The Situational Use of “Excuse Me” and “I’m Sorry”

The Merriam Webster dictionary online defines “Excuse” as a “transitive verb” meaning “to allow to leave” or “to make apology for”. “Sorry” is an “adjective” with the definition “Feeling sorrow, regret, or penitence”. These are simple words, though when used in the phrases “Excuse me” and “I’m sorry” they can carry great power and information or be basically meaningless depending on the use, attitude, and intention.

An apology is the most common use of both phrases and can be used interchangeably in some situations. An example would be in the case of stepping on someone’s foot in an elevator. The offender could offer a polite, but basically meaningless apology in the form of “I’m sorry I didn’t realize your foot was there” or “Excuse me I did not realize your foot was there”. For added emphasis the two phrases may be combined “Excuse me, I’m sorry I did not realize your foot was there”. This type of apology is probably offered to be polite with no real regret and neither party expects more.

Behavior that is socially acceptable is instilled in most children by their parents as they are growing up. This may also be the basis of the meaningless apology. A child running through the house will be told stop and will respond with “I’m sorry”. This child will, probably, repeat the offense and apology dozens of times during his childhood. There is no real regret and no intention to reframe from repeating the offense. Neither the child nor parent believes otherwise.
Both are aware that this is an attempt to escape punishment and the anger of the offended party, in this case the parent.

This attitude is often carried through to adulthood as in the case of the elevator. It is a simple matter to apologize. “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me” are automatically expressed in this type of situation, thanks to mom. Once the apology has been offered it is accepted social behavior that the offended will respond politely. If, rather then “I’m sorry” or “excuse me”, the offender said “get out of my way” the situation could escalate into an argument, physical confrontation, or legal action, depending on the personalities involved. The power of the apology in this case is more to benefit the offender then the offended. Interesting thought…

An apology can also be viewed as a “moral activity” (Taft). An example would be an accident involving the death of a child. Most people in this case would feel true regret, sorrow, and responsibility. An apology in this case would probably include “I’m sorry” as sorrow and regret are clearly expressed. The use of “excuse me” would not be used in this case as it could NOT!!! convey regret or sorrow. This type of apology is offered as comfort to the parents and family of the child and not to benefit the responsible party and is quite likely uttered immediately without any thought of self preservation. Many would view this as a “courageous act” (Taft). This moral compass may also be thanks to mom and lessons learned in childhood.

A less emotionally charged, but still serious situation, may occur in a professional setting and require certain finesse. “I’m sorry” is used to express regret rather then “excuse me” which tends to sound stiffer and a bit defensive. The tone must be professional, but convey the proper amount of regret to illustrate that the offense was serious. The “goal should be communicating your regret.” (Weeks) “Communication … occurs between people and an apology needs to work
well for the other person to be effective.” (Weeks) For example, a team working together completed a project ahead of schedule, but the leader accepted all of the credit indicating that his leadership was the primary reason for success. In truth the entire team worked long hours sacrificing personal time. This warrants an apology. “Excuse me” would not be the appropriate phrase. It does not express regret and has a hard rather then apologetic sound. “I’m sorry”, if sincere, would be a positive step in this situation. To be truly effective the apology would need to be extended to the offended parties in a public way. Others would have developed opinions based on the original information and this needs to be repaired as well. Sometimes a sincere apology works to heal emotions and at other times to heal damage done to a reputation. The proper use of [Grammar] may be seen as a tool, if used properly it is a strength. If used incorrectly it is a weakness.

Expressing sarcasm would be seen as a weakness, in both a professional environment as well as other less formal environments. For example, “I’m sorry! If I had realized you were in such a hurry I would have moved!” The sarcastic tone makes it obvious that the speaker is not at all regretful. Said without the tone (!) this is a perfectly acceptable sentence; a polite and appropriate way to apologize if a person has prevented another from passing. Using “Excuse me” adds a bit more attitude; it is slightly nastier when used in a sarcastic way. For example “Excuse me! I am sure that your opinion is much more important then mine!” This is rather offensive even though the phrases themselves are normally meant to be polite. Yep…

In the case of a person learning English as a second language, our text book notes “excuse me” as an indication of “pragmatic competence” indicating the “proper use of the language in social settings”. To use this as a ruler, as such, to mark an accomplishment for one group of people, those learning, and to be used by another, native speakers, in exactly the opposite way is
wrong. It seems a bit abusive of the language for a native speaker of English to use it in a sarcastic manner which is certainly not the “proper use of the language in social settings”.

The text book also notes that “successful communication requires pragmatic competence” of which an example is the ability to break into a conversation properly. To illustrate, “Excuse me, are you aware that your car is being towed?” is considered more appropriate than “I’m sorry to interrupt, but did you realize that your car is being towed?” A person who I would refer to as being “professional”, but others may refer to as “prestigious”, would automatically say “excuse me” in this case not “I’m sorry”. As “I’m sorry” is used to express regret, sorrow, and sympathy and is not appropriate in this instance. A person in this case would not feel any emotion associated with breaking into the conversation, the phrase with “excuse me” is an expected social grace. Likewise, “Excuse me” can not be substituted for a personal feeling such as “I’m sorry I ran over your bicycle”. This is a true emotion if the person who ran over the bicycle has to live with the child. Cute… (& oh so true… though I know from experience the blame is typically placed on the child for leaving the bike in the middle of the driveway…)

The finer points of social behavior are often demonstrated using the terms “excuse me” and “I’m sorry”. The example “I’m sorry would you repeat what you said?” or simply “I’m sorry?” would be used to indicate that a person was unable to hear another. “Excuse me” is also correct as in “Excuse me would you repeat what you said?” or shortened to “Excuse me?” “Excuse me” indicates a more formal relationship while “I’m Sorry” indicates a more informal relationship or environment. A casual environment may allow the phrase “What’d you say?” which essentially carries the same meaning verbally, but would not be socially acceptable in a professional environment, as it would be seen as overly familiar, rude, or possibly offensive. Another example of a socially acceptable use is “Excuse me, would you please move” or “Excuse me” as
a request to be permitted to pass in front of someone, such as in a theatre. “I’m sorry”, which indicates emotion can not be substituted in either of these sentences just as “excuse me” can not be substituted for “I’m sorry, but I will not agree to the wording in this contract” as the intention is to express regret.

The use of these simple phrases can indicate a great deal about the attitude, personality and professionalism of the speaker. Often people are judged socially, economically, and professionally on the use of these phrases. Professional business people should recognize the different social and economic stereotypes and implications. This does not mean that an individual should condone them; however, professional success will come quicker and easier with the recognition and observation of the associated rules and behavior. Simply stated; the proper use of grammar can be a very valuable tool to many.