Excuse me vs. (I’m) sorry as two contrasting markers of interlocutive relations

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Introduction

1 This article is an attempt to re-examine the meaning of excuse me and (I’m) sorry usually considered as two “common formats for apologizing” in English (Fatigante and al., 2015: 27; see also Trosborg, 1987: 152; Meier, 1996: 216; Ogiermann, 2009: 103, 105). In the literature, much attention has been given to (I’m) sorry, especially in recent work adopting an interactional perspective (Mattson Bean and Johnstone, 1994; Robinson, 2004; Rhys, 2013; Page, 2014; Fatigante and al., 2015; Galatolo and al., 2015; Margutti and al., 2016). By contrast, less research has been conducted on excuse me, and since Borkin and Reinhart (1978), there has been – to our knowledge – no attempt at (re)defining (I’m) sorry in the light of excuse me (or vice versa), at least on a synchronic level (for a diachronic perspective, see Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2008; Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008).

2 It is Borkin and Reinhart’s (1978) comparative method that the present paper tries to renew. Borkin and Reinhart’s contrastive definitions of excuse me and (I’m) sorry relied mostly on apologetic contexts of use. More recently, interactional studies have addressed the nonapologetic function of (I’m) sorry. Mattson Bean and Johnstone (1994) and Page (2014), for instance, deal with pragmatic uses of (I’m) sorry1 in specific situations, i.e. in the workplace and in company-customer interactions through the social media site Twitter, respectively. Our purpose in this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of excuse me and (I’m) sorry in various (mostly nonapologetic) environments, and to provide new tentative definitions for both markers, which are not considered here as apology markers per se. We think these new (hypothetical)
definitions might account for why they sometimes appear to be mutually exclusive or at least hardly interchangeable, and also explain their sequential order when used jointly.

This paper also differs from previous studies on excuse me and/or (I'm sorry) in that we adopt a systematic contrastive approach. Within the framework of Douay and Roulland's (2014) Théorie de la Relation Interlocutive (“Theory of Interlocutive Relation”, henceforth TIR), we propose that every contextual interpretation of excuse me and (I'm) sorry systematically derives from the fact that they fundamentally mark two different types of 'interlocutive relations'. As we will make clear in Section 3, this phrase does not refer to the type of discursive relation that emerges as interaction proceeds between two pre-existing extra-linguistic subjectivities, but rather to a relation that has systematic roots and concerns the two theoretical profiles – sender and recipient – which necessarily emerge within the communication process. These are introduced to capture the idea that linguistic signs are, from the start, encoded in relation to a more or less hypothetical conversation partner and they do not necessarily correspond to any real-world entities, although they can be interpreted as such further down the line.

Our hypothesis is that both excuse me and (I'm) sorry are meant to communicate two different types of sender/recipient relations to the receiving end of the message. We propose that the former expression is fundamentally a form of discordance between sender and recipient which contrasts with (I'm) sorry, which we analyse as a systematic form of harmony between the two poles involved in the communication process (see Section 6).

The paper is organised as follows. We start out in Section 2 by providing some background to the study of apologies, especially focusing on previous work on the different pragmatic functions of excuse me and (I'm) sorry and their interactional function(s) in specific social situations. In Section 3, we lay out the main assumptions put forward within the TIR framework which distinguish it from the field of pragmatics in general and account for the reason why we consider our study to be a new contribution to the study of excuse me and (I'm) sorry as (so-called) 'apology' forms. In Section 4, we provide methodological detail and point to the limitations of the contrastive study that is conducted in Sections 5 to 7 between excuse me and (I'm) sorry. More particularly, we will discuss possible exclusive contexts of use of the two forms in Section 5, which will lead us to delineate some aspects of what we assume to be their linguistic identity. In Section 6, we proceed to examine situations in which they might possibly be considered interchangeable, but will however argue that this is not exactly the case and assume that the inappropriateness of either excuse me or (I'm) sorry in these contexts is related to the type of interlocutive relation that each is supposed to encode. Section 7 elaborates on this hypothesis by providing examples of joint occurrences of the two markers in which the order of the sequence <(I'm) sorry, excuse me> vs. <excuse me, (I'm) sorry> is seen to be crucial. Section 8 offers some final conclusions.

### 1 Relevant literature

Over the past four decades, apologising has been a popular subject in linguistics, particularly in pragmatics. It has been studied extensively both synchronically (Borkin and Reinhart, 1978; Fraser, 1981; Trosborg, 1987, 1995; García, 1989; Mattson Bean and
Johnstone, 1994; Aijmer, 1996; Deutschmann, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Page, 2014; Fatigante and al., 2016; Galatolo and al., 2016; Lutzky and Kehoe, 2016) and diachronically (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2008; Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008; Drew and al., 2016; Kohnen, 2017; Jucker, 2018). Some of the main topics addressed in previous work are the characteristics of apologies as a speech act (e.g. Blum-Kulka and al., 1989), the form and function of remedial expressions (Edmonson, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Aijmer, 1996), and the role of social variables such as age, gender, social distance or power in the use of different forms of apology (Deutschmann, 2003). There have also been a large number of studies offering a cross-cultural approach to the subject (Blum-Kulka and Olhstain, 1984; Blum-Kulka and al., 1989; García, 1989; Meier, 1992; Bamgbose, 1994; Tanaka and al., 2008; Ogiermann, 2009). Of particular interest for the present paper are interaction-based studies which examine the discursive functions of apology forms in apologetic or nonapologetic contexts (Mattson Bean and Johnstone, 1994; Robinson, 2004; Page, 2014; Fatigante and al., 2016).

7 In English, apologising relies essentially on a small repertoire of routinised, formulaic expressions such as (be) sorry, pardon, excuse, apologise, regret or (be) afraid (Blum-Kulka and al., 1989: 290; Aijmer, 1996: 86). Previous research has been conducted on the distinctions between the two routinised formulae under scrutiny in this article, i.e. excuse me and (I’m) sorry, either from a synchronic (Borkin and Reinhart, 1978) or a diachronic perspective (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2008; Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008). Borkin and Reinhart (1978: 57) define excuse me as “a formula to remedy a past or immediately forthcoming breach of etiquette or other minor offense on the part of the speaker”. On the other hand, they consider that I’m sorry is not necessarily used as a remedy (Borkin and Reinhart, 1978: 60) and define it as “an expression of dismay or regret at an unpleasantness suffered by the speaker and/or the addressee” (see also Ogiermann, 2009). Trosborg (1987: 152) also categorises I’m sorry as an expression of regret while excuse me is said to express request for forgiveness.²

8 Taavitsainen and Jucker (2008: 8) observe that among the routinised expressions of remorse and regret used to apologise in Modern English, (I’m) sorry “focuses on the speaker’s emotion”, contrasting with excuse me “which asks for the addressee’s forgiveness” (2008: 8). They point out a diachronic change of orientation from addressee-centred apologies to speaker-centred apologies. In the Renaissance, “apologizers asked their addressees to show generosity and forgive or overlook the perpetrated offense. Present-day speakers […] apologize by expressing their own remorse without presuming or requesting any change of attitude on the part of the addressee” (Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008: 16; see also Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2008: 241-242). Jucker’s (2018) study of the development of apologies in the Corpus of Historical American English (1810-2009) shows that the frequency of sorry has multiplied almost six-fold in the most recent period, leading to the observation that “what used to be sincere requests for exoneration has in many cases turned to token displays of regret”.³

9 Mattson Bean and Johnstone (1994) take a completely different view. Focusing on the uses of sorry, excuse and pardon (and their variants) in 62 telephone interviews conducted for a public polling service, they find that very few of the apologies expressed in these interviews – most of which through the use of sorry – are responses to particular personal offences, meant to express regret. On the basis of the observation that “the felicity conditions for apologizing may be met only loosely” in their telephone interviews (Mattson Bean and Johnstone, 1994: 62), they conceive of apologies as falling
along a continuum, ranging from the most routinised apologies at one end to the most personal and heartfelt at the other. The former, which are for the most part sorry-based apologies, are called “situational” apologies. They “signal and remedy minor interactional difficulties and establish cooperative rapport” with the effect that they ensure the smooth management of the conversation. Their function is “to restore social equilibrium rather than to express genuine regret” (Mattson Bean and Johnstone, 1994: 59). In quite a similar vein, Page (2014) examines the way saying 'sorry' is meant to re-establish rapport between costumers and companies interacting through the microblogging site Twitter.

Fatigante and al. (2016) are concerned with the distinctive uses of sorry and I’m sorry. After pointing out that these two sorry-formats “appear to perform analogous actions in several environments, such as in the context of repair; as pre-facing apologies to (virtual) offenses; and as post-facing apologies to offenses” (Fatigante and al., 2016: 27), the authors argue that sorry is more preferably used “as a resource orienting toward progressivity of and closing the apologetic encounter” or as “a ready-made resource serving the preference for continuation and coherence in conversation” when used in nonapologetic environments (Fatigante and al., 2016: 45; see also Rhys, 2013). On the contrary, they consider I’m sorry a more suitable formula in apologetic-dedicated environments, “initiat[ing] an apology when there is subsequently an expansion of the often quite extended apology sequence (Fatigante and al., 2016: 34).

We consider the findings of these interactional studies valuable for our comparative analysis of excuse me and (I’m) sorry. We agree that these two forms occur frequently in nonapologetic situations in which they are not responses to particular personal offences, meant to express regret. We wish to use the TIR framework to discuss the idea that (I’m) sorry establishes cooperative rapport between interactants in various situations. Moreover, we think that Fatigante and al.’s (2015) analysis of sorry in terms of “continuation”, “progressivity” and “closure” can be extended to I’m sorry when contrasting it with excuse me, provided these terms refer to an absence of interlocutive disruption. Indeed, we will assume in Section 6 that (I’m) sorry systematically establishes a harmonious interlocutive relation between sender and recipient, which contrasts with the hypothesised discordant interlocutive relation marked by excuse me. By ‘systematically’ we mean that the kind of interlocutive relation just mentioned does not emerge as interaction proceeds, but rather is embedded within the linguistic system. This is where we depart from interactional studies of forms like (I’m) sorry (see Section 3 for more detail).

2 The Theory of Interlocutive Relation

2.1 Background and basic principles

The approach developed in Douay and Roulland’s Théorie de la Relation Interlocutive (2014) stems from a critical reading of pragmatic theories which they consider to be essentially “monological” in nature in that they almost always recognise only one communication partner – the speaker – and one side of the communication process – emission – as founding principles of linguistic systems. The other partner – the hearer – is often treated as a mere “alter ego”, which is only introduced further down the line as the entity that is required to process the meaning of the message (Douay, 2005: 5). In
the wake of Grice (1975) and subsequent theorising (Horn, 1984; Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Levinson, 2000), traditional pragmatics is “viewed as a form of intention recognition that involves inferentially reconstructing the meaning that the speaker had in mind and wanted to convey, beyond the literal meaning of an utterance” (Papafragou, 2018: 167). When, and if, meaning somehow eventually comes to be shared through communication, it is thanks to contextual “pragmatic exploitations” that build upon local, contextually-dependent and hearer-centred factors. Even though hearer-participation is taken into account, early approaches to pragmatics do not allow the hearer to play an important role in the original wording nor do they often give the speaker a central role in the construction of meaning.4

While criticising early approaches to pragmatics for not paying enough attention to “the ways in which interactional requirements and contingencies impinge upon grammar” (Douay, 2001: 89, Douay and Roulland, 2014) do admit that “duological” views, that is to say more hearer-inclusive ways of understanding linguistic meaning, have been gaining ground5 (cf. Benveniste, 1966, 1974; Culioli, 1990 for Enunciative Linguistics; Nølke, 2006, among others, for the Polyphony Theory; Goodwin, 1981; Ford, 1993; Ford and Wagner, 1996; Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson, 1996; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2004, etc., for Interactional Pragmatics). Yet, Douay and Roulland (2014: 20-40) depart from these “duological” theories in that they over-emphasise speaker-centeredness (e.g. Enunciative Linguistics) or do not systematically use the receiving end of communication as one of the two organising parameters from which, they claim, every linguistic sign acquires its raison d’être. Both the TIR and interactional linguistics, for instance, are opposed to a Gricean intention-based view of communication. For interactional linguistics, this view is indeed inconsistent with a social constructionist or interactional perspective on communication as a joint and collaborative activity” (Haugh, 2007: 7). In the words of Arundale (2006: 196, quoting Krippendorff, 1984; see also Arundale, 1999, 2008, 2010):

Encoding/decoding models explain communication simply as an output of one system that serves as an input to a separate, independent system. These monologic accounts treat talk between people entirely as a summative phenomenon. In contrast, interactional achievement models take the dyad as the minimum unit of analysis, and explain communication as the conjoint outcome of a single two-person system.

Even though they agree that no aspect of meaning is ever given but should rather be seen as worked out through “interactive negotiations” (2014: 19), Douay and Roulland (2014), however, find it regretful that these interactions, which underline the co-constructed nature of talk (Grainger and Harris, 2003: 3; Mills, 2003: 28, 58; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2004: 1-5; Arundale, 2006: 208-209; Arundale, 2009: 2080-2085; Mills, 2011: 42; etc.), should be located at a discursive level in interactional frameworks, and not at an anterior stage, i.e. at the systematic level of language.

This is why the TIR relies on the fundamental assumption that the sending and the receiving ends of the message are both equally encoded, system-organising parameters of language (Douay, 2005: 5). In other words, linguistic systems must be designed in such a way that they allow for the very possibility of a meaning that is shareable from the start. As Douay (2001: 80) puts it, the TIR constitutes a non-referential approach building on Gardiner’s (1932) study of the “impact of the communicative process on the internal organisation of grammar”. Douay and Roulland (2014) call for a shift in perspective to include the construction of “mutual understanding” in linguistic theory.
Insisting that the primary function of language lies in communication and clearly rejecting the widespread views that it serves to encode the speaker’s thought, the TIR is not concerned with messaging but rather tries to show that one must always infer the meaning of grammatical – and, as we would like to demonstrate here, lexical items –, not in reference to any extralinguistic objects or beings – real-world hearers and speakers – but on the basis of a linguistically internalised image of the communication process itself.

We intend to show in Sections 5 to 7 that (I’m) sorry and excuse me form a contrasting pair (a micro-system) that is best-described in terms of what we think is the core function of language: communication. Thus, we shall argue that it is fruitful to consider interaction as an integral part of the descriptive apparatus which is needed to tackle the linguistic identity of (I’m) sorry and excuse me, rather than introduce it on a separate, pragmatic level.

2.2 Replication

Following the TIR, we believe that the definition of linguistic meaning should include the potentiality of being, or becoming, common to speaker and hearer, and the claim that “shareability” is its most important defining feature explains why this is a central issue within this framework. Douay and Roulland (2014: 161) deal with it through their concept of “replication”, which is introduced in an attempt to capture the idea that meaning can only be understood as something which comes to exist “on two sites”. The TIR draws from general systems theory and brings together two potentially conflicting principles:

(i) Linguistic signs are signifiers in that they symbolise a sign/meaning association which must allow for common interpretation and a certain level of consensus to become understandable.

(ii) Language is considered on both a general and a local level of organisation. It is treated as a “system of systems”, which comprises a set of individual linguistic subsystems.

These principles do not necessarily sit well together since, in accordance with Systems Theory, systems (and subsystems) are “self-organised”, which means that they are theoretically autonomous, independent and cannot rely on any external element for their organisation (Douay and Roulland, 2014: 89-102). Therefore, if one accepts that feelings and thoughts are of a different nature to the language system itself, linguistic signs should not be seen as freighters containing semantic information or conveying extra-systemic cognitive states or perceptions about the world, as this would undermine the proposed autonomy of the system. It follows that meaning never “travels”, and mutual understanding cannot be assumed to exist independently from communication as it is understood within the TIR framework. Furthermore, although there is no such thing as a completely closed system, reconciling (i) and (ii) both highlights the systemic boundaries that exist between individual – i.e. independent and self-contained – versions of the language and accounts for their need to communicate, while questioning their ability to do so. That is why we shall posit that neither (I’m) sorry nor excuse me contain or encode any direct reference to any offensive event or emotion per se but rather guide linguistically towards two contrasting interpretations of a (potentially offensive) extra-linguistic situation. Replication is a way to highlight the
need for anticipatory regulation when it comes to interpreting linguistic signs, so that communication can actually take place.

Indeed, on a local level, individual speakers of the language use their own version of the language, so that (i) the meaning that any given speaker associates with a linguistic item is relativistic by nature, i.e. it is only fully valid and operational within the limits of the speaker’s subsystem itself, and (ii) it is therefore speculative or “opaque” when considered from the outside, i.e. from within another individual subsystem. Thus, any linguistic sign necessarily enjoys inferential, rather than referential meaning when considered by another speaker (Douay and Roulland, 2014: 138). Considered on a local, rather than a universal level, each sign/meaning association is “a private affair” (Douay and Roulland, 2014: 50). The above assumptions entail that all the speaker can do is anticipate what we wish to call the “replicability” of the sign/meaning association, which essentially constitutes a “semiotic proposition” when considered from the receiving end of communication. By this, we mean that the initiator of communication primarily defines the systematic identity of linguistic signs by assessing the ease or the difficulty with which they may come to be accepted with the intended meaning in a recipient subsystem. If speakers and listeners are to understand each other, it is necessary that the sign/meaning association be observed by both systems simultaneously, which implies that the systemic positions are generated by the sign instead of the other way round. Speakers and listeners communicate because the semiotic forms construct them as such. Hence the term “replication” (Douay and Roulland, 2014: 102-114).

### 2.3 The replication process and the Interlocutive Relation

By questioning the replicability of semiotic propositions, the TIR necessarily imposes a shift in the way linguistic signs are to be analysed. They become “recipient-centred”. This does not mean that they require the presence of an actual hearer, only that they are fundamentally designed to regulate and guide their own interpretation in another local subsystem. It is communication itself which is the organising principle of the system, not any reference to a pre-existing subjectivity. This prevents speaker and hearer to be treated as extrinsic users of the language and flesh and bone entities. Rather, it is posited that language deals with the complexity of the communication process by reducing it to a binary opposition distinguishing between an emission, or “α-profile”, and a reception, or “β-profile”, thereby establishing two alternative voices representing all potentially competing subsystems. Both the α and β profiles are bound to emerge because of the drive to communicate. β is another aspect of α itself, a by-product of its status as the initiator of communication. They are meant to capture the purely linguistic roles of “sender” and “recipient” (Douay, 2001: 83), and do not systematically correspond to the speaker/hearer dichotomy, which operates on an interpersonal, extrasystemic level. Douay and Roulland (2014) thereby stress that linguistic forms are always, and from the start, designed with a conversation partner in mind. Linguistic signs are both chosen so as to establish a connection with other subsystems and regulate the reproduction of meaning from one system to the next. How is this achieved?

By problematising hearer-reception, replication necessarily establishes relations of an “interlocutive” and “dialogical” nature (see Douay, 2001) between the emission and the
reception profiles. The state of the α/β relations, which are communicated, or replicated, in the recipient subsystem, becomes crucial and is actually exploited by the emission-profile to influence reception and semantic interpretation. In other words, it is posited that, because linguistic signs serve to mark and reproduce different types of Interlocutive Relations (IR), they impose them into the hearer’s subsystem. This is compelling as it guides towards specific interpretations. The TIR distinguishes three types of IR, related to three ways of achieving replication. Each favours certain types of meaning to be inferred from the replicated state of the IR.

Replication can indeed be achieved through direct acceptance of the semiotic proposition (i) or through negotiation between the two profiles (ii)-(iii). Each mode of replication sets up a specific “inferential frame” (see below and Section 5), and leads to different types of semantic interpretation of the linguistic sign.

(i) “C0-configuration”, also called “Direct Interlocutive Relation” (‘DIR’; see Douay, 2001: 83), refers to a state of the IR in which the two profiles “play an equivalent part” (Douay and Roulland, 2008) and come to direct agreement on reference. Such a configuration, which anticipates and imposes direct acceptance of the semiotic proposition, is normally minimally marked and indicates that no inferential effort is required in interpreting the meaning of the linguistic sign. It can be associated with different English forms like the Ø-determiner, proper names, the imperative and the Ø-ending of the simple present (Douay, 2000; Douay and Roulland, 2014). Pre-established harmony in the IR remains unchallenged, which corresponds to immediate replication of the semiotic proposition. Interpreting the linguistic sign, i.e. validating the semiotic proposition, is not an issue here, unlike C1 and C2 below.

(ii) “C1-configuration” refers to a state of the IR characterised by a state of discordance to be dealt with between α and β. This implies a polarised IR highlighting the role of the emission profile, and is necessarily challenging to the reception profile. It is based on an ‘associative pattern’ (Douay, 2001: 84) whereby α elicits β’s participation. This sets up an inferential frame characterised by ‘duophony’ (Douay, 2009: 24) and non-consensual, possibly polemical views on the semiotic proposition. The semantic interpretation of the linguistic sign is now clearly an issue and needs validating by the recipient as replication is explicitly marked as unfinished and disharmonious. This configuration of the IR has been associated with markers like A(N), THIS and ANY, for instance (Douay, 2000; Douay and Roulland, 2014).

(iii) “C2-configuration” corresponds to pre-eminence of the reception profile, which results in depolarisation and a pre-imposed concordant state of the IR. This results in a ‘dissociative pattern’ (Douay, 2001: 84), in which β-participation is no longer required. The α-profile itself ceases to matter as well, since any potential disagreement is cancelled out. The two profiles have become almost indistinguishable. The inferential frame is now characterised by ‘monophony’ (Douay, 2009: 25). This leads to unity of views as regards the semiotic proposition, the interpretation of which has been turned into a special type of issue, a non-issue as replication has been completed and harmony restored. Validation of the semiotic proposition is now considered complete. This configuration of the IR has been associated with markers like THE, THAT, SOME and the preterite (Douay, 2000; Douay and Roulland, 2014).

We will assume in Section 5 that excuse me is a C1-marker and (I’m) sorry a C2-marker.

3 Data, methodology and limitations of the study

The data used for our contrastive study of excuse me and (I’m) sorry within the framework of the TIR were extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American
English (COCA, Davies, 2008-) which is composed of over 560-million-word texts covering American English from the late 20th century up until the present. COCA is evenly divided into the following five genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic journals. The spoken part is composed of transcripts of conversations from different TV and radio programmes. The written part is based on short stories, novels, plays, different magazines from a wide range of domains, newspapers from across the US, and peer-reviewed journals.

The examples we will provide in Sections 5 to 7 are excerpts from both the spoken and some written parts of the corpus. Casual conversation is the prototypical speech genre in the context of which forms like (I’m) sorry and excuse me are most often studied. For this reason, the most part of our data illustrate spoken English, whether from the spoken part of COCA or from fictional dialogues contained in the written part of the corpus. However, we also found it interesting to occasionally provide a few excerpts from another non-conversational written genre, namely newspapers and magazines articles, because the argumentative function of some of the uses of (I’m) sorry in this particular context also supports and illustrates our hypothesis about its systematic opposition with excuse me (see examples (5) and (16) in sections 5 and 6, respectively).

The present paper is not a corpus study meant to supply information as to the overall frequency of excuse me and (I’m) sorry, their distribution across genders, age, etc. Rather, our interest lies in the comparison or, rather, the contrast between the different types of interlocutive relations that excuse me and (I’m) sorry encode on the level of the linguistic system, and which give rise to various pragmatic functions on a further level, i.e. in discourse). We investigated the first 200 occurrences that the corpus search yielded of both excuse me and sorry. Out of these 400 occurrences, we mainly extracted the syntactic structures in which the Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (Searle, 1969) (I’m) sorry and excuse me are most evident and stand alone. In other words, we excluded examples like “if you’ll excuse me” and mainly focused on sentences in which excuse me and (I’m) sorry appeared in isolation. We considered very few syntactically complex constructions providing explicit reference to a potentially offensive event within the syntactic frame of the forms – e.g. excuse me for speaking bluntly to you / I’m sorry that I’m speaking bluntly to you. This gave us a total of 173 occurrences for excuse me and 87 for (I’m) sorry. We also conducted a separate search of excuse me as it appeared one to six words to the left or right of sorry in order to investigate the possible relevance of the order of the sequence <(I’m) sorry, excuse me> vs. <excuse me, (I’m) sorry> (see Section 7).

The main reasons – apart from lack of space – for investigating the contexts in which (I’m) sorry and excuse me stand alone are their high frequency rate (see, among others, Deutschmann, 2003: 53) and the fact that in several excerpts, the speaker/writer uses excuse me immediately after (I’m) sorry or vice versa. It seems to us that these excerpts are particularly enlightening for the opposition we assume between these two forms (see Section 7).

Though (I’m) sorry and excuse me are not considered here as apology markers per se, our presentation of the data in Sections 5-7 will rely on various types of disruptive events as laid out in, e.g., Holmes (1995: 177), Aijmer (1996: 109), and (Deutschmann, 2003: 64). Holmes (1995: 178), for instance, distinguishes six major offence categories: inconvenience, space, talk, time, possessions and social gaffes. Aijmer (1996: 109) elaborated on Holmes’ taxonomy and proposed an additional category labelled
‘inconvenience or impoliteness to another person’. Deutschmann (2003: 64) further refined these taxonomies in order to accommodate the range of apologies he encountered in the BNC corpus, “the aim of each category label [being] to capture the essence of the social situations which led to the apologies that appear in [his] corpus” (Deutschmann, 2003: 63).

Our purpose is not to discuss the relevance of these taxonomies, to modify or refine them, but rather to show that what we assume to be a systematic interlocutive opposition between excuse me and (I’m) sorry permeates several kinds of social situations in which various types of ‘offences’ might be performed, and accounts for the possible exclusion of (cf. Section 5), or at least the preference for (cf. Section 6), one of the two expressions in specific situations. In Section 7, we shall also try to explain the co-occurrence of the two forms in the two sequences «(I’m) sorry, excuse me» and «excuse me, (I’m) sorry» which might otherwise be considered a priori as counter-examples to the assumption put forward in this paper.

4 Excuse me vs. (I’m) sorry: In search of exclusive contexts

The most serious difficulty when one considers the difference between excuse me and (I’m) sorry as IFIDs lies in identifying exclusive contexts that would automatically lead a speaker to select one of these two expressions and that one could confidently consider as revealing of their linguistic identity. We would like to start with Deutschmann’s (2003: 74) remark that excuse me is “typically the form […] uttered when a speaker want[s] to catch an audience’s attention before making an announcement”. We indeed consider that only excuse me is appropriate in (1)-(2), at least as an attention-getter, i.e. a device which is solely used to catch someone’s attention and seek their participation in the exchange or situation:

(1) “Excuse me, miss?” I looked up to find a short, balding man in a tweed jacket standing at the counter. He was holding his hand over his nose like he smelled something terrible. “Yes?” I asked, taking a deep breath
Everything smelled fine to me. “There’s a cat in here”.
(2015 FIC Bk: DeathByCoffee)
(2) Jasmine: We’re pregnant.
Erik: Oh, wow.
Jasmine: We better get engaged fast. Officially.
Erik: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Jasmine: You don’t seem excited.
Erik: I really, are you, are you sure these are, these are accurate?
Jasmine: Well, you know what, I have more. So, I will go take another one, okay? […]
Erik is left alone and as they keep to themselves he becomes desperate for another woman’s advice.
Erik: Excuse me, guys. Sorry to interrupt but I’m, like, freaking out. I need to talk to somebody.
(2014 SPOK: ABC)

In (1)-(2), speaker and hearer are strangers initially engaged in different occupations until the speaker initiates conversation. In (1), the bald man wishes to draw the girl’s attention to the statement he is about to make, i.e. “there’s a cat in here”, and Erik in (2) addresses some strangers who are having a private conversation so as to get their opinion on the subject of marriage, which his girlfriend has just confronted him with.