The Power Behind Apology

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Apologies may be executed via a wide range of utterances. Each method does not have a one-to-one relationship with the apology’s intentions. I demonstrate that although various expressions of apologies have different causation correlations, they become interchangeable given certain details of the discourse, such as degree of offense and power dynamic among participants. The delta in power “level” between speaker and hearer yields a corresponding level of politeness and frequency and intensity of apology. An algorithm calculating the intensity of an apology may begin by analyzing the degree of offense combined with the delta in power dynamic, then the word choice in the delivery of the speech act; power dynamic is subsequently evaluated in terms of face-threat level. In certain situations, particular word choices may yield different resulting deltas. Determining further need for adjusting the power gap depends on how the hearer responds to the apology, and the discourse context’s corresponding social “expectations”. I test this algorithm by looking at natural occurrences of (I’m) sorry, excuse me, and I apologize- provided by MICASE- thereby testing the hypothesis that an apology is a method of increasing the difference in face level.