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Author
Kimura, Kazumi

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The Multiple Functions of *Sumimasen*

Kazumi Kimura
University of California, Los Angeles

This study will provide a fuller account of the functions of **sumimasen**, *one of the expressions used for both apology and thanks in everyday Japanese conversation. In order to accurately explain these functions, it is necessary to carefully observe the different socio-cultural contexts in which this expression occurs. Hence, a database consisting of ten hours of daily conversation was used as the foundation for the study, with these ten hours of talk yielding a total of 44 tokens of* **sumimasen**. *This study will also attempt to relate* **sumimasen** *to other strategies for expressing apology and gratitude in Japanese and to examine whether certain values of Japanese society may be reflected through the usage of this expression.*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide a fuller account of the functions of *sumimasen* through the examination of its usages in Japanese daily conversation. Previous studies have noted that *sumimasen* is used for expressing both gratitude and apology (e.g., Doi, 1973; Goldstein & Tamura, 1975; Lebra, 1976; Coulmas, 1981; Sakuma, 1983; Mizutani & Mizutani, 1987). However, these studies do not provide a clear explanation as to what elements of *sumimasen* make it possible to express both of these functions. Kumatoridani (1988, 1990, 1992), in his work on contrastive speech-act analysis, argues that the concept of "the shift of point of view" is the key to explaining why apologies in Japanese are performed in situations where thanks are appropriate. However, while Kumatoridani's studies provide an important perspective and help to elucidate the characteristics of Japanese expressions of apology and thanks, his hypotheses are based primarily on intuition and hypothetical contexts and, are therefore, in need of empirical support. In addition, the purpose of his studies was not to specifically explore *sumimasen* itself, but to examine the expressions and motivations of apology and thanks in Japanese society in general. Coulmas (1981, p. 82), characterizing *sumimasen* under the rubric of "routine formulae," mentions that *sumimasen* can be used as a general

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conversation opener, an attention getter, and a leave taking marker in addition to its function of expressing thanks and apology. One drawback of Coulmas' work, however, is that, like the other work mentioned, it is not based on actual discourse data.

The current study, drawing on Kumatoridani's (1988, 1990, 1992) and Coulmas' (1981) work, will demonstrate how extensively *sumimasen* functions in spontaneous discourse and will explore the core concept of *sumimasen*. This analysis furthers the investigation of *sumimasen* in relation to other expressions of apology and gratitude and will shed light on the importance of its role in public interactions in Japanese society.

Sumimasen, which is one of the many apologetic expressions in Japanese, is the polite negative form of the verb *sumu*. According to the *Koojien* dictionary (Shinmura, 1991), *sumu*, the dictionary form of *sumimasen*, is represented by the Chinese character 済む which means "to finish," "to be settled," or "to be satisfied." As is clear from these definitions, *sumimasen* does not contain any morphemic element of *ayamaru* or *wabiru* which both mean 'to apologize.' This suggests the likelihood that the essential meaning of *sumimasen* is something quite different from a literal apology. In fact, often the English counterpart of *sumimasen* is 'thank you,' thus highlighting the fact that *sumimasen* has also been characterized as an expression of gratitude.

This dual nature of *sumimasen* could be considered one of the causes of cross-cultural misunderstandings between Americans and Japanese. For example, English speakers find it difficult to understand why Japanese say "I'm sorry" in situations when the appropriate response is actually "thank you." Many foreigners living in Japan seem to realize that *sumimasen* is not a direct equivalent of "I'm sorry" or "excuse me," yet few actually use this expression correctly across its range of potential uses. As for Japanese speakers, there have been many instances where they confuse the occasions for using "I'm sorry" and "excuse me" in English. Previous studies (Goldstein & Tamura, 1975; Loveday, 1982; Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982; Kindaichi, 1988; Wakiyama, 1990) have examined these particular problems in depth, and all provide relevant examples of misunderstandings or communicative gaps caused precisely by these differences in apology strategies between Americans and Japanese. However, none has fully succeeded in actually explaining the dual functions of *sumimasen* in the contexts of both gratitude and apology.

Several studies on apologies in English (Goffman, 1971; Owen, 1980; Fraser, 1981) have offered some interesting perspectives. Goffman (1971), in particular, views apologies as one type of "'remedial interchange,' an action taken to change what might be seen as an offensive act into an acceptable one" (p. 90), which is one aspect of 'interpersonal rituals' (p. 63). In accordance with R. Ide (1992) the consideration of *sumimasen* as an instance of Goffman's (1971) "interpersonal rituals" illuminates its interactional characteristics. Other studies conducted from a cross-cultural perspective (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Trosborg, 1987; Bulm-Kulka et al., 1989; Olshtain, 1989) employ a discourse

completion test as their analytic tool; however, these studies do not offer enough clues for understanding the multiple functions of apologetic expressions, although this research does help to establish the fact that apology strategies are transferred from one language and culture to another.

Kumatoridani (1988, 1990, 1992) suggests that the shift in point of view is the key to understanding why apologies are performed in many situations where the giving of thanks is possible in Japanese. According to Kumatoridani, an interaction may be viewed as "favorable for the speaker" but "unfavorable for the addressee" (1988, p. 231). The speaker may see him/herself as the causer of the event which leads to an unfavorable situation for the addressee. Conversely, the speaker may see him/herself as the recipient of a favor which the addressee offers to the speaker. Kumatoridani claims that there is a shift in the point of view which treats "a favorable situation for the speaker" as "an unfavorable situation for the addressee" when thanks alternate with the speaker's feelings of apology. According to Kumatoridani, the shift occurs as a result of empathy and this operation is regarded as politeness behavior since more politeness is added through the operation of humbleness when the point of view shifts from the speaker to the addressee. The present paper will illustrate how Kumatoridani's notion of a shift in point of view operates in relation to the use of *sumimasen* in spontaneous interactive discourse.

THE DATA

The primary data used for this study is *Shufu no Isshuukan no Danwa Shiryo* (*One Week's Discourse Activity of a Housewife*) (Ide et al., 1984), which consists of a transcript of approximately ten hours of audio-recorded conversation between a housewife in Tokyo (Mrs. K), and some of the people with whom she interacted during the course of one week. Mrs. K, 49, is married to a white collar worker and has two daughters. She is an active PTA member and also teaches cooking at home. Mrs. K's encounters, as recorded in these data, range from her everyday conversations with her family and friends to conversations with a salesclerk or banker. The data include many tokens of *sumimasen* and other expressions of apology and thanks uttered by various speakers.

There are 44 total instances of *sumimasen* in this database, 41 of which were uttered by females and 3 by males. Of the 41 tokens uttered by women, 14 were said by Mrs. K The 44 tokens of sumimasen were then categorized according to the following: 1) Request marker, 2) Attention-getter, 3) Closing marker, 4) Regret marker,[1] and 5) Gratitude marker.

Two additional factors were also considered: whether *sumimasen* is located in the first pair part (1PP) or second pair part (2PP) of an adjacency pair (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974); and if it occurs as a second pair part, whether it is followed by any additional verbal response by the interlocutor.

FUNCTIONS AND SEQUENCES OF *SUMIMASEN*

The Five Functions

Request marker (8 tokens)

Sumimasen may be used when the speaker performs a request to or asks a favor of the addressee. Eight tokens of *sumimasen* were identified as request markers. Example (1) below illustrates this function:

(1) ((Mrs. K is at the copy shop and is speaking to the store owner))

1 Mrs. K: *A konnichiwa.* ***Suimasen.***[2] *Kopii o onegai shimasu.*
Ah, hello. I need some photocopies, please.

2 *Ichimaizutsu de ii'n desu keredo.*
Just one of each would be fine.

In line 1, *suimasen* precedes the speaker's request which can be considered as a "face threatening act" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 65), since Mrs. K might be interrupting the store owner's work. Mrs. K's utterance of *suimasen* minimizes the imposition on the store owner, even though the interaction is taking place in the context of doing business. Aoki and Okamoto (1988) point out that *sumimasen ga* (i.e., *sumimasen* plus the concessive particle *ga*) is often used before expressing a request, and describe this expression as a sentential hedge. Example (1) demonstrates that *sumimasen* alone can also serve as a mitigating device.

Attention-getter (2 tokens)

Sumimasen functions as an attention-getter when the speaker uses it to start an interaction. Two such tokens were identified in the data. This function is exemplified in (2):

(2) ((In a department store))

1 Mrs. K: *Ano* ***suimasen*** *ano* ***suimasen****, ano kore no shiro naideshooka?*[3]
Excuse me, would you have this one in white?

2 Salesclerk: *Sono shiro wa. Gomennasai.*
The white ones are (we're all out of them). I'm sorry.

Closing marker (3 tokens)

While *sumimasen* is used to initiate an interaction, it can also trigger the closing of an interaction. *Sumimasen* in this function appears in three cases. The following example of *sumimasen* illustrates its function as a pre-closing marker (Sacks & Schegloff, 1973), initiating the closing of an interaction in order to leave a place.

(3) ((An insurance company representative has come to Mrs. K's home to collect the insurance premium))

1 Mrs. K: *Taihen ne atsui aida no shuukin wa.*
It must be hard to come out and collect money in this hot weather.

2 Insurance Rep: *Kyoo wa sukoshi (xxx) kedo.*
Today it's a little (better).

3 Mrs. K: *Ma kinoo yori wa ne.*
Well, (it is a little better) than yesterday, isn't it?

4 Insurance Rep: *Un.*
Yes.

5 Mrs. K: *Maa korekara doo naru ka wakaranai kedo.*
I have no idea how the weather will be from now on.

6 Insurance Rep: *Hai* ***suimasen deshita.***
Yes.

7 Mrs. K: *Hai* ***suimasen deshita.***
Yes.

8 Insurance Rep: *Doomo hai doomo.*
Thank you.

9 Mrs. K: *Otesuu kakemashita. Gokuroo sama.*
I have troubled you. Thank you.

Interestingly, Mrs. K responds by using the identical utterance in line 7 as her interlocutor used in line 6. Through a reciprocal exchange of *sumimasen* in closings, the conversational participants also display acknowledgment of their interlocutors' acts before they close the interaction.

Regret marker (20 tokens)

This function of *sumimasen* displays speakers regret for what they have done. There are 20 tokens from the data which function as a regret marker. Example (4) below illustrates this function:

(4) ((In a telephone conversation, Mrs. Yano asks Mrs. K to check on tickets for a school play))

1 Mrs. K: *Ano soremadeni ano shirabete mimasu ga.*
I will check (with the theater).

2 Mrs. Yano: *Hai.*
Yes.

3 Mrs. K: *Anoo.*
Well.

4 Mrs. Yano: *Otekazu kakete* ***suimasen*** *desu.*
I am sorry to cause you so much trouble.

5 Mrs. K: *A iie.*
No (it's no trouble).

In this excerpt, Mrs. Yano produces *sumimasen* as a device for expressing apology, explicitly mentioning the reason for her apology, that is to say, for imposing extra work on Mrs. K. Mrs. K then responds with a minimization, 'no,' in line 5.

Gratitude marker (11 tokens)

Sumimasen is used when the speaker shows gratitude for some action performed by the addressee where the speaker views him/herself as a causer of the trouble as well as recipient of some benefit. There are 11 tokens of this function.

(5) ((Mrs.K has invited Prof. Ito to her home for lunch))

1 Mrs. K: *Ma chotto okuchi yogoshini*
This is just a small meal.

2 Prof. Ito: *Maa* ***suimasen*** *nani kara nani made.*
Oh, thank you. (you have done) so much (for me).

3 Mrs. K: *Ano kawatta ano itadaki kata nande gozaimasu no.*
This food has been prepared in a unique way.

This is a clearcut example of the function of *sumimasen* as a gratitude marker. *Sumimasen* in line 2 shows the speaker's conception that what the addressee has done is more than what she expected. Prof. Ito views herself as the cause of trouble, even though Mrs. K is the hostess and perfectly willing to have cooked for her. In this case, no response by the addressee follows.

Sumimasen in example (6) displays the speaker's gratitude for the addressee's favor, tinged with the speaker's regret for being troublesome.

(6) ((Mrs.Tada has forgotten to bring her envelope containing her monthly payment of tuition for cooking school))

1 Mrs. K: *Kondo fukuro irete motte kite chanto nante*
You can bring the right envelope next time.

2 Mrs. Tada: *Sono hoo ga ii desu?*
Do you prefer it that way?

3 Mrs. K: *Sono hoo ga iiwa.*
I do prefer it that way.

4 Mrs. Tada: *Soo desu ka? Jya raishuu*
Do you? Then, (I will bring it) next week.

5 Mrs. K: *Hai.*
Yes.

6 Mrs. Tada: ***Suimasen**. Nanka nanka saisho no tsuki ni motte kuruno ga*
Thank you. We are supposed to bring it at the beginning of the month

7 Mrs. K: *Iie, doo itashimashite.*
No. That's OK.

8 Mrs. Tada: ***Suimasen** deshita.*
Thank you.

9 Mrs. K: *Fukuro wa kocchi ne.*
This is the envelope (that you're supposed to use).

In this interaction, using *sumimasen* in line 6, Mrs. Tada expresses her gratitude to Mrs. K for her understanding, since Mrs. Tada forgot to bring the

correct envelope and her payment for the cooking school tuition will be late. Furthermore, the fact that Mrs. Tada adds an expansion which explicitly indicates that she knows she was wrong (*nanka nanka saisho no tsuki ni motte kuruno ga* 'we are supposed to bring it at the beginning of the month') shows that this token of *sumimasen* also implies her regret for not bringing the money which was due that day. Then, in line 8, Mrs. Tada responds to Mrs. K's minimization (*Iie, doo itashimashite.* 'No, that's OK') and again shows gratitude to Mrs. K through her utterance of *sumimasen deshita.* These examples of *sumimasen* illustrate that the speaker can at the same time demonstrate regret for being the source of trouble as well as appreciation for the addressee's understanding through the use of this one expression.

Sequence Organization of *Sumimasen*

Table 1: Sequential Position of *Sumimasen*

	1pp	2pp	non-adjacency pair	TOTAL
Function 1 (request)	7		1	8
Function 2 (attention-getter)	2			2
Function 3 (closing)	2	1		3
Function 4 (regret)		8 (4)*	12 (3)	20 (7)
Function 5 (gratitude)		6 (0)	5 (2)	11 (2)
TOTAL	11	15	18	44

*The numbers in parentheses indicate that some type of minimization response by the interlocutor (e.g., *doozo, doo itashimashite)* followed the speaker's utterance of *sumimasen.*

Table 1 shows the sequential positions of *sumimasen* as it occurs in these data. As indicated by the tokens of *sumimasen* for Function 1 (request marker), Function 2 (attention-getter), and Function 3 (closing marker), *sumimasen* tend to be produced as a first pair part. In contrast, the tokens of *sumimasen* as they occur in Function 4 (regret marker) and Function 5 (gratitude marker) tend to be

uttered as a second pair part. This indicates that *sumimasen* in a first pair part position signals the speaker's reluctance to impose on the addressee and *sumimasen* in a second pair part position signals the speaker's regret for having already imposed on the addressee. Therefore, *sumimasen* is aimed not only toward the speaker's previous actions but toward future actions as well.

Interestingly, 9 of the 11 occurrences of *sumimasen* which function as a gratitude marker are followed by no response from the interlocutor; while of the 20 tokens of *sumimasen* as a regret marker, seven are followed by some type of response: four, by minimizations such as *doo itashimashite* 'that's okay,' and three, by some encouragement to pursue an action such as *doozo* 'please' or 'go ahead.'

THE FUNCTIONAL PRINCIPLE OF *SUMIMASEN*

The five different functions of *sumimasen* are not unrelated to each other but emerge from a single underlying functional principle. I propose that the core function of *sumimasen* is to redress the addressee's face threatened by an imposition caused by the speaker.

In all the interactions involving *sumimasen* in the data, there is a wide range of impositions through which the speaker threatens the addressee's face. For Functions 1 (request marker) and 2 (attention getter), the speaker's request is an imposition on the addressee. For Function 3 (closing marker), the speaker considers his/her action of invading the addressee's space or time as an imposition. For Function 4 (regret marker), *sumimasen* clearly displays the speaker's regret for imposing trouble or extra work on the addressee. According to Kumatoridani's (1988, 1990, 1992) shift in point of view, even a favor done by the addressee for the speaker, can still be viewed as an imposition on the addressee, as in Function 5 (gratitude marker). Thus, the speaker, recognizing that s/he is the causer of some trouble for the addressee, attempts to redress the threat to the addressee's face by producing *sumimasen*. If *sumimasen* is not uttered by the speaker, the addressee may feel that s/he has lost face through the imposition.

The face-redressive function of *sumimasen* is closely related to the feeling of indebtedness. Whether the speaker's response is regarded as gratitude or apology, indebtedness to the addressee always underlies *sumimasen*. In the speech act of apology, it is common in any language or society for the speaker to feel indebtedness to the addressee for having caused him/her trouble (Coulmas, 1981). However, in Japanese society the speaker regards him/herself as a causer of trouble even when the addressee voluntarily provides some benefit to the speaker.

From an etymological perspective, *sumimasen*, among other apologetic expressions, specifically indicates the speaker's feeling of indebtedness. The *Gogen-daijiten* (*Japanese dictionary of etymology*) (Horii, 1988) points out that

sumimasen derives from the verb *sumu* represented by the character 澄む which means "to be clear." Although the *Gogen-daijiten* definition of the verb *sumu* is somewhat different from the one in *Koojien* (Shinmura, 1991) and other dictionaries (i.e., 'to finish,' 'to be settled,' 'to be satisfied') this other meaning can account for the source of indebtedness conveyed by *sumimasen*. The *Gogen-daijiten* indicates that the original sense of *sumimasen* is "my mind is not calm and peaceful if you do me such a favor." By producing *sumimasen*, the speaker not only shows gratitude to the addressee but also attempts to change, as much as possible, his/her unbalanced relationship with the addressee into a balanced one, at least verbally.

This concept of indebtedness may be related to the traditional custom of gift-giving in Japanese society where reciprocity is one of the interactional principles (Befu, 1974). In addition to gifts, Japanese feel indebted when they receive favors from other people. They might feel that only expressing gratitude is not sufficient to convey their indebtedness.

SUMIMASEN IN RELATION TO OTHER EXPRESSIONS OF APOLOGY AND GRATITUDE

Sumimasen and Other Expressions of Apology in the Data

As described previously, *sumimasen* has been characterized as a face-redressive marker with multiple functions. To examine whether other apologetic expressions in Japanese also have similar functions, all other apologetic expressions in the data were isolated and counted. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Expressions of Apology

expression[4]	# of tokens	meaning
mooshiwake nai (" *arimasen*) [polite] (" *gozaimasen*)[superpolite]	26	I'm sorry
gomen (" *nasai*) [polite]	24	I'm sorry
gomen kudasai	25	Excuse me
shitsurei shimasu	18	Excuse me

(" *shimashita*) [past] (" *itashimashita*) [past, polite] (" *mooshiagemashita*) [past, superpolite]		I'm sorry
warui desu	2	I feel bad (guilty)
otesuu kakemashita	3	I'm sorry to cause you trouble
omatase itashimashita	3	I'm sorry to keep you waiting
ojyama itashimashita	3	I'm sorry to intrude
gomendoo desuga	1	I'm sorry for troubling you
meiwaku to zonjimasu	1	I'm sorry to bother you

Next to *sumimasen*, the expressions *mooshiwake nai* and *gomen (nasai, kudasai)* occur very frequently. There are also certain routine formulae such as *otesuu kakemashita*, *omatase shimashita*, and *ojyama shimashita*, all of which explicitly mention the speakers actions objectively, displaying nothing about their personal feelings.

Figure 1 illustrates the various strategies for expressing apology in Japanese, with these strategies arranged along a comprehensive scale of denotational explicitness. In this figure, all the expressions in italics occur in the data base, except *owabi shimasu*. The arrow in Figure 1 runs from the high end of denotational explicitness to the low end. As noted, the core function of *sumimasen* is to show the speaker's indebtedness. In this light, *sumimasen* is less explicit than other expressions which contain explicit semantic components of apology. For example, *warui* denotes the speaker's recognition of his/her fault; *gomen nasai* indicates a request for forgiveness; *mooshiwake arimasen* denotes an excuse; and *owabi shimasu* explicitly denotes apology, since *wabi* by itself means 'apology.' Although there is no occurrence of *owabi shimasu* in the data, this expression can be considered one of the most sincere in terms of apologizing.

HIGH END OF
DENOTATIONAL
EXPLICITNESS

6. Offer apologies
   (owabi shimasu)

5. Acknowledge responsibility
   mooshiwake arimasen

4. Request forgiveness
   gomen nasai
   gomen kudasai

3. Express attitude towards an offense
   warui desu

2. Assert that an offense has occurred
   shitsurei shimashita
   otesuu kakemashita
   ojyama shimashita
   omatase itashimashita
   ote o wazurawase mashite
   gomendoo desu ga

1. Assert imbalance or show deference
   sumimasen

V

LOW END OF
DENOTATIONAL
EXPLICITNESS

Figure 1: Strategies of Apology

As Figure 1 shows, *mooshiwake arimasen* is distinguished as a strategy with a high degree of apologetic explicitness. *Mooshiwake arimasen* is prompted by the speaker's acknowledgment of his/her being at fault while *sumimasen* is frequently produced without the speaker's admission of fault. The next example demonstrates how the speaker could employ both *sumimasen* and *mooshiwake arimasen* in one turn.

(7) ((In a department store, Mrs. K asks the clerk to bring her another blouse after the clerk had already brought her the wrong one))

1 clerk: *A ookii hoodesu ka. Jyaa ooki hoo omochi shimashoo.*
Do you mean the blouse with bigger dots? OK, I will bring it to you.

2 Mrs. K: ***Suimasen. Mooshiwake arimasen.***
Sorry. I'm so sorry.

In this instance, Mrs. K might feel that *sumimasen* alone is not sufficient to apologize for having caused trouble again. Thus, to express a more sincere apology, Mrs. K produces *mooshiwake arimasen*, which conveys the speaker's recognition of her fault to the addressee. In this sense, *sumimasen* is less substantive than *mooshiwake arimasen*, and that is why *sumimasen* is considered as a "routine formula" (Goldstein & Tamura, 1975; Coulmas, 1981).

It is interesting that this non-substantive characteristic of *sumimasen* sometimes triggers a dissatisfied response by the addressee, such as *sumimasen de sumu to omotte iru'n desu ka?* 'Do you think that saying *sumimasen* will finish (be sufficient to apologize for) it?' when the offense is a more serious one. This expression demonstrates that *sumimasen* alone is not an appropriate apologetic expression where the trouble is so problematic that the addressee requires the speaker to repair the damage, be it emotional, psychological, or physical, or provide compensation for it. The fact that this expression contains a pun (i.e., finish/apologize) indicates cynically that the addressee's annoyance cannot be cleared up (*sumu*) just by virtue of the speaker's uttering of *sumimasen*. In such situations, *sumimasen* as a declaration of indebtedness, is not only insufficient but it also makes the speaker sound insincere.

Sumimasen and Other Expressions of Gratitude

In addition to expressions of apology, all expressions of gratitude in the data have also been coded and characterized to illuminate the strength of each expression and to compare them to *sumimasen*.

Table 3: Expressions of Gratitude

expressions[4]	# of tokens	meaning
arigatoo (" *gozaimasu*) [superpolite]	33	thank you
osore irimasu (" *irimashita*) [past]	14	thank you so much
kyooshuku desu (" *degozaimasu*) [polite]	4	thank you so much

gokuroo sama (" *deshita*) [polite, past]	7	thank you for your trouble
gochisoo sama deshita	3	thank you for the food
osewa sama (" *ni narimashita*) [polite, past]	2	thank you for your help
otsukare sama	7	thank you for working hard
tasukarimashita	1	thank you for your help

Arigatoo/arigatoo gozaimasu literally means that the addressee's action or favor is so precious that it hardly seems possible. This is the most common expression of gratitude in daily conversation.

Both *osore irimasu* and *kyooshuku desu* literally mean 'to be frightened' and convey the speaker's humbleness toward the addressee's favor which is too great to be taken for granted. There are also routine formulae for expressing gratitude, such as *gokuroo sama*, composed of the honorific prefix *go*, *kuroo* meaning 'trouble' or 'hard work,' and the respect term, *sama*. Three other expressions of gratitude, *otsukare sama, gochisoo sama,* and *osewa sama* are constructed in an identical manner, with the main element in each—*tsukare* (tiredness), *chisoo* (feast), and *sewa* (care) preceded by the honorific prefix *o* or *go* and followed by *sama*.

These strategies of expressing gratitude have also been ranked using the same scale of denotational explicitness, as shown in Figure 2.

HIGH END OF
DENOTATIONAL
EXPLICITNESS

5. Express gratitude
   (orei o mooshiagemasu)

4. Express attitude towards favor
   kyooshuku desu
   osore irimasu

3. Evaluate the action
   arigatoo
   tasukari mashita

2. Assert that favor has taken place
   gokuroo sama
   otsukare sama
   gochisoo sama
   osewa sama

1. Assert imbalance or show deference
   sumimasen

V

LOW END OF
DENOTATIONAL
EXPLICTNESS

Figure 2: Strategies of Gratitude

Figure 1 and Figure 2 reflect many similarities between strategies for expressing apology and gratitude, in that both contain routine formulae. Moreover, the ways of expressing gratitude in these routines are very similar to those for apology--the speaker mentions the addressee's action without explicitly expressing a feeling of appreciation, gratitude, or apology.

It is also interesting to note that *sumimasen* is identified as an expression with the lowest degree of denotational explicitness for strategies of both apology and gratitude.

Sumimasen vs. *Arigatoo Gozaimasu*

The speaker's feeling of indebtedness is a key for differentiating *sumimasen* from other gratitude expressions such as *arigatoo gozaimasu*. The following example, excerpted from a conversation among Mrs. K, Mrs. Ueno, and Mrs. Doi, illustrates this point:

.

(8) ((Mrs. Ueno offers a ride to Mrs. Doi))

1 Mrs. Ueno: *Doi-san ookuri suru wa.*
Mrs. Doi, I'll give you a ride.

2 Mrs. Doi: ***Arigatoo gozaimasu**. A daijyoobu desu. Moo ame mo.*
Thank you. That's all right. The rain's not so bad now.

3 Mrs. Ueno: *Oaruki ni narun jya.*
It would be hard if you walk.

4 Mrs. Doi: *Kyoowa ginkoo itte chotto.*
I have something to do at Kyoowa Bank.

5 Mrs. Ueno: *Kyoowa ginkoo.*
At Kyoowa Bank.

6 Mrs. K: *Soo, jyaa kyoowa no tokoro made nosete itadakeba?*
Then, why don't you get a ride (from Mrs. Ueno) to Kyoowa Bank.

7 *Ie, moshi Uenosan irassharanakereba atakushi ame dakara ookuri shiyoo to omotte itano yo.*
If Mrs. Ueno doesn't give you a ride, I thought I would take you

.

8 Mrs. Doi *Iya iya chotto shita toko dakara*
No no since we're so close (to Kyoowa Bank).

9 Mrs.Ueno: *Hanarete iru kara.*
It's far away.

10 Mrs. Doi: *Chotto shita toko dakara.*
It's close.

11 Mrs. K: *Jyaa eki made nosete itadakeba? nee*
Well, why don't you get a ride to the station?

12 Mrs. Ueno: *Soo yo.*
Yes, that's right.

13 Mrs. Doi: *Itsumo* ***suimasen*** *nanka itsumo nanka.*
(Thank you for) always giving me a ride, always.

14 Mrs. Ueno: *Ii no yoo.*
It's no problem.

In line 2, Mrs. Doi's response to Mrs. Ueno's offer is not *sumimasen*, but *arigatoo gozaimasu*, because Mrs. Doi is refusing Mrs. Ueno's offer. Mrs. Doi shows her feeling of gratitude for the offer only, with no immediate intention of accepting it. If Mrs. Doi had produced *sumimasen* as a second pair part to Mrs. Ueno's utterance, it would have indicated that she intended to accept the offer, showing both her appreciation and her regret for causing Mrs. Ueno to go out of her way. At line 13, however, Mrs. Doi does produce *sumimasen* since she finally decides to accept the offer after a circuitous interaction involving Mrs. K (from line 3 to 12). This means that Mrs. Doi's state of indebtedness does not occur until she actually accepts the offer. This phenomenon is also evident in (9):

(9) ((Prof. Ito congratulates Mrs. K on her daughter's receiving an award))

1 Prof. Ito: *Hai omedetoo gozaimashita.*
Yes, congratulations.

2 Mrs. K: ***Arigatoo gozaimasu.***
Thank you very much.

Here, Mrs. K utters *arigatoo gozaimasu*, not *sumimasen*, since her purpose is not to redress any indebtedness toward Prof. Ito, but simply to express her gratitude in response to her statement of congratulations. This accounts for the fact that *sumimasen* can never be uttered as a response to praise or to receiving a compliment.

With respect to the combined use of *sumimasen* and *arigatoo*, Kumatoridani (1990, p. 65) argues that *sumimasen* functions to repair an imbalance in a particular relationship, while *arigatoo* functions to close the interaction of a gratitude exchange. In my data, however, I did not find any examples where *arigatoo* functioned as a closing marker. Instead, I would like to propose that it is the speaker's recognition of indebtedness which determines the choice of *sumimasen* or *arigatoo* as seen in example (8).

THE ROLE OF *SUMIMASEN* IN PUBLIC INTERACTIONS

The Absence of *Sumimasen* in Family Interactions

Sumimasen, which is employed as one of the least denotationally explicit strategies for expressing both apology and gratitude, plays a very important role in Japanese society, yet tokens of *sumimasen* are not found in the interactions which involve only family members. The fact that there is no occurrence of *sumimasen* in the family conversations in these data may be one piece of indirect evidence to support its importance in public interactions; that is to say that *sumimasen* seems to be a crucial expression outside of the home, while it is noticeably rare among family members and other intimate relations.

Of the ten hours of recorded conversation with Mrs. K, approximately three hours are spent communicating with her husband and two daughters. As I have mentioned, there are no occurrences of *sumimasen* in these three hours of family interaction; however, I do find tokens which occur when Mrs. K is addressing someone outside of the family. This suggests that *sumimasen* is not used in interactions where the speaker feels no indebtedness, and consequently has no need to maintain the addressee's face. Example (10) also supports this point.

(10) ((Mrs. K is speaking to her daughter, Aya))

Mrs. K:	*Aya-chan, Aya-chan.* Aya, Aya.
Aya:	*Haai.* Yes.
Mrs. K:	*Chotto, oneechama okoshite.* Please wake up your sister.

Instead of uttering *sumimasen*, Mrs. K only uses a hesitation marker, *chotto*, which has been termed by Matsumoto (1985, p. 143) as "a speech act qualification." However, as we have seen, the same speaker, Mrs. K, uses *sumimasen* often when making requests to her friends, her cooking class students, or sales clerks.[5]

Sumimasen and *Kao* (Japanese 'Face')

As pointed out earlier, Mrs. K seems to have a great consideration for not violating the interlocutor's image in public. *Kao*, the Japanese notion of face, might be the key concept for discussing the significance of *sumimasen* in public interactions. The fact that there are so many expressions in Japanese with *kao*[6]

indicates the sensitivity of Japanese people to this notion of "face." Matsumoto (1988, p. 423) points out that the Japanese conception of "face" does not always fit the notion of "face" defined by Brown and Levinson (1978). For Japanese people, *kao* is more than 'self-image' or 'self-respect' (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p.66); it is a person's face in public or even honor in accordance with one's status. For example, if someone is not treated in an appropriate way in terms of his/her status, s/he feels that "his/her honor was disgraced," which is much stronger than losing face. This is reflected in the expression *kao ga tsubusareru* 'to have one's face crushed' (i.e., to have one's reputation ruined). If the speaker shows that s/he is indebted to the addressee, the addressee's face can be maintained through the speaker's uttering of *sumimasen*, despite the imposition that the speaker has already made.

Sumimasen can also be considered as an utterance for *omoiyari* 'consideration for others' which Maynard (1987, p. 219) emphasizes as a crucial element of Japanese conversational interaction. Maintaining the interlocutor's face is one way of expressing *omoiyari*, and the speaker can show *omoiyari* by producing *sumimasen*, even though s/he does not intend to substantively apologize.

The Absence of *Sumimasen* and Losing Face

The following example demonstrates how the absence of *sumimasen* in interpersonal relationships among Japanese and this interesting stretch of talk shows just how important Mrs. K considers the expression.

(11) ((Mr. and Mrs. K discuss their neighbor whose house was under construction. The construction company vehicles always parked in front of the entrance to the Ks' garage))

1 Mrs. K: *Soshitara sono otoosan to iu hito mo oohei na hito de,*
(Then I found out that) his father is arrogant, too.

2 Mr. K: *Huhun.*
Yes.

3 Mrs. K: *Sorede kooji no kuruma yokete kudasaranai to ano atashi no kuruma dooshite dasun'deshooka tte ittano.*
Then I told him I couldn't get my car out of the garage if that car was not moved.

4 Mr. K: *Hun*
Yes.

5	Mrs. K:	*Soshitara futsuu dattara* ***suimasen*** *toka nantoka iudesho,* Normal people say "I'm sorry" or something like that, don't they?
6	Mr. K:	*Hun.* Yes.
7	Mrs. K:	*Nani mo iwanaino yo.* He said nothing.
8	Mr: K:	*Un.* Yes.
9	Mrs. K:	*Watashi mo honto ni shaku ni sawatta kara....* This really made me upset.
10		*Konna kootsuu boogai sarete anata* ***suimasen*** *no hitotsu mo naishi ne,* Having our driveway blocked, you know, we didn't even get a "*sumimasen*,"
11		*De ne, kocchi wa shitade ni dete, "****Suimasen****. Chotto kuruma dashitai'n desu kedo," te ieba,* And then, when I said, humbling myself, "Excuse me, I would like to take my car out,"
12		*moo urusai dano ne mendoo kusai dano nante ne.* they said "That's annoying," or "what a trouble maker."
13		*Ano toki hontoo watashi ne hontoo ni keisatsu ni denwa shichaookashira to omotta kurai yo.* That time, it made me so upset that I really thought I would call the police.

Indeed, this conversation illustrates that Mrs. K feels that her honor was violated by her neighbor who did not even say *sumimasen*. What bothers Mrs. K more than anything (line 9) is the absence of *sumimasen* (line 7) rather than the act of illegal parking itself. Thus, *sumimasen* is crucial for maintaining the interlocutor's face, even though an offensive action has already been committed. Mrs. K must have felt that *kao ga tsubusareta* 'her face was crushed' (See page 19) because of her neighbor's failure to utter *sumimasen*.

Another interesting finding is that the utterance *futsuu dattara*, which literally means 'if he were a normal person,' suggests that Mrs. K regards the neighbor as a person lacking common sense. Mrs. K's impression that the

neighbor is "arrogant" (line 1) may also be related to his non-use of *sumimasen*. A person's failure to produce an expected utterance might result in that person being judged an inappropriate member of society. In this sense, *sumimasen* might be one index by which a speaker is judged. Mrs. K's utterance *suimasen no hitotsu mo naishi* (line 10) 'we didn't even get a "*sumimasen*,"' also indicates that she recognizes *sumimasen* as the absolute minimum response required under such circumstances.

In addition, in line 11 Mrs. K displays her perception that she has done nothing wrong yet uses *sumimasen* as a politeness strategy for asking her neighbor to move the car: *kocchi wa shitade ni dete, suimasen...te ieba* 'when I said, humbling myself, "excuse me."' Naturally, Mrs. K knows that it is not her but the neighbor who should recognize himself as the source of trouble and produce *sumimasen*, and the fact that he did not frustrated her deeply.

This is a strong example of how the failure to use *sumimasen* breaks the rapport between interlocutors. If this neighbor had uttered *sumimasen* to Mrs. K, she would not have such hostile feelings. Thus, *sumimasen* functions as "a social lubricant which keeps the wheels of human relations running smoothly" (Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982, p. 93) in spite of troublesome situations. Even though *sumimasen* is used in a ritualized and formulaic way and sometimes seems to lack sincerity, this expression has an important role for maintaining smooth relationships. Since language is not only a tool of communication but also "a tool of human interaction" (Wierzbicka, 1991, p. 1), the absence of a single utterance such as *sumimasen* can have detrimental effects on interpersonal relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the multiple functions of *sumimasen* which cannot be defined based on the concept of apology alone. This study demonstrates that *sumimasen* has great importance in maintaining face as well as avoiding conflict in public interactions.

I began this study with the realization that there are many communicative gaps between American and Japanese interpretations of the notions of apology and gratitude having heard many instances of Japanese learners of English uttering "I'm sorry" as a generalized counterpart of *sumimasen*. In addition, I have heard Americans living in Japan posing the following question: "Why do the Japanese say 'I'm sorry' when they receive a gift?" Researchers have pointed out that native speakers of other languages also have difficulties in mastering speech acts of apologies in English (Borken & Reinhart, 1978; Olshtain, 1989); however, misunderstandings regarding apologies between Japanese and Americans might be more frequent because of the differences in their strategies of apology and thanks. Recognizing the peculiarity of the multiple functions of

sumimasen can contribute to the resolution, or at least the reduction, of such misunderstandings.

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NOTES

[1] In some cases, it was difficult to classify the functions as either expressing regret or gratitude since *sumimasen* can display the speaker's mixed feelings of gratitude and apology through dual points of trouble. In classifying each function, I tried to measure the relative weight of gratitude and apology. If the degree of apology appeared greater, that instance of *sumimasen* was coded as a regret marker. Conversely, if the degree of gratitude appeared greater, then the token was coded as a gratitude marker.

[2] *Sumimasen* often occurs in its reduced phonological form, *suimasen,* which has the identical meaning but is slightly less formal.

[3] Based on this example, it could be argued that the function of the attention getter closely resembles that of the request marker since the speaker in this interaction requests something of the addressee just after producing *sumimasen.* However, *sumimasen* clearly does have the function of getting attention, as in a classroom, a restaurant, or on the street, and since other expressions of apology such as *mooshiwake arimasen or gomen nasai* are not used as attention-getters, I think it is fitting to maintain this classification of *sumimasen.*

[4] The expressions in parentheses are variations of the base expression, (i.e., plain or present forms). There is no semantic difference if the expression appears in the plain form or the present form.

[5] Of the eight tokens identified as request markers, six are produced by Mrs. K.

[6] For example, *kao o tateru* which means 'to give or save face' is used in situations where something unfavorable or disgraceful happens. The opposite of *kao o tateru* is *kao o tsubusu* 'to crush one's face' or *kao ni doro o nuru* 'to do a shameful thing. *Kao* can even mean 'power' as seen in such expressions as *kao ga hiroi* 'a person who has many contacts', or *kao ga kiku* 'a person with influence whose word goes a long way.' The great importance which the Japanese place on the notion of *kao* is clear through these expressions.

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Kazumi Kimura holds an M.A. degree in Teaching English as a Second Language from UCLA. Her research interests are in discourse analysis and teaching English as a second/foreign language.