

# "SORRY . . . I'M CANADIAN" AN ANALYSIS OF WHEN CANADIANS USE THE WORD "SORRY"

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## *1. Introduction*

Why is it that we feel the need to apologize when we are not at fault? It could simply be the way in Canada, as Canadians appear to be world leaders in official apologies. Perhaps Canadians are overly concerned with maintaining their self-image as a tranquil, multicultural, peacemaking nation.

Through our research, we strived to discover when Canadians use the word "sorry," in which contexts, as well as whether these contexts differ for other nationalities. From our experience we believed Canadians would be likely to say "sorry" more than other nationalities. By definition, the word "sorry" is appropriate when someone is feeling regretful about something they have said or done, but Canadians have different uses for the phrase "I'm sorry," with variations indicated primarily by inflection. Canadians use "sorry" not only when expressing regret but also when trying to grab someone's attention or avert a potential problem.

## *2. Purpose and Hypothesis*

The purpose of this paper is to explore how and when Canadians say the word "sorry" and how this differs between age groups and from other nationalities.

We speculated that saying "sorry" in order to avert potential problems would be a "Canadianism," in other words, a use of "sorry" very common among Canadians, far less common for other nationalities. We believe this use of "sorry" is especially Canadian since the Canadian government has used this tactic repeatedly: making official apologies to various groups not to right historical wrongs but to try and ease political tensions and improve future relationships between communities in Canada.

## *3. Research and Procedure*

We found research on apologizing that compared different languages syntactically but none that compared dialects within one language. We did not find much data on the Canadian "sorry"; therefore, we decided to conduct our own survey. Our survey gave

participants a series of scenarios in which a verbal response of “sorry” *might* occur. Participants were asked to write down their verbal response to each scenario, and the data were analyzed. The survey is reproduced in **Appendix A**.

After surveying 33 individuals at random, we divided our participants into three different age categories: ages 9-17, ages 18-25, and ages 26 and above. We also divided the participants into categories based on nationality: Canadian and non-Canadian. We had intended to compare results between males and females, but we were unable to do this because we had very few male participants.

#### 4. *Survey Results and Analyses*

In order to analyze the results of the survey, we divided our ten survey questions into three categories based on the type of “sorry” the participants would be using if their response included the word. The three categories were as follows: apologizing, attracting attention, and averting a potential problem. Category one questions established how many participants said “sorry” when they were actually the person at fault. Whether they were in a situation where they had bumped into someone else at a grocery store, or they had arrived late and interrupted a class, for category one cases, if the participants used the word “sorry,” they were using the word according to its dictionary definition, for an actual apology. Category two established how many participants said “sorry” when they were attempting to catch another individual’s attention. Whether they needed to stop someone and ask for directions, return a dropped mitten, or simply ask for assistance at a physical fitness centre, if the participants in category two scenarios used the word “sorry,” it was in an attempt to catch the attention of another. The third category established how many participants said “sorry” in order to avert a potential problem—even when they were not at fault. Participants were asked what they would say if a stranger bumped into them, or if someone was interrupting them while they were on the phone, or busy at work. Given the nature of these scenarios, if the participants responded with “sorry,” they were using the word to avert a potential problem.

All the results of the survey were interesting. Certain questions, however, yielded more surprising data than others. Comparing the results of particular questions produced quite unexpected results, which contributed greatly to our understanding of the use of the word “sorry” in the Canadian population. Below we present selected results in detail.

##### 4.1 *Comparing Questions 1 and 6*

Question 1: *You are browsing at your local grocery store and a stranger bumps into you.*

Question 6: *You are browsing through your local grocery store and you bump into a stranger.*

For Question 6 (you bump into a stranger), all participants, Canadian or otherwise, responded with, "sorry," with a single exception: a Canadian male, aged 56, wrote, "Excuse me please." This response may indicate either an idiolectal (personal linguistic) or personality difference.

It was "sorry" in response to the scenarios like Question 1 (a stranger bumps into you) that we considered especially Canadian. This is because if people say "sorry" in such cases, they are not apologizing for being at fault but rather out of habit or to avert a potential problem.

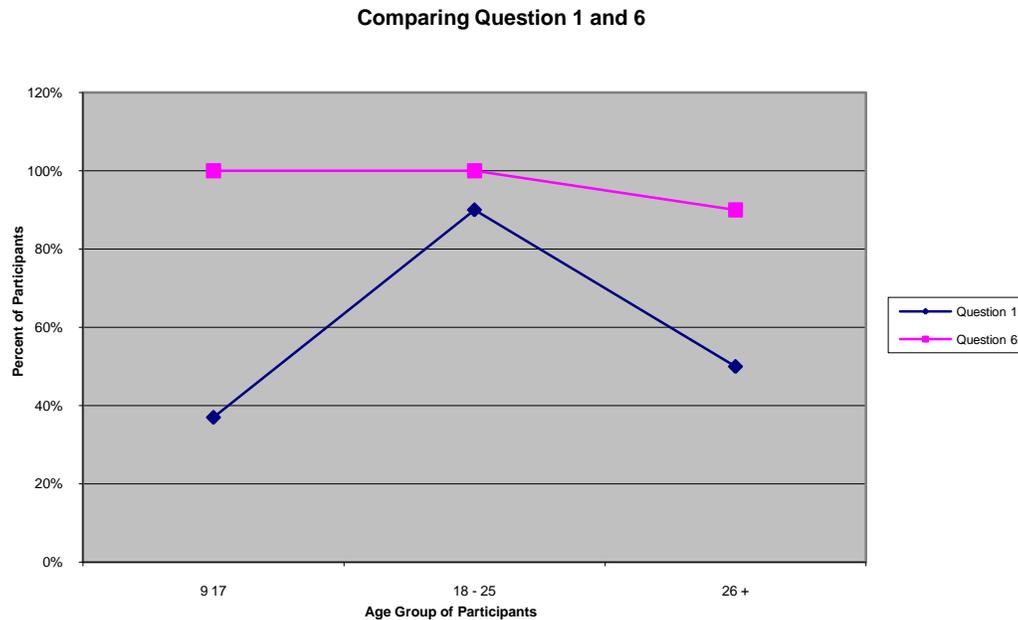
Strikingly, the results for Question 1 demonstrate age-grading; the percentage of responses of "sorry" in each age category was significantly different (see **Table 1**). The individuals in the age category of 18 to 25 were the most likely to say "sorry," with 90% including the word in their answer. The age group 26 and older answered with "sorry" 50% of the time. The youngest group, aged 9 to 17, were the least likely to respond with "sorry": they used the word in their answer only 37% of the time.

Age	Question 1	Question 6
9 – 17	37%	100%
18 – 25	90%	100%
26 +	50%	90%

**Table 1.** Questions 1 and 6, Use of "Sorry" by Age

Note the spike among 18 to 25 year olds in the use of "sorry" when not at fault in **Figure 1** (below). We hypothesized that the individuals aged 18 to 25 were the most likely to say "sorry," even when they were not the person at fault, because they are old enough to understand the importance of being polite, and they want to be sure that they show respect to the individuals around them in order to be respected and liked themselves. Individuals at this age may think it is crucial that they do not offend anyone in order to be perceived in a positive way. The individuals over the age of 26 were less likely to use the word "sorry" when they were not the person at fault. We think this is because they are well established and have already gained respect from those they need or desire respect from. Individuals at this age view time as being limited and think it is important not waste valuable time and energy on impressing those who have no large effect on their life and do not matter to them. The participants aged 9 to 17 were even less likely to use the word "sorry" when they were not at fault. We think this is because they do not care what other people think or because they do not understand the importance of being polite. Generally at this age, in order to gain respect and be admired by one's peers it is more effective to be comical

or athletic or to have other particular character traits; being polite with good manners does not usually increase the number of one's strong social connections.



**Figure 1.** Questions 1 and 6, Use of "Sorry" by Age

#### 4.2 Question 10

Question 10: *You are having a fairly in depth conversation on your cell phone and someone is trying to get your attention to speak with you.*

Question 10 demonstrated interesting results because it was apparent that individuals were unsure which would be more polite: to ask the person who is on the phone to hold or the person who is right in front of you to wait. We found were that individuals in the youngest category, who were aged 9 to 17, were most likely to ask the person in front of them to wait. The individuals in the older categories, aged 18- 25, and 26 and older, were more evenly split between who they would ask to wait. We hypothesize that the younger generation is much more familiar with using and communicating through new technologies, such as the cell phone. Therefore, those in this age group view telecommunication as valid and significant, considering it impolite to ask the person on the phone to hold simply because another person is in front of them and does not want to wait. In contrast, people in the older generations view face-to-face conversation as much more significant, as this is the form of communication that they are familiar with. One participant, a Canadian female aged 63, wrote for Question 10 that she would "excuse [her]self from the phone call and say, 'yes?'" to the person trying

to get [her] attention." She then went on to write in brackets, "cell phones shouldn't take priority over real people!"

### 4.3 Comparing the Three Different Uses of the Word "Sorry"

The overall rates of use of each type of "sorry" in each age group are shown in **Appendix B**. Here we examine each "sorry" in detail. Our first category of "sorry" occurs when someone is apologizing out of regret; this use is seen in Questions 6 and 7 (see **Appendix A**). As **Table 2** below demonstrates, individuals aged 9 to 17 apologized the most.

Age	%
9-17	93%
18-25	85%
26+	81%

**Table 2.** Using the word "sorry" to apologize by age group (Canadian data only)

We believe that the youngest group, when at fault, is most likely to apologize with "sorry" because young children are conditioned by their parents and guardians to apologize when they are in the wrong. As you can see, participants of all age groups apologized with a "sorry" when they were at fault more than 80% of the time.

Our second use of the word "sorry" is to grab someone's attention. This use is seen in Questions 2, 3, 4, 5a, and 9 in the survey (see **Appendix A**). **Table 3** below shows the percentage of people who use "sorry" in this manner.

Age	%
9-17	10%
18-25	14%
26+	0%

**Table 3.** Using the word "sorry" to grab attention by age group (Canadian data only)

As you can see, the percentages of people using the word "sorry" in this way were low. However, we found that people aged 26 years and older as well as 18-25 years were still polite despite not using "sorry." Children aged 9 to 17 may have used "sorry" more than their elders but were still more likely to be impolite. For example, an eleven-year-old girl responded to Question 10 as follows: "I would go in front of their face and say EXCUSE ME!" Children at this age are still very rule based. Thus the scenario "you

need to ask a nearby stranger for the time” prompted a nine- and a ten-year-old girl to answer, “I wouldn’t ask a stranger.”

Our third use of “sorry” is to avert a potential problem, which is seen in Questions 1, 5b, 8, and 10 (see **Appendix A**). **Table 4** below shows the percentage of people who use “sorry” in this manner.

<b>Age</b>	<b>%</b>
9-17	21%
18-25	32%
26+	15%

**Table 4.** Using the word “sorry” to alleviate a problem by age group (Canadian data only)

**Table 4** illustrates that people aged 18 to 25 years said “sorry” the most as a strategy for averting a potential problem. We speculate people in this age group want to be respected, socially accepted, and are at a point in their lives where they are trying to advance themselves personally and in their career paths, making it very important that they are respected and well liked.

An example of saying “sorry” when trying to alleviate a problem is demonstrated in Question 8 of our survey:

*You work in retail and after you finish a display, a customer bumps into you, causing you to knock over your display.*

The responses we received in the aged-26-and-older category demonstrated that many of the participants expected the customers to be the first to apologize. Several wrote in brackets that they would only say the accident was “okay” if the customer apologized first. One man even wrote that he would say, “Nice hip check. Are you in a hurry or do you have a problem?” In the group of participants aged 9 to 17 year old, there were also many who indicated that they expected an apology first. One girl wrote, “I would make sure they say sorry.” We think that this response occurred in the younger age category because the youngest participants are rule based and are reiterating what they have been taught.

## 5. *Discussion and Conclusions*

Our original hypothesis was that Canadians would make more use of the word “sorry” to avert or alleviate a problem than other nationalities. We were unable to draw any

conclusion about this because of the lack of data in the "other nationality" category; however, we did find other interesting data.

Looking only at the Canadian data, those aged 18-25 were found to use the word "sorry" more frequently and in different scenarios. In comparison to those in the 26 and older category, the 18-25 year olds were more likely to use the word "sorry" when they were not the one at fault. We believe that the older individuals understand that they should be honest and just and let the person who is actually at fault take the blame. In the workplace, for example, an individual who has made a mistake could end up being fired; therefore, employees will not take the blame unless they actually made the mistake for fear of unjust punishment.

We believe the 18 – 25 year olds are more interested in impressing others and in advancing through making personal connections in their career and everyday life and therefore are more open to saying "sorry" to keep the relationship positive.

Throughout our data, in certain scenarios, we found that, while one individual of an age group would say "sorry," another of the same age group would respond with "excuse me." Although these words may seem interchangeable, we found that "excuse me" was more commonly used sarcastically. It was also seemed to be used to express the idea "Please disregard what I've done," which holds less concern for the other person than apologizing and taking the blame by saying "sorry" (or "I regret what I did. Could you please forgive me?").

## *6. Problems*

After receiving our completed surveys, we found that we were lacking non-Canadian participants. This made it very difficult to distinguish between the way in which Canadians use the word "sorry" and the way in which non-Canadians use "sorry." Since there were so few non-Canadian results, we found the data insignificant. We decided to analyze the use of the word "sorry" across different age groups of Canadians rather than across nationalities.

Another problem we encountered in analysing our data was that we had written our survey for an older audience; individuals in the age group of 9 to 17 found it difficult to answer particular questions. This was because they were not familiar with certain scenarios and therefore could not predict how they would respond.

## *7. Suggestions for Future Research*

Future research in this area could be done by surveying a greater number of non-Canadian participants and then analyzing the results across nationalities. Results in this area would determine how polite Canadians are, and if the rate of use or number of discrete uses of the word "sorry" differs across nationalities.

*Appendix A  
Linguistics Survey*

**Age:**

**Province and Country born:**

**Any other locations you have lived in for five or more years in your life:**

*The following is a list of scenarios, which occur, in everyday life. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers; this exercise is an observation of the English language. Please don't feel pressured to write what you think is a 'proper' answer, honestly write out what your typical verbal response would be for each scenario.*

1. You are browsing at your local grocery store and a stranger bumps into you.
2. You need to ask a nearby stranger for the time.
3. You are walking down the sidewalk and a person in front of you drops their mitten.
4. You are lost in an unknown city and you need to ask a stranger on the street for directions.
5. a) You are looking for a place to work in a busy library and you notice someone standing up. You approach them to be sure they are leaving so that you can take their seat.  
  
b) They confess that they are not leaving but were simply standing to stretch their legs.
6. You are browsing through your local grocery store and you bump into a stranger.
7. You arrive late for class and after you walk in, the teacher stops to look at you for a moment.
8. You work in retail and after you finish a display, a customer bumps into you, causing you to knock over your display.
9. You are at the gym and you need to get the attention of a stranger who is listening to an ipod, in order to ask for help with the equipment.
10. You are having a fairly in depth conversation on your cell phone, and someone is trying to get your attention to speak with you.

*Thank you for your time!*

## Appendix B Rates of Use of Three Types of "Sorry" by Age Group

The overall rates of use of each type of "sorry" in each age group are charted and graphed below.

Age	Apologizing	Attention	Alleviate Problem
9-17	93%	10%	21%
18-25	85%	14%	32%
26+	81%	0%	15%

Comparing Three Sorry's

