

Truly Sorry

TRULY SORRY

– on Apologies and Apologia

It Seems to Be the Hardest Word

"I'm sorry." You might have heard it many times, and you might have said it a few times yourself. Not many people get through life without a few excuses, admissions, concession, or apologies, and those types of communication will be the focus of this chapter.

admission indrømmelse
concession indrømmelse

The word "apology" is derived from the Greek *apologia* which means "to speak in one's defense". It was traditionally thought of as a way of justifying one's actions, but in later English usage it has come to mean more of an excuse where one admits or explains wrongdoing. So, confusingly, apologizing can mean different things depending on the context. Sorry about that.

derive from stamme fra

justify retfærdiggøre

context sammenhæng

This chapter explores various ways of apologizing when some people or organizations flat-out admit everything, and when others use strategies where what appears to be an apology in reality becomes something else; a defense or perhaps even an accusation.

defense forsvær
accusation anklage, beskyldning

Face the Music

But why even say sorry in the first place? Hopefully, the reason is to express remorse about something you did, but at times we apologize

remorse angar, fortrydelse

		without actually being sorry which means other factors can be at play. So why do it? Because when we have made a mistake, we might be criticized, and that will make us lose "face". And our face is very important to us because we need to maintain credibility (ethos) and be likable; it provides us with a healthy self-image. Consequently, what we are arguably doing when we offer an apology is so-called "facework".	1 5
maintain credibility	opretholde troværdighed		
		Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman, has stated that "[w]hen a face has been threatened, face-work must be done." Part of facework is what is called "image repair"; our image has been damaged, and now we must repair it, so we can move on. Hopefully unscathed.	10
	* Goffman "On Face-Work", In <i>Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior</i> , pp. 5-45 unscathed uskadit		
justification	retfærdiggørelse	Arguably, when one's image has been attacked, we feel the need to "offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for our behavior." The attack on our image can be seen as being constituted by two factors:	15
	* Benoit <i>Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies - Image Repair Theory and Research</i> , p. 19		
		1. An undesirable act has occurred 2. You are responsible for that action'	20
	* ibid., p. 20		
deliver	præsentere, levere	But forgiveness depends on how the apology is delivered.	
		Whether the person apologizing is a celebrity, a coworker, or a friend, the same strategies apply. Basically, the person wants to repair something – the image or the relationship – and so it becomes a matter of persuasion, and "persuasion is all about trying to change the audience's attitudes."	25
apply	gælde		
persuasion	overtalelse		
	* ibid., p. 31		
culpable	skyldig	If the act of persuasion is accepted by the person or people you apologise to, and perhaps an audience witnessing the apology, there is no problem as the culpable person's 'face' is no longer threatened. Thus, the audience (mediators of change) will have a huge impact on how (or if) an apology should be made. If the person making the apology does not understand how the mediators of change perceive the action, the person getting ready to do facework might get it completely wrong. But if they read the room correctly, an apology can restore their 'face' and ethos.	30 35
perceive	opfatte		
restore	gænoprette		
		Professor in Communication Studies William Benoit has named five strategies you can employ when you are accused of something.	40
denial	benægtelse	1. Denial	
evasion	undvigelse	2. Evasion of responsibility	
reduce	mindske	3. Reducing offensiveness	
		4. Corrective action	
mortification	øergrelse, græmmelse	5. Mortification	45

1 Denial - It Wasn't Me

With this strategy, the person accused of misconduct simply denies having done anything wrong, either because they deny that misconduct took place, or that they deny being responsible. To be responsible for an action does not necessarily mean that you need to have committed the action yourself. You might have "allowed others to perform an action, encouraged others to act, or facilitated an action."

encourage *opfordre*
facilitate *facilitere, muliggøre*
* Benoit Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies - Image Repair Theory and Research, p. 22

This strategy works best if the people who have to defend themselves can point to someone else who has committed the misdeed, thus shifting the blame.

Example: "I didn't do anything wrong. It was my brother."

15 Evasion of Responsibility - Blame It on the Boogie

The accused admits to the offense, but to evade responsibility, one or more of the four strategies could be applied:

- o **Provocation:** the act was done in response to something someone else did, and therefore it is arguably justified.

Example: "Yes, I punched him, but he was trying to steal my car."

- o **Defeasibility:** the act was done due to factors outside the defender's control or they acted in a certain manner because they were misinformed/lacked information that would have given them a fuller picture, which would have made them act differently.

Example: "I punched him because I thought he was trying to steal my car. Someone told me it was him. I didn't know it was the other guy."

- o **Accident:** the act was done due to factors outside the person's control.

Example: "Yes, I hit the person with my car, but it was because the brakes were malfunctioning."

- o **Intention:** the act was done with the best of intentions and therefore a bad outcome should not be blameworthy.

Example: "I tried to prepare a delicious meal, and I didn't know she was allergic."

Reducing Offensiveness

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- I Never Meant to Cause You any Sorrow

This strategy aims to make the offense seem less bad. The accused admits to the offense but tries to make it seem better than how it has initially been viewed. Here are six strategies:

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bolster styrke, øge

- **Bolstering:** the accused brings forth information about themselves which they believe the mediators of change (the audience influenced by the offense) will appreciate, and therefore they will perhaps focus on the positive attribute and not the negative.

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attribute egenskab

Example: "As a company, we built the best machines and have the best customer service."

- **Minimize effect:** the accused tries to minimize the mistake, so it does not look as bad as it did initially.

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Example: "Only 1 out of 1,000,000 has experienced this problem."

differentiation skelnen

- **Differentiation:** the accused compares their own mistake with worse mistakes committed by others with the goal of making their mistake different and thus seem better. You usually do this by comparing your own act with something that is worse.

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Example: "We forgot to label the product properly, but we never jeopardized the lives of the consumers, like that other company did."

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transcendence transcendens, noget der ligger uden for grænser

- **Transcendence:** the wrongdoing is placed in a different context thus justifying the actions.

Example: "Yes, there were some issues, but this is really about trying to make products for a better world, and people understand that."

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- **Victim blaming:** the wrongdoer attacks the one(s) who accuse them of wrongdoing by, for instance, damaging their credibility/ethos or making it seem like they had it coming, and thus making themselves the victim and not the perpetrator.

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Example: "We specified that the creature should not be fed after midnight, so what were they expecting?"

- **Compensation:** the accused offers to compensate the accuser in the form of money, services, or other goods valued by the accuser.

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Example: "We will offer a \$500 refund for all customers and a free subscription to our hotline services."

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Corrective Action – Going Through Changes

Here the offenders promise that the offense will never happen again, and they show us what steps they will take to ensure this.

Example: "We will establish a new quality department that will make sure this never happens again."

Mortification – If I Could Turn Back Time

Here the offender admits the wrongdoing, expresses regret, and asks for forgiveness.

Example: "It was my fault, and I'm truly sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Apology or Defense

It is interesting to note that the sentence "I'm sorry" in English does not necessarily mean the speaker takes responsibility for the offense. It *could* just suggest a degree of empathy, like saying "I'm sorry this happened to you, and I will help you, but it really wasn't my fault", and thereby the accused has not directly taken responsibility, but said something they hope will repair their image without having to admit guilt.

People who are accused of wrongdoing and who wish to save face and repair their image may use one or several of these strategies depending on the case and who their mediators of change are. As mentioned earlier, it is crucial to understand what people are upset about for facework to be successful. In rhetorical criticism, you often distinguish between an apology and apologia. The apology is an expression of regret whereas the apologia is a defense of your actions.

So when you analyse an utterance, do a thorough investigation into the situation that has led the person or company to release a statement addressing the issue, look at what image repair strategies are used, and you may thus determine whether it is an apology or an apologia.

For a guide to analysing (and distinguishing between) apologies and apologias, see chapter 7.

Find suggestions for further studies including videos, texts, and podcasts on narratingtruth.org