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How effective are the things people say to apologize? Effects of the realization of the apology speech act.

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How Effective Are the Things People Say to Apologize? Effects of the Realization of the Apology Speech Act

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Abstract: The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989a) has identified five components of an "apology speech act set": five strategies that speakers use to apologize. This study examines the effects of four of those strategies (illocutionary force indicating device, expression of responsibility, promise of forebearance, and offer of repair) on the judgments made by hearers about the speaker and about the apology. Each of the strategies is shown to have an independent effect in improving reactions to the speaker. Further, the magnitude of these effects appear to be roughly similar for each of the strategies. The things people say to apologize do seem to be effective in accomplishing the self-presentational goals of apologizers.

Apologies are common utterances. They are appropriately offered when an individual has violated a social norm. When given in this context, apologies serve as remedial work, designed to smooth over or remedy any social disruption that was caused by the norm violation. In Hoffman's (1971) eloquent words, "an apology is a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule" (p.113). In this way, apologies deflect the moral implications of the transgression from the perceived identity of the transgressor. In other words, apologies "save face" for the transgressor (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1978).

In the past 15 years, a substantial body of research has appeared which explores both the things people say when they apologize (e.g., Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989a; Olshtain, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Trosberg, 1987) and the effectiveness of apologies in remediating the negative effects of transgressions (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989; Givens, Mills, Smith, & Stack, 1994; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Scher & Huff, 1991). However, these two lines of inquiry have proceeded more or less independently of each other. In particular, researchers have not looked at the differing effects of the different things people actually say when they apologize.

The most extensive analysis of the content of apologies has been carried out by the Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project (CCSARP; cf. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989a, for reviews). This project began as an attempt to develop a measure of sociocultural competence in the learning of a second language (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981), but developed into a comprehensive analysis of the realization of the speech acts of requests and apologies across cultures.

The CCSARP has proposed five strategies that form the "apology speech act set," the strategies that can be used to apologize (cf., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989b;

Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). These five strategies are an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID; such as, "I'm sorry," "I apologize," or "Excuse me"), an explanation or account of the cause which brought about the violation, an expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance. In data collected by the CCSARP, these five strategies are used frequently in apologies in a variety of languages and across a variety of cultures.

While these data on the contents of apologies have been accumulating, research on the effectiveness of apologies has examined how judgments made about a transgressor, and the amount of blame and punishment assigned to transgressors, differs when a transgressor apologizes versus when no apology is given. Apologies reduce sanctioning applied to transgressors by reducing negative evaluations of the identity of the transgressor (Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989; Givens et al., 1994; Scher & Huff, 1991; Scher, Darley, & Lynn, 1996). They may also affect sanctioning by reducing the anger victims feel after the transgression (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Scher & Huff, 1991).

The question of whether or not apologies also reduce blame is somewhat unclear at this point. Because apologies include an expression of responsibility or admission of blameworthiness, it may be the case that apologies actually increase blame. On the other hand, because apologies serve to reaffirm the speaker's compliance with the moral rules of society, the admission of responsibility may not necessarily affect the more moralistic judgments of blame. Empirically, apologies have been shown to reduce blame judgments by Darby and Schlenker (1982), but had no effect on blame in research by Darby and Schlenker (1989), Scher and Darley (1988), and Scher, Darley, and Lynn (1996).

Despite this growing literature on the effects of apologies, there has been only limited examination of differing effects of different forms of apologies. For example, Darby and Schlenker (1982) examined the differences in children's responses to a transgressor who either did not apologize, gave a perfunctory apology ("Excuse me"), a "standard apology" ("I'm sorry, I feel badly about this"), or a "compensation apology" ("I'm sorry, I feel badly about this. Please let me help you."). While these apologies are increasingly complex in the number of messages included in the apology, they do not allow an independent analysis of the effects of the different messages. For example, the results of this study do not allow a comparison of the effects of the expression of remorse ("I feel badly") and the offer of repair ("Please let me help you").

However, there are good reasons to believe that each of the apology strategies identified by the CCSARP should have important independent effects on the reactions to apologizers. There are two functions served by apologies in social discourse. On the one hand, an apology is an illocutionary act, which serves to show that the speaker is aware of the social requirement to apologize in certain situations. (The CCSARP seems to view apologies in this light.) However, an apology also works by communicating important information about the psychological state of the

speaker. As discussed above, an apology seeks to change the beliefs of listeners regarding the informativeness of the transgression regarding the type of person the speaker is.

Two of the apology strategies identified by the CCSARP, in fact, convey information that is a required part of an apology. In order for an apology to be performed, the speaker must acknowledge responsibility for having committed some offending act, and he or she must express regret about the offense (e.g., Fraser, 1981). These are definitional qualities of apologies, which Darby and Schlenker (1982) defined as "admissions of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event" (p. 742).

The admission of responsibility for the transgression is a necessary feature of an apology because it conveys to the listener that the speaker is aware of the social norms that have been violated ("affirms a belief in the offended rule"), and therefore conveys that the speaker will be able to avoid the offense in future interactions. The admission of responsibility further performs the function of "splitting the self in preparation for the expression of regret or remorse that will serve as an indication of the separation of the good, innocent self from the guilty self.

Remorse or regret is the primary information intended to be conveyed by an apology. The paradigmatic apology typically consists of an expression of feeling (e.g., "I'm sorry" in English; "Lo siento" ("I feel it") in Spanish). 4 An apology without an expression of remorse (e.g., "I apologize": "Pardon me") generally seems to be perfunctory or formal, indicating the illocutionary force of apology, without conveying information about the emotional state of the transgressor.

The lack of this information can seriously impair the broader effectiveness of the apology. Negative emotion following a transgression is a sign that the outcome was distressful and surprising for the transgressor (cf., Heise & Thomas, 1989; Lazowski, 1987). Semin and Manstead (1981, 1982; Manstead & Semin, 1981) have shown that displays of embarrassment after a clumsy act reduce the likelihood that observers will attribute a clumsy disposition to actors. Remorse, similarly, serves to deflect negative personality judgments and other reactions from the transgressor.

A promise of forbearance increases the effectiveness of an apology by assuring hearers that the speaker will not repeat his or her transgression. If the function of an apology is to remedy the social breach and bring the transgressor "back into the fold," then it is important for social interactants to feel that the transgressor is aware of the violated rule and will strive to follow the rule henceforth.

An offer of repair has a straightforward connection to the remedial function of an apology. It is an offer to try to make the situation right, to repair things so that it is as if the transgression had not occurred. Furthermore, such an offer can have a symbolic function, serving as a form of self-punishment of the "guilty self."

An explanation or account, while often given in conjunction with an apology, is not part of an apology. The offering of external, mitigating cir cumstances forms part of an excuse (cf. Austin, 1962; Goffman, 1971; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snyder, Higgins, & Stuckey, 1983), another form of remedial work which seeks to reduce the responsibility of the transgressor for the transgression. While the reduction of responsibility entailed may improve judgments made about the speaker and his or her relationship to the transgression, it does so through mechanisms that are distinct from apologies. As such, we will not consider this aspect part of the apology speech act, and will not include it in the current study.

The remaining four apology strategies, though, should each provide important information about the speaker; each should, therefore, have an independent effect on judgments made about a speaker and about the apology. Each apology strategy should improve perceptions of the speaker's identity, reduce the sanctioning applied to the speaker, increase the remorse or regret attributed to the speaker, and increase perceptions of the appropriateness of the apology. The current study was designed to test this notion. Subjects were presented with different versions of apologies that systematically manipulated each of the four apology strategies in the apology speech act set, and indicated how they would judge the transgressor if he had given each apology.

METHOD

Overview

The presence or absence of the four apology strategies was manipulated in a split-plot design. Promise of forbearance, expression of responsibility, and offer of repair were manipulated as within-subject factors. The IFID/remorse expression was manipulated as a between-subjects factor. Subjects read about a character who failed to fulfill an important promise for a friend. Each subject responded to eight possible combinations of the apology elements. To control for order effects, the eight apologies for each subject were counterbalanced with a Latin square. At each level of the between subjects variable, two replications of an 8 X 8 Latin square were used.5 Subjects and Procedure Thirty-two students (75% female, median age = 22 years) from psychology and anthropology classes at the State University of New York at Fredonia volunteered to serve as subjects. Prepared packets were distributed to subjects in each of the experimental sessions. Each packet instructed subjects to read the story that followed, and to "form an accurate impression of the main character of the story (Ralph)." Subjects were asked to put themselves in the place of the other character in the story and to imagine how that person would feel.

The story described the Parker family—an old-time "blueblood" Savannah family. Ralph Parker worked for a large company which manufactured equipment for the commercial sector of the economy. (This description was adapted from an essay by Trillan, 1984.) Ralph had agreed to call a friend before 2 pm with some information that was crucial for the friend's presentation at a job interview. However, Ralph

forgot to call. The story concluded by saying that Ralph called his friend several days later.

In a subsequent set of instructions, subjects were informed that the experiment was concerned with "how the different ways people react to their own behavior can affect the way those people are seen by others." The subjects were informed that they would be reading and responding to several different but similar ways that Ralph could have dealt with the situation in the story, but that they should react to each response as if it were the first thing that Ralph said on the phone when he called his friend, and that they should keep their judgments independent of each other. Each of the eight apologies followed, along with the dependent measures.

Independent Variables

The presence or absence of the four apology strategies were operationalized with the statements shown in Table I.

Table I. Operationalization of Apology Components and Definitions for Strength Ratings (Ralph Story)

Remorse/IFID[a]	"I'm really sorry I didn't call you the other day with the information."	An expression of remorse or sadness about one's actions
Responsibility expression	"I know what I did was wrong."	An acknowledgment that some rule or norm of social conduct has been violated
Promise of forebearance	"I promise something like this will never happen again."	A promise to keep one's word in the future
Offer of repair	"If there is any way I can make it up to you please let me know."	An offer to make recompense for one's actions

[a] IFID = illocutionary force indicating device.

The order of the components within each apology was constant. When present, the IFID always came first, followed by responsibility expression, forbearance, and repair. Every apology ended by saying: "This was the last Ralph said about what had happened." In the conditions where all four components were absent, the following sentence was used: "When Ralph called his friend, Ralph never talked about what he (Ralph) had done."

Dependent Variables

After reading each apology, subjects responded to seven dependent variables, measured on 9-point scales with the end points labeled. Low numbers always represented low levels of the dependent variables. Subjects were asked how appropriate and apologetic they thought Ralph's response to the situation was, how bad Ralph felt about what he had done, how much they would blame Ralph for what

had happened, and how much they would "condemn him for his actions." "That is, how much would you want to avoid seeing him or being friendly to him?" Two last questions focused on Ralph's identity. Subjects were asked how reliable a friend Ralph was, and how conscientious he was.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data proceeded in three stages. To examine the effect of each of the apology components, regression analyses were conducted. These analyses allow us to estimate whether or not the four apology strategies had effects on each of the dependent variables, and also to compare the size of the effects of each of the strategies (by comparing the beta weights—cf. Cohen & Cohen, 1983). If the size of the effects of each of the strategies were roughly similar, it would be reasonable to assume that they might be more or less interchangeable, that apologies become more effective as more of the apology strategies are used. This would suggest that there should be a linear relationship between the number of apology components used and each of the dependent variables. This hypothesis was tested with trend analysis.

These analyses did not take into account the possibility that specific strategies might interact with one another. To examine this possibility, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, followed by univariate analyses for those effects which were significant in the MANOVA.

Effects of Specific Apology Components

In order to examine the relative effectiveness of each of the four explicit apology strategies, multiple regressions were run on each of the dependent variables with the four apology strategies (remorse/IFID, repair offer, forbearance promise, and responsibility expression) as predictors. Because of the repeated-measures design, subject was also entered as a predictor in the regression (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973).

The apology components all significantly contributed to the prediction of each dependent variable, with one exception: The expression of remorse failed to predict subjects' ratings of Ralph's conscientiousness. Otherwise, the four apology strategies examined in this study each affected reactions to the apologies and to the transgressor. For each dependent variable, the beta weights for each of the apology components were compared with beta weights for the other components for that dependent variable, using a t-test (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Only comparisons involving the prediction of conscientiousness by remorse reached the .05 probability level. That regression coefficient was significantly smaller than the analogous weights for responsibility expression ($t(250) = 2.80$, $p = .006$) and for repair offer ($t(250) = 1.93$, $p = .05$). In all, these results indicate that, with the exception of effects on conscientiousness, the four components not only all contributed to the appropriateness and effectiveness

of the apology, but also that each component seemed to have roughly the same importance, all else being equal.

All else may not be equal, however. Two caveats must be added. The first is that the operationalization of the apology strategies may not have been equally powerful in operationalizing the meaning of the apology strategy. To test this possibility, nine native English speakers were recruited, and were asked to judge the force with which each of the statements expressed the intended meanings (see Table I). There were no differences between the ratings on the four strategies (F < 1).

A second problem stems from the use of a mixed experimental design. The effects of variables manipulated as between-subjects variables have less statistical power than variables manipulated within subjects. The remorse variable was expected to have the largest effect size. Manipulating it as a between-subjects variable therefore offered less risk of making a Type II error. However, it is likely that the remorse variable would have shown a stronger effect on all of the analyses if it had not suffered from this reduced power. The present data cannot resolve this issue. However, the data reported here did confirm that the other three components contributed equally to apology effectiveness.

Trend Analysis

The equal effects of the strategies suggest the possibility that there is a linear relationship between the number of strategies used and the dependent variables. A trend analysis, again controlling for the lack of independence between observations by including subject as a factor in the analysis, confirmed this expectation (see Fig. 1). There were strong linear components in the relationships between the number of apology components and the dependent variables (all $Fs(1,250) > 30.0$, $ps < .001$). There did seem to be an ever-increasing effectiveness of apologies as more apology strategies were used (within the range included in this study). However, this was qualified by the presence of quadratic trends in the appropriateness, apologeticness, sanctioning, and "reliable friend" variables (all $Fs(1,250) > 4.0$, $ps < .05$), and a marginally significant quadratic trend for the conscientiousness variable ($F(1,250) = 3.21$, $p = .07$). There was also a marginally significant cubic component for the appropriateness variable ($F (1,250) = 3.40$, $p < .07$).

The quadratic components seem to have resulted from two aspects of the data (Fig. 1). The use of at least one apology strategy had a more dramatic effect on apology effectiveness than the addition of strategies beyond one. This is especially apparent for the appropriateness variable. Several of the variables also seem to have shown an asymptotic effect—the increasing effectiveness of more apology strategies diminished as apologies became close to including all four strategies (e.g., the reliable friend variable).

Interaction Effects

To examine the interactions between the various explicit apology components, a 2 X 2 x 2 X 2 MANOVA was conducted. All of the multivariate main effects were significant, and univariate analyses showed that these results were completely consistent with the regressions. Only two of the multivariate interactions were significant: a two-way interaction between responsibility expression and repair offer (F(7,24) = 2.76, p < .05), and a threeway interaction between those two strategies and forbearance promise (F(7,24) = 2.80, p < .05).

Responsibility Expression and Repair Offer. The major variables contributing to this effect are appropriateness, sanctioning, and blame (univariate F(1,30) = 6.88, 4.05, 14.10, respectively, all ps < .05). When subjects rated a target who neither expressed responsibility nor made an offer of repair, they rated that target's apology as less appropriate, and they wanted to blame and punish the target more than when the apology contained one or both of these strategies.6 There was also a marginal tendency for the same pattern in subjects' ratings of how apologetic the target was (univariate F(1,30) = 3.79, p = .06). Means are shown in Table II.

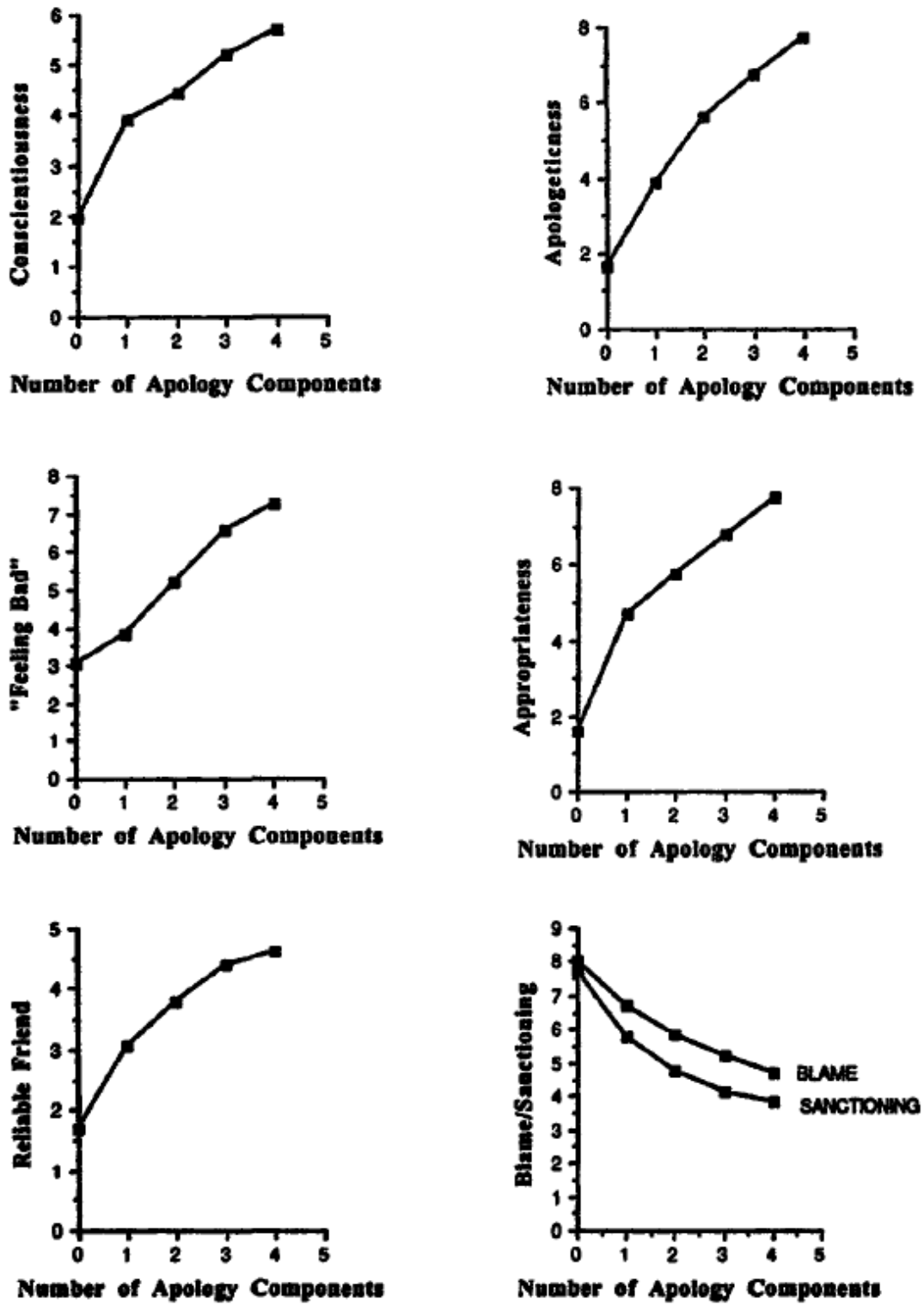Responsibility Expression X Repair Offer X Forbearance Promise. The three-way interaction was significant at the univariate level for appropriateness (F(1,30) = 13.63, p < .001) and conscientiousness (F(1,30) = 4.18, p < .05) and marginally significant for apologeticness (F(1,30) = 3.27, p = .08), sanctioning (F(1,30) = 3.25, p = .08), and the reliable friend variable (F(1,30) = 3.94, p < .06). Tukey analyses again showed that these interactions were driven by the cell involving the apologies containing the fewest components (see Table II).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that the strategies people use to realize the speech of apologizing have clear and independent effects on the judgments people make about the transgressor. The addition of each strategy seems to have had an additive effect on judgments of how appropriate the utterance of the transgressor was and how much the transgressor was blamed and sanctioned for the transgression, and on judgments related to the identity of the transgressor.

However, the greatest improvement in perceptions came from the addition of one apology strategy—i.e., the offering of an apology, compared to no apology. The first evidence of this came from the quadratic trend components present in most of the conditions. However, more evidence of this came from the interactions identified. When expression of speaker responsibility, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance were all absent, subjects indicated that the apology was least appropriate, that the speaker was least apologetic, and that they blamed the speaker more and wanted to sanction him more. Although the absence of the IFID as a factor in this interaction suggests that the inclusion or omission of this apology strategy was not relevant in these changes, it would be too early to reach such a conclusion. Specifically, the lower power of this component (because it was manipulated as a between-subjects variable) could have kept it from interacting

with these other variables.

Fig. 1. Trend analyses: number of Apology Components × Dependent Variables.

Table II. Responsibility Expression × Forbearance × Repair Interactions[a]

	Repair offer present responsibility expression		Repair offer absent responsibility expression	
	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Appropriateness	7.0	5.8	6.0	3.9
Forbearance present	7.4	6.0	6.0	4.8
Forbearance absent	6.3	5.5	5.9	3.0
Condemnation	4.3	4.8	4.7	6.0
Forbearance present	4.1	4.6	4.6	5.4
Forbearance absent	4.6	5.1	4.9	6.6
Blame	5.5	5.6	5.8	7.0
Forbearance present	5.1	5.4	5.6	6.6
Forbearance absent	5.9	5.8	6.0	7.3
Apologeticness	6.7	5.4	5.5	3.7
Forbearance present	7.1	5.5	6.0	4.7
Forbearance absent	6.3	5.2	5.0	2.6

[a] All responses were made on 9-point scales, with higher numbers indicating that the apology was more appropriate, that the transgressor was to be blamed and condemned more, and that the transgressor was more apologetic.

One hypothesis leaps out for further investigation. It is surprising that the promise of forbearance, offer of repair, and expression of responsibility strategies each had an impact on the amount of remorse that was attributed to the speaker. Even in situations where the remorse expression was not explicit, subjects read the apology as if remorse had been communicated by the speaker. The other components seemed to imply this information. Data reported by Scher (1989, Study 2) shows that at least one other message—speaker responsibility—is implied by each of the apology strategies. Further exploration of this issue seems warranted, using methods explicitly developed to measure what meanings are implied by various types of apologies. Of particular interest is the degree to which apologies containing illocutionary force indicating devices other than expressions of remorse (e.g., "I apologize" or "Pardon me") also imply these messages. Given the implicational nature of some of the apology strategies, there should be further research directed toward examining whether apology strategies need be explicit or whether they can remain implied to have their effect on the judgments of the transgressor.

Further research also should be developed to explore the specific effects of the various apology strategies. We have suggested above how each of the four strategies manipulated in this study should effect judgments of transgressors and of the transgression; there is the need for further research to test whether these are, indeed, the mechanisms by which the apology strategies work.

Despite this need for further research, the current study shows that there is a correspondence between the things people say when they apologize and the effects

of those apologies. The four apology strategies identified by the CCSARP as part of the apology speech act set—expression of remorse, expression of responsibility, promise of forebearance, and offer of repair—each have something to offer apologizers in their attempts to remedy the social relationships that have been threatened by their transgressions.

Footnotes

4 In data collected from subjects from the same population as in the current study, "I'm sorry" was by far the most frequent IFID used by subjects asked to write an apology. In fact, between 73.9% and 91.7% (depending on the gender of the subject and the particular transgression) of these subjects included this statement (Scher & Darley, 1990). Similarly, examining a corpus of natural apologies given by New Zealanders, Holmes (1989) showed that 53.3% of the apologies given by females, and 42% of the apologies given by males, contained an expression of regret—far more than any other "explicit expression of apology."

5 The Latin-square design allows an assessment of the effects of order on the dependent variables. This analysis yielded only two significant effects. The Remorse x Order effect due to between groups (cf. Bruning & Kintz, 1977) was significant for blame and for sanctioning. These effects were completely counterbalanced in the data, however. Further details are available in Scher (1989), or from the authors.

6 Unless otherwise indicated, all post hoc comparisons were carried out using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference Test (HSD) (Cf. Howell, 1992), with significant comparisons having a probability level less than .05.

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