
The Pragmatics of Public Apologies

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People apologize for a variety of reasons but it is mostly to make a repair for an offense and maintain a good relationship with the addressee. Apologies can take different forms depending on the circumstances. The purpose of this paper is to examine the different characteristics of apologies, the reasons why people apologize, the different ways they express their apologies, and the effects of those apologies. I am particularly interested in examining the political and moral dimensions of public apologies issued by governments, religious organizations, and companies. These entities generally offer apologies to the public when they find themselves in a situation where they violate the moral standards. The data will be collected through the review of the available literature dealing with this particular topic. I will analyze written excerpts of apologies with a focus on their effects on the addressees and the general public.

Introduction

This paper is divided into five sections, which includes the introduction. The second section focuses on the characteristics of apologies. The third section analyzes the reasons why people apologize. The fourth section examines some excerpts of apologies. The conclusion addresses some of the issues to be considered in developing successful apologies.

A new culture of apology has emerged in today's world characterized by an atmosphere described as apology mania. Tavuchis (1991) defines apology as an "acknowledgment and painful embracement of our deeds, coupled with a declaration of regret." The issuing of apologies can be done in many ways. Weyeneth (2001) contends that apology can be communicated through verbal statements issued publicly, joint diplomatic declarations, legislative resolutions, documents and reports. Within the past few years, governments, religious and civic organizations, and even business enterprises have issued numerous apologies, thus acknowledging previous wrongs against particular groups.

Among governments, world leaders have apologized on behalf of their nations for wrongful deeds. Jacques Chirac apologized in July 1995 for the role French people played in persecuting Jews during the German occupation of France. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin formally apologized for the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. F. De Klerk apologized for apartheid in April 1993, in August 1996 and in September

1996. Former Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro apologized for Japanese colonial rule including the institution of military comfort women in 1993. Mills (2001) indicates that, in May 1997, Toni Blair expressed remorse for the British government's part in the deaths of a million Irish people in the potato famine. Bill Clinton apologized for slavery, U.S. sponsorship of murderous regimes in Guatemala, and also for the Tuskegee experiment in Alabama. In Africa, Mathieu Kerekou of Benin apologized for his country's participation in the slave trade.

Among religious groups, there has been an outpouring of *mea culpa*, thus acknowledging their fault in the damage done to those who were vulnerable to their power (Mills, 2001). Prominent figures like John Paul II apologized for the errors committed by the "children" of the church. In the U.S., the Southern Baptist leaders apologized for their support to slavery.

Some characteristics of apologies

Apologies are complex speech acts, their success and / or failure depends on certain factors. Burke (1970) points out that for an apology to have a positive effect, it should take the form of mortification, likely to play a very important part in the redemptive purification of the guilt. As a case in point, Clinton's apology to the Tuskegee survivors is an illustrative example of a form of mortification. President Clinton said, "What the U.S. government did was shameful, and I am sorry." (The White House, 1997).

An apology should also contain an expression of remorse. According to Gill (2000), "For an act to count as an apology, the apologizer must have an attitude of regret with respect to the offensive behavior and a feeling of remorse in response to the suffering of the victim" (p.14).

An apology must also be sincere and should express a promise from the apologizer to refrain from similar actions in the future. Harvey (1995) views sincerity as being naturally associated with certain actions, such as trying to undo the harm so far as possible, forming the intention not to repeat the wrong in the future, and following through on that intention. It is to be noted, however, that measuring sincerity is no easy task, which makes it hard to determine the effectiveness of an apology. Such difficulty had led some judges to experiment "apology rituals". As Rosen (1997) wrote, "In Maryland some young people convicted in misdemeanors are required to apologize on their knees to the victims of their crimes; they are released if and when the victims find the apology sincerely remorseful". We have thus seen that apologies are of different; in the same line of thought, people apologize for different reasons.

Reasons for apologies

One important purpose of apology is to allow people to ask for forgiveness from those who have been harmed. Those who have apologized have come to understand that apologies are necessary to restore image and reputation (Power, 2000). In this respect, the U.S. government had issued apologies to restore its image after being held responsible for the Tuskegee experiment on the treatment of syphilis. Medical researchers had recruited hundreds of black men with the false promise of free healthcare but in fact they were used as guinea pigs to study the long-term effects of untreated syphilis (Weyeneth, 2001). As Power (2000) indicates, those men's syphilis went untreated from 1932 until 1972 despite the availability of penicillin to treat the disease. The Vatican also issued a report in 1998 acknowledging the "errors and failures" of Roman Catholics during World War II. In 1999, the Colonial Pipeline Company apologized for discharging a million gallons of diesel fuel into a river (Weyeneth, 2001). All these apologies were offered to seek forgiveness, to restore institutional reputation, establish accountability and encourage future relationship. As Holmes (1990) said, the issuing of an apology is a face-saving strategy where the remedial exchange may incorporate an attempt to simultaneously redress the speaker's positive face needs as well as the victim's face needs. Whenever one's public self-image has been tarnished, an action should be taken to restore the image of the offended. The offender and the offended should cooperate with each other in order to resolve the conflict. This cooperation will take the form of a successful exchange between the two parties. However, it is to be noted that not all those who apologize have caused the wrong. They act out of blame management which derives from Heider's scale of responsibility where a person is held responsible for each effect that is in any way connected with him or that seems to belong to him. Parents are thus held responsible for the delinquent acts of their children, politicians responsible for the delinquent acts of their supporters (Bell and Tetlock, 1989:1077).

Political pragmatism, a pattern among some whites burdened by racial guilt and who seek forgiveness in order to maintain their political status, also leads people to issue apologies. As Weyeneth (2001) points out, in the wake of civil rights victories that enfranchised African Americans, George Wallace, former governor of Alabama who was an ardent segregationist and whose name became synonymous with white resistance to civil rights, asked for forgiveness from African Americans. The positive impact apologies can have on people enabled him to stay in politics with the support of a significant number of black voters. This kind of cynicism leads politicians to manipulate the public in order to get or stay into office. Their apologies are only dictated by the circumstances and may not be sincere.

As we can see many people choose apologies as a way out to seek forgiveness but not all apologies are successful, and many are not accepted as it will be illustrated in the following section. An analysis of some apologies will help to determine what can make an apology effective or ineffective.

Some examples of effective and ineffective apologies

The performance of apology is a complicated and courageous act. In the course of this verbal exchange, the addressee's interpretation of what is said or written is essential. Without the addressee's proper interpretation, communication may fail for, in interaction, meaning is never totally determinate but rather is a joint production (Tannen, 1986). An analysis of some excerpts of apologies will help to determine their respective outcomes. In 1997, Bill Clinton issued the following apology:

No power on earth can give you back the lives lost, the pain suffered, the years of internal torment and anguish. What was done cannot be undone. But we end the silence. We can stop turning our heads away. We can look in the eye and finally say on behalf of the American people, what the U.S. government did was shameful, and I am sorry... To our African-American citizens, I am sorry that your federal Government orchestrated a study so clearly racist. This can never be allowed to happen again. It is against everything our country stands for (Clinton quoted by Power, 2000, p. 192).

Clinton issued a good example of a successful apology. He used a direct code of speech when addressing the victims. He acknowledged the wrongs of the U.S. government, expressed sorrow using mortification strategies, and promised that such a thing would never happen again. Besides the formality with which he issued the apology, he tried his best to show solidarity with the African-Americans by using expressions like "our African-American citizens", "your Federal Government"... He tried to get closer to them, recognizing their social status as American citizens and making them aware that the Federal government is theirs. The variety of reference words, the formality, and the respect of the sincerity maxim contained in this apology make this illocutionary act meet the conditions of a sincere and effective apology. However, it is to be noted that Clinton is apologizing for a past mistake he did not take part in. His apology is characteristic of what Harvey (1995) calls an institutional representative apology in that the wrong was committed at an earlier time and he was not personally involved.

His predecessors did not deem it necessary to apologize for the wrong deeds in which they had a hand. Political pragmatism and the rise

of a new culture of apology led him to perform this act of courage, moral strength and self-respect. The careful choice of words helped to make Clinton's apology relevant. His words produced adequate contextual effects on the addressees. His popularity among African-Americans is illustrative of the payoff of his apology.

Politicians are not the only people who issue apologies. Businessmen also have espoused this new culture of apology. In fact, refraining from apologizing for the wrongs of their companies would be business suicide.

Thus, James Goodwin, United Airlines Chairman, issued the following apology in 2000 after the company had cancelled thousands of flights, "This summer thousands of people have had their travel plans disrupted while flying United Airlines. If you were one of them, I want to apologize personally on behalf of United" (Mills, 2001, p. 113).

It is clear that United Airlines did not treat the passengers properly. In issuing this apology, Goodwin was trying to show respect by recognizing the right of the victims not to be treated the way they had been. In performing this speech act, Goodwin has followed one of the necessary steps of an apology, which is naming the offense. Indeed, disrupting thousands of people's travel plans constitute a serious offense and he did admit it, and he expressed regret and sorrow. However, the apology lacks the next step that could make it more effective. In fact, Goodwin did not make any offer of reparation or a promise that there would not be any flight cancellations in the future. Yet, his apology contains the minimal components of a sincere one, which can be enough to make it successful.

However, not all apologies are successful. Nixon delivered the following apology on August 8, 1974:

I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events that have led to this decision [to resign]. I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong, and some were wrong, they were made in what I believed at the time to be in the best interest of the nation (Nixon quoted by Lazare, 1995, p. 1141).

At first sight, one might jump onto the structure of this illocutionary act with the expressive verb "regret" reinforced by the intensifier "deeply" to conclude that Nixon's apology is sincere. However, a close and careful analysis of the apology can reveal that it falls in the category of what Lazare (1995) calls "botched apologies", apologies which not only fail to communicate effectively the offender's repentance, remorse, and regret, but creates further harm. A botched apology overlooks fault; it refuses to accept responsibility. As a matter of fact, Nixon did not name a specific offense; rather, he claimed that his

wrongs were for the greater good of his people. The sincerity of such an allegation is questionable, otherwise how should we understand the reason for his apology if he acted for the good of his people? We do not need to apologize if we believe that we have acted right; we apologize for wrongs inflicted to others. It is also believed that the sincerity of an apology is connected with personal coherence (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). However, there seems to be no coherence in Nixon's attitude; we find it hard to understand his resignation if he believed he had acted out of good.

Another example of a failed apology is the one issued by Senator Robert Packwood: "I am apologizing for the conduct that it was alleged that I did" (quoted by Taft, 2000, p. 1141).

The mere use of expressive verbs like "apologize" is not sufficient to make an apology successful. Senator Packwood did not admit his offense; he even refrained from naming it. He shifted the blame to the others and, in the process, inflicted another offense. As Lazare (1995) said, to apologize you have to acknowledge that you have made a mistake. Thus, Senator Packwood has flouted both the maxims of quality and quantity in so far as his apology did not provide any exact specification of what his conduct was. He also implied that what people said about his conduct was not related to reality; rather, it was simply alleged. The dearth of information that characterizes his apology made it unclear and therefore contributed to its failure.

The recognition of a mistake constitutes a moral quality. Therefore, an apology is a moral act and it can have surprising power when it is delivered well. However, saying sorry is not easy; it requires strength and courage on the part of the apologizer. Also, in issuing apologies, some precautions need to be taken to make them successful. Governments, religious institutions and companies that caused any sort of harm try to win public forgiveness with an apology.

Some suggestions on how to make apologies successful

As stated earlier, the performance of an apology is an act of courage and saying "sorry" is not easy. Fear of legal consequences can be a serious obstacle to apology. Therefore, a safe-harbor should be created for would-be apologizers in order to remove the impediment to apology. To be successful, the apology should come from the top. This is why President Clinton, Pope John Paul II, the CEO of Intel, just to name a few, made apologies on behalf of the people they represent.

The apology should also be genuine. Zutlevics (2002) indicates that in order to genuinely apologize the apologizer must express a degree of empathy toward the one harmed. The apology should also be delivered clearly in unequivocal words. Political and religious leaders can issue apologies years after the wrong has been committed; however,

companies' acknowledgement of their wrongdoings should not be delayed. The apology should be delivered quickly before it seems too calculated. It is clear that other means to make apologies exist, and could constitute an object of another study. Are these characteristics enough to make an apology effective?

It would be naïve to think that any apology that comes from the top or is delivered unequivocally would be accepted. Recently, Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi has issued five apologies within a short time in a few days. His apologies, relayed by the US local newspapers and TV channels, met all the criteria of a successful apology. However, the polls that were conducted had shown that the vast majority of the people who responded to the poll had rejected his apologies. It is not because they were too late, nor because they lacked expressions of remorse, mortification, and promise. It was because the public perceived his apologies as a way to maintain his position. As I said earlier, political pragmatism can lead people to issue apologies that can be beneficial to them. In Senator Lott's case, his political pragmatism did not pay off. He had become a thorn in his party members' sides because of his wrongdoings. His apologies were quickly issued and seemed sincere; yet, many thought that he should resign because of the embarrassment he had caused to his party members.

Conclusion

Despite the precautions people take to issue successful apologies, there are questions as to their relevance. Some contend that there is no point in asking people to apologize for the wrongs they have not committed to those who were not even the actual victims. Others argue that there are so many past deeds for which to apologize and they cannot understand the reason why some choose to apologize for just a few of them and leave the others. Others defend the idea that there are dangers in revisiting the past and it is time to look forward and not backward. Finally, the most extremists contend that there is nothing for which to apologize.

However, critics against apologies cannot hide the evidence that apologies matter given the fact we now live in an age of apologies. Apologies are in demand for they have the power to ease passions and help people and even nations come closer. South Korea and Japan have lived decades of bitterness between 1910 and 1945. Thanks to the written apology sent to the newly elected President of South Korea in 1998 by the Japanese government, the two nations seem to be drawing closer (Weyeneth, 2000).

Apologies are effective when they are sincere. They become ineffective when they have underlying motives. I have dealt with the different characteristics of an apology as a speech act. I have also

indicated some of the reasons why people issue apologies and the precautions they can take to avoid botched apologies. Apologies are needed in the process of reconciliation between individuals and nations. They constitute complex speech acts and, without the cooperative principle between the apologizer and the addressee, it would be hard to get into that complexity.

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