'I Believed It Was a Work Event': Sociolinguistic Features in an Apology and Its Responding Memes

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1. Introduction

Saying you are sorry, apologising, or expressing regret is essential for functioning socially in the world. This applies to all interpersonal conversations as well as to situations in which politicians and state leaders deliver either personal or official apologies in formal settings such as the national parliament or through the media. However, sometimes apologies fail to reach their objective. They are not accepted and can become disputed or even ridiculed, for example, through satirical comments in the form of internet memes. Memes have become an increasingly important means of communication on social media, serving as channels for protest movements, satirical political commentary, and other countercultural expressions (Shomova 2022).

This article examines the sociolinguistic features of apologies and memes and is structured into two main parts. The first part explores apologies as speech acts, drawing on theoretical insights from the rhetorical arena and politeness theory. These concepts are then applied to a specific apology made by then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the House of Commons. The second part shifts the article's focus to memes, examining their central sociolinguistic features and how they contribute to new interpretations of the original apology when used as responses.

2. Apologies

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) have set up a framework for understanding apologies, which has become widely adopted by other researchers of speech acts. Speech Act Theory entails that there are manifest intentions behind an utterance. In the case of apologies, there must be recognition that a violation of a social norm has occurred and admittance that the speaker has been involved in it (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, 206). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain assert that there are two basic forms of apology strategies: (1) illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), containing performative verbs such as 'sorry', 'apologise', 'regret', 'excuse', etc. and (2) utterances that relate

to the cause of the offence, the acceptance of responsibility, a willingness to offer repairs and promises that the offence will not happen again (206). These utterances may be modified into either stronger or weaker apologies depending on the circumstances.

Apologies may also be seen in the light of ancient Greek texts, where apologies are defined as the rhetorical device 'metanoia', which allows a speaker to modify or retract a statement. In Christianity, metanoia has evolved to mean renouncing all sinful deeds and rejecting one's old ethos (Ellwanger 2020, 21). Where the rhetorical meaning of metanoia is 'taking back' words, the Christian meaning is renouncing one's actions. When someone takes back an earlier action, they are also undergoing some modification of their identity and are 'expected to offer a discursive account of the inner change' (25). The modern, secular apology is modelled on the medieval church's repentance rituals within a formula primarily adapted from Christian confessional rites, argues Ellwanger (26). The Christian formula largely corresponds to the work of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, adding the process of inner transformation to the apologist. Other researchers also view apologies as essentially moral acts and a source of potential moral growth (Harris et al. 2006, 722).

When we examine how and why the speech act of apology is performed, it is productive to include theories of politeness, as they provide an understanding of what is at stake for both the speaker and the hearer when the apology is performed. Brown and Levinson (1987) have combined aspects of speech act theory with Goffman's (1967) understanding of 'face' in order to explain how social needs and linguistics affect each other. Goffman defines face as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Goffman 1967, 5). In other words, we strive to present ourselves to other people in a manner that will secure positive recognition because our 'line' or stance is being accepted. Brown and Levinson derive their notion of face partly from Goffman, partly from the English folk term, 'which ties up face with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or "losing face"' (Brown and Levinson 2004).

Face can be either negative or positive, according to Brown and Levinson, who argue that the former expresses a wish to steer clear of other people's interference, while the latter reflects a wish that one's self-image is appreciated and approved. Apologies tend to originate from acts that threaten either face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker (Brown and Levinson 2004).

These face-threatening acts might be a less serious threat to the speaker's face if the apology comes across as authentic. Delivering an apology understood as well-intentioned may reduce some of the threat to the offender's face. 'Followers who appraised their leader's apology as sincere perceived their leader as humble, which, in turn, generates positive follower reactions' (Bithiah et

al. 2019, 9). Furthermore, the vocalisation of regret from the offender in the form of an apology is a 'diminution of one's standing in relation to the offended other … the self-renunciation that any apology entails is also the punishment for the offense that it names' (Ellwanger 2020, 27). The victim's face can be saved when the offender puts themselves in a lower position and, by doing so, accepts a symbolic punishment.

Lowering or humbling yourself as a means of conveying sincerity and mitigating the offence whilst simultaneously reducing the threat to one's own face becomes especially relevant when turning to political apologies. Political apologies are far more face-threatening to the speaker than other politeness-sensitive speech acts and can result in severe loss of face, argues Leech (2014). Therefore, the restoration of 'a balance of good relations has to be weighed against the negative reasons for avoiding apology in order to avoid face loss or humiliation' (Leech 2014, 133).

Political apologies have four core characteristics that set them apart from interpersonal apologies, according to Harris et al. (2006). (1) These apologies are heavily mediated, which is an important aspect of the purpose – to report the apology to as many receivers as possible. (2) They are often rooted in conflict and likely to generate more conflict, especially if an apology is not offered voluntarily but made based on the background of the demands of an offended public. (3) For the media and audience to perceive the apology as valid, an explicit IFID and relevant words that indicate acceptance of responsibility must be present. For example, the word 'apologise' is considered less ambiguous than 'sorry'. However, even using the performative verb 'apologise' can be evasive if it refers to someone else's behaviour, or it becomes unclear what the speaker is apologising for. Furthermore, an apology that appears to take responsibility but denies any transgression has occurred, or addressing the outcome rather than the act, can both be regarded as non-apologies that initially appear logical (Kampf 2009, 2263-2264). (4) Threats of legal repercussions may prevent politicians from offering an apology. Often, the only promise of forbearance is connected to a general statement of 'we have learned from this' (Harris et al. 2006, 720). These characteristics are closely connected to the reflections on how the political culture has shifted from being based on ideological ideas to a personification of politics that 'has made the credibility and trustworthiness of public figures and organizations crucial issues' (Kampf 2009, 2259). As a consequence, audiences view the apologist as transformed 'into a performer who seeks to restore his image. The emphasis on one's public character leads to totally different considerations in realizing an apology' (2259).

The political apology should therefore be regarded in the light of a development that places the apologist in a less ideological and more performer-oriented role. Humbling your stance as the offender may make the apology more palatable to the offended party, and the apology will come

across as more sincere if the speaker takes responsibility for their actions as unambiguously and precisely as possible. The risk of severe face loss for the speaker emphasises the importance of weighing the advantages of offering an apology against potential negative consequences, including possible legal repercussions. Furthermore, a promise of bettering oneself by renouncing wrongful deeds is a prerequisite for a potentially successful apology.

2.1 Method – analysing an apology

The following analysis examines Boris Johnson's apology, issued on 12 January 2022, concerning a breach of COVID-19 regulations (BBC News 2022). The analysis combines close reading with a sociopragmatic approach derived from Geoffrey Leech's study of politeness theory (2014). This approach evaluates the appropriateness of the apology according to the context.

It can be argued that Johnson's apology was not a formal, official, or political apology because it did not address the wrongdoings in historical times or towards specific groups in the name of the state or government – see, for example, the definition of official apologies in Villadsen and Edwards (2020, 2). However, because Boris Johnson was the Prime Minister at the time and committed the offences for which he apologised while performing official duties, and because the apology has several of the characteristics described as belonging to the definition of political apologies, I will treat it as such in my analysis.

2.2 Analysis: 'There were things we simply did not get right' – the apology

During the COVID lockdown, allegations were made that parties and other gatherings had taken place at Number 10 Downing Street. The gatherings allegedly breached the existing regulations and were dubbed 'Partygate' by the media. The Prime Minister, government ministers, and the official spokesman continuously denied that rules had been broken. However, on 12 January 2022, Boris Johnson made a statement lasting 2 minutes and 17 seconds to the House of Commons just before PMQ (Prime Minister's Question Time), in which he admitted wrongdoings. The circumstances behind the apology appear to be an email leak revealing that Johnson's private secretary had invited No. 10 staff to a gathering to 'make the most of the lovely weather' in May 2020 and to bring alcohol to the gathering (HuffPost UK 2022).

Boris Johnson begins by making a declarative statement using an explicit and unambiguous IFID: 'Mr Speaker, I want to apologise' (BBC News 2022, 00:00–00:04). He then acknowledges the sacrifices made by the British people during the lockdown. However, he does not explicitly state what he is apologising for. Instead, he expresses understanding of the difficulties the people have gone through and continues, 'And I know the rage they feel with me and with the government

I lead, when they think that in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed by the people who make the rules' (BBC News 2022, 00:23–00:38). This utterance appears to express more empathy with the British people, but in fact, places Johnson and his government in the role of the offended party by assuming people of thinking ill of him and is thereby posing a threat to his face. He also extends the supposed feelings of the people to include the government as a whole, shifting the responsibility from a strictly personal to a governmental matter.

This line is continued in the following passage, in which Johnson admits that 'there were things we simply did not get right, and I must take responsibility' (BBC News 2022, 00:46– 00:53). What 'we did not get right' is a very general observation, which makes it unclear what the PM exactly is taking responsibility for. Furthermore, this utterance is preceded by 'I have learned enough to know', which implies that he claims *not* to have known 'things' to be wrong at the time they happened. As Harris et al. (2006, 723) point out, the risk of litigation can be a reason for not apologising directly for a misstep and instead allude more evasively to unspecified offences.

After explaining the physical layout of No. 10 Downing Street and stating he had only intended to thank the staff at a gathering that lasted about 25 minutes, Johnson goes on to say: 'I believed implicitly that this was a work event' (BBC News 2022, 01:19– 01:23). This becomes the central argument in the speech as it repeals the formerly proffered promise to take responsibility and paves the way for the claim that the gatherings did not technically overstep any rules. With this utterance, it becomes clear that Johnson is apologising for an event he does not believe was a transgression at all – or at least one he was unaware of – cf. Kampf (2009, 2263).

Expressions of regret are found in the section of the speech where Johnson includes the rhetorical device of an anaphora: '… with hindsight, I should have sent everyone back inside, I should have found some other way to thank them, and I should have recognised that even if it could be said technically to fall within the guidance, there would be millions and millions of people who simply would not see it that way' (BBC News 2022, 01:26– 01:47). The anaphora emphasizes and reinforces the regret expressed, creates rhythm in the speech, and suggests sincerity. It is also an efficient rhetorical device used plentifully in both famous speeches and celebrated poetry – cf. MLK's speech 'I Have a Dream' and John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting, and for ever young' (Keats 1819). After having once more expressed empathy with people suffering from the COVID restrictions, Johnson offers his 'heartfelt apologies' to the British people and the House of Commons (BBC News 2022, 02:00– 02:03). He concludes the speech by promising a new statement once the ongoing inquiry ends.

Boris Johnson's speech has a strong emotional tone: Expressions like 'extraordinary sacrifices', 'anguish', 'rage', and 'heartfelt apologies' all convey pathos. These words can be seen as the verbal antidotes to feelings of distraught that Johnson believes are felt by the people 'who suffered terribly', '[were] unable to mourn their relatives', 'were forbidden from meeting loved ones'. The focus lies on the victims and their emotions, giving the impression of an appropriate correlation between the level of sympathy expressed by Johnson and the feelings of hurt. However, the credibility of these statements is negated, and their appropriateness becomes invalid when it becomes clear that the strong IFID in the opening of the speech, 'I want to apologise', is an apology for a transgression that is not acknowledged or at least just given for the outcome, not the act. By refusing to accept that he has knowingly breached the rules, Johnson has forfeited the opportunity to rise to the occasion, demonstrating no moral or personal growth as required in the Christian understanding of apologies.

It is also worth noting what is *not* said as part of the apology: There are no mentions of words like 'party', 'alcohol', or 'gathering' that would address the allegations directly. Furthermore, the central statement that reveals the apology's non-apologetic nature is Johnson's claim that he believed he was attending a work event. In the following sections of this article, the central features of memes will be examined, and afterwards, a selection of the memes that comment on Johnson's apology will be analysed.

3. Memes

Originally coined as a term in 1979 by Richard Dawkins, memes were defined as 'a unit of cultural transmission passed on by imitation' (Huntington 2015, 78). In a more contemporary definition, memes can be described as 'a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission' (Grundlingh 2017, 148) and as an expression of creativity and participatory culture-making, which also functions as devising political communication (Shomova 2021, 232). The content allows a distinction between "us" and "them" and is compressed in a manner that makes memes really easy to reproduce (232), as well as allowing non-traditional political debaters to 'talk back' to authorities (233). Overall, the success of memes in propagating depends on their 'ability to resonate with individuals on both the personal and societal levels' (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018, 297).

The research on memes originally sprang from Dawkins and the analogy to the spread of genes, but has since profited from a more comprehensive theoretical approach. Elaborating on Ferdinand de Saussure's classic formula of a sign being imbued with meaning by the abstract signifier and the physical signified, Grant Kien argues that we, as a result of living within the

postmodern condition, have 'come to consider everything capable of being a signifier as ours to appropriate, deconstruct, and reassign into a new, meaningful semiotic assemblage' (Kien 2019, 9). The signifier can be 'reassigned to make the sign mean whatever one wants because what is signified has become open to whatever one chooses' (10). Kien's point is that the instability of signification and the inherent fluidity of meanings are the foundations of memes as we know them today – they are products of the disconnection between the signifier and the signified.

Bezemer and Jewitt extend the semiotic understanding of memes by drawing on the concept of multimodality, recognising that people make meaning by using multiple means (Bezemer and Jewitt 2018, 1). 'Multimodality marks a departure from the traditional opposition of 'verbal' and 'non-verbal' communication, which presumes that the verbal is primary, and that all other means of making meaning can be dealt with by one and the same term' (2). Grundlingh expands these ideas even further by arguing that a meme's interpretation is a process of signification and can be regarded as a speech act. 'Because memes are multimodal artefacts that can also be interpreted through the theory of semiotics, it is possible for them to be a message that is more complex than just a simple image being sent from one individual to another' (Grundlingh 2017, 150). Furthermore, Grundlingh argues that although speech acts have traditionally been associated with spoken communication, memes can be understood as using a creator-receiver relation and therefore share similar conditions for communication. 'As in all speech acts, the context and the intent of the creator also play an important role in the understanding of memes' (161). At the same time, social media reduces the distance between creators and receivers as the receivers are able to 'cross the fence', so to speak, and become creators themselves (Olesen 2022, 1328).

When using a multimodal approach to memes, the involvement of social context is part of the shaping of meaning and interpretation (Holm 2021, 13). Memes can be connected to specific events or serve as commentary on political issues. They can be regarded as social texts, artefacts that are pieced together in a co-creational process that paves the way for understanding societal discourses (Milner 2012). Memes can be used as jokes to express negative emotions about influential decision-makers when they comment humorously on political events. Of course, for the joke to work, the receiver must know the original speech act or situation the meme relates to (Grundlingh 2017, 164).

In summary, the research points to these central features in memes: Memes are culture-making artefacts with the ability to 'talk back' to authorities and perform political communication. They are sense-making through creativity, potentially forming new semiotic assemblages, and they are multimodal, using various communicative tools and means. They may also be regarded as speech acts that facilitate discussion and understanding of societal discourses.

3.1 Method – analysing the memes

The internet overflowed with memes commenting on Boris Johnson's apologetic statement in Parliament on 12 January 2022 (BBC News, 2022). In the following analysis, a handful of memes will be examined qualitatively, drawing on the theoretical framework outlined above. The memes chosen for analysis represent different expressions, aesthetics, and levels of meaning, illustrating the variety, though not the full range, of memes produced in response to the apology.

3.2 Analysis: 'I believed it was a work event' – the memes

On the same day Boris Johnson apologises, meme-creators take to Twitter to comment on the utterance 'I believed implicitly that this was a work event', paraphrasing memes around the element 'work event' or adding the word 'party'.

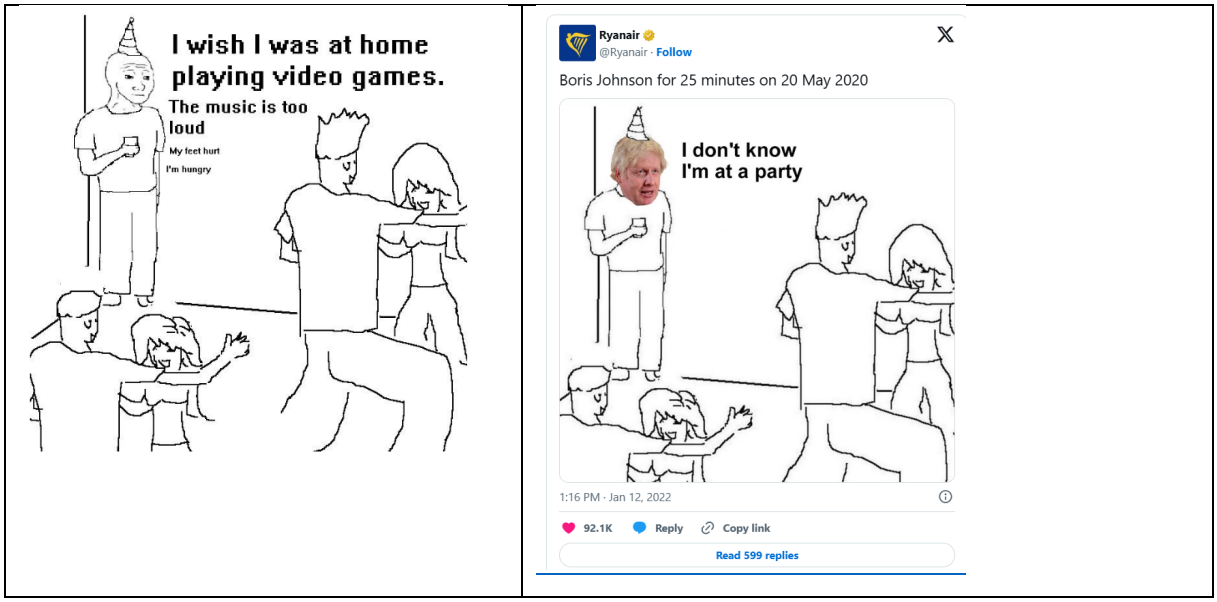

Figure 1. Original meme (Know Your Meme 2009) vs. Ryanair's comment. (Houston 2022).

Airline carrier Ryanair reuses the 'I Wish I Was at Home (Playing Videogames)' meme as a template. This meme was initially created in 2009, depicting the meme's main character, Wojak or Feels Guy, as being uneasy at parties (Know Your Meme, 2009. 'I Wish I Was at Home/They Don't Know'). In Ryanair's version, Boris Johnson's head is inserted in lieu of Feels Guy's with an accompanying tweet, 'Boris Johnson for 25 minutes on 20 May 2020, and the caption is altered to 'I don't know, I'm at a party' (Houston 2022). The character's changed identity and the new caption contribute to the creation of a new sign because the signifier has been reassigned to a new semiotic assemblage, referring to a new signified cf. Kien (2019). The caption does not align with the depicted situation, and the inserted image of Boris Johnson shows him in what the audience must

perceive as a highly unrealistic position, given the many public photographs of Johnson posing with a pint of beer. The cohesion between text and image depends on the audience's understanding of the context and the original meme, whereas the joke is rooted in using the antithesis between text and image. The creator of this meme is a private company, which suggests a social media strategy that aims to reduce the distance to customers by engaging in light-hearted conversations about politics and ethics.

Figure 2. Light entertainment comedy game show as template for a meme. (Calladine 2022)

Some of the memes take inspiration from other popular culture products, such as game shows and comedy. 'Would I Lie to You?' is an award-winning game show on the BBC. The concept is that one team gains points for correctly guessing whether a statement from the other team is true. Both must present and guess the correctness of unlikely stories such as: 'I have a crippling fear of the underside of ships' (WILTY? Nope! 2017). The inserted text, 'I once spent 25 minutes at a party but mistook it for a work event,' mimics the implausible statements from their original context. As a part of the show's humour, the contestants play with the likelihood of their story by sometimes pretending that they cannot read it aloud without laughing or, as in this case, pulling a face of disbelief, which is clearly a comment on the unlikely event of Boris Johnson attending a party unknowingly. The title of the cue card, repeated in the left-hand corner of the screen, becomes a rhetorical question when put into the context of 'Partygate'; would I lie to you? Of course you would, Boris Johnson…

Figure 3: The satirical sketch show 'Little Britain' as template for a meme. (MC 2020)

Figure 3 draws on characters from the sketch comedy 'Little Britain'. Fictional Sir Norman Fry, Tory MP, with his long-suffering wife standing by, regularly holds press conferences in his garden, giving fantastical and imaginative explanations for transgressions that always include sexual misconduct. For example: 'Shortly after my arrival, my clothes accidentally fell off. At that moment, I slipped on a glazed cherry and landed inside one of the men' (Pig Head 2020). The caption in the new meme mimics the style of the wholly unrealistic explanations, playing on the congruency between real-life political apologies and their comedic parodies. The meme equates Boris Johnson with Sir Norman Fry as the archetypal scandal-ridden British MP who struggles to maintain a respectable appearance despite his evident hypocrisy, questioning Johnson's general morality. Memes in figures 2 and 3 require knowledge of the context and content from which the images were extracted in order to understand the joke because the signifier and the signified have been disconnected. Using game shows and comedy as the starting point for the critique implies that Johnson and his government act in a manner comparable to performance or entertainment.

Figure 4: Casting doubts about Johnson's moral habitus.
(White 2020).

The final example of memes in this article refers directly to the statement, 'I believed it was a work event'. A short clip from the movie 'The Wolf of Wall Street' depicts an extravagant office party demonstrating excessive behaviour (Winter and Belfort 2013). This meme likens the greed and lack of professionalism in the fictional world of Jordan Belfort's brokerage firm to the goings-on at No. 10 Downing Street. The caption reads, 'I thought I was at a work meeting'. The statement is juxtaposed with a marching band, servers carrying trays with champagne glasses, and scantily clad women storming into the office. This meme expresses an ideological critique and negative emotions about Boris Johnson's persona, casting doubt on his and his political colleagues' moral habitus on a broader scale than merely the actual event, raising the question: Can we trust these hedonistic people to lead the country? The message becomes more complex when the underlying social context is addressed and scrutinised by re-using artefacts from other cultural products – cf. Milner (2012).

4. Conclusion

When done correctly, an apology can restore a fractured relationship and bring reconciliation with the offended party in a situation of conflict or conflicting interests. Boris Johnson's apology in Parliament on 12 January 2022 fails to live up to this ideal. Instead of taking genuine responsibility

for breaches of lockdown regulations, Johnson focuses on addressing the emotional suffering of the British people as a consequence of the lockdown, without admitting any knowledge of wrongdoing on his part. Although Johnson uses IFIDs such as 'apologise' and 'heartfelt apologies', there is no acceptance of responsibility, no willingness to make amends, or promises that the offence will not happen again, making the unspecified apologies untrustworthy. Having examined the central features of memes as a communicative genre, it may be concluded that the humorous memes commenting on Boris Johnson's apology embody cultural resistance and critique of the political establishment using creative and multimodal devices. The added layers of meaning make memes more than just simple images. They suggest that digital cultural products are expanding the arenas in which politics can be discussed and evaluated, giving voice to explicit testing of the legitimacy of political speech acts.

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