted to record every single situation that happen within the operation of Lion Group. However, due to the company's attempt to keep and to maintain its reputation in public, the situations recorded should be erased right after I was done with the transcript writing. Then, I break down the response into the utterances to be analyzed. While recording, I did pay attention also to the intonation and the body language of the passenger while talking, so that I can easily classify them in to the two types of passengers (calm or emotional). There were ten cases in total (case 1-10) and the way I number the utterance is based on the number of the case itself.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1 Types of apology strategies and their frequency found in the officers' language used when handling problems with calm passengers.

Type of Apology Strategies		Frequency
Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)	Performative	4
	Offer of apology	-
	Request for forgiveness	7
	Expression of regret	2
	Conciliatory expression	-
	Disarming softener	1
		Total IFIDs: 14
Account (Acc)	Opt out	2
	Denial responsibility	4
	Acting innocently	2
	Minimization	1
	Excuse	2
	Admission of fact	15
	Justification	5
	Lack of intent	-
	Expression of embarrassment	-
	Acceptance of responsibility	-
	Self-criticism	-
		Total Acc: 31

Positive Politeness Apology Strategies (PPAS)	Direct offer of repair	12
	Indirect offer of repair	3
	Intensification	4
	Promise for forbearance	-
	Concern for hearer	-
		Total PPAS: 19
Total Apology strategies used:		64

From the table above, it can be seen that the four types of apology strategies used more frequently by the officers in handling problems with calm passengers are the types of three categories; Admission of fact which appeared about 23.43%, direct offer of repair which appeared 18.75%, request for forgiveness which appeared about 10.93%, and justification which appeared about 7.81% in total. However, the types of apology strategies which is not found in the data are offer of apology, conciliatory expression, lack of intent, expression of embarrassment, acceptance of responsibility, self-criticism, promise for forbearance, and concern for hearer. According to the data, in handling the problems with calm passengers, the officers tended to combine the types of either two or three different categories. However, the tendency to use one type of strategies over the others would be very influenced by and depended on the context

Example 1 explain about the delay problem which show the combination of types of three categories of apology strategies.

- Example 1: (1.1) *bapak/Ibu, mohon maaf*  
(Sir, mam, please forgive us)  
(1.2) *ini penerbangan ke UPG sedikit terlambat bapak/ibu.*  
(The flight to UPG will be a little bit delayed).  
(1.3) *Pesawatnya mengalami masalah operasional.*  
(The aircraft is having an operational problem)  
(1.4) *Pesawatnya berangkat sekitar jam 6 ya pak/bu*  
(It will be departed at 6 p.m).  
(1.5) *Bapak/ibu bisa langsung masuk ke ruang tunggu*  
(However, you can directly enter the waiting room).  
(1.6) *Disana ada petugas Lion air, nanti bapak/ibu bisa ambil snacknya disana*  
(There will be other Lion officers whom you can take the snacks from).  
(1.7) *Mohon maaf ya bapak/ibu.*  
(sir, mam, please forgive us)

From the given response above, the combination of types of apology strategies found is:

IFIDs + Acc + PPAS:  
(Request for forgiveness + Admission of fact + Excuse + Direct offer of repair)

Figure 4.1.1 Combination of types apology strategies found in Example 1 and 2 (case 1)

Here, the officer began with IFID's Request for forgiveness strategy by saying "*bapak/ibu, mohon maaf*" (Sir, mam, please forgive us) which clearly informed the passengers that the problem had taken place and that they had to apologize for the problem. After that, the officer continued to state the fact as the reason of her apology by saying "*ini penerbangan ke UPG agak sedikit terlambat, bapak/ibu*" (the flight to UPG will be a little bit delayed) with an intention to distance herself from the possible complaints because of the problem. Here, the officer used Account's Admission of fact. Furthermore, the officer continued with the Account's Excuse strategy by mentioning the external factor without which the problem would not have taken place. It was done to completely free herself from taking personal responsibility by saying "*Pesawatnya mengalami masalah operasional*" (The aircraft is having an operational problem). Then, it was followed by other Admission of fact by saying "*pesawatnya berangkat sekitar jam 6 ya pak, bu*" (It will be departed at 6 p.m). Here, the officer tried to avoid herself from accepting future complaint by telling the truth in advance. Then, it was followed by a Direct offer of repair strategy as a type of Positive Politeness Apology Strategies

(PPAS) by saying “*Bapak/ibu bisa langsung masuk ke ruang tunggu*” (However, you can directly enter the waiting room) and “*disana ada petugas Lion air, nanti bapak/ibu bisa ambil snacknya disana*” (there will be other Lion officers whom you can take the snacks from). This was done in purpose to prevent the company from receiving future complaints from passengers due to the delay problem. Lastly, she closed the response by repeating the IFIDs’ Offer of apology by saying “*Mohon maaf ya bapak/ibu*” (Please forgive us) to give a sense of being regret because of the problem while actually they were not.

Example 2: (1.8) *bapak/ibu, mohon maaf*

(Sir/mam, please forgive us).

(1.9) *karena alasan operasional, bapak/ibu akan diterbangkan ke CGK bukan dengan Lion tapi Batik*

(Because of the operational reason, you will depart using Batik Air, not Lion Air).

(1.10) *Tapi batiknya nanti baru berangkat jam setengah 8*

*ibu, bapak*

(However, the schedule is at 8 p,m).

(1.11) *Sementara menunggu, ibu dan bapak akan kami antarkan ke lounge dan bisa beristirahat sebentar disana.*

(While waiting, we will take you to the lounge to have some rest)

(1.12) *Karena dipindahkan ke Batik, ibu dan bapak akan diservice sesuai dengan layanan batik, yaitu full service.*

(And since you are moved to Batik Air, you will be given a full service as the procedure of the airline)

(1.13) *Bapak, ibu bisa istirahat sebentar, mau makan juga boleh, nanti akan kami jemput lagi saat sudah harus boarding ya bapak, ibu*

(You can spend some times taking a nap or having dinner and then when the check-in counter opens, we will definitely pick you up).

(1.14) *sekali lagi kami mohon maaf*

(Once again, please forgive us)

Though the order is different, example above draws the same combination of types of apology strategies as written in figure 4.1.1. Just like the response given in the previous context, the officer began with IFIDs’ Request for forgiveness by saying “*bapak/ibu, mohon maaf*” (“Sir/mam, please forgive us”). In this context, this utterance was actually the officer’s strategy to inform the passengers that the problem has occurred. After that, he continued with the Account’s excuse strategy which was combined together with Admission of fact in one utterance mentioning about the operational reason as the external factor and then mentioning about the problem itself by saying “*karena alasan operasional, bapak/ibu akan diterbangkan ke CGK bukan dengan Lion tapi Batik*”. These two types of Account strategies were used to completely free the officer himself from taking any personal responsibility because of the problem. Then, still it was followed by another Admission of fact in the form of giving further information by saying “*Tapi batiknya nanti baru berangkat jam setengah 8 ibu, bapak*” (However, the schedule is at 8 p,m).

After apologizing and stating the fact as the reason of their apology, the officer then continued with PPAS’s Direct offer of repair in a purpose to show their responsibility to the problem by saying “*Sementara menunggu, ibu dan bapak akan kami antarkan ke lounge dan bisa beristirahat sebentar disana*”(While waiting, we will take you to the lounge to have some rest) and “*Karena dipindahkan ke Batik, ibu dan bapak akan diservice sesuai dengan layanan batik, yaitu full service*”(And since you are moved to Batik Air, you will be given a full service as the procedure of the airline). These utterances were considered to be the officer’s effort to put things right and at the same time can reduce the degree of the offensiveness. Still using the same types of apology strategies, the officer then continued with a statement saying “*Bapak, ibu bisa istirahat sebentar, mau makan juga boleh, nanti akan kami jemput lagi saat sudah harus boarding ya bapak, ibu*” (You can spend some times taking a nap or having dinner and then when the check-in counter opens, we will definitely pick you up). Then, the officer closed his response by repeating the characteristic of IFIDs’

request for forgiveness by saying “*sekali lagi kami mohon maaf*” (Once again, please forgive us), not necessarily for the officers or company to be forgiven, but to make the delay problem more accepted so that it will not affect the passengers’ choice to choose the airline whenever they want to fly in the future. In the end, just like what happened in Example 1, the apology was well accepted. It could be seen by the reaction of the passengers after being informed about the delay problem. They remained calm, did not complaint, and patiently wait until the time to take off.

Table 4.2 types of apology strategies and their frequency found in the officers’ language used when handling problems with emotional passengers.

Type of Apology Strategies		Frequency
Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)	Performative	3
	Offer of apology	1
	Request for forgiveness	4
	Expression of regret	6
	Conciliatory expression	-
	Disarming softener	1
		Total IFIDs: 15
Account (Acc)	Opt out	9
	Denial responsibility	9
	Acting innocently	4
	Minimization	1
	Excuse	2
	Admission of fact	19
	Justification	17
	Lack of intent	-
	Expression of embarrassment	-
	Acceptance of responsibility	4
Self-criticism	-	
		Total Acc: 65
Positive Politeness Apology Strategies (PPAS)	Direct offer of repair	4
	Indirect offer of repair	2
	Intensification	2
	Promise for forbearance	-
	Concern for hearer	-
		Total PPAS: 8
Total types of apology strategies used:		88

The tables above clearly shows that in handling problems with emotional passengers, the four types of apology strategies used more frequently by the officers are all come from Account category. From 88 types of apology strategies appeared in the data, Account’s Admission fact has the highest percentage which is 21.59% in total. It is then followed by justification which is appeared about 19.31%, and Opt out as well as denial of responsibility which are about 10.22% in tota. Meanwhile, types of strategies that never appeared at all in the data were IFID’s offer of apology, conciliatory expression, Account’s Lack of intent, Expression of embarrassment, Self-criticism, and PPAS’s Promise for forbearance, and Concern for hearer.

According to the data, in handling the problems with emotional passengers, the officer tended to use the combination of types of three categories of apology strategies (types of IFIDs + types of Account + types of PPAS) though the order might be varied. To support, I will provide some examples below:

Examples 21-23 explain about the broken baggage. Realizing that he suitcase was broken, the passenger then approached the L&L counter and asked the officer how her suitcase could be broken. To the passenger’s question, the officer said:

Example 21: (3.1) *maaf ibu, bisa kita periksa sebentar?*”  
(sorry, mam. can we check it first?)

(3.2) *permisi beta coba cek ke petugas di belakang dolo ibu e, apa ini memang ketika dong angkat barang dari blakang tu kopernya sudah dalam keadaan bagini ataukah bagemana*

(wait a minute, let me ask the ground officer first to see whether this has been broken when they took it or not)

The combination of types of apology strategies of the response:

IFIDs + Acc:  
Expression of regret + Acting innocently

Figure 4.2.10 Combination of types of apology strategies found in Example 21 (case 3)

Here, the officer began his response by saying “*maaf*” (sorry) because he wanted to distance himself from the passenger’s anger, or in the other words, it was just for a formality. After that, he began with Account’s acting innocently, simply by saying “*permisi, beta coba cek ke petugas di blakang dolo ibu e, apa ini memang ketika dong angkat barang dari blakang tu kopernya sudah dalam keadaan bagini ataukah bagemana*” (wait a minute, let me ask the ground officer first to see whether this has been broken when they took it or not). The utterance was actually the officer’s way to say that he did know nothing about how the suitcase can be broken which means that it should not be him who supposed to be asked. After checking, the officer found out that the baggage had been broken even before the ground officer took it. To inform it to the passenger, he said:

Example 22: (3.3) *Maaf ibu tapi pas ambil memang akang su bagitu ibu*

(I am so sorry, mam, but the suitcase had been broken even before the officer took it)

(3.4) *Mungkin kesalahan petugas bandara origin ibu*

(Maybe it is the officer of the origin airport’s failure)

The combination of types of apology strategies of the response:

IFIDs + Acc  
(Expression of regret + Admission of fact + Denial of responsibility)

Figure 4.2.11 Combination of types of apology strategies found in Example 22 (case 3)

Having anticipated that the passenger would get angrier, the officer then came up with a repetition of expression of regret. Here, the officer showed his expression of being sorry through his facial expression too. The strategy was also combined with Account’s Admission of fact in one utterance by saying “*tapi pas ambil memang akang su bagitu ibu*” (but the suitcase had been broken even before we took it). This fact was stated by the officer as his attempt to save his face because of the problem. By stating the fact, the officer did hope that the passenger could understand that the blame could not be put on the officer himself. After that, he then continued with Account’s Denial responsibility by saying “*mungkin kesalahan dari bandara origin ya ibu*” (maybe it is the officer of the origin airport’s failure). By saying so, the officer seemed to completely free himself from the responsibility by putting the blame on the officer of origin airport. After using that kind of strategies, still, the passenger could not accept it. Furthermore, the officer came back with other combination of the strategies. He said:

Example 23 : (3.5) *bagini ibu, kalau bagasinya rusak, iya, ini tanggung jawab airlines.*

(If the baggage is broken, yes, it is the airline’s responsibility)

(3.6) *Tapi katong juga masih harus cari tau apakah bagasi ini rusak memang sudah dari stasiun origin ataukah transit.*

(But we still have to find out whether the baggage is broken at the origin airport or the transit one)

(3.7). *Untuk sementara barang-barangnya dipindahkan dulu, trus kopernya kita proses ya ibu.*

(while waiting, you can move all the stuffs in the box then we process the suitcase)

(3.8) *Tapi prosedurnya itu minimal akan diproses selama 2 minggu ibu.*  
(But usually it takes two weeks to fix the broken suitcase, mam.)

(3.9) *Dan ini harus di kirim ke entah jakarta atau makasar utk diperbaiki.*

(and it should be sent whether to Jakarta or Ujungpandang)

(3.10) *tu juga kalo zn banyak antrian barang bu.*

(And that if there is no too many baggage to be fixed there)

(3.11) *Paling cepat 2 minggu lah.*

(Two weeks the shortest)

The combination of types of apology strategies of the response:

Acc + PPAS: (Acceptance of responsibility + Minimization + admission of fact + Direct offer of repair)
---

Figure 4.2.12 Combination of types of apology strategies found in Example 23 (case 3)

In giving the explanation for the passenger, the officer started by using Account's Acceptance of responsibility. It was shown by his statement, saying "*iya, ini tanggung jawab Airline*" (yes, this is the Airline's responsibility). By saying so, the officer showed his willingness to take the responsibility. However, it was followed by Account's Minimization by saying "*tapi katong juga masih harus cari tau apakah bagasi ini rusak memang sudah dari stasiun origin ataukah transit*" (but we still have to find out whether the baggage is broken at the origin airport or the transit one). By using that strategy, the officer seemed to reduce the threat on his face which was caused by the problem. After that, he then continued with a Direct offer of repair, a type of PPAS, by saying "*untuk sementara barang-barangnya dipindahkan dulu, trus kopernya kita proses ya bu*" (while waiting, you can move all the stuffs in the box then we process the suitcase). This was considered as the officer's effort to put the things right again. Without hearing the passenger's response, he directly continued with Account's Admission of fact by saying "*Tapi prosedurnya itu minimal akan diproses selama 2 minggu ibu*" (But usually it takes two weeks to fix the broken suitcase, mam). "*Dan ini harus di kirim ke entah jakarta atau makasar utk diperbaiki*" (and this should be sent to either CGK or UPG, mam). "*Itu juga kalo seng banyak antrian barang bu*" (and that if there is no too many baggage to be fixed there) *Paling cepat 2 minggu lah* (Two weeks the shortest). After using the Direct offer of repair as his attempt to put things right again, the officer came up with Admission of facts which might become the consideration for the passenger before giving her suitcase to be fixed.

## CONCLUSION

Firstly, the finding showed that in handling problems with calm passengers, the officers tend to combine types of two or three categories of apology strategies. A combination of types of three categories (IFIDs + Account + PPAS) were used by the officers when the problems were seen as heavy problems from which the officers get the pressure, such as delay problems and the missing baggage problem of a business class passenger. When the context did not give pressure for the officers, they tend to use the combination of types of two categories of apology strategies only (mostly Account + PPAS) in which the direct expression of apology such as "sorry", or "I apologize" did not appear.

It also supports what I found in the officers' apology strategies used in handling the problems with emotional passengers. Here, the finding showed that in handling problems with emotional passengers, the officers tended to use the combination of types of three categories of apology strategies namely IFIDs + Account + PPAS. This might because in handling the problems with emotional passengers, the officers get the pressure both from the kind of problems and the passengers' verbal language in communicating the problems.

## **REFERENCES**

- Ogierman, E. (2009). *On apologizing in negative and positive politeness cultures*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin publishing company.
- Shwartz, M. (1999). *Apology strategies*. Germany: GRIN Verlagsprogramm.