

Workplace Reasons for Saying You're Sorry: Discourse Task Management and Apology in Telephone Interviews

JUDITH MATTSON BEAN

BARBARA JOHNSTONE

Texas A&M University

We propose a model of the speech act of apologizing that ranges apologies along a continuum from the most situational, on one end, to the most personal, on the other. We then analyze the 252 occurrences of *I'm sorry*, *excuse me*, and *beg pardon* and their variants in 62 telephone interviews conducted for a public-opinion polling service. Very few of the apologies in the interviews are responses to particular personal offenses, intended to convey regret and apparently successful in doing so. Rather, because of the necessity for *discourse task management* in this genre, interviewers and respondents use apologies at the situational end of the continuum. Such apologies signal and remedy minor interactional difficulties and establish cooperative rapport. Situational apologies also serve as indirect ways of rejecting questions or answers or cajoling reluctant respondents. Situational apologies are routinized in origin and unelaborated in form; their function is to restore social equilibrium rather than to express genuine regret. They are responses to disruptions in the interview task rather than in the personal interaction between interviewer and respondent. We suggest that the continuum model of apology is useful in coming to a detailed understanding of the working of expressions like *I'm sorry* in discourse, and that discourse genre plays a role in the distribution and expression of speech acts.

According to the model of apology on which most research is based, the prototypical apology occurs in a situation in which a speaker believes him- or herself to have caused offense to an interlocutor, regrets this, and successfully remedies the offense, conveying regret to the offended party. Though it is acknowledged that the offense need not always be large nor the regret always heartfelt, the apologies with which theorists start are ones that arise in situations involving fairly salient personal offense and genuine regret for it.¹ The prototypical apolo-

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Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Barbara Johnstone, Department of English, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843.

¹This is in line with the examinations of ordinary linguistic usage out of which speech act theory arose; for example, a person "apologizes" to another for damaging property, failing to honor promises, or hurting feelings. Although we say things like "I'm sorry" and "excuse me" in connection with minor interactional infractions such as starting to talk at the same time someone else does, we do not generally, in everyday usage, refer to this as "apologizing."

gy is most often studied in the context of the prototypical speech genre, casual conversation. In this genre, as Tannen (1984) and others have shown, the creating and maintaining of personal relationships is as important as the exchanging of information. Personal offense is always possible when people interact as particular individuals, and if interlocutors' main goal is to get along together, they should regret such offenses and try sincerely to atone for them. Apologies in rapport-building conversation might be expected generally to approximate the prototype. What, though, of genres of talk in which people interact not primarily as individuals but instead as role-fillers and in which interpersonal relatedness is not the primary aim? In this article, we examine the functions of expressions such as *I'm sorry* in a set of telephone interviews in which paid interviewers collected information from anonymous, randomly selected respondents. We find that overt expressions of genuine regret for personal offense are rarely relevant in this speech event. Instead, it is the need for professional *discourse task management* that accounts for most of the *I'm sorrys* and related expressions. We detail some of the uses of relatively routinized, perfunctory apologies in task-oriented professional talk. Our analysis underscores the fact that not all apologies are equivalent in interactional function or weight, so that it may be misleading to treat the apology category as an unanalyzed whole in comparative analyses of apologizing across social groups or situations.

A FUNCTIONAL CONTINUUM FOR APOLOGY

Apologizing has been thought to be relatively easy to define and apologies relatively easy to elicit, making this speech act a useful test case for theories of pragmatic interpretation and the relationship of speech act to linguistic form (Edmondson, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Norrick, 1978; Owen, 1983). Apologizing is, furthermore, a speech act people perform relatively frequently (unlike christening, for example) and are often consciously aware of performing (unlike asserting, for example). Apologizing is especially noticeable in the cross-cultural or cross-gender breach, a fact which has given rise to studies of what is involved in a nonnative speaker's learning to apologize (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987), comparing men's uses of and reactions to apologies with women's (Holmes, 1989), and examining reasons for apologizing and ways of doing so across languages (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

Most of this research begins by defining apology in terms of its interactional function or in terms of pragmatic conditions for its felicity. Most researchers point out that apologizing is one form of "remedial exchange" (Goffman, 1971). A straightforwardly Austinian approach is that of Fraser (1981, pp. 261–262), who lists four beliefs an apologizer must hold:

- some act, A, has been performed before the time of speaking;
- A has offended the hearer;

- the speaker, S, is at least partly responsible for the offense; and
- S regrets A.

Fraser then lists two "basic conditions" for the performance of an apology:

- S must acknowledge responsibility for the performance of A, and
- S must convey regret for A.

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) provide a similar, though less precise, definition: "When an action or utterance (or the lack of either one) has resulted in the fact that one or more persons perceive themselves as offended, the culpable person(s) needs to apologize" (p. 20). Some mention speaker intention: Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), for example, say that an apology is "an attempt by the speaker to make up for some previous action that interfered with the hearer's interests" (p. 20).

Not all of these definitions result in the same category of potential utterances being singled out as apologies. (Some include remedies that take place before infractions, for example, while some do not; for some, explanatory accounts are a subset of apologies while for others they are a separate speech act.²) Typically, however, the result of the analysis is a list of *apology strategies* or *semantic formulae* for apologizing, and a list of utterances realizing each. For example, *Let me apologize for . . .* requests the hearer to accept an apology; *I'm sorry* expresses regret; *I beg your pardon* requests forgiveness (Fraser, 1981, p. 263). Contrastive studies then analyze who does which of these things and under what circumstances.

Not all uses of forms such as *I'm sorry* have the same function, except in the very general way captured in broad definitions of apology like those we have mentioned. To say "I'm sorry" after unintentionally overlapping an interlocutor's talk with one's own is different, in a number of ways, from saying "I'm sorry" after bumping into a person, and both are different from saying "I'm sorry" after breaking a person's heart. Researchers have noted this point. Holmes (1989, p. 196) observes, for example, that an apology can serve to announce that a violation has occurred as well as to apologize for it. Norrick (1978) shows that the "social function" of an apology may be to assuage anger, or to show good manners. Edmondson (1981, pp. 282–283) points out that an apology such as *I'm sorry* can express regret not only for an offense that has occurred but also for an offense that is about to occur—or it can even *be* the offense, as when a person turns down a request by saying "I'm sorry." Fraser (1981) discusses "ritual apologies" used as "facilitating moves" in situations in which apologies are not really expected or required, and Coulmas (1981) mentions the "derived use of apology expressions as attention-getters" (p. 76).

²Brown and Levinson's (1987, pp. 189–190) treatment of apology seems to focus almost exclusively on things that are said before a potential impingement on "negative face." Their examples of apologies—"I'm sure you must be busy, but . . .," "I normally wouldn't ask you this," "I can't think of anyone else who could . . .," and "excuse me" or "I hope you'll forgive me"—are all of this sort.

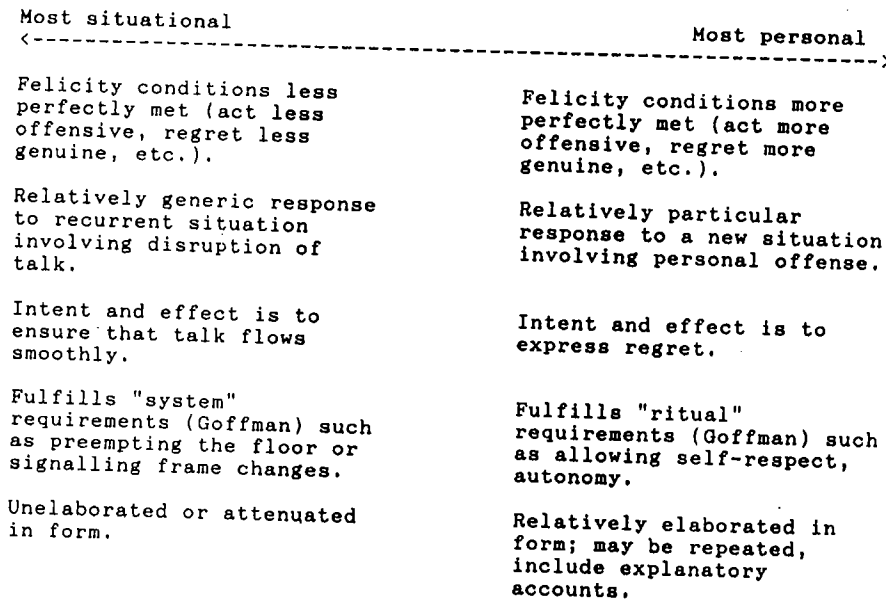


Figure 1. Continuum of apology functions and forms.

One way of modeling the range of things apologies can do in interaction is to conceive of apologies as falling along a continuum, with the most automatic, routinized apologies at one end and the most personal and heartfelt at the other. Figure 1 illustrates what we have in mind.

Toward the "situational" end of the continuum are cases in which the felicity conditions for apologizing may be met only loosely. Such apologies may not, for example, convey regret in any but a fairly perfunctory way, and the situations in which they arise may not be ones in which one would expect the speaker to feel regretful. Situational apologies are relatively generic responses to recurrent difficulties in discourse such as unregulated simultaneous talk, mishearing or non-hearing, or, in cases in which interlocutors have predefined jobs such as question-asker or question-answerer, mistakes in performing these jobs. Such apologies tend, as we will show, to be fairly unelaborated in form and in effect: They may be highly attenuated forms such as *pardon* (from *I beg your pardon*) or *sorry* (from *I am sorry*), and they tend not to generate verbal uptake. In Goffman's terms (1981, pp. 9-22), such apologies arise as a result of "system constraints." They help to regulate the flow of talk, to reopen closed channels of communication, to signal changes in frame, and in other ways to keep the communicative system working.

At the other extreme are the most personal apologies, responses to particular situations in which personal offenses have been committed. Felicity conditions are fully and nonmetaphorically met: A fully personal apology would be one intended by the speaker to convey regret and, in fact, conveying regret to the

hearer. Apologies toward this end of the spectrum tend, we will show, to be elaborated in form and interactional effect: They are often longer, they are repeated more often, they may include explanatory accounts that relate them to the particular situations and persons that called them forth, and they are often responded to verbally, sometimes becoming the topic of talk. These apologies remedy what Goffman (1981) calls "ritual" lapses, lapses, that is, in the protection and sustenance of interlocutors' feelings.

A model of apologies as ranged on a continuum like this allows for more sensitive analyses of what people are doing when they say things like *I'm sorry* than does a model in which all such utterances are treated alike. The continuum provides a basis for an examination of the differences in forms and functions of apology across speech situations.

We begin by assuming as little as possible about what forms such as *I'm sorry* are for. We do this in the tradition of descriptive linguistics, beginning with linguistic forms and moving to their functions, rather than beginning with functions and then collecting forms. The forms we examine are *I'm sorry* and utterances that include it, *I beg your pardon* and its variants, and *excuse me*. We are not the first to take a formal rather than a functional approach to expressions such as *I'm sorry*: Borkin and Reinhart (1978) begin with forms as well, examining functions of *excuse me* and *I'm sorry*, and Owen (1983), after attempting and essentially abandoning a functional definition of apology, considers only utterances containing *apology* or *apologize*, *sorry*, and *I'm afraid* followed by a sentence or sentence pro-form.

THE TEXAS POLL INTERVIEWS

In what follows, we analyze the functions of the occurrences of the forms *I'm sorry*, *excuse me*, *I beg your pardon*, and their variants in 62 telephone interviews conducted for a nonprofit public-opinion polling service. The 15- to 45-min. survey consisted of questions asked on behalf of academic researchers and governmental agencies; among the topics were the performance of elected officials, gun control, skin cancer, nuclear energy, and abortion. Interviews ended with demographic questions about the respondents' age, income, occupation, residence, religion, and ethnicity. Like most surveys of this sort, this one was scheduled (interviewers read questions from a printed script³) and standardized (all respondents were asked the same questions, though not necessarily in the same order). The respondents were selected by means of an automatic telephone number generating mechanism that weighted area codes in such a way as to produce a demographically representative sample of residents of the state.

³The script never instructs interviewers to utter "I'm sorry" or any other apology form. Although they are not supposed to, interviewers frequently deviate from the script (see Johnstone, 1991, for a discussion of this). Some of the interviewers' apology forms in fact serve to signal such deviations, as we will demonstrate.

We selected 62 of the 1,007 taped interviews, first rejecting interviews in Spanish and ones with untranscribable sound quality, then selecting an approximately equal number with male and female respondents, and finally filling in the sample to increase the number of surveys with male interviewers and with black and Hispanic respondents. The result is a sample roughly representative of who interacts with whom in this speech task.⁴ Having selected the interviews, we then identified every instance of each of the apology forms in each one: a total of 252. In what follows, we refer to these 252 tokens as "apology forms," although, as will become clear, most of them are not used for particularly apologetic purposes, as the term "apologetic" is understood in everyday discourse.

We first pose and answer some general quantitative questions about the apology forms: who uses them, to whom are they used, and which are most common? Then we examine the functions of these forms, suggesting that the vast majority of the apologies are close to the purely situational end of our continuum, serving discourse task management functions. We show what these functions are. We also examine the few apologies in the interviews which are toward the personal end of the continuum, noting that personal apologies are usually syntactically different from discourse task management apologies and have different interactional results. We then analyze one interview in detail, to see how the use of apologies relates to the overall structure of the interview conversation, particularly to the ebb and flow of personal rapport. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE APOLOGY FORMS

Table 1 displays how many apology forms were, on the average, uttered by interviewers and by respondents, and to whom they were addressed.

Poll interviewers uttered far more apology forms than did respondents. Interviewers averaged 3.4 apology forms per interview to respondents' 0.8, and interviewers uttered 81.5% of the total tokens. Female respondents were addressees for roughly the same number of apology forms as were male respondents (3.6 for females, 3.1 for males), and female interviewers received nearly the same

⁴Thirteen of the 18 interviewers are women, which reflects the fact that many more women than men work as telephone interviewers. There are more female respondents ($n = 37$) than male respondents ($n = 25$); this reflects the fact that women answer the telephone at home more often than do men and are more likely to be willing to cooperate. Our sample is not representative of the ethnic mix of the state, which is 27% Hispanic and 14% black; only six of the respondents are African-American and eight Hispanic. (The low number of Hispanic respondents has partly to do with the fact that people are interviewed in Spanish if they request to be.) As it turns out, however, apparent differences among ethnic groups in the use of apology forms were related to facts about age and native language rather than culture, so we will henceforth not discuss ethnic groups separately.

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TABLE 1
Mean Numbers of Apologies per Interview Given and Received by Female and Male Interviewers and Respondents

	Interviewers			Respondents		
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
Apologies given	2.3	5.6	3.4	0.7	0.8	0.8
Apologies received	0.7	0.8	0.8	3.6	3.1	3.4

Note. $N = 62$. For female interviewers, $n = 42$; for male interviewers, $n = 20$. For female respondents, $n = 37$; for male respondents, $n = 25$.

TABLE 2
Percentage of Total Apologies Involving Each Apology Form

Form	Percentage of Total Apologies
<i>I'm sorry</i> and variants	77
<i>Excuse me</i> / <i>'scuse me</i>	13
<i>Pardon</i> and variants	10
Total	100

number as male interviewers (0.7 for females, 0.8 for males). But males, interviewers and respondents alike, uttered more apology forms than did females. The difference is minute in the case of respondents (male respondents uttered 0.8 apology forms per survey and female respondents 0.7) but striking in the case of interviewers: The male interviewers employed an average of 5.6 apology forms per survey to the female interviewers' 2.3.⁵

In Table 2, we break the apologies down by form. By interviewers and respondents alike, *I'm sorry* was the most commonly uttered apology form, accounting for 68% of the 252 tokens. Adding variants of simple *I'm sorry*—*I'm really sorry*, *I'm sorry about that*, *sorry to have v-ed*, *I'm sorry + S*, and so on—raises the percentage to 77%. *Excuse me* and its one variant, *'scuse me*, accounted for 13% of the tokens, and all apologies involving *pardon* (*I beg your pardon*, *beg pardon*, *pardon me*, etc.), for 10%.

⁵This disparity can be explained in part with reference to individual interviews. One interview by a male, with a Hispanic woman whose English was hard to understand, included 36 interviewer apology forms, 34 of which were *I'm sorry*s used for the purpose of requesting repetition. Discounting these, though, male interviewers still used 4.0 apology forms per survey to females' 2.3. One of the five male interviewers consistently used many apology forms, averaging 7.0 per survey. But even discounting his interviews, there is still a difference: 3.6 apology forms per survey for male interviewers versus 2.3 for female interviewers.

FUNCTIONS OF THE APOLOGIES

Ninety-five percent of the apologies in the interviews were routine situational apologies. These apologies served functions related to discourse task management (Johnstone, Ferrara, & Bean, 1992). By discourse task management, we mean the techniques used by interlocutors in speech situations involving explicit, predefined referential goals, to keep themselves on task and to get their job accomplished smoothly.⁶ In casual, rapport-building sorts of conversation, discourse task management accounts for a minor amount of the talk, since interlocutors are not trying to get through a preset list of topics, code or copy one another's answers, or finish in a set amount of time. But in the task-oriented talk required in many jobs, discourse task management may account for much of what is said. Discourse task management includes techniques for requesting repetition, when a speaker needs to know exactly what was said; techniques for announcing errors in delivery, when speakers' exact wording matters; techniques for accepting or rejecting the format of another's turn, when the format is crucial; techniques for keeping the floor while talk is being recorded or encoded, for announcing interruptions and getting back to the task at hand after them, for probing for the required information or turn format, and so on. The list of ways in which discourse has to be managed presumably varies with the task at hand.

In the Texas Poll interviews, apology forms were used for five task management functions: requesting repetition, rejecting question or answer formats, announcing errors in delivery, announcing the beginnings and/or ends of interruptions in the interview, and managing the interruption of the other speaker. Table 3 lists these functions, and the proportion of apology forms by interviewers and respondents that served each.

Requesting Repetition

By far the most common function of apology forms in the interviews was for requesting repetition: 59% of the interviewers' apology forms and 60% of the respondents' were in this category. In (1), the interviewer used *pardon me* to request the respondent to repeat⁷:

- (1) Int.: Okay. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about [skin cancer]. In the past year or so have you heard a lot about skin cancer, a little, or nothing at all?

⁶Discourse task management should not be confused with discourse marking (Schiffrin, 1987). Discourse marking arises out of the necessity for speakers always to show what they are doing with language as they do it. Discourse marking is a much more general phenomenon than discourse task management, which is required only in situations in which turns and topics need to hew to preset patterns. Discourse task management techniques are a subset of discourse marking techniques.

⁷The following transcription conventions are used in this article:

- Unfilled brackets enclose unintelligible talk.
- Equal signs on consecutive lines indicate "latched" talk following immediately on the preceding turn:

TABLE 3
Functions of Apology Forms in 62 Telephone Public-Opinion Survey Interviews

	Interviewers' Apology Forms ^a		Respondents' Apology Forms ^b	
	N	%	N	%
Situational Apology				
Requesting repeat	123	59	27	60
Rejecting question or answer	5	2	1	2
Signaling performance error	49	24	12	27
Interrupting interview	2	1	5	11
Interrupting other speaker	4	2	0	0
Total situational apologies	183	88	45	100
Personal Apology	24	12	0	0

^aN = 207. ^bN = 45.

Resp.: A little. Uh, in the past year or so?

Int.: Yes sir, in the past year or so.

Resp.: Uh a little.

Int.: *Pardon me?*

Resp.: Uh, just a little.

Excuse me or *I'm sorry* could also serve this function, as in (2):

- (2) Int.: Would you agree or disagree with a law that would require a one-week waiting period before a handgun could be purchased.

Resp.: Yes.

Int.: *I'm sorry?*

Resp.: Yes I'd agree.

Note that the *I'm sorry* in (2) actually elicited a repetition filled out in such a way that the answer now conformed to the required format: *yes* was not an option the interviewer could check off on the questionnaire, but *agree* was. Requests for repetition sometimes appeared to be compelled by the need to probe for appropriate responses. Hesitant respondents were sometimes encouraged to decide on an

Int.: I'm sorry, go ahead =

Resp.: =That's kind of a . . .

- Square brackets on consecutive lines indicate overlapping talk, beginning at left bracket and continuing to right bracket:

Int.: I'm sorry that we missed the callback [again, I really am.]

Resp.: [Oh okay,] that's all right.

- Double parentheses enclose descriptions of paralinguistic behavior or pause: ((laugh))

answer by interviewers who acted as if an answer had already been given but had not been heard, as in (3):

- (3) Int.: Okay, um, all and all from what you've heard or read, how safe are nuclear power plants that produce electric power, very safe, somewhat safe, not very or not at all.
 Resp.: Uh . . .
 Int.: Uh, *I'm sorry?*
 Resp.: Not at all.

Respondents, too, used apology forms to request repetition, as in (4):

- (4) Int.: So would you say [skin cancer is] life-threatening, or not life-threatening?
 Resp.: *Beg pardon?*
 Int.: Would you say it's life-threatening or not life-threatening?

Requesting another speaker to repeat can be considered an offense requiring remediation. In a speech event like the survey interview, however, in which the exchange of information in precisely controlled format is the goal, it is a frequent offense, and a necessary one. Neither interviewers nor respondents are likely to feel personal regret at having to request repetition—or if they do, it is more likely because repetition takes up their time than because they feel they have offended.

Rejecting Questions or Answers

Both interlocutors used apology forms to signal that a question or a response was inappropriate. Rejections could be expressed with the apology form *sorry* and declarative intonation. Interviewers did this when answer format were incorrect, as in (5):

- (5) Int.: Would you agree or disagree with passing a law in Texas requiring a person under eighteen to have parental consent or a court order before an abortion?
 Resp.: I'd say yes.
 Int.: *I'm sorry.* Would you agree or disagree?
 Resp.: Agree.

Interviewers also used the apology form *sorry* and declarative intonation when answers were incorrect, as in (6):

- (6) Int.: The number after nine hundred ninety-nine?
 Resp.: Two hundred.
 Int.: Uh nine hundred ninety-nine? *Sorry.*
 Resp.: OH. One thousand.

In one case, an interviewer responded to a hostile series of rapid-fire questions about the Texas Poll with "I beg your pardon," which had the effect of getting the respondent to rephrase his question more calmly:

- (7) Resp.: What's, what is the name of this organization that you are talking about that you are with? What is this? What is all this for?
 Int.: *I beg your pardon?* ((laugh))
 Resp.: What is this for? These questions.

A respondent used an apology form to reject a question about George Bush, who had been elected president three months prior to the survey but only inaugurated a few days before. He used *excuse me* to signal his objection, apparently thinking that the question was about how Bush had done since the inauguration:

- (8) Int.: Okay, um, how would you rate the job George Bush has done since the election. Excellent, good, [only fair]
 Resp.: [Excuse me, but.]
 Int.: Okay.
 Resp.: Wha- What's he done?

Like requesting repetition, rejecting another's contribution to the talk is an interactional offense. To say, though, that the purpose of the apology forms in these examples was to express regret would be to miss a large part of their function. Interviewer and respondent are doing jobs here, and if the speaker's performance of the task is unsatisfactory, it interferes with the other speaker's performance as well, and needs to be pointed out. There is also an important sense in which interviewers are not personally responsible for the offense of rejecting respondents' misformatted questions: The interviewers did not write the questions or dictate the formats for their answers. Respondents were made aware of this at the beginning of the interview, when interviewers said they were calling "for the Texas Poll" and used *we* to refer to themselves, rather than *I*.

Signaling Errors in Performing the Task

Another common function for apology forms in the interviews was to signal errors in speakers' performance of their respective tasks. Interviewers used apology forms to acknowledge errors in reading the questions, in pacing the interview, in hearing the answers, and in explaining the poll's purpose and procedures. Respondents used apology forms when they misunderstood questions, misstated answers or were unable to answer, or got the interview off track. These apology forms showed that an error had been made and that a restart was imminent or in progress. Twenty-four percent of the interviewers' apology forms had this function, compared to 27% of the respondents'.

Interviewers often used apology forms after they broke off, mispronounced words, or misread questions and before restarting, sometimes with an explicit "Let me start over":

- (9) Int.: Okay, how about building prisons with bonds that will p- paid, *I'm sorry, let me start over.* Build prisons with bonds that will be paid from taxes over several years . . .

