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Public ritual apology – A case study of Chinese

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the phenomenon of 'public ritual apology'. In our definition, this phenomenon covers an apology performed in front of public, and which is ritual in the sense that it is symbolic and expected to restore the moral order of the public, rather than grant actual reconciliation between the apologiser and the offended party. Thus, 'public ritual apology' usually occurs in contexts when someone apologises for acts that are deemed as grave and in the case of which apology is seemingly dysfunctional in the sense that it cannot usually grant forgiveness. Public ritual apology is a regretfully neglected area, in spite of the fact that such apologies are not only frequent but also generate significant public attention in media – thus, this paper fills an important knowledge gap. In our paper we focus on Chinese public ritual apologies, which are noteworthy to explore as Chinese is stereotypically referred to as a culture which disprefers apologising behaviour. Our methodology is predominantly interactional and metapragmatic, and it combines qualitative research with quantitative elements.

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1. Introduction

In the present paper we explore the phenomenon of public ritual apology in the context of the media and the Internet, by using case studies drawn from Chinese.

1.1. Background

The notion of 'public ritual apology' refers to forms of apology that are performed in front of an audience, with the goal of confessing the performer's guilt and formally accepting the subsequent punitive action (see: Bennett, 2008; Pan and Kádár, 2011). Public ritual apology is a form of public apology (Kampf, 2009; Kampf and Löwenheim, 2012), in the sense that it is performed by an individual or a representative of an organisation in front of what is perceived as 'the public' (e.g. the watchers of a television announcement) – the notion of 'public' may involve certain individuals who are perceived to have suffered harm that the apology addresses, or anyone in a society in a general sense (see more in Bovens, 2005). It is different from other forms of public apology: as Kampf's (2009) insightful work illustrate, apology in the public arena is often about the *evasion* of responsibility, while Tavuchis (1991) draws attention to the reconciliatory effect of apologies made in public. The apology type that we examine covers the interactional practice type of public ritual apology that cannot – in our definition – offer resolution for a particular problem and subsequent reconciliation, but rather it serves the admittance of guilt, and as a reason d'être of this apology type the apologiser does not attempt to evade responsibility either. While 'admittance of guilt' is a central motif in any apology (see Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), as Tavuchis's (1991) above-cited authoritative study points out, apology by default serves the ultimate goal of reconciliation – which is a reason why apology is a key means of conflict resolution (see e.g. studies in Bar-Siman-Tov ed. 2004).

An attempt to reconcile may often imply, in the view of sociologists such as Barkan (2001), an opportunity to negotiate the apologising party's level of guilt (which makes such apologies far too complex to be captured as speech acts in a strict sense; cf. Kádár

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and Haugh, 2013). In addition, public apology operates with the latent opportunity to evade guilt (see Kampf, 2009 above). That is, while perhaps no apology can be effective without the apologising person taking some guilt (either explicitly – by referring to 'responsibility' (cf. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984) – or implicitly), an apology may be still functional if the apologising person attempts to decrease their level of guilt, and this is valid to 'ordinary' public apologies. Thus, non-ritual public apology by default operates as an opportunity for the apologising person to claim innocence and/or decrease guilt for a course of action, as the following example illustrates:

(1) In 2004, the U.S. senator John Kerry performed a public apology to the country's soldiers, after making the following joke:
You know, education, if you make the most of it, if you study hard and you do your homework, and you make an effort to be smart, uh, you, you can do well. If you don't, you get stuck in Iraq.

Following the outcry, he performed the public apology below:

I sincerely regret that my words were misinterpreted to wrongly imply anything negative about those in uniform, and I personally apologise to any service member, family member or American who was offended... As a combat veteran, I want to make it clear to anyone in uniform and to their loved ones: My poorly stated joke at a rally was not about, and [was] never intended to refer to any troop...

I left out one word. I left out the word 'us.' They got 'us' stuck. Instead of that, I said, 'They got stuck,' and they're taking advantage of it.

[http://www.perfectapology.com/political-apology.html]

Such an apology is strategic in Brown and Levinson's (1987) sense, in that it is evasive in a particular unpleasant situation, and so its strategic goal is to reposition the apologiser as someone whose attempt of being humorous has been misinterpreted. Note that even if no such attempt to wiggle out of responsibility takes place, a public apology represents an attempt to reconcile, and as such it provides an opportunity to strategically manipulate the anticipated reception (see Kádár 2017).

Unlike such more general public apologies, ritual public apology cannot result in escape: on the contrary, its raison d'être is the admittance of guilt, and the actioning of such apologies does not tolerate any attempt to decrease the apologising person's guilt. Ritual public apology represents facework in Goffman's (1955) sense, but definitely not in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987) and that part of apology literature that accepts the Brown and Levinsonian interpretation of facework in the context of apology as an attempt to decrease imposition (e.g. Holmes, 1990). More specifically, it may save the apologiser's 'face' as the apologiser's sacred property, in particular in public ritual apologies that are made on the behalf of someone who belongs to the apologising person's in-group – a phenomenon which we examine at several parts of in this paper. Public ritual apology provides an opportunity for self-punishment (Watanabe and Ohtsubo, 2012), but it may not attempt to directly trigger the offended party's forgiveness. This is why this interactional practice is ritual from the ritual researcher's point of view: it is a public (and often scripted) performance that essentially serves the restoration of the moral order (Whutnow, 1989) of a community or a broader society, and to a certain extent repair the face of the apologiser (in Benoit's 1995 sense). That is, such apologies operate beyond the spectrum of individuals: they come into existence under communal pressure, and ultimately the apologising person may not *profit* from performing them. Research on ritual public apology (see an overview in Kádár, 2017) has revealed that there are situations in which the perceived violation of the perceived moral order is so large that accepting and even *requesting* punishment is the only action for the apologiser, which the majority of a community can endorse. In addition, ritual public apology tends to occur in contexts in which the public wrong cannot be remedied by consecutive actions.

It is important to point out that there is no clear border between ritual and non-ritual (conventional) public apology: as with any etic constructs, differences between these categories may become fuzzy when one attempts to use them for the analysis of real-life data. Nevertheless, we still believe that setting up such typological categories is important, in order for apology research to avoid presenting the specific case of ritual public apology under the umbrella of public apologies. To operationalise this distinction between ritualistic and non-ritualistic public apologies, we have utilised the following criterion:

A public apology becomes ritual if the apologiser unambiguously admits their fault, that is, if no explicit or implicit attempt can be observed to decrease responsibility for the event that occurred.

1.2. Hyptohesis

Examining ritual public apology is a challenging task, in the respect that public apology does not take place in dyadic settings, unlike many other forms of apology (see an overview in Christie, 2002, and Kampf, 2009 on this issue in particular). Since (im)politeness comes into operation vis-à-vis evaluative moments (Eelen, 2001), the effect of ritual apology cannot be studied within an actual interaction (which is often a monologue; cf. Webber, 2005 on interactional monologues).[3] In addition, it is not without difficulty to examine the question of whether there is any sense of 'proportionateness' between the gravity of the act that triggers a ritual public apology and the form of the given apology (Hatcher, 2010). In various theories of politeness, spanning Brown and Levinson (1987) to discursive theories such as Watts (2003) and Mills (2003), there is an underlying assumption that if politeness (in our case, apology) operates to redress an alleged violation of appropriateness, it takes a form that is regarded as being in proportion with the gravity of the violation, otherwise it becomes subject to be interpreted as overpolite and insincere. Our hypothesis is that, when it comes to public ritual apology, it is difficult to evidence that there is a direct relationship between the form/reception of the apology and the gravity of the matter that triggers the apology. More precisely, public ritual apology is a reflective phenomenon, in the respect that the occurrence of this ritual practice assumes that there is an error, which is sufficiently grave the validate the ritual. In other words, once such a ritual is deemed as necessary by the performer, it is assumed that the deed that triggers the apology is grave, and so it is difficult from an academic/observer point of view to differentiate between the 'weight' of deeds that trigger such apologies. This characteristic is allegedly due to the fact that a public ritual apology affords and even necessitates excessive interactional behaviour (Bax, 2010), which would count as over-polite and as such insincere in other interactional contexts (Watts, 2003), whereas in the context of the moral turmoil that triggers a ritual public apology it may count as simply necessary. Therefore, an innovative aspect of this research is the synthesis of the form and reception of apology: it is

[3] Note that this does not mean that public ritual apologies are not interactional: they can not only be interrupted by ratified and unratified interactants (Goffman, 1981), such as the host of an interview or hecklers of a political speech (see more in Kádár, 2014), but also such monologues tend to be situated in larger dialogues such as a television programme or a courtroom trial.

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