



## Sociopragmatic Functions of Sumimasen and Gomennasai in the Film Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou

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### Abstract

Apology expressions play an important role in maintaining interpersonal relationships in Japanese communication. Among the commonly used expressions, sumimasen and gomennasai perform distinct sociopragmatic functions depending on situational context and speaker-listener relationships. However, learners of Japanese often experience difficulty distinguishing the appropriate contexts for using these expressions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the sociopragmatic functions of sumimasen and gomennasai in film dialogue. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using sociopragmatic analysis. The data were collected from the animated film Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou through observation and note-taking techniques. A total of fifteen utterances containing the expressions were identified and analyzed based on their contextual functions. The findings reveal that sumimasen performs two main functions: avoiding conflict and expressing dissatisfaction (two instances) and maintaining attitudinal distance (one instance). Meanwhile, gomennasai appears more frequently and functions as a marker of attitudinal distance (six instances) and as an expression of sincere apology (six instances). These findings suggest that the choice between sumimasen and gomennasai is strongly influenced by interpersonal relationships and emotional context within the narrative interaction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human communication is fundamentally shaped by the use of language to express intentions, share experiences, and interpret the perspectives of others. In social interaction, utterances do not merely convey information but also perform social actions that help individuals maintain relationships and coordinate mutual understanding. Within pragmatic studies, speech acts are considered a key concept for explaining how meaning emerges through the interaction between linguistic forms and situational contexts (Degen, 2023; House & Kádár, 2025). Effective communication therefore requires both the ability to articulate ideas clearly and the capacity to recognize the emotional and relational dimensions embedded in an utterance (Fenuku, 2024). Speakers often rely on various linguistic strategies to manage interpersonal relationships and to prevent misunderstandings that may disrupt social harmony (Haugh et al., 2021). One such strategy involves the use of apology expressions, which serve to repair social relationships when an action or utterance is perceived as inappropriate or potentially threatening to another person's face. Previous research has highlighted that apologies function not only as expressions of regret but also as mechanisms for negotiating social meaning and restoring relational balance in interaction (Friedrich, 2022; Lahiri & Padmakumari, 2025; Stackhouse et al., 2024; Valipour et al., 2025). For this reason, examining how apology expressions are used in real communicative contexts provides important insight into the ways language mediates interpersonal relationships.

In Japanese communication, apology expressions play a particularly prominent role because maintaining harmony and showing sensitivity toward others are central cultural values. Within Japanese linguistics, expressions used to convey apology are often categorized as wabi hyōgen, which include various forms employed to acknowledge mistakes, express regret, or mitigate potential tension in interaction. Among these expressions, sumimasen and gomennasai are frequently

encountered in everyday communication and are widely recognized by both native speakers and language learners. Despite their apparent similarity, these expressions often carry different pragmatic meanings depending on the situational context and the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. Research has shown that sumimasen may function not only as an apology but also as a way to express appreciation, attract attention, or maintain social distance in interaction (Diegoli, 2022; Masuji & Mihic, 2022). Likewise, studies in Japanese sociopragmatics indicate that apology expressions are strongly influenced by factors such as hierarchy, interpersonal distance, and emotional closeness between participants in conversation (Diegoli, 2022a; Imai, 2024). Because of these contextual complexities, learners of Japanese often experience difficulty determining when each expression should be used appropriately in communication (Maa & Taguchi, 2022; Sato, 2024). Consequently, examining the functions of sumimasen and gomennasai provides valuable insight into how apology expressions operate within Japanese sociocultural interaction.

Given the importance of these expressions in Japanese communication, several studies have examined Japanese apology expressions from various pragmatic perspectives. For instance, Sandu (2012) investigates the co-occurrence of sumimasen and gomennasai with other linguistic devices in Japanese interaction, demonstrating that these expressions can perform multiple discourse functions beyond simple apologies. In a subsequent study, Sandu (2013) further shows that the meanings of sumimasen and gomennasai are dynamic and shaped by contextual factors such as social relationships, interactional roles, and situational settings. Similarly, Diegoli (2022) analyzes the use of gomen in computer-mediated communication and reveals that apology expressions may convey pragmatic meanings that extend beyond apologizing, including mitigating face-threatening acts or managing interpersonal relations. More recently, Diegoli (2024) highlights how linguistic forms associated with apology can function as indexical markers of (im)politeness, depending on interactional context and communicative intentions.

Despite these contributions, most previous studies have primarily focused on naturally occurring conversations, online communication, or television dramas, often employing corpus-based approaches to examine apology expressions in general communicative contexts. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how these apology expressions function within narrative media such as animated films, where emotional relationships and character dynamics strongly influence language use. In particular, the sociopragmatic functions of sumimasen and gomennasai in film dialogue remain underexplored. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how these expressions are used in the animated film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, focusing on their sociopragmatic functions in relation to interpersonal distance, emotional context, and narrative interaction among characters.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive analytical approach to examine the sociopragmatic functions of the Japanese apology expressions sumimasen and gomennasai in film dialogue. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective of this research was to interpret the contextual meanings of linguistic expressions within natural communicative interactions rather than to quantify their occurrence. The study adopted a sociopragmatic perspective, which focuses on how language use is shaped by social relationships, situational context, and communicative intentions (Haugh et al., 2021). Through this perspective, apology expressions are analyzed not only as linguistic forms but also as social actions that function to manage interpersonal relationships. By examining the use of sumimasen and gomennasai in narrative dialogue, this study aims to reveal how these expressions function in different interactional contexts and how they reflect sociocultural aspects of Japanese communication.

### Participant

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from dialogues spoken by characters in the Japanese animated film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*. Instead of human participants, the study focuses on interactions among fictional characters whose utterances serve as the source of linguistic data. These characters function as speakers and interlocutors whose conversations contain the apology expressions sumimasen and gomennasai. The film was selected

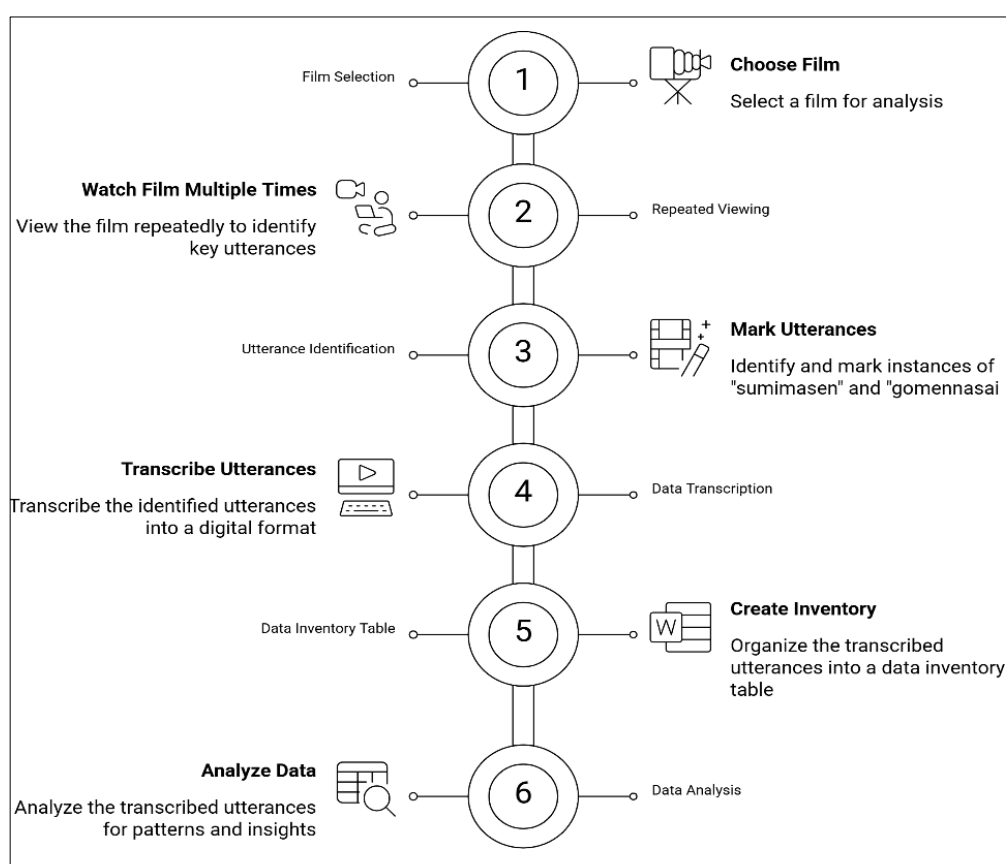
because it presents various interpersonal interactions involving family relationships, emotional exchanges, and social encounters that provide meaningful contexts for analyzing apology expressions. Through repeated observation of the film, fifteen utterances containing the target expressions were identified and selected as the data for analysis. Each utterance was examined in relation to the communicative situation, the relationship between the characters, and the pragmatic intention underlying the use of the expression.

### Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument responsible for identifying, selecting, and interpreting the data. In this study, the researcher conducted repeated observations of the film to identify utterances containing the expressions *sumimasen* and *gomennasai*. To support the data collection process, an observation checklist and a data inventory table were used as supporting instruments. The inventory table was designed to systematically record relevant information for each data instance, including the dialogue excerpt, time stamp in the film, speaker and interlocutor, situational context, and the pragmatic function of the expression. This instrument enabled the researcher to organize and classify the data systematically while ensuring that each occurrence of the target expressions was documented accurately for further analysis.

### Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was carried out through several systematic stages. First, the animated film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou* was selected as the primary data source due to its rich narrative interactions and the presence of various communicative situations involving apology expressions. Second, the film was watched repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and the relationships among the characters. Third, utterances containing the expressions *sumimasen* and *gomennasai* were identified through careful observation of the dialogue throughout the film. After the relevant utterances were identified, each instance was transcribed and recorded along with its corresponding time stamp and contextual information, including the speaker, interlocutor, and interactional setting. The collected data were then organized in a data inventory table to facilitate systematic classification and further analysis. The overall procedure of the data collection process employed in this study is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Data Collection Procedure

## Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted through several stages of qualitative interpretation. First, all identified utterances containing *sumimasen* and *gomennasai* were transcribed and verified by repeatedly reviewing the relevant scenes in the film. Second, each utterance was examined in relation to its situational context, including the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, the communicative setting, and the emotional circumstances surrounding the interaction. Third, the utterances were coded and categorized according to their sociopragmatic functions. The coding process involved identifying the communicative purpose of each expression, such as expressing sincere apology, maintaining attitudinal distance, avoiding conflict, or expressing dissatisfaction. Finally, the categorized data were interpreted to explain how the use of these expressions reflects sociopragmatic aspects of Japanese communication within the narrative context of the film.

## Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied during the research process. First, repeated observation of the film was conducted to confirm the accuracy of the identified utterances and their contextual interpretation. Second, contextual analysis was carried out carefully by considering situational factors such as character relationships, interactional setting, and communicative intention. Third, the data classification process was performed systematically using a data inventory table to maintain consistency in coding and categorization. These procedures helped ensure that the interpretation of the apology expressions was grounded in the interactional context of the dialogue and that the findings reflected a reliable analysis of the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

In this study, the data analyzed consist of utterances exchanged between characters in the film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*. Based on the results of data collection, the researcher identified a total of 15 instances representing the functions of *sumimasen* and *gomennasai*. The functions of *sumimasen* include avoiding conflict and expressing dissatisfaction, which account for two instances, as well as maintaining attitudinal distance, represented by one instance. Meanwhile, the functions of *gomennasai* comprise regulating attitudinal distance, with six instances, and expressing sincere apologies, also with six instances. For a more detailed explanation, the research findings are presented in the following table.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the Functions of *Sumimasen* and *Gomennasai*

Gomennasai/ Sumimasen	Function	Data Code	Frequency
Gomennasai	Regulating attitudinal distance	D01, D02, D04, D05, D07	6
	Expressing sincere apologies	D03, D06, D09, D10, D11, D12	6
	Avoiding conflict and		
Sumimasen	expressing dissatisfaction	D13, D14	2
	Attitudinal distance	D15	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>15</b>

### Function of *Gomennasai*

#### 1. *Gomennasai* as a Marker of Attitudinal Distance

There are six instances of *gomennasai* that fulfill the function of regulating attitudinal distance, namely data D01, D02, D04, D05, D07, and D08. The following section presents the interpretation of one representative datum.

Data [D01]

レイリア	:	母さん！おかえりなさい！
Leilia		<i>Kaa-san! Okaerinasai!</i>
		Mother! Welcome home!

レイリアの母 親 Ibunya Leilia	:	布をそんなふうに扱っちゃダメ <i>Nuno o sonna fū ni atsukatcha dame</i> Don't handle the cloth that way.
レイリア Leilia	:	エヘヘッ... ごめんなさ~い <i>Ehehe... gomen nasāi</i> Hehe... I'am Sorry.
レイリアの母 親 Ibunya Leilia	:	アア... こんなにぬれて <i>Ā... konna ni nurete</i> Ah... it's soaked like this.

(*Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, menit 03:14 - 03:21)

Data D01 takes place in the afternoon when Maquia's group returns from playing by the river. The interaction occurs between Leilia, as the speaker, and her mother, as the interlocutor. In this situation, Leilia comes home and notices her mother waving at the entrance of the village. She runs toward her mother and throws a basket of freshly washed cloth toward another Iorph standing beside her mother. As a result, her mother scolds her for handling the washed cloth carelessly, after which Leilia apologizes.

The utterance that functions as a marker of attitudinal distance appears in Leilia's expression "*Ehehe... gomen nasāi*." The use of *gomennasai* in this context is motivated by the close kinship relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, namely that of a child and her mother. Consequently, Leilia employs *gomennasai* with a relaxed intonation accompanied by light laughter (*ehehe*) as a means of adjusting attitudinal distance, maintaining intimacy, and softening the reprimand without escalating it into conflict.

It can therefore be concluded that the use of *gomennasai* in this speech event exemplifies one of its primary functions, namely serving as a marker for regulating attitudinal distance.

## 2. Sincere Apology

There are six instances of *gomennasai* that fulfill the function of expressing a sincere apology, namely data D03, D06, D09, D10, D11, and D12. The following section presents the interpretation of one representative datum.

Data [D03]

ディタ Dita	:	こないだごめんね <i>Konoida gomen ne</i> I'm sorry about the other day
デオル Deol	:	エリアルならもういないよ <i>Eriaru nara mō inai yo</i> If you're looking for Ariel, he's no longer here.

(*Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, menit 32:11-32:15)

Data D03 occurs after Dita previously said hurtful things to Ariel. The interaction takes place between Dita, as the speaker, and Deol, as the interlocutor. The conversation occurs in front of Mido's house after Maquia and Ariel have left the area to move to the capital city. Dita comes with the intention of apologizing to Ariel for her past remarks; however, Ariel is no longer present.

As a result, the utterance "*konoida gomen ne*" is expressed by Dita as a manifestation of regret for her earlier behavior, even though Ariel is not directly present as the interlocutor. This apology is conveyed without any ulterior motive other than to express the speaker's sense of guilt. Therefore, the use of *gomennasai* in the form of *gomen ne* in this speech event reflects a sincere apology.

It can thus be concluded that the use of *gomennasai* in this utterance exemplifies one of its core functions, namely expressing a sincere apology.

*Function of Sumimasen***1. Avoiding Conflict and Expressing Dissatisfaction**

There are two instances of *sumimasen* that fulfill the function of avoiding conflict and expressing dissatisfaction, namely data D13 and D14. The following section presents the interpretation of one representative datum.

Data [D13]:

マキア Maquia	:	ちょっと、ダメだってば！ エリアル！もう ！ 約束したでしょう？ じっとよい子にし てて... あっ！ す...すみません。あっ... <i>Hey, stop it! I told you not to! Ariel! Honestly! We promised, didn't we? Stay still and be a good boy... Ah! S-sorry... ah...</i>
クリーム Krim	:	ハッ.....マキア？ <i>Ha..... Maquia? Huh... Maquia?</i>
エリアル Ariel	:	うん？ <i>Un? Hm?</i>
クリーム Krim	:	生きてた...マキア！ <i>Ikiteta... Makia! You're alive... Maquia!</i>

(*Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, menit 32:47-33:06)

Data D13 occurs when Maquia and Ariel leave Mido's house and travel toward the capital city. The interaction takes place between Maquia, as the speaker, and Krim, as the interlocutor. The conversation occurs aboard a ship during the journey, in a crowded and bustling environment. At that moment, Ariel runs around the ship, prompting Maquia to chase after him while scolding him to stay still and honor their promise.

In this situation, Maquia accidentally bumps into someone and spontaneously utters the expression "*su... sumimasen*." This utterance is produced in a state of surprise and urgency. The use of *sumimasen* in this context serves to prevent the occurrence of conflict with the interlocutor as a result of the collision. At the same time, it implicitly reflects the speaker's discomfort and irritation caused by the chaotic situation.

It can therefore be concluded that the use of *sumimasen* in this speech event exemplifies one of its key functions, namely avoiding conflict while simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction.

**2. Attitudinal Distance**

There is one instance of *sumimasen* that fulfills the function of maintaining attitudinal distance, namely data D15. The following section presents the interpretation of the data.

Data [D15]:

ラング Lang	:	遅いぞ、エリアル。 <i>Osoi zo, Eriaru. You're late, Ariel.</i>
エリアル Ariel	:	すみません！ <i>Sumimasen! Sorry!</i>

(*Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, menit 01:16:42-01:16:44)

Data D15 occurs when Ariel arrives late at the base during a wartime situation. The interaction takes place between Ariel as the speaker and Lang as the interlocutor. The setting is the military

headquarters, where the atmosphere is tense due to the ongoing war, a condition that demands discipline and punctuality. Ariel's delay is caused by his visit to Dita, his pregnant wife.

When Lang reprimands Ariel with the utterance "*Osoi zo, Eriaru*," Ariel immediately responds with "*sumimasen*." This expression is used as a means of maintaining appropriate attitudinal distance toward a superior or authority figure. By uttering *sumimasen*, Ariel demonstrates politeness, respect, and an awareness of his social position, thereby preventing the situation from escalating into a harsher reprimand. Therefore, the use of *sumimasen* in this data functions as a strategy for maintaining attitudinal distance.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the expressions *sumimasen* and *gomennasai* serve distinct sociopragmatic functions in the dialogue of the film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*. A total of fifteen utterances containing these expressions were identified, with *gomennasai* appearing more frequently than *sumimasen*. This difference in frequency suggests that the choice of apology expression in the film is strongly influenced by the interpersonal relationships between characters and the emotional context in which the utterances occur. Within sociopragmatic perspectives, linguistic choices are closely related to social meaning, relational distance, and communicative intentions between interlocutors (Lee-Wong & Mei, 2002; Napoli & Tantucci, 2022). Therefore, the distribution of apology expressions observed in this study reflects how language is used to negotiate interpersonal relationships within narrative interactions.

One of the prominent findings of this study is the frequent use of *gomennasai* as a marker of attitudinal distance in interactions involving close relationships. In several scenes, characters employ *gomennasai* in situations where emotional closeness exists between the speaker and the interlocutor, such as interactions between family members or individuals who share a strong personal connection. In such contexts, the expression functions not merely as a formal apology but as a relational strategy that maintains intimacy while acknowledging a minor mistake or inappropriate behavior. This finding supports previous research indicating that apology expressions in Japanese communication are closely related to relational management and emotional alignment between speakers (Diegoli, 2022). The use of *gomennasai* in these interactions therefore reflects the tendency of speakers to convey sincerity and emotional involvement within close interpersonal relationships.

In addition to regulating attitudinal distance, *gomennasai* in this study also appears as an expression of sincere apology. In these cases, the expression is used to communicate genuine feelings of regret following actions that may have hurt or inconvenienced another person. Such usage demonstrates how apology expressions in Japanese communication can convey emotional depth and moral responsibility. Previous studies have noted that Japanese apology strategies often involve acknowledging personal accountability while simultaneously restoring social balance between interlocutors (Sandu, 2013). The presence of sincere apology functions in the film dialogue illustrates how characters express remorse as part of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, which is consistent with cultural expectations within Japanese society.

In contrast, the expression *sumimasen* appears less frequently in the data but demonstrates distinctive sociopragmatic functions. In several instances, *sumimasen* is used as a strategy to avoid conflict or to mitigate potentially tense situations. When speakers accidentally interrupt, inconvenience, or collide with others, the expression serves as a linguistic device to reduce the possibility of confrontation and to restore situational harmony. This function reflects the pragmatic flexibility of *sumimasen*, which has been widely recognized as an expression that can convey apology, gratitude, or polite acknowledgment depending on the communicative context (Diegoli, 2022; Sandu, 2012). The findings therefore highlight the multifunctional nature of *sumimasen* within Japanese discourse.

Another important function identified in this study is the use of *sumimasen* as a marker of attitudinal distance in hierarchical interactions. In the data, this expression is used when a speaker addresses someone with a higher social status or authority, such as a superior or an elder. In such situations, *sumimasen* functions as a politeness strategy that acknowledges the speaker's subordinate position while simultaneously demonstrating respect toward the interlocutor. This pattern is consistent with sociopragmatic theories that emphasize the influence of power relations and social hierarchy in shaping language use in Japanese communication (Haugh et al., 2021). The

use of *sumimasen* in hierarchical contexts therefore reflects broader cultural norms that prioritize respect and social harmony.

The dominance of *gomennasai* over *sumimasen* in the film dialogue can also be understood in relation to the narrative structure of the film itself. The storyline of *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou* emphasizes emotional relationships among characters, particularly those involving family bonds, separation, and personal sacrifice. Because many interactions occur within emotionally intimate contexts, characters tend to employ apology expressions that convey sincerity and emotional closeness. As a result, *gomennasai*, which often carries a more personal and heartfelt nuance, appears more frequently than *sumimasen*. This observation suggests that narrative context can influence the distribution and function of apology expressions in fictional dialogue.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the use of *sumimasen* and *gomennasai* in film dialogue reflects the dynamic relationship between linguistic expressions and sociocultural context. Both expressions function as pragmatic tools that allow speakers to manage interpersonal relationships, regulate emotional interactions, and maintain social harmony within communication. By examining these expressions within the narrative context of an animated film, this study highlights how apology expressions operate not only as linguistic forms but also as socially meaningful actions embedded in interaction. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Japanese apology expressions function within communicative contexts shaped by interpersonal relationships and cultural expectations.

### IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the sociopragmatic functions of Japanese apology expressions, particularly *sumimasen* and *gomennasai*, within narrative dialogue. By analyzing their use in the film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*, this study demonstrates that the selection of apology expressions is strongly influenced by interpersonal relationships, situational context, and emotional dynamics between speakers. These results highlight the importance of considering sociopragmatic factors when interpreting apology expressions in Japanese communication. Furthermore, the study provides insights into how apology expressions function not only as linguistic forms but also as relational strategies that help speakers manage interpersonal harmony, express sincerity, and negotiate social distance in interaction. In this regard, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions in sociopragmatics and Japanese linguistics regarding the role of apology expressions in maintaining social relationships.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data analyzed in this study were limited to a single animated film, which restricts the scope of the findings to the specific narrative context represented in the film. As a result, the patterns identified may not fully represent the broader use of apology expressions in other communicative settings such as everyday conversation, television dramas, or real-life interactions. Second, the number of utterances analyzed in this study was relatively small, consisting of fifteen instances of *sumimasen* and *gomennasai*. While this amount allowed for detailed qualitative analysis, it limits the possibility of making broader generalizations regarding the frequency and distribution of these expressions. Third, the study focused primarily on verbal expressions and did not examine multimodal elements such as intonation, facial expressions, or gestures, which may also influence the interpretation of apology expressions in interaction. Future studies may therefore expand the data sources, incorporate additional media contexts, or employ multimodal analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Japanese apology expressions.

### CONCLUSION

This study examined the sociopragmatic functions of the Japanese apology expressions *sumimasen* and *gomennasai* in the animated film *Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana wo Kazarou*. Based on the analysis of fifteen utterances identified in the film dialogue, the findings show that both expressions perform distinct pragmatic roles depending on the interactional context and the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. The expression *gomennasai* appears more frequently in the data and primarily functions as a marker of attitudinal distance and as an expression of sincere apology, particularly in emotionally intimate interactions among characters. In contrast, *sumimasen* occurs less frequently but demonstrates multifunctional pragmatic roles, including

avoiding conflict, expressing dissatisfaction, and maintaining appropriate social distance in hierarchical situations.

These findings indicate that the use of apology expressions in Japanese communication is closely related to sociocultural factors such as interpersonal relationships, emotional context, and social hierarchy. The dominance of *gomennasai* in the film dialogue reflects the narrative emphasis on emotional relationships and personal interactions among the characters. Overall, the study highlights how apology expressions function not only as linguistic forms but also as social strategies that enable speakers to manage interpersonal relationships and maintain harmony within interaction. By examining apology expressions within a narrative media context, this study contributes to a better understanding of how sociopragmatic meanings are constructed through language use in Japanese communication.

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