Sorry, Regrets, and More

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Battistella is the author of five books on varying aspects of linguistics, including two books on linguistic markedness, two on nineteenth- and twentieth-century language attitudes, and a book on public apologies. *Sorry About That: The Language of Public Apology* (2014) examines the public apologies offered by politicians, entertainers, and others, to analyze how certain language is perceived as creating sincere or insincere apologies. The essay here, which focuses on analyzing both the grammar and reception of notorious public apologies, is excerpted from *Sorry About That*.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Have you apologized recently? To whom? Why? Spend a few minutes trying to recall your apology. What language did you use? How did you convey your sincerity? Could your language or tone have been misconstrued as insincere? Why or why not?*

"I'M VERY SORRY FOR THAT"

When he became president in 1993, Bill Clinton quickly set up the Task Force on National Health Care Reform. Headed by first lady Hillary Clinton, the task force was intended to make good on Clinton's campaign promise to enact universal health care. The effort failed, as had previous efforts beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, and health-care reform became a major factor in Democratic losses in the 1994 midterm elections. Opponents personalized the failure by portraying the task force as an intrusive bureaucracy being imposed by the first lady. They called it HillaryCare.

After the 1994 midterm losses, Bill Clinton began to adjust his priorities and adapt his approach. Hillary Clinton also began to think about her role, at one point organizing an off-the-record lunch with a group of columnists and journalists that included syndicated columnist Ann Landers,

Cindy Adams and Louis Romano of the *New York Post,* Marian Burros of the *New York Times,* and others. At the lunch, Clinton described how she believed her health-care efforts had been twisted by opponents and how she herself had been portrayed. She told the journalists, "I regret very much that the efforts on health care were badly misunderstood, taken out of context and used politically against the Administration. I take responsibility for that, and I'm very sorry for that." What Clinton was saying was that the fault lay with others who were distorting her efforts on health care and that she should have better understood the political machinations.

Was Clinton apologizing? She regrets three grammatically passive actions—efforts on health care being misunderstood by the public, efforts being taken out of context, and efforts being used by political opponents—and she says she is sorry. However, her sorry refers to the actions of others who misunderstood or misrepresented health-care reform. Sorry indicates regret for a situation, not regret for an offense. Taken alone, her sorry is more like the usage in "I'm sorry that I missed your call" than "I'm sorry that I lost your book."

Clinton confused matters somewhat by also saying "I take responsibility for that." With that phrasing she also asserted responsibility for the public's misunderstandings and her opponents' misrepresentations. She treated what happened as something she might have prevented with different actions—in other words she treated it as a transgression. Her "I'm very sorry for that" was thus ambiguous, carrying both the sense of reporting on a regrettable situation and that of taking the blame for that situation. The conversational logic of her statement was unresolved.

When Clinton's comments came out, she was criticized for apologizing. The *Chicago Sun Times* headline was "Hillary 'Sorry' About Health Care," and the article led with the statement that "over a plate of heart-healthy American cuisine, Hillary Rodham Clinton took full responsibility for the failure of the health-care program she helped design . . . and said she was 'sorry.'" The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* wrote "First Lady Says She's Sorry, But Insists She Won't Hide For Next 2 Years" and the *New York Times*—which broke the story—wrote that "Mrs. Clinton put most of the fault on herself." 5

As the story developed, others commented on the first lady's words and whether or not saying sorry was a stereotypical feature of women's speech. One state legislator said, "When [Clinton] says she is responsible for the failure of health care, that is the woman trying to take all the burdens on herself. She could have been Mother Teresa and that health care bill still would have failed." Linguist Deborah Tannen even discussed the incident and its relationship to gender in a *New York Times Magazine* article, quoting an unnamed political scientist saying, "To apologize for substantive things you've done raises the white flag. There's a school of thought in politics that you never say you're sorry."

Ironically, Clinton had noted, "I can only guess that people are getting perceptions about me from things I am saying or doing in ways that don't correspond with things I am trying to get across." Were her words treated as an apology because she was woman? Let's start by taking a closer look at the grammar of *sorry* and how it differs from *apologize*.

THE GRAMMAR OF *SORRY*

Saying "I'm sorry" is different from saying "I apologize." The former reports on an internal state of the speaker but does not literally perform an apology. Instead, speakers and hearers use the conversational maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner to imply or infer an apology. By itself, the minimal report "I'm sorry" (or, the simple "Sorry" used for minor transgressions) doesn't tell us much. Much of the meaning-making comes from the complements that follow *sorry*.

Like *apologize*, *sorry* can occur with a gerund complement or a conditional (*if*) complement—I can be sorry for speaking out of turn or I can be sorry if I have offended you. Unlike *apologize*, *sorry* can occur with an infinitive complement. If the following infinitive is *to be*, *sorry* is understood as an apology ("I'm sorry to be such a bother"), while if the verb is one of perception it is often understood as report of empathy ("I'm sorry to hear about your loss").

Sorry differs from *apologize* in that it frequently occurs with a noun 10
clause. Noun clauses, you'll recall, are tricky because the choice of the subject of the clause can affect the meaning: I can be sorry that I was so inconsiderate or I can be sorry that you were offended. When the subjects of both clauses are the first person *I* (or *we*), the speaker is sorry for something he or she has done. But when the subordinate clause subject does not match the first-person subject of the main clause, then the speaker is sorry for something that happened. So "I'm sorry that it's raining" expresses disappointment but not apology. *Sorry* also differs from *apologize* in not allowing an expressed indirect object. That means that the grammar of *sorry* does not indicate to whom the apology is addressed. An apology using *sorry* must either rely on context (by uttering the expression face to face or in a person-to-person communication like a letter or email) or on making the recipient of the apology clear by mentioning it elsewhere.

Sorry provides somewhat more grammatical flexibility than *apologize* and somewhat more semantic flexibility. When a speaker says "I'm sorry," he or she may be implying an apology or making a report. Thus, when businesswoman Martha Stewart was convicted of several charges related to insider stock trading in March 2004, she said she was sorry. In court she told the judge:

> Today is a shameful day. It is shameful for me, for my family, and for my beloved company and all of its employees and partners. What was a small personal matter became over the last two and a half years an almost fatal circus event of unprecedented proportions spreading like oil over a vast landscape, even around the world. I have been choked and almost suffocated to death.

She ended by saying "I'm very sorry it has come to this." Was Stewart apologizing? Perhaps she intended it to be taken that way. But her ambiguous language can also be understood as meaning that she regtets the unfortunate situation she is in. And both the abstractness of the shame ("Today is a shameful day") and the vague passiveness of the language ("a small personal matter . . . has become," "I have been choked . . ." ". . . it has come to this") suggest that she is not performing an apology but merely reporting her feelings.

The distinction between performing an apology by saying "I apologize" and reporting a mental state by saying "I'm sorry" provides insight into another aspect of apologetic discourse—apologies sometimes combine the two expressions. Thus when England's Prince Harry apologized for dressing in a Nazi uniform for a 2005 costume party, he said this: "I am very sorry if I caused any offense or embarrassment to anyone. It was a poor choice of costume and I apologize." The use of "I apologize" extends and supplements the conditional "I am very sorry if" in the first sentence. There is also a bit of a verbal trick in the positioning of the word *apologize*. The prince is apologizing for an abstraction—a poor choice of costume—not for offensive behavior or the values implied in dressing as a Nazi. Putting the apology last allows the speaker to shape the transgression in a more innocuous way. A similar verbal trick arises with the positioning of *sorry* in our next example, from the 2004 presidential election.

RATHER SORRY

Shortly before the 2004 presidential election, CBS broadcast a *Sixty Minutes* segment calling into doubt President George W. Bush's National Guard record. The September 8 report by Dan Rather aired on *Sixty Minutes Wednesday* and showed four documents that appeared to have been written by Bush's commanding officer. The documents created the impression that Bush had disobeyed orders to report for a physical, had been grounded from flying, and had used political influence to receive more positive evaluations than he deserved. The presumed author of the memos, Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Killian, had died in 1984, and the memos were provided to a CBS producer by another retired National Guard lieutenant colonel, Bill Burkett, who claimed to have burned the

originals after faxing them to CBS. Prior to airing the segment, CBS producers consulted with several document experts and interpreted the results in the most positive light for the potential news story, but failed to contact a crucial typography expert.

Immediately after the story aired, bloggers and then the print news media began to question the authenticity of the documents. For a time, CBS and Rather defended the segment, but soon they had to disavow it. On the September 20 *CBS Evening News,* Rather explained that in light of additional research on the authenticity and source of the documents: 15

> I no longer have the confidence in these documents that would allow us to continue vouching for them journalistically. I find we have been misled on the key question of how our source for the documents came into possession of these papers. That, combined with some of the questions that have been raised in public and in the press, leads me to a point where—if I knew then what I know now—I would not have gone ahead with the story as it was aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question.
>
> But we did use the documents. We made a mistake in judgment, and for that I am sorry.

Dan Rather first explains the situation and concludes that he would have acted differently if he had more information. At the end, he names the offense—a mistake in judgment—and he explains that he is sorry, inviting viewers to infer an apology. Because an apology was in order, *sorry* was indeed understood as implying an apology instead of simply regrets that something happened. Conversational logic suggests that Rather would not be saying CBS made a mistake and that he was sorry if he did not intend an apology.

I hope you noticed how Rather used the plural *we* in the last two sentences cited above, switching from an earlier *I*. He switches from "I no longer have confidence," "I find we have been misled," and "I would not have gone ahead," to "we did use" and "we made a mistake." He depersonalizes the naming of the offense then switches back to *I* at the end to personalize his regret. Rather uses pronouns to ever so slightly separate himself from the offense.

Following the incident, CBS commissioned an independent review panel whose report led to several executive- and producer-level firings. The panel's report noted that Rather still felt the documents were accurate and that he had merely "delivered the apology" in support of the corporate decision to back off the story. Two months after the panel report was issued, Rather left the CBS anchor position, a year ahead of his planned retirement, and sued the network. In the lawsuit, Rather argued that he was forced to apologize by CBS, that he was not responsible for the errors in the reporting, and that he was being made a scapegoat. The seventy-million-dollar suit was unsuccessful.

Soon after the original story aired, CBS also issued a separate statement saying, "Based on what we now know, CBS News cannot prove that the documents are authentic, which is the only acceptable journalistic standard to justify using them in the report. We should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we deeply regret." Here CBS makes its apology with *regret* rather than *sorry*. But how does *regret* differ from *sorry*?

REGRETS

The sorries expressed by Hillary Clinton and Dan Rather illustrate self-reports of speakers' attitudes about their actions or inactions. Just as common is the verb *regret*, which also reports on a speaker's internal state. The grammar of *regret* largely parallels that of *sorry*. *Regret* does not allow indirect objects, but it does take direct object nouns and pronouns, conditionals, noun clauses, gerunds, and infinitives as complements. I can regret my actions, regret it if anyone was offended, regret that I behaved so poorly, regret calling him mean, or regret to have to tell you bad news. Again, a gerund can provide an especially strong grammatical foundation for an implied apology: "I regret calling him mean" aligns the subject of the main clause with the understood subject of the gerund. A noun clause can similarly invite interpretation as an apology when the subjects match, as in "I regret that I behaved so poorly." Both gerunds and noun clauses, however, can complement *regret* in ways that merely report on situations without assuming agency for them: "I regret your being inconvenienced" and "We regret that they feel that way." Here, the speaker regrets a situation but does not assume responsibility for it. 20

Regret also occurs with noun phrases, as we have seen: "I sincerely regret the unfortunate choice of language" (Harry Truman), "I . . . profoundly regret my horrific relapse" (Mel Gibson), and "I deeply regret any offense my remark in the *New York Observer* might have caused anyone" (Joe Biden). And *regret* of course may be a noun, which provides a further option for apologies: "I always put the victim first but here I didn't follow my principle and that is my greatest regret" (said by Scotland Yard assistant commissioner John Yates on his decision not to reopen an investigation into *News International* in 2009) or "I'm very disappointed and want to express my regret to The Open fans" (Tiger Woods commenting on his performance at the 2011 British Open). Having or expressing regrets makes the attitude more abstract—it is more a thing than a mental action—and distances the regretter from the regret.

Like *sorry*, *regret* is ambiguous. Literally, *regret* refers to one's attitudes toward an event or action. It can be used to indicate an apologetic stance toward one's own actions but can also merely comment on a disagreeable state of affairs. Often the difference is clear. When a Soviet court

sentenced captured pilot Francis Gary Powers to a ten-year sentence in 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower's press secretary released a statement that Eisenhower "deplored the Soviet propaganda activity associated with the episode beginning last May and regrets the severity of the sentence." Eisenhower was not apologizing. He was expressing disapproval. When President John F. Kennedy sent troops to oversee the integration of the University of Mississippi, he noted that it was his responsibility to enforce the court decision even though the government had not been a part of the court case. Kennedy said: "I deeply regret the fact that any action by the executive branch was necessary in this case, but all other avenues and alternatives, including persuasion and conciliation, had been tried and exhausted." Kennedy was explaining and regretting that circumstances made federal action necessary. But he was not apologizing.

Like *sorry*, *regret* is ambiguous.

Sometimes in partisan politics there is public debate about whether an expression of regret implies apology. This was the case when secretary of state William Jennings Bryan presented a treaty to the Senate expressing "sincere regret" to the nation of Colombia. Was this an apology? We will get to this controversy in just a moment. First, one last question.

Does "I regret" mean the same thing as "I'm sorry"? There is overlap of course, but as we have seen, *sorry* reports on internal emotional states and de-emphasizes the calculus of acts and consequences. *Regret,* on the other hand, places more weight on situations and on the analysis of acts and consequences. Thus, *sorry* is typically used for mild transgressions (jostles and spills) and *regret* for more formal, serious, and detached situations. Of course, as speakers of English, we use and understand the nuances intuitively. The overlap and distinction between regretting and being sorry are evident in fixed expressions like "I regret to inform you that we selected another applicant" as opposed to "I'm sorry for your loss." *Sorry* is too personal for some professional and business exchanges, while *regret* is usually too impersonal and detached for condolences.

DID THE WILSON ADMINISTRATION APOLOGIZE TO COLOMBIA?

In the early part of the twentieth century, US relations with Colombia deteriorated because of the Panama Canal conflict. The geographically strategic state of Panama had been a part of Colombia since 1821. Panamanian secession efforts had repeatedly failed, most notably during the Thousand Days War of 1899 to 1902. At the same time, the United States was negotiating with the Colombian government to gain rights to a five-hundred-square-mile area for a canal.

Events turned when the Colombian Senate rejected the Hay-Herrán Treaty, which would have given the United States rights to the canal zone in perpetuity in return for a $10 million initial payment and annual payments of $250,000. Determined to have the canal, the Roosevelt administration threw its support behind the Panamanian independence movement. American ships, ordered to the area by President Roosevelt, blockaded Colombian forces. In November 1903, Panama proclaimed its independence and was immediately recognized by the United States. American troops landed with the stated role of keeping order and protecting American lives and property, but also to interfere with and intimidate Colombian forces. Five days after independence was declared, the treaty the United States had sought was signed, and in 1904, work began on the five-hundred-mile-long canal.

The Colombians, and many Americans as well, insisted that the separation of Panama was an immoral and illegal action instigated by American commercial interests and abetted by Roosevelt. Later in the Roosevelt administration and through the Taft years, efforts were made to repair the rift. Diplomatic contacts continued, and when Woodrow Wilson became president, one of his priorities was to improve relations with the strategic region of Central and Latin America. By 1914, a treaty had been negotiated to ensure full recognition of Panama. The Thomson-Urrutia Treaty proposed to pay Colombia twenty-five million dollars and to grant special canal privileges in return for Colombia's recognition of Panama's independence and sovereignty. The treaty also included this sentence:

> The government of the United States of America, wishing to put at rest all controversies and differences with the Republic of Colombia arising out of which the present situation on the Isthmus of Panama have resulted on its own part and in the name of the people of the United States expresses sincere regret that anything should have occurred to interrupt or to mar the relations of cordial friendship that had so long subsisted between the two nations.

When the treaty was presented in April of 1914, it met with strong opposition from Roosevelt's supporters in the Senate. Roosevelt himself lobbied against it, calling the payment "blackmail." And some senators objected to the words *sincere regret* as an apology to Colombia. California senator George Perkins, for example, said, "I do not believe that the United States Senate will ever ratify this treaty, which implies an apology to Colombia and payment of $25,000,000 in reparations. Colombia should apologize to the United States." The *New York Times* added its opinion that "a formal apology is uncalled for," since the Colombians were trying to prevent construction of the canal.

James Du Bois, the minister to Colombia under William Howard Taft, argued that the treaty was not an apology at all but rather a "simple expression of regret." Du Bois reported telling the Colombian negotiators

that the United States "would never apologize for a political act" and noted that neither he nor the Colombian negotiators viewed the statement as an apology. The apology claim was, he said, "only the cry of the Roosevelt people to defeat the treaty." Woodrow Wilson too denied that the treaty had an apology, describing that view as "pure guff." Nebraska senator Gilbert Hitchcock elaborated: "The language of the treaty falls very far short of an apology, and an apology in this case is not called for."

The wording of the treaty supports the view that there was no apology. Look back at the phrase "expresses sincere regret that anything should have occurred to interrupt or to mar the relations of cordial friendship." The noun clause following *regret* is nonspecific. Expressing regret for "anything that might have occurred" does not name any particular transgression. An apology might be inferred, but the implication is weak given the vagueness in the sentence and in the context. Nevertheless, those who argued against the treaty carried the day through the Wilson administration. The treaty would not have included the word *regret*, they argued, unless apology was implied. By 1915, it was clear that the treaty would not be ratified with the expression of regret included. Wilson was soon occupied by other issues and never returned to the treaty. But in 1921, two years after Theodore Roosevelt had died, the new Harding administration succeeded in passing the treaty, with the expression of regret omitted.

SHORTCUTS

The expressions "I was wrong" and "Forgive me" are also sometimes taken to imply apologies. "I was wrong" concedes error. "Forgive me" asks for reconciliation. To conversationally cooperative listeners, either can imply the full apology process. Recall our earlier modeling of the apology process as made up of a call to apologize, a two-part expressed apology (a naming and a regretting), and a response. When we shortcut a full apology by merely saying "I was wrong," we are relying on the naming of the offense to perform the work of the apology without the sorry-saying. And when we shortcut a full apology with "Forgive me," we are jumping directly to the response step of the process.

Sometimes such shortcuts are sufficient, especially if the person apologizing is sufficiently contrite or if the audience is particularly receptive. Consider this terse public admission by Senator John McCain: "It was the wrong thing to do, and I have no excuse for it." McCain was referring to a joke he had made about Chelsea Clinton's appearance and parentage, which he characterized as a "very unfortunate and insensitive remark." Saying he was wrong suggests regret, and saying he had no excuse condemns the behavior. The statement thus contains two key elements of an apology: regret and condemnation of one's behavior. McCain was not literally apologizing here, but his statement uses conversational logic to invite the inference.

Shortcutting the apology process is understandable. John McCain had apologized privately to the Clinton family, so he perhaps felt no need to apologize expansively in public. But for a serious offense, a shortcut apology often seems like a verbal trick to gain the social benefits of apologizing without having to say you are sorry. Thus, McCain seems to be not quite apologizing. And the converse is true as well. Admitting a mistake can be treated as an apology, even when no apology is intended.

For very minor offenses, of course, a shortcut is often exactly what is called for. For the stepped-on foot or jostled elbow, a linguistically elaborate process is overkill. For small social offenses, we may skip the call to apologize and the naming of the offense, Both are apparent from the immediate situation, so we move right to a quickly spoken "Sorry," "'Scuse me," "Pardon," or "My fault" which may or may not be followed by a response from the person harmed. The French-derived counterparts of "Forgive me," "Excuse me," and "Pardon me" are especially common for very minor transgressions. And they are conventionally used to pre-apologize for an imposition. We say "Pardon me, do you have the time?," or "Excuse me, can I ask you a question?"

Just as we take a shortcut by saying "I was wrong," we can also imply 35
an apology with the simple possessive phrase *my fault*. Even shorter is the phrase *my bad*, used as a tic of adolescent speech in the 1995 movie *Clueless*. Lexicographers have traced the origin of the phrase to basketball. Ben Zimmer, who for a time wrote the On Language column at the *New York Times*, favors the view that *my bad* originated on playgrounds in the 1970s and 1980s. He cites *Oxford English Dictionary* examples from the 1980s as proof, including a 1986 guide which gives this definition: "My bad, an expression of contrition uttered after making a bad pass or missing an opponent." Today, *my bad* lends itself to any quick expressions of apology where the call to apologize is apparent and no response is expected.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. How does Battistella analyze Hillary Clinton's 1994 apology? What grammatical voice does she use? How is the text of the apology different than the way it is received?
2. What role may Clinton's gender have played in how her words were received? Why? Why might women, stereotypically, apologize more in our society?
3. How does "I'm sorry" differ from "I apologize," according to Battistella? Which focuses on one's own feelings or "mental state"? Which focuses on the feelings of the other and performs an act showing regret? Why and how do these words work? Why is their difference important?
4. In what ways can "I'm sorry" be manipulated or changed in meaning? Can the phrase actually convey the opposite of its proposed meaning? If so, how?
5. How does regret differ from "I'm sorry" and "I apologize" in public apologies? What are the limitations of "regret"?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Though the percentage varies depending on circumstance, some social scientists estimate that nonverbal communication makes up as much as 93 percent of our communication. This means that our body language—the way we carry ourselves, our facial expressions, our gestures, etc.—constitutes the vast majority of what we actually say. With that in mind, why does Battistella say so very little about body language in the context of public apologies?

To decide whether you think body language should have bearing on how apologies are perceived, search for video of famous public apologies. Compare what you notice about body language to Battistella's written analysis. Does what you see affect how you interpret the words said, and should Battistella have accounted for visual cues? Based on what you see versus what you read, what percentage of communication is nonverbal? Does 93 percent seem like an accurate number?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Battistella usefully diagrams the difference between "I'm sorry," "I apologize," and "I regret" in speeches perceived as public apologies, and he models a pattern for analyzing these words and their effect in the public forum. Choose a public figure's recent "apology" to closely analyze as Battistella does. Although you do not need to focus, as the linguist does, on parsing and identifying the parts of speech in operation, his approach should help you identify the "quirks" within the apology you choose to analyze. What words of apology does the speech use? Does the apology focus on an action or on the speaker's feelings? What words seem to limit the apology? Does the speaker deflect blame in any way? Write an essay analyzing how these aspects of the apology affect denotative meaning (the meaning of the words as used in the sentence) and connotative meaning (the meaning implied by the context of the speech and what readers infer about it). Be sure to weigh in on whether or not the speaker has actually apologized.
2. Choose a public "apology" that appears insincere or evasive, and rewrite it to convey an actual apology. Read and compare the original version with your own and write a reflective essay. What are the differences between the actual apology and your version? Why do those differences matter? What do you think the consequences would have been if your version had been the one used publicly—both for the perpetrator and the victims of the offense?