When are public apologies 'successful'? Focus on British and French apology press uptakes

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Abstract

Public apologies are one of the most prominent examples of migration of speech acts from the private to the public sphere and now commonly feature in a wide range of public and media settings. Judging by the last two decades, the act of public apology is clearly in the process of social change, although perhaps more particularly in English-speaking cultures. The paper inscribes itself in a growing and vigorous literature on public apologies and public apology processes and aims to reveal public apology felicity conditions as represented by newswriters. Their scripts reporting what successful public apologies are or should be are therefore investigated using a corpus of over 200 apology press uptakes (reactions to public apologies in the press or 'metalinguistic discussion', Davies, 2011) taken from popular and quality British newspapers spanning a one-year period (207 articles). A smaller comparable French dataset (61 articles) is also included for contrastive purposes. Explicitly evaluative metapragmatic comments identified in these two corpora of apology press uptakes are the main source of data. The apology felicity conditions identified in the discourse of these comments in the British press are presented in the form of a 'model'. The latter is interpreted in the light of Olshtain and Cohen's widely-recognized apology speech act set (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Olshtain, 1989).

1. Introduction

The public apology phenomenon is particularly suitable for linguistic analysis as it provides 'media texts or practices where language is itself more or less explicitly thematized' (Johnson and Ensslin, 2007:6) and offers invaluable insights into politeness in the public sphere. There is a wide range of ways in which linguists can examine this phenomenon. The present paper adopts a pragmatic focus, using explicitly evaluative metapragmatic comments (henceforth 'explicit comments') identified in two corpora of apology press uptakes to access overt representations of the felicity conditions of public apologies. In other words, I aim to capture newswriters' explicit beliefs about public apologies and hence assess their collective construction of 'a set of features that are more or less essential to the apology speech act' (Jeffries, 2007:49). Owing to this aim, a qualitative discourse analytic approach is adopted to interpret the data.

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2. Literature review

Apology research has grown in importance over the past two decades. Despite the inherently mediatized (here understood as 'mediated by the media', Verdoolaege, 2009) nature of public apologies (see Fetzer and Weizman, 2006; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Fairclough, 1998; Harris et al., 2006:720; McNeill et al., 2014), relatively little research into media representations/uptakes of public apologies has been carried out (with the exceptions of, Harris et al., 2006; Jeffries, 2007; Kampf, 2009; Davies, 2011). The media can decide to support or criticize public apologies, hence having significant impact on the general public's perception of public apologies (Davies, 2011:199). Apology research also includes numerous discussions regarding the formulation of apologies, with particular emphasis on the distinction between 'offers of apology' and 'sorry-based expressions'. Robinson, for example, argues that 'explicit' apologies include sorry-based units of talk (e.g. I'm sorry) and offers of apology (Robinson, 2004:293). In the same vein, Jeffries (2007) and Harris et al. (2006:720–723) suggest that an explicit IFID (and acceptance of responsibility) are critical in political apologies. However, expressions of sorrow are often portrayed as a way out of apologizing, or a way of avoiding the consequences of an explicit apology. The premise in this paper is that public apologies, even more than private apologies, require that researchers use real life evaluators of apologies to determine what counts as a public apology, i.e. distance themselves from conventional and prescriptive understandings of apologies. This pragmatic focus is echoed in many studies (e.g. Thomas, 1995; Davies et al., 2007:41; Jeffries, 2007:12) and emphasizes the need for public apologies to count as apologies for recipients, rather than follow a set of rules. In apology research, apologies are perceived as an essentially hearer-supportive speech act (e.g. Edmondson and House, 1981). However, speaker-supportive approaches to speech acts have been upheld by social psychologists (e.g. Meier, 1998) and applied to public apologies (e.g. Page, 2014 on apologizers' concern in saving their face in online corporate apologies). This has led Davies et al. (2007) to question how costly apologies are to the speaker while others usefully highlight that public apologies may inherently be used to maintain or restore apologizers' reputation.

Most studies on apology felicity conditions focus on the private sphere. Austin (1962), who first advanced the notion of felicity condition, distinguished between 'essential', 'sincerity' and 'preparatory' conditions. This was applied to apologies by Owen (1983:117–122) putting particular emphasis on sincerity. Apology taxonomies are multifarious (e.g. Marrus, 2007:79; Abadi, 1990; Meier's review 1998:222–224; Jeffries' prototypical public apology taxonomy 2007:53) and their usefulness is sometimes questioned. Meier, for example, suggests they tend to obscure the 'variability and creativity present in apology behavior' (1998:225) and Holmes (1990) highlights 'the impossibility of defining a speech act set which would account for all apologies'. The public apology felicity conditions model presented in this paper is examined in the light of Olshtain and Cohen's general descriptive apology model. The latter is based on Fraser's 9 strategies for apologizing (1980) and 'sets out to encompass the potential range of apology strategies, any of which [...] may count as an apology' (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:20). This model focuses on conditions concerning the textual aspects of the apology and hence does not include cognition or situation-related conditions (Jeffries, 2007:50). This model (outlined below) underpins many (if not the majority of) apology models (Harris et al., 2006:721):

Two general strategies
1)   An expression of apology (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device/IFID)
     a) an expression of regret (e.g. I'm sorry)
     b) an offer of apology (e.g. I apologize)
     c) a request for forgiveness (e.g. excuse me, forgive me)
2)   An acknowledgement of responsibility for the offence (e.g. It's my fault)

Three situation-specific strategies
2)   An offer of repair/redress (e.g. I'll pay for your damage)
3)   An explanation or an account of the situation (e.g. I missed the bus)
5)   A promise of forbearance (e.g. I'll never forget it again)
     (adapted from Olshtain, 1989)

Two ways of accessing the felicity conditions of public apologies can be distinguished: firstly, through investigations into what was said (focus on 'apology formulation'); secondly, through media representations of successful apologies (focus on 'apology interpretation'). This paper adopts the latter approach. This supports Thomas (1995:204–205) who argues that 'explicit commentary by someone other than the speaker' (e.g. metapragmatic comments and apology press uptakes) can be used as forms of evidence to identify speech acts. Focus on press uptakes, including aspects of ideological positioning, also echoes the aims and scope of discourse analytic research, and illustrates a now widespread desire among discourse analysts not to impose their interpretation but to use instead real-life interpretations of the data: