

The Social Construction of Public “Apologies”

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Increasing demands for social justice have led to calls for public government apologies. Recent research has investigated the linguistic resources used in such apologies and ostensible apologies, or non-apologies (e.g. Battistella 2016, Kampf 2009; Mok & Tokunaga 2009). In the current “age of apology” (Cunningham, 1999), Japan has issued numerous apologies for actions during WWII, while the U.S. has not apologized for the horrific atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 2016, U.S. President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry each visited Hiroshima, but prior statements made clear that they would not “apologize.”

Our discourse analysis shows how these men walked a fine line, including supportive moves of apologies, such as strong adjectives expressing personal reactions to the visit to the Hiroshima memorial (e.g. *gut-wrenching, terrible moment, mourn*) and acknowledging human suffering. Obama highlighted shared humanity and called for an end to atomic stockpiling and all acts of war,. In line with the focus on human suffering, they both also focus on semantic patients, rhetorically minimizing agency and responsibility via agentless constructions (*death fell from the sky, the bomb fell, innocents killed*) and the delegation of agency to inanimates (*the plane that dropped the atomic bomb*). Thus their mixed expressions of regret include components that may be associated with either apologies or commiseration. Interestingly, the American public, as seen online postings, had varied reactions as to these speeches constituted apologies or not. In addition, these speeches are particularly interesting because both men were trying to navigate two cultures that have very different approaches to the performance and significance of apology, in addition to responding to the needs of both countries.

We thus argue that apologies are not simply combinations of linguistic formulae such as head acts and conventionalized supportive moves, but social constructions. That is, what counts as an apology for some may not be considered an apology by others, even as speakers of the same language. Judgment of one or more utterances as constituting an apology also involves the assumptions one brings to the situation, and even one’s political ideology. For example, in the absence of profession of guilt, whether one interprets Kerry’s and Obama’s speech as apologies depends on whether one thinks they makes the U.S. look weak or not. Finally, we make connections to the *metoo movement detailing instances of sexual harassment by (often prominent) individuals and calling for personal public apologies, where there has been considerable public commentary on the quality of such “apologies” as counting as real or not. We conclude with a discussion of the apologies under consideration in the light of the Politeness1 and 2 distinction (e.g. Terkourafi 2011).

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