

“The Sorriest Prime Minister”: Apologies of Justin Trudeau

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1. Introduction

Apologies are important. Apologies oblige you to face your wrongdoing and rebuild relationships. However, apologies place you in a vulnerable position. Admitting your wrongs is hard and puts you in a bad light. But what if you are not the offender? Recently, politicians and state leaders have been delivering historical apologies. These are apologies for past transgressions, often by the past government, and the speaker is thus not the direct offender (Augoustinos et al. 2011, 510). A politician who does not hesitate to apologize is the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau. In Canadian media outlets, he has gained the nickname “the sorriest Prime Minister” for his many apologies, both historical and personal, throughout his time in office (Martin 2021). Despite being a left-wing and progressive leader who preaches minority rights, Trudeau has been caught up in multiple scandals concerning delicate topics. These topics include wearing Blackface or traveling during an Inuit remembrance day, for which he has apologized, sometimes multiple times (CBC News 2019). This paper aims to examine how Justin Trudeau apologizes for personal offenses versus historical transgressions. Firstly, the paper will discuss previous apology research and theory on apologies and politeness. Secondly, the paper will analyze four public apologies by Trudeau in the form of critical discourse analysis. Lastly, the paper will discuss and compare the results.

2. Apologies

One of the most prominent groundworks of recent apology research is Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s (1987 [2004]) work on politeness theory. They work with Erving Goffman’s (1967) notion of *face* to explain how social contexts form utterances. *Face* is derived from the English folk term “losing face” and can hence be lost, enhanced, maintained, and must be attended to when interacting (Brown & Levinson 1987 [2004], 61). Almost all interactions threaten the speaker’s and the addressee’s *positive* or *negative* face. Positive face is our “wish to be well thought of ... to be understood by others, and ... to be treated as a friend and confidant” (Grundy 2019, 243).

To affirm the addressee's positive face, the speaker would use positive politeness strategies such as compliments, jokes, and expressing gratitude and solidarity using an ingroup identity marker (245). Negative face is our "wish not to be imposed on by others, ... to go about our business unimpeded." To acknowledge and respect the addressee's negative face, the speaker would use negative politeness strategies such as indirectness and hedging to minimize imposition (Grundy 2019, 243). Therefore, positive face entails a wish to connect with others, while negative face entails a wish for independence and autonomy.

Apologies concern both the speaker's and the addressee's positive and negative face needs. Most apologies are prompted by *face-threatening acts*, FTAs, orientated at the face of the addressee, leaving the addressee's face already threatened. Naturally, the speaker wishes to satisfy the addressee's face needs and compensate for the FTA (Grundy 2019, 242). Apologizing hereby serves as a remedy for any damage made to the addressee by the FTA which triggered the apology. Apologies appeal to the addressee's positive face by recognizing the importance of their desires, wishes, and expectations and by the speaker expressing regret for disregarding these desires. However, the nature of apologies threatens the addressee's negative face by being obligated to accept or reject the apology, constraining their freedom to do as they please (Murphy 2014, 24). As a result, apologies can appeal to the addressee's positive face while also threatening their negative face.

Furthermore, the act of apologizing is a highly FTA for the speaker and further damages the speaker's positive face (Lakoff 2001, 305). An apology damages the speaker's positive face by acknowledging and accepting responsibility for causing face-threatening situations for others. If the addressee rejects the apology and discards the speaker's positive face need of being understood, it further damages the speaker's positive face (Murphy 2014, 24). Conversely, apologies can also attend to the speaker's positive face needs through the apology's objective of repairing harm done to relationships, increasing the possibility of being liked and connecting with the addressee (25). Therefore, apologies threaten the speaker's face by acknowledging their wrongdoing and risking rejection. Yet, apologies can also strengthen the speaker's positive face by aiming to repair damaged relationships with others.

Additionally, apologies are considered speech acts. Speech acts are utterances that not only convey a particular meaning but also perform a specific function or action. Speech act theory also aims to explain these functions and actions in terms of how they affect the speaker and addressee. An apology is an expressive speech act, meaning it serves the function of performing an expression of regret for a past action to save face (Murphy 2015, 186). In speech act theory, apologies have been studied by Shoshana Blum-Kulka and Elite Olshtain (1984). They assert that the most direct

apology strategy is using an explicit *illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID), which consists of performative verbs such as “sorry,” “apologize,” “regret,” “excuse,” etc. (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, 206). Furthermore, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain assert that apology speech acts entail the four potential strategies, “(1) an explanation or account of the cause which brought about the offense, (2) an expression of responsibility for the offense, (3) an offer of repair, (4) a promise of forbearance” (1984, 207). Apologies can be strengthened by combining different apology strategies, by adding intensifiers like adverbs, or they may be modified to minimize the speaker’s responsibility depending on the desired face needs of the speaker (1984, 207). Therefore, apology speech act research is concerned with the presence or absence of IFIDs, how the potential apology strategies formulate and modify the apology, and how that affects the perception and function of the speech act.

2.1 Political apologies

Research on political apologies demonstrates how apologies are essential for image restoration and dealing with social relationships in the public sphere. Zohar Kampf (2009) argues that “face considerations are a crucial matter for the actor’s status and survival in the public arena” and that the recent personalization of politics has made apologies an even more FTA for the speaker (2259). Kampf’s research on political apologies reveals how politicians draw on apology strategies “which are best fit to placate the victim’s face without posing a dangerous threat to one’s own face” (2260). One of the first studies solely on political apologies is by Sandra Harris et al. (2006). With a pragmatic approach, they inspected how politicians formulate apologies under highly mediated circumstances, resulting in more formal and wary language (Harris et al. 2006, 721). Therefore, research shows how politicians are highly concerned with their own face needs when apologizing, considering that their image and career are at stake.

Politicians tend to use various apology and politeness strategies to minimize the damage to their face when apologizing. Harris et al. suggest that by not using the IFID “apologize,” the speaker can minimize some of their own responsibility and, thus, try to save their positive face (2006, 722). They argue how “apologize” is the only IFID in formal discourse that can be unambiguously characterized as a formal speech act of apology. They explain that IFIDs, such as “sorry,” can be used “merely as an expression of regret, i.e., ‘I’m sorry that you’ve been ill’ ... without implying any sense of personal responsibility” (722). By using ambiguous IFIDs, the speaker can disown their responsibility and attempt to minimize the damage to their positive face.

In addition, politicians are inclined to use non-performative apology strategies. Here, they use the IFID “apologize” but then express a willingness or duty to carry out the apology. For

instance, instead of an unambiguous performative speech act such as “I hereby apologize,” they might state, “I would like to apologize.” As a result, the speaker can undermine the performativity of the utterance and reduce the threat to their face (Kampf 2009, 2262).

Moreover, by using ambiguous, equivocal, passive, and evasive speech, the speaker can amend the damage the apology itself is doing to their face. Using this ambiguous and equivocal speech, the speaker can formulate evasive apologies to satisfy their face needs (2260). Conversely, too evasive and cautious apologies can come off as insincere and thus trigger a negative reaction and backlash from the public (Harris et al. 2006, 731). Apologies that minimize the speaker's responsibility and only attend to the face needs of the speaker can, therefore, seem unauthentic and insincere. Political apologies are, therefore, a complex matter to perform, and how the speaker formulates the apology appropriately is vital to save their desired face and to maintain and strengthen relationships in the public sphere.

3. Method

The following will analyze four chosen apologies of Justin Trudeau. The analysis will take the form of Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA is a broad interdisciplinary research method and explores the correlation between discourse, the speaker, and the social and political contexts in which it occurs (Catalano & Waugh 2020, 1). Therefore, CDA is vital when examining the factors that may influence the formulation of apologies. To study how Trudeau formulates his apologies for personal offenses versus historical transgressions, the paper will analyze two apologies from each category. First, two apologies for personal offenses, his Blackface scandal and traveling on an Inuit holiday, will be analyzed. Second, two historical apologies for the government's mistreatment of LGBTQ2 and the government's mistreatment of Inuit will be analyzed. The chosen apologies were delivered reasonably close in time, from 2017 to 2021, and regard minority subjects to compare how Trudeau apologizes for similar topics properly.

Due to the two national languages of Canada, Trudeau's apologies shift between English and French. This paper concerns the English parts only. Therefore, the French parts may include some apology strategies that the English do not, and vice versa.

4. The apologies of Justin Trudeau

4.1 Blackface apology

On September 18th, 2019, photos of Trudeau in blackface surfaced online. The first photo broke in a Time Magazine article, showing Trudeau in 2001, a then teacher at a Vancouver private school, dressed in blackface at a school gala. The story was huge since it surfaced during his re-election

campaign for prime minister. Trudeau issued three apologies for this incident. The first of which was an emergency news conference and will be analyzed in the following (CBC News 2019).

Trudeau opens his apology by briefly explaining the incident, confirming that he did, in fact, “put makeup on” (CTV News 2019, 0:08). By describing the act of blackface simply as “putting makeup on,” Trudeau attempts to hedge the magnitude and his responsibility of the act. This indirect description is the first of many strategic measures Trudeau takes to save his desired positive face as a person who would not do such offensive behavior. When later asked if this was the only instance he did blackface, he replies that he also had “makeup on” in a high school talent show once (2:06). By avoiding the word “blackface” again and not specifying that there is no more than these two instances, Trudeau’s language becomes evasive. Furthermore, he states, “I didn’t consider it a racist action at the time, but now we know better” (9:24). By saying, “now we know better,” Trudeau downplays his personal responsibility, implying that it was a shared understanding, that blackface was not a big deal in the early 2000s. In an attempt to amend his positive face, Trudeau might also have attempted to connect with his audience by appealing to their positive face through an ingroup identity marker. His use of “we” suggests that he aims to relate to the audience and their past shared unawareness. However, this comment backfired with negative reactions from the public, partly resulting in Trudeau’s two later apologies (Dobrowolsky & Leal-Iyoupe 2022, 87). In addition, Trudeau hedges more questions from the reporters, including the question of why he had not spoken about this sooner, to which he replied, “I’m talking about it now” (11:02). The lack of description of the gravity of the offense appears to be a method of face-saving. Hedging these details is also a way for Trudeau to maintain his negative face. Still, by diluting the explanations of the offense, Trudeau reduces his responsibility for the act and appeals to his own positive face needs.

Nevertheless, Trudeau uses multiple IFIDs and apology strategies to amend his and the audience’s face needs. He states, “I regret it deeply. I am deeply sorry that I did that. I should have known better, but I didn’t ... It is something that I shouldn’t have done many years ago, and I recognize that I shouldn’t have done it” (2:55). Here, Trudeau uses the IFIDs “regret” and “sorry,” strengthened with the adverb “deeply” expressing regret and responsibility for “it,” the offense. With this, he appeals to the audience’s positive face needs by trying to remedy the now damaged relationship Trudeau has with the public. He also uses the explicit IFID “apologize” in the passage, “I am going to be asking Canadians to forgive me for what I did ... I take responsibility for it. It was a dumb thing to do. I’m disappointed in myself ... and I apologize for it” (4:33). By voicing the unambiguous IFID “apologize,” Trudeau reinforces the performativity and function of the speech act. Moreover, he acknowledges responsibility and his disappointment, damaging his

positive face. He also threatens his audience's, all Canadians', negative face by asking for forgiveness. This forces them to respond to his apology, threatening their autonomy. Still, this apology is marked by positive face-saving strategies like hedging and ambiguous speech.

4.2 Tofino vacation apology

Trudeau came under fire on September 30th, 2021, for traveling on the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a remembrance day for Inuit communities. He declined two invitations to participate in the holiday and instead spent the day in Tofino, B.C., with his family. Global News broke the story with pictures of Trudeau with his family, and the public reacted negatively. A week later, on October 6th, Trudeau issued a short apology in a larger press conference (Global News 2021).

Trudeau begins the apology by expressing, "I want to address the issue of last week" (cpac 2021, 12:38). By referring to the offense as "the issue of last week," Trudeau's language becomes very ambiguous and equivocal, trying to maintain his positive face. He, furthermore, declares that "I was in error to choose to travel on that day" (13:59). By choosing the wording "I was in error" instead of the more common "I made a mistake," Trudeau again tries to save his positive face by hedging the significance of his responsibility. When later asked why he did it, he replies, "I think the 'how it happened' is far less important than 'that it happened,' which I regret" (14:51). Here, Trudeau is highly concerned with saving his desired face as a minority ally and avoids explaining his choice to travel on a national Inuit remembrance day. By not clarifying his choice to travel that day, Trudeau also attempts to appeal to the Inuit communities' positive face by minimizing his conscious action to spend the day with his family instead. Moreover, he uses multiple IFIDs, like "regret," repeatedly (12:46, 14:51), and the direct IFID "apologize" in the passage, "I apologize directly to Chief Casimir for not having attended the event that she invited me to" (14:04). Here, he expresses guilt and responsibility for the offense, furthering his appeal to the audiences' positive face, by expressing regret for disregarding their expectations. However, it is worth noting that the unambiguous IFID "apologize" is only directed at Chief Casimir for not attending her event and not a direct act of apologizing for the offense itself.

4.3 Historical apology: Government LGBTQ2 discrimination

From the 1950s to the 1990s, LGBTQ2 people in Canada experienced severe systematic discrimination supported by laws and policies by the Canadian government. On November 28th, 2017, Trudeau delivered a historical apology in the House of Common, apologizing to LGBTQ2 Canadians for this past discrimination (CBC News 2017).

Trudeau begins his apology by describing the severity of the offense, as he states, “This is the devastating story of people who were branded criminals by the government, people who lost their livelihoods and in some cases their lives” (Global News 2017, 1:36). He proceeds to recount in full detail the circumstances of the transgressions. Trudeau does not mask the damage the unjustified transgressions have done to these people’s lives, which threatens the positive face need of his audience, to be treated well by others, including the government. The threat to the audience’s positive face is strengthened as he asserts, “The number one job of any government is to keep its citizens safe. And on this, we have failed LGBTQ2 communities and individuals time and time again” (8:10). By acknowledging the government’s contribution to the unsafety of many people, Trudeau threatens both his audience’s and his positive face. Trudeau positions himself as part of the government by saying, “We have failed,” and places the responsibility partly on himself, threatening his positive face.

In his historical apology, Trudeau uses various IFIDs and apology strategies. One strategy is explaining the case that brought the offense, which he thoroughly does at the beginning of the apology. Another strategy is expressing responsibility for the offense, which he does in the previous example. He also uses numerous IFIDs, such as in the passage, “It is with shame and sorrow and deep regret for the things we have done that I stand here today and say: we were wrong, we apologize, I am sorry, we are sorry” (8:32). Here, Trudeau uses the IFIDs “regret,” “sorry,” and “apologize” to intensify the apology speech act. He also uses the strategy of promising forbearance, stating, “Never again will Canada’s government be the source of so much pain for members of the LGBTQ2 communities. We promise to consult and work with individuals and communities to right these wrongs and begin to rebuild trust” (15:42), appealing to his and his audience’s positive face by expressing a wish for their well-being and rebuilding trust.

In this apology, Trudeau focuses on LGBTQ2 Canadians and tries to appeal to their positive face. An instance of this is, “It is my hope that we will look back on today as a turning point, but there is still much more work to do ahead of us ... We want to be a partner, an ally to LGBTQ2 Canadians” (13:44). Here, Trudeau uses the strategy of offering repair while expressing a will to reconcile the relationship between the government and LGBTQ2 communities. Expressing a desire for partnership strengthens the addressees’ face while also strengthening Trudeau’s desired positive face of wanting to be a minority ally. Trudeau strengthens his and the audience’s positive face further by affirming, “For all our differences, for all our diversity, we can find love and support in our common humanity. We’re Canadians, and we want the very best for each other” (16:34). Trudeau uses the positive politeness strategy of expressing solidarity by ingroup identity markers of being “human” and “Canadian” to connect with the audience to satisfy his and the audience’s

positive face. Consequently, this apology is marked by IFIDs and apology strategies not undermining the gravity of the transgression. Trudeau acknowledges responsibility partly, which causes a slight threat to his positive face. Still, he appeals highly to the positive face of the audience by expressing a desire for reconciliation and their well-being, which further amends his own positive face.

4.4 Historical apology: Mistreatment of Inuit during tuberculosis epidemics

Tuberculosis outbreaks between the 1940s and 1960s led to the Canadian government forcing many Inuit children to go south for treatment. They were separated from their families to the south, not speaking the language and often buried in unmarked graves. Tuberculosis was the leading death cause among Inuit, resulting in a major loss of Inuit people, language, and culture. On March 8th, 2019, Trudeau offered a historical apology in Iqaluit, Nunavut, on behalf of the government for these transgressions (BBC News 2019).

Trudeau's apology is highly focused on amending the addressees' positive faces. Trudeau begins by expressing, "What a pleasure to be here today" (Global News 2019, 0:13). Trudeau appeals to the Inuit communities' positive face by expressing that it is a "pleasure" for him to be in Iqaluit to deliver this apology. This desire for reconciliation strengthens his addressees' and his positive face. He moreover states, "My friends, we know where we are and where we're going, but to really know, we need to know first where we came from. We have to know our history" (2:18). Here, Trudeau distances himself from the historical transgressions, by asserting that "we know where we are," at the time of the apology, under his government, and contrasts it to the transgressions from their "history." Trudeau reinforces his desired positive face as a progressive leader and minority ally by distancing the current government and their ambitions from the past. He further appeals to the Inuit's positive face by declaring them "friends" and suggesting that it is a shared understanding that society is progressing away from the actions of the past.

Trudeau uses various apology strategies, including explaining the cause of the offense, which he does in detail. He accounts that "Canada ... was treating people throughout Inuit Nunangat as inferior, identifying Inuit with numbers instead of names" (2:47), threatening the positive face of the Inuit, wishing to be treated well. This threat is strengthened as he clarifies that the transgressions purposefully harmed their well-being, "The policy wasn't an accident. It was purposeful" (10:44). Trudeau also recognizes the government's responsibility behind the wrongful actions and acknowledges the racism and discrimination Inuit faced by saying, "Today, we take responsibility for the harm caused by the policies and actions of the federal government. The racism and discrimination that Inuit faced was and always will be unacceptable" (13:39), additionally

threatening their positive face. Furthermore, he threatens his positive face by partly taking responsibility for the long overdue apology, stating, “It shouldn’t have taken us so many years to tell you that ... We’re sorry that because we waited, there are many loved ones who will never hear this apology” (13:20). When saying this, Trudeau highly threatens his and his addressees’ positive face by explaining the damage the late apology has caused to others. These apology strategies intensify the damage to his and his addressees’ positive face while strengthening the function and performativity of the speech act.

Moreover, Trudeau reinforces the apology’s performativity through IFIDs and promises of forbearance, reestablishing his and his addressees’ positive face. He uses the IFIDs, “apologize,” and “sorry,” stating, “Today, I am here to say sorry. To offer an official apology for the federal government’s management of the tuberculosis epidemic” (10:29). The expression of wanting to reconcile with his addressees appeals to both his and their positive face. Moreover, Trudeau repeats the IFID “sorry” 12 times throughout the apology, intensifying the performativity of the apology (11:44, 12:33). Additionally, Trudeau uses the strategy of promising forbearance as he states, “An apology alone is not enough. We must also promise to do better” (14:00), intensifying the magnitude and performativity of the speech act, by promising a change in behavior. The promise of change further strengthens Trudeau’s positive face by stating, “As Prime Minister, I have pledged to renew the relationship between the government of Canada and Inuit” (14:27). The expression wishing to reconcile and connect further strengthens the addressees’ and his positive face. Consequently, the use of IFIDs and the strategy of promising forbearance reinforces the addressees’ and Trudeau’s positive face of desiring to reconcile. Moreover, Trudeau’s use of positive politeness strategies helps restore his image as a progressive politician.

5. Discussion

The analysis suggests that Justin Trudeau formulates his personal apologies differently from his historical apologies. Trudeau’s language is rather evasive and less performative when apologizing for a personal offense. Compared to his historical apologies, where Trudeau explains the circumstances and gravity of the transgression in detail, his personal apologies avoid these details. For instance, in his Tofino apology, Trudeau implies that “how it happened” is insignificant (cpac 2021, 14:51), whereas, in the examples of historical apologies, he expresses a “need” to understand the contexts surrounding the historical transgression to apologize genuinely. The difference suggests that Trudeau attempts to minimize his responsibility when apologizing for personal offenses. When apologizing for historical transgressions, Trudeau does not shy away from partly blaming himself for being part of the government and using various IFIDs. However, by still not

being the direct offender for the historical transgression, Trudeau's positive face is not equally at risk compared to his personal offenses (Kampf 2009, 2262). This could lead him to undermine his responsibility for personal offenses, to save his desired positive face and attempt to appeal to the audience's positive face by undermining his responsibility of causing harm to others.

Moreover, the contrasting ways of apologizing in the examples suggest that Trudeau's language and apology strategies in the historical apologies aim to restore his image as a progressive politician and minority ally. Trudeau's historical apologies are heavily concerned with assuring the addressed minority groups of their belonging and amending the wrongful treatment in the past. Through positive politeness strategies, he reconciles and bonds with minority groups, which strengthens his positive face as well. This contrasts with his personal apologies, where he avoids detailed descriptions and uses evasive language to downplay his responsibility. For instance, in his Inuit tuberculosis apology, he states that the racist discrimination Inuit faced "was and always will be unacceptable" (Global News 2019, 13:39). In contrast, he states with a different attitude in his blackface apology that "I didn't consider it a racist action at the time, but now we know better" (CTV News 2019, 9:24). Considering the apologies were delivered in the same year, 2019, Trudeau is more definitive and direct in this language about racism in the Inuit tuberculosis apology than in his blackface apology. The evasive language in the personal apologies disowns his responsibility and amends his desired positive face as a progressive leader. The unambiguous language helps him restore this desired image in his historical apologies by owning responsibility and initiating reconciliation, appealing to the minority groups' positive faces. Therefore, the strategic use of positive politeness, apology strategies, and direct and detailed language in Trudeau's historical apologies suggests that he attends to his desired positive face of being an ally of minorities and a progressive politician.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, Justin Trudeau uses different politeness and apology strategies in personal apologies than in historical apologies. In personal apologies, Trudeau is concerned with saving his positive face, resulting in evasive and ambiguous language and a less performative speech act. In historical apologies, Trudeau is not the direct offender and is more concerned with appealing to his audience's positive face needs by positioning himself as an ally, strengthening his own desired face. Consequently, Justin Trudeau formulates his apologies differently depending on his responsibility for the offense to maintain his public image and strengthen his desired face of being a progressive leader and minority ally.

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