Workplace reasons for saying you're sorry: Discourse Management and Apology in Telephone Interviews

Judith Mattson Bean
Barbara Johnstone, Carnegie Mellon University

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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-

Authors’ names are in alphabetical order; we are equally and jointly responsible for this work. Part of our title, “On saying you’re sorry,” is the title of a paper by Edmundson (1981). We are grateful to Neal Norrick and to two reviewers for this journal for comments on earlier drafts.

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

1 This 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.”
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 & Olshain, 1981; Olshain, 1983; Olshain & 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 Austenian 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.) 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 Colman (1981) mentions the "derived use of apology expressions as attention-getters" (p. 76).
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 script)3 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. 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 addressed 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 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' 2.35.

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%.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Numbers of Apologies per Interview Given and Received by Female and Male Interviewers and Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 1</strong> Mean Numbers of Apologies per Interview Given and Received by Female and Male Interviewers and Respondents</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewers</strong></td>
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<td>---------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologies given</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apologies received</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Total Apologies Involving Each Apology Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm sorry and variants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pardon and variants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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We thank James Dyer of the Texas A&M Public Policy Resources Laboratory for permission to tape the Texas Poll of January 1989 and Guy Bailey for making the tapes available. This was funded by National Science Foundation Grant BNS-8812552 to Guy Bailey.

**TASK MANAGEMENT AND APOLOGY**

**Note.**

This 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 sorrys' 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. 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.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interviewers’ Apology Forms</th>
<th>Respondents’ Apology Forms</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situational Apology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting repeat</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting question or answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signaling performance error</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting other speaker</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total situational apologies</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Apology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 207. **N = 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' misshaped 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...
Less commonly, the apology form could follow the correction:

(10) Int.: Okay. And do you expect your child to be able to own her own home? His or her own home, I'm sorry.

Interviewers also used apology forms to signal errors in conducting the interview, as when the interviewer in (11) discovered that she had skipped the last of a series of options respondents were to evaluate:

(11) Int.: Okay. Um Texas has, I'm sorry, al- also one more of those. Cutting spending for higher education by eight percent.

Like interviewers, respondents used apology forms when they misspoke:

(12) Resp.: Well, with respect to nuclear power, one of the most important issues is that we don't know what to do with th-, the, oh excuse me, the waste.

Respondents also used apology forms to signal answers that were unintended or incorrect:

(13) Resp.: I would say more conservative.
Int.: Okay, and what's [your]
Resp.: [Oh, I'm sorry, more liberal.

Respondents also sometimes used apology forms when they misunderstood a question or did not know an answer.

Managing Interruptions of the Interview
Apology forms were also used to manage two sorts of interruptions: interruptions of the task at hand and speakers' interruptions of each other. Respondents were fairly often distracted by other people in their homes or by signals from their second telephone lines and sometimes used apology forms to announce their return to the interview. One example is (14):

(14) Int.: Okay, so any other besides those?
Resp.: ((pause))
Int.: ((to someone else)) Tony, would you see what you can do for our daughter here? ((to Int.)) I'm sorry, go ahead again, um, I was interrupted.
Resp.: Oh, that's okay . . .

In two interviews, respondents used apology forms both before and after interruptions, thus framing the off-task time, as in (15):

(15) Resp.: What? I'm sorry, hold on just a minute.
Int.: Sure, uh-huh.
((pause))

Okay, spoken by the interviewer, almost invariably signals the successful completion of a question–answer pair and the transition to the next. One function of I'm sorry appears to be to signal a different level of discontinuity: the transition from interview to noninterview talk. That these apologies are not necessarily responses to personal regret for having offended is more clearly demonstrated in (16), in which the interviewer said "I'm sorry" in connection with an offense for which she was not responsible. For the second time during the interview, the respondent received a signal that there was a call on his other telephone line. He asked the interviewer to "wait again," to which she responded "I'm sorry."

(16) Resp.: Would you wait again?
Int.: I'm sorry, sir.
Resp.: ((pause while Resp. speaks on other phone line))
Int.: Okay.
Resp.: Oh, I'm sorry.

Acknowledging Interruptions of the Other Speaker
Another kind of interruption in the interviews was the usurpation of one speaker's turn by the other. Interviewers interrupted respondents more often than respondents interrupted interviewers, because respondents needed to hear the questions, whereas interviewers did not need to hear respondents' frequent digressions from and justifications of their answers. But interviewers also needed to be polite, because they were imposing on respondents' time and privacy. When their interruptions failed to accomplish an immediate and smooth transition—when, in other words, the respondent kept talking—interviewers sometimes used apology forms to signal that they were relinquishing the floor. In (17), the interviewer proceeded to the next question before the respondent had finished elaborating on the current answer. (The question was about whether the respondent thought that nuclear power plants produce dangerous radioactive waste.)

(17) Resp.: I strongly agree that [they do. ( ]
Int.: [Okay. Ho-] I'm sorry.
Resp.: Well, they at one time they were trying to develop something that would reverse the the ah I want to say the atomic, reaction you know . . .

In (18), the interviewer cut off a request for clarification of an answer:

(18) Resp.: Okay. What's the difference between that one =
Int.: =Okay, the first statement, I'm sorry, was expanding the sales tax to cover more goods and services.
Not all interruptions are offensive, as Tannen (1983) has shown. The one in (18) was in fact helpful: "The interviewer correctly anticipated the respondent’s question. There is a conventional sense in which beginning to speak when someone else has the floor is an offense that requires apologetic remediation, but it is misleading, we think, to conflate task-related offenses and remediations like this with ones that involve personal responsibility and regret.

**Semipersonal Apologies by Respondents**

Respondents frequently expanded and justified their requests for repetition, far more often than did interviewers, saying things such as “Beg pardon, give me that question again,” “I don’t understand you, excuse me,” or “What was that again? I’m sorry.” In signaling errors, too, respondents’ apology forms were more elaborate, more likely than those of interviewers to include explanations or justifications. Why should this have been? Respondents were new to the interview game in a way interviewers were not, so their errors should have been excusable in a perfunctory way rather than requiring personal apology. Furthermore, respondents were doing interviewers a favor by allowing themselves to be imposed on and should thus have had less need than interviewers to be polite. Being apologetic is, as Brown and Levinson (1987) point out, one aspect of being polite. We propose that the brevity of apology forms was related to how practiced a speaker was at the interview task. Experienced interviewers had learned that requesting repetitions and acknowledging errors could be accomplished most efficiently without time-consuming explanations. Respondents were not as practiced at being interviewed, and hence more likely to fall back on the rapport-building kinds of elaborated apologies that help make casual conversation work.

**Personal Apologies**

We found no personal apologies by respondents in the interviews. However, 24 of the 207 apology forms uttered by interviewers, or 12%, were remedies for particular personal offenses. The clearest examples are apologies in which interlocutors explicitly stated what the offense was. The conversation excerpted in (19) and (20) provides three examples. This was a callback to complete an interview broken off by the respondent for lack of time. Generally, when incomplete interviews occurred, respondents were asked when it would be convenient for the Poll to call again. In this particular case, the interviewer misread the note about when to call, phoning at 7:00 pm instead of 2:00 pm. He apologized three times for his timing error, twice at the beginning of the interview and once at the end. Excerpt (19) is from the beginning of the call:

(19) Int.: Uh, we had a message here to call you back. Did this say two or seven?
Resp.: Two.
Int.: Okay, I’m really sorry, there was some mistake, uh, when it was going up there, they thought it said seven.

Calling people unexpectedly and asking them to answer questions for 15 to 45 min is making an imposition, and both the interview script and transcripts of what was actually said are full of efforts to remedy this offense by means of deferential and friendly politeness (Johnstone et al., 1992). But a cold call is not a personal offense in the way the error in (19) was. Someone asked an individual when it would be convenient to talk, and her answer was apparently ignored. This act was a personal offense in a way requesting a repetition or signaling an error is not, and this is shown in how it was dealt with. The interview explicitly laid out what the offense was: “. . . we didn’t call you back when you said would be most convenient for you.” The respondent made it clear that she was in fact inconvenienced: “I may have to stop get babies to bed.” Responsibility for the offense was acknowledged: “there was some mistake”; “we didn’t call you back.” By increasing the length and complexity of the apology with explanatory accounts and repetition, the interviewer called attention to it, underscoring its illocutionary force. At the end of the interview, the interviewer apologized again:

(20) Int.: Okay? Well that’s all my questions.
Resp.: [Okay.]
Int.: [I] sure do appreciate your help. I’m sorry that we missed the callback [again, I really am.]
Resp.: [Oh okay] that’s all right. Things remained calm.
Int.: Okay. ([laugh]) Thank you very much.

Apology forms used in personal apologies were typically more elaborate than apology forms used for other purposes, in two ways. First, they tended to be structurally elaborate. As do the second one in (19) and the one in (20), personal apologies often included dependent syntactic elements, either clauses (“I’m sorry they got tedious”; “I’m sorry that it took so long”) or phrases (“Sorry to have kept you away”; “I’m sorry about that”). As does the one in (20), personal apologies sometimes involved repetition: “I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry” or “I’m sorry . . . I really am.” They sometimes included intensifiers (“I’m really sorry”), and they were sometimes longer in other ways. (I beg your pardon was more likely to express a personal apology than was beg pardon or beg your pardon).
Second, apology forms used in personal apologies tended to give rise to interactional elaboration. They became topics for talk; they were responded to. This is the case in (20), for example, where the respondent overlapped the apology with an acceptance, “Oh okay that’s all right,” and then commented on the situation: “Things remained calm.” In (21), the interviewer probed for an appropriate answer until the respondent began to sound annoyed and refused to cooperate with her. The interviewer apologized, and the respondent accepted her apology and relented.

(21) Int.: Okay could you give your opinion of it a number from zero to ten?
    Resp.: Well, maybe three or four.
    Int.: Three or four?
    Resp.: Uh-huh.
    Int.: Could you pick one?
    Resp.: (2-s pause)
    No.
    Int.: I’m sorry I’m [making this kind of hard on you but]
    Resp.: [Oh all right yes I know you’re trying to write it down]
    Int.: Yeah.
    Resp.: Uh just put it three.

The interviewer’s apology gave rise not only to a comment by the respondent, but to a change in the respondent’s attitude. Personal apologies tended to occur in difficult interviews, ones in which the respondent was reluctant and easily offended. So, for example, at the end of a lengthy interview complicated by the Spanish-speaking respondent’s difficulty in understanding the questions, the interviewer said, “I’m sorry that it took so long.” Some apologies were in fact elicited by respondents when they voiced objections. One example is (22):

(22) Int.: Okay. And uh, generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent or what.
    Resp.: ((laugh)) You should’ve kept my husband on the phone.
    Int.: ((laugh))
    Resp.: He’s the county Democratic chairman. He was working on his business and I was watching a movie. If I’d have any idea what the questions were, he’d’ve taken it regardless that he’s a month older than I am.
    Int.: I know it. I’m sorry. I had to follow this, this thing = Democrat.
    Resp.: =Democrat.

One particularly difficult respondent repeatedly announced that the interviewer had caused offense. The excerpt in (23) begins after she said “don’t know” in answer to a question:

(23) Resp.: You have to study these DAMN questions before you can answer.
    Int.: Okay, ma’am.
    Resp.: I don’t ((2-s pause)) I think you should have told me to begin with how long this would ((take)
    Int.: [Okay] ma’am. We’ll be finished in two minutes ma’am.
    Resp.: You better or I’m HANGING UP.
    Int.: Okay, okay, that’s fine ma’am.
    Resp.: I’m getting pissed off.
    Int.: I’m sorry ma’am.

The respondent states explicitly that she is offended (“I’m getting pissed off”) and that she thinks the offensive act is the interviewer’s responsibility (“you should have told me. . .”). That the interviewer managed to repair the offense acceptably is evidenced by the fact that the interview continued. But there is more to the full description of this I’m sorry: It is a way of regaining the respondent’s cooperation and ensuring that the interaction will continue.

All apologies, and in fact all uses of apology forms, can be seen as strategic, of course. Like all linguistic choices, they are elements in speakers’ ongoing strategies for keeping talk flowing and relations smooth. But some apologies in the Texas Poll data served the purpose of managing the respondent’s mood. In some cases, for example, interviewers apologized for offensive acts which did not in fact occur (but which the respondent may have thought did occur). This is the case in (24), in which the interviewer accepted responsibility for having failed to hear an answer, when in fact the answer had not been given. (The goal of the question was to elicit the word lost).

(24) Resp.: The opposite of found?
    Int.: Uh-huh.
    Resp.: Lose.
    Int.: Okay uh but the opposite of found. The past tense.
    ((pause)) When you- When you can’t find something and you go in the building to the what and found?
    Resp.: The lost and found.
    Int.: There you go.
    Resp.: I said that already. ((laugh))
    Int.: Oh did you say that? I’m sorry I didn’t hear you.
    Resp.: You lost me again. I was going what in the hell is he talking about?
    Int.: ((laugh)) I’m sorry.
    Resp.: ((laugh))

The effect of the apology was to shift the focus of the talk momentarily from the interview onto the respondent, who took a turn to report on his own thoughts (“I was going what in the hell is he talking about?”). This created rapport between
interviewer and respondent, who then laughed together. In what follows, we examine such interactional functions of apologies in more detail.

**APOLOGIES IN INTERACTION**

In addition to smoothing momentary rough spots, apologies could affect the overall course of the interaction. Apologies often occurred at moments when tension was high: when interviewers were having trouble making themselves understood, when respondents were reluctant to answer or impatient with how long the interview took, when respondents or interviewers were trying to assert control. Apologies interrupted the interview task at such moments, shifting the focus from the task to the personal needs of the interlocutors and showing concern with these needs—sometimes only briefly, but sometimes at length. When the speakers acknowledged and thereby validated each other’s difficulties—difficulties in hearing and understanding, difficulties in performing, difficulties in negotiating turns to talk, objections to procedures and to the imposition on their time—and, in many cases, explained the reasons for them, they often achieved a new level of rapport and cooperation. Once a satisfactory relationship had been established between interviewer and respondent, fewer apologies were required. Failure to use apologies at tense moments could cause interview interactions to deteriorate and rapport to worsen.

In order to see how apology forms could function in the ebb and flow of the interviews, we examine one interview in some depth. In this interview, the respondent used I’m sorry in several ways, most of which had to do with getting the interviewer to respond to him personally. Once he accomplished this goal, he stopped using apology forms in situations in which he had used them before. The interviewer was a college-age woman, the respondent a 19-year-old male college student.

During the first third of the interview, the respondent repeatedly attempted to get the interviewer’s personal attention. Though his mother, having had the most recent birthday, should have been the respondent, he refused to summon her, saying, “You can interview me, but my mother wouldn’t want to talk, she doesn’t like these things.” The interviewer explained that if the most-recent-birthday question weren’t used “we might for example get to talk to too many housewives and too many retired people but not enough single people or younger adults.” The respondent answered with “I’m single. I’m single,” and tried to create common ground with the interviewer by mentioning that he had once worked in a similar job and “hated it ’cause I had people hang up on me all the time.” This elicited a brief “Yeah. So do we” from the interviewer, but no more; she immediately began the questions (having decided it would be all right to interview the young man).

The next few minutes of the interview proceeded in a businesslike way with little off-task talk. The respondent’s first use of an apology form was to request a repetition of a question: “Um what was that again? I’m sorry.” About one third of the way through the interview, he used another apology form to request a repetition, but this one was in a different sort of context:

(25) Int.: Okay. How much, if any, economic benefit will the supercollider bring to this state? A great deal, some, not very much or none at all?
Resp.: Hmm well ((1-s pause)) I don’t know much about it right now =
Int.: =Uh-huh
Resp.: And I I want to work there when I get out of college, so,
Int.: Okay.
Resp.: Wh- Wh- Uh what did you say? I’m sorry.
((laugh))
Int.: That’s okay. How much of any economic benefit =
Resp.: =it’ll help. [Oh]

Rather than directly answering the question, the respondent admitted his ignorance about the supercollider and disclosed some personal information about himself. It is not clear whether the interviewer’s response, “okay,” bore on the admission or the disclosure. The respondent’s “What did you say? I’m sorry” requested and resulted in a repetition of the question, but it also commented on the interviewer’s failure to respond to his self-disclosure.

The respondent continued to try to elicit a personal response from the interviewer, and very soon did elicit, in the form of a laugh, a response to his joking justification of an answer. Excerpt (26) immediately followed (25):

(26) Int.: Okay. A great deal, some, not very much =
Resp.: a
Int.: great deal.
Resp.: Okay. Okay =
Int.: Okay. Okay =
Resp.: =I gotta agree to it if I want to work there.
Int.: ((laugh)) All right.

Having gotten the interviewer to respond to his off-task, personal talk, the respondent continued to joke, and to be responded to when he did. The next I’m sorry was, like the previous two, a request for repetition, but it took place in an even more personal context: “I’m sorry, one more time. I—I know y- y- you’ve spoke all night and your voice is just going out but I didn’t catch that one.” This apology form, elaborated with a lengthy personal comment, marks a turning point in the relationship between the interlocutors. After this, the interviewer not only responded to personal asides by the respondent, but added her own, and there was more mutual laughter. About halfway through the interview they digressed into an extended personal chat about the interviewer’s job and where
she lived and worked. The change in the interlocutors' relationship was accompanied by a change in how the respondent used apology forms. Whereas previous apology forms requested repetition, the next acknowledged, and also highlighted, his joking deviation from the interview task. When asked about organizations that raise money for health problems, he inquired "Does that include pets?" This exchange followed:

(27)  
Int.: ((laugh)) I don’t know = Just joking just uh
Resp.: uhh uhh
Int.: Maybe you should be a comedian instead of working in the supercollider.
((laugh))
Resp.: I’m sorry.
Int.: That’s okay. ((laugh))
Resp.: ((staged-sounding cough)) Organizations?
Int.: Keeps the calls from getting boring.
Resp.: It does doesn’t it.
Int.: ((laugh))

This I’m sorry had different interactional results than did the first “What was that again? I’m sorry.” It elicited overt acceptance of the respondent’s jokes and personal remarks (“Keeps the calls from getting boring”) which appeared to obviate the need for him to use any more apology forms in the interview. He made subsequent requests for repetition without I’m sorry (“What did you say?” “What was the question?”), and he no longer highlighted his jokes.

As we have pointed out, situational apologies serve relatively mechanical, conventional functions. However, as we have suggested in this section, the pattern of their use may indicate shifts in the relationship between interlocutors on a range of greater or lesser formality or tension. They may be used equally often by interviewers and respondents, or shift from one to the other as the relationship develops. Such shifts can indicate changes in the dynamics of the interaction.

**DISCUSSION**

Treating apology forms as we have helps to answer a number of questions about their use by different groups of participants in the interviews and about the specific forms they take. For one thing, we noted that interviewers used far more apology forms than did respondents. Interviewers typically spoke somewhat more than did respondents, since most of the questions were multiple-choice and hence longer than the answers they called for: “Fair,” “Somewhat,” “Fifty to a hundred thousand,” and the like. But this is unlikely to be the reason for interviewers' employing more apology forms. We suggest that the reason is rather that their task required them to, in two ways. First, interviewers were responsible for managing the flow of turns and topics—managing the talk—and, as we have seen, most apology forms served functions related to this. Second, interviewers were imposing on respondents in unsolicited “cold calls.” As a result, they had to be very polite, just to keep the interaction going at all. One form of politeness is deference (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and one deferential politeness strategy is apologizing. Interviewers did not employ many apologies on the personal end of the continuum, but they did so occasionally, as we have seen; respondents’ apologies were less personal.

We also noted that males used more apology forms than did females. This result is intriguing, especially in light of previous findings about apology and gender: Holmes (1989) found that women both apologized and were apologized to half again as often as men. Two of Holmes’s findings might help to clarify ours. First, Holmes found that men apologized more for intrusions on others’ time, women more often for intrusions on space. The poll interviews were intrusions on respondents’ time, so it could perhaps be argued that males needed to apologize more for that reason. Second, Holmes notes that men apologized more to strangers than women, women apologizing equally often to friends and strangers, and more often to intimates than did men. Texas Poll respondents were invariably strangers to the interviewers; perhaps males apologized more often for this reason.

While explanations of this sort are thought provoking, they ignore the fact that not all apology forms express personal apology, as we have shown. The 24 highly personal apologies in the data were almost equally likely to be spoken by men (.45 per interview) as by women (.35 per interview), and the necessity for these apologies appears to have had far more to do with demands made by respondents than with gendered discourse tendencies of interviewers. The male-female difference in numbers of apology forms had to do with discourse task management rather than with the need for personal apology: The 5 male interviewers used more apology forms for discourse task management than did the 13 female interviewers.

A more general implication of our findings is that research on speech acts and their linguistic expression must take genre into account. The apology forms in the Texas Poll interviews may not function the way apology forms do in casual conversation, because the interviews are not rapport-building chat. Interviewers and respondents worked together to complete a highly referential, clearly defined linguistic job. Getting the job done required them sometimes, and to some extent, to emulate casual talk: to stray from the script, divulge personal information.

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8 Fraser (1981), in a study of “several hundred” apologies collected in various ways, found no such difference.

9 Since our sample only included five male interviewers, we are not in a position to generalize about this. It is conceivable that other research might correlate male interviewers' greater tendency to manage discourse with the perception among pollsters that men are less effective interviewers than are women.
tion, acknowledge feelings and needs, and so on. For universal reasons, they had to be polite, and for cultural reasons they had to express individuated personalities (Johnstone, 1991). But paramount in this workplace speech event are accuracy and efficiency in the job; getting the questionnaires filled out. One result is that the vast majority of apology forms in the interviews were in service of accuracy and efficiency; even personal apologies appeared often to serve strategic purposes in managing respondents. Another result is that gender differences found in casual conversation appear in the main to be neutralized. Our work underscores the importance of considering the effects of discourse type and speech event in the study of linguistic politeness and pragmatics more generally (Kasper, 1990), and emphasizes the need for more research on language use in specific work contexts (Coleman, 1989).

REFERENCES


