

# Public (non-) apologies: The discourse of minimizing responsibility

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## Abstract

The frequent realizations of apologies in the global arena since the beginning of the 1990s, has turned the speech act into a common device for image restoration. In spite of the advantages that public figures can benefit in contemporary *politics of trust* from apologizing, the speech act still poses a threat to the public figure's image. Apologies can undermine the public figure's desired face, and project an image of a person who is lack of professional capabilities. The aim of this paper is to examine how public figures realize creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds, while calculating the costs and benefits in producing apology utterances. Based on the analysis of 354 apologies made in the Israeli public discourse between 1997 and 2004, I demonstrate tactics which range on four main categories of minimizing responsibility for misdeeds: compromising the apology's performative verb (e.g. using the verb *sorry* or *regret* instead of *apologize*), blurring the nature of the offense (e.g. by apologizing for a specific component, rather than the entirety of the offense), questioning the identity of the offended (e.g. claiming that no one should be offended by the act) or questioning the identity of the offender (e.g. explicitly denying direct responsibility for the offense).

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## 1. Apologies in contemporary politics

It seems that the dictum “Never apologize, Never explain” has lost its illustrative power in the last two decades. Hundreds of apologies made by states, organizations, and public figures have turned the dictum into an archaism and brought academic scholars to claim that we are living in the *Age of Apology* (Brooks, 1999; Cunningham, 1999; Gibney et al., 2008; Govier and Verwoerd, 2002; Harris et al., 2006; Lakoff, 2000; Meier, 2004). Admittedly, when made genuinely, motivated by moral concerns, public apologies can be considered moral acts (Gill, 2000; Harvey, 1995; Thompson, 2008). However, studies that have focused on several problems stemming from the public context of apology realization have undermined to various degrees the sincerity and authenticity of many of these gestures. Those studies point to problems such as issuing delegated apologies (i.e. apologizing for acts that the speaker was not involved in directly; Cunningham, 1999), limiting the regret to symbolic restitution (without material compensation; Govier and Verwoerd, 2002), manipulating the form of the rhetorical genre (Lakoff, 2000, 2001), and evaluating apologies by public actors and social groups in a cynical and distrusting manner (Kampf, 2008). In spite of the fact that more often than not the moral core of public apologies is doubtful (James, 2008), frequent realizations of the speech

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act in the global arena since the 1990s have turned apologies into a common device for image restoration as well as a legitimate tool for managing social relationships with others in the public sphere. The practice has been conventionalized through its recurrent realizations in the international and national discourse, and the norm of apologizing for misdeeds in the distant and recent past has been established through this process. The constraining aspect of this norm is apparent in the reflexive designation of verbal responses by public figures, which conforms to the contemporary moral discursive standard (i.e. expressing the “right” feelings of sorrow following transgressions of human justice). This compliance in the discourse level with the constructed norm of apologizing contributes in its turn to the expansion of the *age of apology* (Kampf, forthcoming).

In spite of the political benefits public figures can gain from apologizing upon being accused of violating norms, values, or ethical codes, the speech act still poses a threat to the public figure’s image: by apologizing, the transgressor admits to failing to fulfill a task or conform to a norm. Therefore, the act is *face threatening* due to the fact that it may be regarded as a challenge to the apologizer’s ability to perform his role appropriately in the public arena. Furthermore, in some cases – mainly in the international and national political arenas – apologizing may be perceived as a humiliating act which detracts from the apologizer’s symbolic power (Bilder, 2008; Kampf, 2008; Olshtain, 1989).

Considering the contemporary popularity of this rhetorical genre, it is surprising to find a relative lack of research on the pragmatics of public apologies (see also Harris et al., 2006). Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine how public figures – whether as individuals or representatives of organizations – realize creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds while taking into consideration the structural tension between the moral-discursive standard of late and their face needs as well as the specific situational constraints in the production of apology utterance.

## 2. Public apologies research

In the last decade, public apologies have become one of the ‘hot’ topics studied in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, international relations, sociology, discourse studies, communications, and law. Most of the works on public apologies, as well as those on mundane apologies, are based on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), on Goffman’s terms *face* (1967) and *remedial interchanges* (1971), and on the fusion of the two in politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this theoretical context, one of the most cited definitions for apology in the literature interweaves the concern for the face needs of both the hearer and the apologizer, “. . . a speech act which is intended to provide a support for the hearer who was. . . malaffected by a violation X. In the decision to carry out the verbal apology, the speaker is willing to humiliate himself or herself to some extent and to admit to fault and responsibility for X” (Olshtain, 1989: 156). Indeed, the apologizer’s acknowledgment of a transgression is the most important feature for facilitating an understanding of the motive for apologizing or avoiding it (Meier, 1998). In addition to a clear acknowledgment of responsibility, an ideal apology should contain an illocutionary force indicating device (*ifid*) (Harris et al., 2006) and be void of any other type of excuses and/or justifications (Tavuchis, 1991).

Most of the interest in the public speech act of apology thus far has been focused on the ways in which political actors realize creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds (Abadi, 1990, 1991; Benoit, 1995; Lakoff, 2000, 2001). As such, apologies have mostly been studied as one strategy among other types of excuses and justifications for *image restoration* (see for example Benoit, 1995). Relatively recent studies in the field of pragmatics demonstrate that apologies generate conflict and controversy in the public domain (Harris et al., 2006; Lakoff, 2000). Therefore, the extent of responsibility, which is apparent in the utterance of an apology, is often an issue for negotiation between the apologizer and the offended party (Abadi, 1990, 1991; Lakoff, 2001; Olshtain, 1989). The outcome of the discursive struggle over the form is the public perception of the speech act as an insincere gesture (Abadi, 1991; Kampf, 2008). This perception is reinforced by several syntactic (for example, the use of passive) and lexical (for example, the use of the *sorry* verb instead of *apologize*) tactics that manipulate the form of apology in order to minimize the offender’s responsibility (Bavelas, 2004; Lakoff, 2000, 2001). These types of equivocal “non-apologies,” as Bavelas and Lakoff argue, are the outcome of situational constraints that inhibit direct apologies.

In spite of the research conducted thus far on the speech act, to date there has been no study that systematically analyzes the way in which responsibility is minimized in the apology utterance. Furthermore, despite the claim that there are countless ways to apologize in everyday life (Holmes, 1990; Mills, 2003), and in spite of the calls in current linguistic politeness research to focus on the recipient’s understanding of apologies (Grainger and Harris, 2007; Mills,

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