

LINGUISTICS AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

The Allusive Language of Politics: Do Americans Ever Apologize?

Ahmad Kareem Salem
University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract: The present study is a pragmatic approach to apology. According to John E. Joseph, “The study of language and politics aims at understanding the role of linguistic communication in the functioning of social units, and how this role shapes language itself.” Politics is the art, and language is the medium, whereby politicians position themselves to get what they need, and beyond that, what they want. Politics has been defined as the continuous search for ways through which the “conflicting interest” can be resolved. It cannot be carried out without language, and it could be the use of language in the composition of social groups that leads to what is called politics. Political language is a variety of language that allows politicians to use certain effective aspects in their speeches (whether spoken or written), and to bring about the effect they seek on their addressees. The language of politics is the carrier of apology in the sense that apologizing is a speech act in which something is claimed to hold by, for instance, presidents of state, such as the American Presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama.

Keywords: *apology, language, political discourse, pragmatics.*

1. Introduction: Pragmatics as a Branch of Semiotics¹

Recently, the term “pragmatics” has come to be applied to the study of language from the users’ point of view, especially the encounter in using language in social interaction, using the language for the purposes they seek and the effect their use of language has on other participants in an act of communication. A large number of conflicting definitions of pragmatics have been proposed in the course of its history in order to classify the wide range of the subject-matter involved, or to delimit its vast scope. Unfortunately, so far no definition has given us any possibility of delimiting pragmatics clearly and neatly to everybody’s satisfaction. This is because some authors, such as Mey, and others, either confine themselves to strict linguistic definitions or resort to definitions that incorporate as much societal context as possible, but necessarily remain nearly vague as far as

¹ An extended version of this research has been accepted for publication as “Elusiveness in Political Discourse: How to Apologize the American Way” in Emilia Parpală and Leo Loveday. *Ways of Being in Literary and Other Cultural Spaces*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

the relation between pragmatics and other areas of language studies is concerned. Some of the definitions of the term pragmatics given by Levinson, can be stated to shed light on the term as follows:

- “Pragmatics is the study of all those aspects of meaning not captured in a semantic theory”;
- “Pragmatics is the study of language from a functional perspective, that is, it attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes.”
- “Pragmatics has as its topic those aspects of the meaning of utterances which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to the truth conditions of the sentences uttered.”
- “Pragmatics = Meaning-Truth Conditions.” (Levinson, 1983: 7, 9, 12)

Within the field of linguistics, it becomes a common sense that knowing the general meaning of an utterance will be insufficient, to know the meaning of an utterance we need to make inferences connecting with what is mentioned to context in which it is used or what is mutually assumed by the speaker and the hearer. The following definition, given by Levinson (1983: 21), asserts the idea that pragmatics studies “the relations between language and context that are basic to account for language understanding.” Making it clear, the study granted a division between knowledge about language and the way in which this language is used, and the principle is to distinguish how knowledge of language interacts with general reasoning in order to understand language and outline the effects that can be achieved through communication.

Two senses of pragmatics: narrow and broad sense were given by Crystal, (1985: 240), for the former, pragmatics refers to those aspects of context, which are formally encoded in the structure of the language, as in the study of speech acts, presupposition, *deixis*. As for the latter, pragmatics is concerned with those aspects of meaning that are not governed by the semantic theory. In this respect, pragmatics has been characterized as the study of the principle and practice of conversational performance which includes all aspects of language usage such as politeness, appropriateness, social apprehension, etc.

In the spirit of our “new way of looking at things linguistics,” “pragmatics” does not constitute an additional component of a theory of language, but it offers a different perspective (Verschueren, 1999: 7). Sometimes we fail to give an explanation of a phenomenon in language using accepted, regular linguistic theories, then we must have recourse to

something else, something that is supposedly as un defined as it is tangible, namely pragmatics.

The questions that may arise are: what do pragmatic methods give us in the way of greater understanding of how the human mind works, how humans communicate and in general how they use language? The general answer is: pragmatics is needed if we want deeper, fuller, and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior. (Mey, 2001: 12)

2. Discourse Analysis Conceptualized

There are several ways to conceptualize discourse analysis: both as a general approach, or as a concrete method, as a cluster of methods, and as a field of research. These differences are derived from the different definitions of the term. As a principle, we can talk about a number of dominant approaches:

1. Discourse = text = language in use (Chafe, *apud* Widdowson, 2007, p. 86; Salkie, 1995, p. ix). The supporters of such an approach rely heavily on the linguistic constructions that exceed the limits of the phrase (which is seen, in structural linguistics, as the final level of linguistic analysis; cf. Bahtin, 1979, p. 280 *et passim*). In this sense, discourse analysis starts from (and partially overlaps with) text grammar, text linguistics, transfrastic linguistics along a tradition influenced by structuralism. According to this approach, the text is an assembly of phrases that enjoy such common traits as coherence, cohesion, acceptability, intentionality, etc. The object of the analysis is made up of these features of the text and the way they are updated by linguistic structures.

2. Discourse is defined as an “individualizable group of statements” (Foucault, 1972: 80, quoted in Mills, 2001: 6) or as a “totality of mutually relevant texts” (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). Such an approach is closer to gender analysis, and examines the way one (or several) texts conform the principles/norms of a discourse community. A similar definition is often used in the critical discourse analysis.

3. Discourse = communicative intention (Widdowson, 2007: 6). According to this approach – greatly inspired by pragmatics – the discourse is dissociated from the text, representing the totality of its author’s intentions and, on the other hand, “what is understood” by the receptor of the text. In this sense, the analysis attempts to determine the communicative intention – what the author

does *in* and *through* the text he produces and how is he understood by the receptor. A similar approach was advanced by E. Benveniste, who contributed a narrower definition of *discours*, which he opposed to *histoire*. To him, discourse implies the fact to be addressed, and the locutor's intension of influencing his receptor in a certain way. (cf. Mills, 1997: 5)

4. Discourse = the general domain of verbal interaction. This approach highlights the negotiation of the meaning and the way discourse construes reality. It is partially influenced by the foucauldian theory of discourse, social constructionism, and conversation analysis.

Discourse analysis implies the careful reading of a text (even the transcript of a conversation) and the examination of the language used, for a better understanding of the way the participants conceive of a fragment of reality, the structure of their interaction, and the way their communicative intentions are reflected in the language. Namely, in several cases, the practice of discourse analysis is similar, even if it starts from different theoretical assumptions. Hugh Trappes-Lomax offers a very precise description of discourse analysis as activity:

Discourse analysts do what people in their everyday experience of language do instinctively and largely unconsciously: notice patternings of language in use and the circumstances (participants, situations, purposes, outcomes) with which these are typically associated. The discourse analyst's particular contribution to this otherwise mundane activity is to do the noticing consciously, deliberately, systematically, and, as far as possible, objectively, and to produce accounts (descriptions, interpretations, explanations) of what their investigations have revealed. (quoted in Davies, Elder, 2004: 133)

As such, discourse analysis is situated at the crossroads of several fields – rhetorics, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology – and each of them applies the methodology of analysis (more than often, virtually identical) in a personal manner and according to its own interests. And if we consider apology in view of the theory of politeness model developed by Brown and Levinson, they defined a face-threatening act as “an act that mortifies or offends a face of one of interactants” occurring “by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of others.” Given the assumptions of the universality of ‘face’ and ‘rationality’, B&L argue that certain acts intrinsically threaten face, and chose to term these FTA (Face Threatening

Acts), namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (1987: 65). B&L construct two-way classifications of FTA, according to whether positive face or negative face is threatened and a two-way classification of when it is mainly the Speaker (S)’s face or the Hearer (H)’s face which is threatened, according to the nature of particular FTAs(1987: 65-68). Eva Ogiermann, well aware of the difficulties encountered in developing a chart that would easily apply to all speech acts alike, taking into account “S’s and H’s face as well as the tension between their positive and negative face needs,” suggests Figure 1 as an attempt at capturing all the face considerations involved in the performance of an apology:

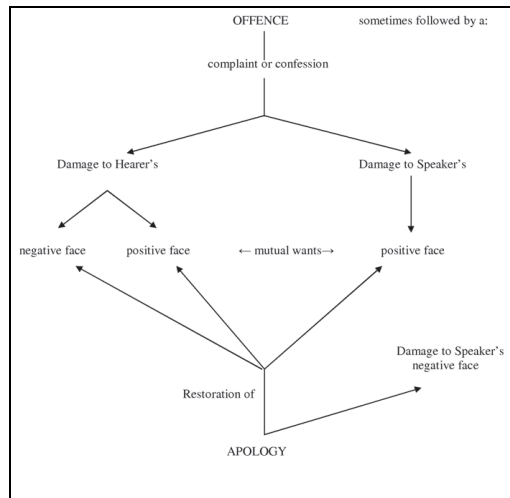


Figure 1
Face considerations involved in remedial interchanges

Here is her conclusive comment:

The offence, sometimes followed by a complaint or a confession, damages both H’s and S’s face. In the case of H, it may be either positive or negative face that is harmed, depending on the offence. In S’s case, it is positive face that is damaged, for committing an offence makes S’s wants less desirable. Positive face is especially important in relationships characterised by low social distance; with both parties willing to maintain social harmony and continue the relationship, S’s and H’s positive face

wants can be regarded as mutual. H's negative face is more central in offences between strangers, though brief encounters involving space offences generally require ritual rather than substantial apologies. (Ogiermann, 2009: 54)

3. The Language of Political Apology

Political apology – or, perhaps, more appropriate – apologies made by politicians is a topic that has elicited numerous responses from specialists. It is because the very notion of political discourse does not remain restricted only to the situational field of politics, as it happens nowadays in the elections campaigns, parliamentary discourse, and occasional speeches, all over the world. Political discourse allows and is open to all linguistic manifestations that may be considered to be political, provided that it is convincingly argued.

From the multitude of approaches to political discourse and due to the limitations imposed by this presentation, I have selected the often-cited position of Girma Negash who, in his *Apologia Politica* (2006), proposed a distinction between what he calls “mending” and “healing” apologies. Political (or state) apology is a collective apology which is extended by one group to another. For a state apology to be successful, Negash devised a theoretical framework based on four requisites: acknowledgement, accountability, truth-telling and public remorse. Some apologies are apologies ‘by proxy’ because “apologies need to be delegated by leaders or appointed delegates in group-to-group” (Negash, 2006: 2). He developed a simple typology of state apology, with its three cardinal dimensions:

1. political apology can be either voluntary or demanded
2. apologies can be either categorical or non-categorical, and here categorical refers to the action (direct action) to the wrong doing act, while non-categorical apologies here refer to nonaction to prevent a crime, and nevertheless these apologies tend to come easily
3. apologies can either seek to heal societies or to mend relations (ibid: 138).

Table 1 is a synthesis of Negash's views on state apology, and the solutions (requisites and policy implications) he suggests for a successful mending apology.

Table 1
 Requisites and policy implications for a successful mending apology
 (according to Negash)

Requisites	Acknowledgement	“a self-conscious process of assessing or estimating the damages one has committed,” referring “not only to the reckoning of damage done, but to recognition of the consequences of one’s actions to others.” (9)	By acknowledging that a wrong has occurred and accepting accountability for it, perpetrators satisfy deep psychological needs of victims and pave the way for further reconciliation. In doing so, the pragmatic relationship between states can be mended (even if some underling animosity remains unhealed).
	Accountability	Accountability takes acknowledgement one step further, as perpetrators take responsibility for their actions. This is important, because it is often not exactly clear who is apologizing to whom, and for what.	A successful mending apology can re-establish positive relations between perpetrators and victims by acknowledging
	1. The apology must be expedient, or timely.	“under the gaze of international media, delayed admission can prove to be diplomatically costly” (152)	
	2. The apology	Apologies that	

Policy Implications	should be formal.	lack formality and the corresponding appropriate rituals and decor may be perceived as insincere.	wrongs and accepting accountability for them in an expedient, formal, proximate and legitimate process.
	3. The proximity between the apologizer and the recipient must be diminished.	In order for an apology to be effective, it is essential that the victims, or those closest to them, are addressed and that they are aware of the apologetic gesture.	
	4. The apology should have public support.	An apology that lacks legitimacy through public support is less likely to be perceived as genuine, and is unlikely to be accompanied by the material reparations often essential to reconciliation.	

4. Sample Analysis of American Political Apology

After clarifying the concepts needed for this analysis and after emphasizing some patterns of speech act of apologizing in political discourse identified across nations, we will proceed below to the pragmatic analysis of American speech act of apology. The pragmatic analysis of this study is based on four excerpts from relevant political speeches held by American officials in the past decade. (See Table 1) Most of the time politicians try to create forms of speech act of apologizing by ways in which they aim to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds which comes

to be an interesting matter in the public speech act of apology (Abadi 1990, 1991; Benoit 1995; Lakoff 2000, 2001). From the politicians' different statements, we may conclude that there are different formal configurations indicating the illocutionary force of speech act of apology.

Table 2: Samples of political apology

No.	Explanation	Excerpt
(1)	President Bush on Thursday apologized for the "humiliation" some Iraqi prisoners suffered at the hands of U.S. troops, May 07, 2004.	"I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliation suffered by their families," Bush said.
(2)	Former U.S. President George W. Bush apologized for the Iraq War today, saying the conflict was "his biggest mistake," March 20, 2013.	"After my presidency I have come to the belief that the Iraq War, although well intentioned, was unnecessary and too costly to justify. I deeply apologize to the American people and to our soldiers and veterans in particular for engaging them in such a conflict."
(3)	Former president Clinton apologizes for having done something that helped ensure his re-election, but that turned out to be hopelessly bad public policy, July 16, 2015.	"I signed a bill that made the problem worse. And I want to admit it," Clinton said at the 106th NAACP National Convention, which concluded Wednesday in Philadelphia. "In that bill, there were longer sentences, and most of these people are in prison under state law, but the federal law set a trend. And that was overdone; we were wrong about that."
(4)	President Obama Apology to the Muslim world, January 27, 2009.	"My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy, we sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect. But if you look at the track record, as you say, America was not born as colonial power, and that the same respect and partnership that America had with the Muslim world as recently as 20 or 30 years ago, there is no reason why we can't restore that."

In (1) president Bush used his speech in a way to show that he apologized for the “humiliation” of some Iraqi prisoners who suffered at the hands of U.S. troops. Pragmatically speaking it is an apology but syntactically he used past sentence (“I was sorry”) to show that he is insincere, which was proceeded by another sentence in past tense (“I told him”) to Donald Rumsfeld, both of the sentences were not stated to Iraqi prisoners but to Rumsfeld. Bush also used the lexical word (“sorry”) instead of the real word of apologizing (apologize) which is one of the tactics in order to minimize the offender’s responsibility (U.S. troops). Such abusing matter like what had happened in Abu Ghraib, if it happened to American prisoners or soldiers, does Bush use the same way of apologizing to them or their families as he did in the text above?

In (2), it may seem to be the only example which carry the verb apology instead of other way of apologizing or the use of different tactics to release the responsibility of the offense the actor does. Former president Bush offered in his speech his direct apology to American people and soldiers and to veterans for having involved them in the war with Iraq. Bush expressed his fault by using the additional markers accompanied with detached apology which used for intensifying the apology or signaling the emotional state of the speaker i.e. the use of (Intensifier + apology) (deeply + apologize) which conveys the speaker involvement, the statement is expressed directly by using a declarative sentence. So pragmatically, syntactically and semantically it is an apology. But the questions that arise here is what if the former president was asked to apologize to Iraqi victims in his war, does he use the same technique of apologizing as he did with American victims or no? Does he apologize directly or no? Does he even think to apologize or no?

In (3), the former president Clinton apologized indirectly in another way this is pragmatically can be interpreted as an apology of the fact that Clinton admitted he signed the bill and along with the other sentence, Clinton said “we were wrong about that,” but syntactically and semantically it is not apologizing because of the absence of the detached verb of apology or at least other forms which indicate the speech act of apologizing. The use of “about that” in Clinton’s speech is claimed to be another tactic for evading the responsibility for his offence. In fact, there was no even single utterance in which “about that” was used to describe the offence was made by him.

In (4), “we sometimes make mistakes,” “we have not been perfect,” here these utterances can be pragmatically interpreted as an apology of the fact that “Americans are not perfect and they have done something wrong to Muslim world.” But syntactically and semantically the utterances are not

Apology because the use of coordinating “But,” which expresses contrast between the content of the linked sentences which may function as explanation, excuses, justification, or trivialization of the offence, also absence one of the apology verbs asserts the fact.

5. Conclusion

From what was stated above we can conclude that the speech act of apology made by American politicians, which is directly and typically made by the declarative sentence type as intended to express the speakers psychological state towards the state of affairs as can be seen in (2), can also be seen as indirect. What is really common to some of the texts mentioned above is the lack of the Americans’ sincerity. In other words, the Americans use their ways of apologizing in order to lessen their amount of responsibility towards the offenders. Based on the analysis made above, I demonstrated some tactics used by the American officials to minimize their responsibilities. One of the tactics was used by Bush which is apology verb without responsibility. Bush used his apology in another form. The relation between the forms and functions make the speech act difficult to identify, and Bush’s use of the multiple function of the apology verb (sorry) made it clear. One more tactic I have demonstrated along with the indirect speech act was used by Clinton, meaning the use of evading the responsibility by using (about that) which Clinton did not use in order to describe the offense itself. The tactic which we can see in Obama’s speech is his indirect way of apologizing. But if we take a look wisely we can see it is not apology. The use of coordinating “but” asserts that Obama did a kind of non-linked ideas, meaning that to release his responsibility from being offender to Muslims.

References:

Primary sources:

President Bush on Thursday apologized for the “humiliation” some Iraqi prisoners suffered at the hands of U.S. troops, May 07, 2004. Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2004/05/07/bush-apologizes-for-iraqi-prisoner-abuse.html>.

Former U.S. President George W. Bush apologized for the Iraq War today, saying the conflict was “his biggest mistake,” March 20, 2013. Available at: <http://dailycurrant.com/2013/03/20/george-bush-apologizes-iraq-war/>.

Former president Clinton apologizes for having done something that helped ensure his re-election, but that turned out to be hopelessly bad public policy, July 16, 2015. Available at: <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/news/a36476/bill-clinton-apologizes-sentencing-laws/>.

President Obama Apology to the Muslim world, January 27, 2009. Available at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/06/barack-obamas-apologies-how-the-president-has-humiliated-a-superpower>.

Secondary Sources:

Bahtin, M. *The Aesthetics of Verbal Art* (Russian). Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979.

Ball, T. *Transforming Political Discourse*. Basil Blackwell, New York, 1988.

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (Eds.) *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1989.

Brekke, E.H. "War with Words." In Wodak, R. (Ed.), *Language, Power, and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 81-91, 1989.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena." In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (56-310). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. *Politeness: Some language universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Crystal, D. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.

Davies, A. and Elder, C. *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Singapore: Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd, 2004.

Goffman, E., "Footing." In: Monaghan, L., Goodman, J. (Eds.), *A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication: Essential Readings*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, 396-399, 2007.

Grice, P. "Logic in conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics: Speech Acts 3*, edited by P. Cole & J. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

Holly, W. "Credibility and Political Language. In: Wodak, R. (Ed.), *Language, Power, and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 115-135, 1989.

Joseph, J. E. "Language and Politics," in Davies and Elder, 347-366.

Leech, G. *Principles of Pragmatics*. Essex: Longman, 1983.

Levinson, S. C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.