# Public (non-) apologies: The discourse of minimizing responsibility

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**Public (non) apologies: The Discourse of Minimizing Responsibility**

**1. Apologies in Contemporary Politics**

It seems that the dictum "Never apologize, Never explain" has lost its illustrative power in the last two decades. Hundreds of apologies made by states, organizations, and public figures have turned the dictum into an archaism and brought academic scholars to claim that we are living in the *Age of Apology* (Brooks, 1999; Cunningham, 1999; Gibney et al., 2007; Govier and Verwoerd, 2002; Harris, et al, 2006; Lakoff, 2000; Meier, 2004). Admittedly, when made genuinely, motivated by moral concerns, public apologies can be considered moral acts (Gill, 2000; Harvey, 1995; Thompson, 2007). However, studies that have focused on several problems stemming from the public context of apology realization have undermined to various degrees the sincerity and authenticity of many of these gestures. Those studies point to problems such as issuing delegated apologies (i.e. apologizing for acts that the speaker was not involved in directly; Cuningham, 1999), limiting the regret to symbolic restitution (without material compensation; Govier and Verwoerd, 2002), manipulating the form of the rhetorical genre (Lakoff, 2000; 2001), and evaluating apologies by public actors and social groups in a cynical and distrusting manner (Kampf, 2008). In spite of the fact that more often then not the moral core of public apologies is doubtful (James, 2007), frequent realizations of the speech act in the global arena since the 1990s have turned apologies into a common device for image restoration as well as a legitimate tool for managing social relationships with others in the public sphere. The practice has been conventionalized through its recurrent realizations in the international and national discourse, and the norm of apologizing for misdeeds in the distant and recent past has been established through this process. The constraining aspect of this norm is apparent in the reflexive designation of verbal responses

by public figures, which conforms to the contemporary moral discursive standard (i.e., expressing the "right" feelings of sorrow following transgressions of human justice). This compliance in the discourse level with the constructed norm of apologizing contributes in its turn to the expansion of the *age of apology* (Kampf, 2007).

In spite of the political benefits public figures can gain from apologizing upon being accused of violating norms, values, or ethical codes, the speech act still poses a threat to the public figure's image: by apologizing, the transgressor admits to failing to fulfill a task or conform to a norm. Therefore, the act is *face threatening* due to the fact that it may be regarded as a challenge to the apologizer's ability to perform his role appropriately in the public arena. Furthermore, in some cases—mainly in the international and national political arenas—apologizing may be perceived as a humiliating act which detracts from the apologizer's symbolic power (Bilder, 2007; Kampf, 2008; Olshtain, 1989).

Considering the contemporary popularity of this rhetorical genre, it is surprising to find a relative lack of research on the pragmatics of public apologies (see also Harris et al, 2006). Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine how public figures—whether as individuals or representatives of organizations—realize creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds while taking into consideration the structural tension between the moral-discursive standard of late and their face needs as well as the specific situational constraints in the production of apology utterance.

**2. Public Apologies Research**

In the last decade, public apologies have become one of the 'hot' topics studied in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, international relations, sociology, discourse studies, communications, and law. Most of the works on public apologies, as well as those on mundane apologies, are based on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), on Goffman's terms *face* (1967) and *remedial interchanges* (1971), and

on the fusion of the two in politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this theoretical context, one of the most cited definitions for apology in the literature interweaves the concern for the face needs of both the hearer and the apologizer, "…a speech act which is intended to provide a support for the hearer who was…malaffected by a violation X. In the decision to carry out the verbal apology, the speaker is willing to humiliate himself or herself to some extent and to admit to fault and responsibility for X" (Olshtain, 1989: 156). Indeed, the apologizer's acknowledgment of a transgression is the most important feature for facilitating an understanding of the motive for apologizing or avoiding it (Meier, 1998). In addition to a clear acknowledgment of responsibility, an ideal apology should contain an illocutionary force indicating device (*ifid*) (Harris et al, 2006) and be void of any other type of excuses and/or justifications (Tavuchis, 1991).

Most of the interest in the public speech act of apology thus far has been focused on the ways in which political actors realize creative forms of apologetic speech in order to minimize their responsibility for misdeeds (Abadi, 1990, 1991; Benoit, 1995; Lakoff, 2000, 2001). As such, apologies have mostly been studied as one strategy among other types of excuses and justifications for *image restoration* (see for example Benoit, 1995). Relatively recent studies in the field of pragmatics demonstrate that apologies generate conflict and controversy in the public domain (Harris, et al, 2006; Lakoff, 2000). Therefore, the extent of responsibility, which is apparent in the utterance of an apology, is often an issue for negotiation between the apologizer and the offended party (Abadi, 1990, 1991; Lakoff, 2001; Olshtain, 1989). The outcome of the discursive struggle over the form is the public perception of the speech act as an insincere gesture (Abadi, 1991, Kampf, 2008). This perception is reinforced by several syntactic (for example, the use of passive) and lexical (for example, the use of the *sorry* verb instead of *apologize*) tactics that manipulate the form of apology in order to minimize the offender's responsibility (Bavelas, 2004; Lakoff, 2000,

2001). These types of equivocal “non-apologies,” as Bavelas and Lakoff argue, are the outcome of situational constraints that inhibit direct apologies.

In spite of the research conducted thus far on the speech act, to date there has been no study that systematically analyzes the way in which responsibility is minimized in the apology utterance. Furthermore, despite the claim that there are countless ways to apologize in everyday life (Holmes, 1990; Mills, 2003), and in spite of the calls in current linguistic politeness research to focus on the recipient's understanding of apologies (Grainger and Harris, 2007; Mills, 2003), there is still a need to understand the principle ways in which public figures apologize when they are held accountable for their misconduct. This need has become even more crucial in the context of the process I introduced above, according to which apologizing is becoming a prominent tool for image restoration and managing relations with others in contemporary global and local politics.

**3. Apologies, Face Consideration, and Equivocal Speech in the Public Arena**

Studies on public and political image have taught us that *face* considerations are a crucial matter for the actor's status and survival in the public arena (Bull et al, 1996; Gruber, 1993; Olshtain, 1989; Perez de Ayala, 2001; Thompson, 2000). Face maintenance in political contexts "is not merely a strategy, but an end of its own right" (Bull et al 1996: 271). The outcome of an act that threatens public face may be a detraction from the figure's symbolic power, that is "…the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions and beliefs of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms" (Thompson, 2000: 98).

Apologies are an interesting case study for studying the costs and the benefits for a public figure's face. On the one hand, the realization of apologies not only conforms to the moral discursive standard of late and to the public’s expectations of its representatives but can assist an apologizer project a moral persona and reconstruct public trust. Apologies have

the potential to do so because, once interpreted as sincere acts, they indicate that the transgressor is responsible, sensitive, and capable of acknowledging his deficiencies (Harvey, 1995). On the other hand, apologies can undermine the public agent's desired face and project the image of a person who lacks professional capabilities and discretion and even behaves recklessly.

The structural tension between the moral discursive standard that motivates public figures to apologize and different *face* considerations that inhibit them from doing so is even greater in contemporary *politics of trust* (Thompson, 2000). The transformation of Western political culture in recent decades from ideological politics to the personalization of politics has made the credibility and trustworthiness of public figures and organizations crucial issues. In the *politics of trust*, public figures and institutions are monitored routinely by journalists and media technologies and are forced to survive *credibility tests*. These tests emerge when journalists report to the public on a public figure's misconduct, a slip of the tongue for example, that brings to light an inconsistency between his backstage behavior and front stage performance (Thompson, 2000). The inconsistency between the two spheres causes public scandals and requires the transgressor to exercise means for saving his face in order to maintain his former status or sometimes even survive in the public arena (Olshtain, 1989; Thompson, 2000).

Some public *credibility tests* consist of apology moments in which figures and organizations are called to issue an apology (and not merely an explanation, excuse, etc.). In such moments, the transgressor's decision whether to apologize or not becomes more complex compared to the interpersonal arena due to several factors. The first factor is related to the presence of indirect participants in the public domain who do not necessarily share the same assumptions about the events as the offender and the offended. Audiences transform the apology process in several ways (Tavuchis, 1991). The participation of others leads to the

creation of a "punitive atmosphere," and sometimes the main goal of indirect participants is to humiliate the wrongdoer. Moreover, the involvement of others "front stages" the reputation of the offender and turns him 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. The outcome of the will or the obligation to apologize without acknowledging responsibility is a realization that lacks the sincerity and authenticity which characterize apologies in the private sphere. A second factor which has to be taken into consideration before apologizing is the documentation of the statement by the media in a kind of public quotation archive. The documentation "on record" of an apology creates a definitive story with a clear offender and victim. In the long run, it enables others, including journalists and rival politicians, to cite the apology in any case of the same occurrence. The last factor that public figures must take into account when performing apologies is related to the juridical stance of their words. In cases in which the apologizer has violated a criminal law, issuing an apology, that is accepting responsibility for a misdeed, may endure material or severe consequences, such as financial restitution or dismissal from a political role (Bilder, 2007; Govier and Verwoed, 2002; Kampf, 2008).

The dilemma that public figures face in these avoidance situations (Bavelas et al, 1990), in which any type of response may have negative consequences for their *face* (not conforming to the discursive moral standard of late on the one hand, and voluntary acknowledgment of responsibility for a misdeed on the other hand), obligates them to consider two matters. First, they must decide whether to realize an apology or not. Second, if they choose to realize an apology, they must decide upon the pragmatic strategies which are best fit to placate the victim's face without posing a dangerous threat to one's own self-face (Chen, 2001). Accordingly, Olshtain (1989) hypothesized that specific situations in the public arena in which the benefits from apologizing greatly exceed the costs are more likely

to lead to the realization of the speech act.[1] In other cases in which the costs outweigh the benefits, there is a tendency to avoid apologies or to perform them in an equivocal manner.

Indeed, *ambiguous*, *evasive*, or *equivocal speech* is a possible solution for avoidance conflicts. These terms apply to cases in which more than one pragmatic force can be assigned by an interpreter to a given expression (Blum-Kulka, 1989). In Grice's (1975) terms, by using equivocal speech, the speaker violates the maxim of manner, and potentially leads to pragmatic misunderstandings (Blum-Kulka and Weizman, 2003). In given situations in the public arena, evasive language can be useful from the speaker's point of view precisely due to the various meanings that may be assigned to his ambiguous utterance. An avoidance conflict in which the public figure is held accountable for his misdeed is an excellent example of this. The way to politically survive this avoidance conflict, and to pass the *credibility test*, is to formulate evasive forms that can potentially placate several public actors and audiences with different perceptions in regard to responsibility and/or guilt[2] of the speaker. In doing so, public figures become linguistic acrobats, creatively using various pragmatic and linguistic strategies in order to reduce their responsibility for the events under public discussion (Lakoff, 2001).

**4. Method**

The data consisted of 354 reported apologies made or received by Israeli public figures, organizations, and institutions between the years 1997-2004. Six conventional lexemes of apology in Hebrew were searched using a systematic 'key word' sample in the online archives of the elite newspaper *Haaretz*. Utterances containing variants of the words

[1] For example, beneficial situations are common during electoral campaigns, after failing to be elected, before a return to the political arena, or in any circumstance in which a public figure is interested in establishing, strengthening, or securing political alliances (Kampf, 2007).

[2] Generally speaking, whereas responsibility means committing the act under discussion, guilt is related to the offensive nature of the act. Thus, when justifying his act, the wrongdoer acknowledges responsibility but denies guilt. By apologizing, in contrast, the speaker acknowledges both responsibility and guilt. For further discussion on the difference between the two terms, see Goffman, 1971: 98.

*hitnatzlut* (apologize), *tsa'ar* (sorry), *slicha* (forgiveness), *charata* (regret), *mechila* (absolution) and *kapara* (atonement) were considered. 841 news items that contain 354 apology utterances were sampled from a corpus of 2525 news items found in *Haaretz*. Other occurrences of apologies were collected from television news editions, radio interviews, major internet sites, and other Israeli newspapers.

Detailed discourse analysis of the apology utterances were made in order to demonstrate the various ways in which public figures reduce their responsibility for misdeeds. Each of the utterances made was analyzed by its deviance from the prototypal apology. The analysis focused on the way in which public speakers manipulated one of the four components of apology, as identified by Deutschmann (2003): (1) The remedy: Does the speaker use a formulaic and routinized expression of apology? (2) The offense: Does the speaker admit that a transgression occurred? (3) The offended: Does the speaker identify the offended party as such? (4) The offender: Does the speaker perceive himself as the offender, that is, acknowledge full responsibility and guilt for the transgression?

**5. Ways of Compromising Responsibility and Guilt in Apology Utterances**

In the following section, I will demonstrate how speakers use various tactics that focus on each one of Deutschmann's four components in order to lessen their responsibility for misdeeds. Importantly, these tactics are not mutually exclusive, and in each case, I focus on the tactic under discussion without elaborating on other tactics used by the speaker in the same apology utterance.

**5.1 The Apology Verb and the Discourse of Responsibility**

Apologies in the public arena should include explicit and routinized Illocutionary indicating devices (*Ifid's*) in order to be perceived as such (Harris et al., 2006). Thus, when a public transgressor is facing an avoidance conflict after a demand for apology, there are two major ways to incorporate an explicit verb in the utterance without truly apologizing: (1) Using a

verb with several pragmatic functions that does not necessarily count as an apology, or (2) Realizing a non-performative speech act. Both of these allow speakers to project an appearance of regret (and, in turn, a moral persona), without taking self-threatening responsibility or juridical liability for the offense.

**Apology Verb without Responsibility:** Apologies can be realized in many forms, each of which has several functions (Lakoff, 2001). The complex relations between forms and functions make the speech act "hard to identify, define, or categorize" and make "the analyst's task more daunting" (Ibid: 201). However, for public figures, the multiple functions of apology verbs such as *sorry*[3] (see for example Lakoff, 2000), enable creative use of the form in order to solve avoidance conflicts and pass credibility tests. Examples of using non-responsible apology verbs can be found in the formal announcements of Israeli spokesmen during the second Intifada, after "targeted killings" in which Palestinian civilians were also killed. The necessity to issue a response for the collateral damages sets an avoidance conflict before Israeli spokesmen. On the one hand, not apologizing for killings would be a second order transgression and would violate the international expectation to display appropriate feelings after such a grave offense. On the other hand, apologizing would be an admission of violating an international law (killing civilians in armed conflict) and may expose Israel to liability in future litigations. This is the reason that during the second Intifada various representatives of Israel used non-responsible expressions of sorrow instead of explicit apologies.

One example is the response to the exchange of fire on April 5, 2001 between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian security officers at the Erez border crossing. In response to

[3]Kampf (2007) identified six semantic-pragmatic functions of the verb *sorry* in Hebrew: all refer to a negative emotion that is aroused in the context of an unwanted state of affairs, act, or outcome from the speaker's point of view. From this basic definition of (1) general expression of sorrow (he/she/etc. is sorry for what happened) stem five more functions which depend on the attribution of guilt in the utterance and the way in which the participants are positioned in it: (2) apology; (3) expression of sympathy (4) condemnation and criticism; (5) denial of the need to apologize, and (6) expression of regret.

international condemnation of Israel (which was accused of attempting to assassinate Palestinian senior officials), Israeli PM Ariel Sharon sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in which, in the name of the Israeli government, he expressed "sorrow [tsa'ar] for the regrettable incident" (*Haaretz*, 10.4.01). This expression of sorrow was realized by Sharon in order to project an appearance of regret while avoiding responsibility de facto. It was subsequently reported as an *apology* in the newspaper *Maariv*: "The Prime Minister sent a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell and apologized [hitnatzel] for the shooting by IDF soldiers" (*Maariv*, 6.4.01). This substitution of verbs was the starting point for a second wave of accusations, this time by Israeli right wing politicians such as Yitzchak Levy from the National Religious Party, who perceived the letter as a "slap in the face and expression of distrust that weakens the strength of IDF" (*Maariv*, 10.4.01). In response to this development, the prime minister's spokesman issued a press release in which he explained the multifunction of the *sorry* verb:

> The prime minister did not apologize [hitnatzel] and does not intend to apologize [lehitnatzel]. He is simply expressing his sorrow [tsa'aro] that the incident occurred…The letter was written in a highly sophisticated manner. If one reads it carefully, he will notice that, in fact, the PM blames the Palestinians (for the incident) and is not apologizing [mitnatzel] for any Israeli act (*Maariv*, 10.4.01).

In this reflexive response, the spokesman negated the implication that the PM had apologized for the incident. From his point of view, the compound "express sorrow" should be interpreted differently by Israeli recipients than by the U.S. Secretary of State. In other words, while Sharon's statement was intended to suffice as an apology in the eyes of the U.S., he intended it to be a general expression of sorrow, or even a shifting of blame to the Palestinians in the Israeli context. This tactic would have worked had *Maariv* kept the original version in its report. Formulating the news item with the apology verb, combined with the controversy over the gesture that emerged afterwards, produced a need to clarify the

intention behind the letter and in turn to reveal the rhetorical possibilities folded in the verb *sorry*.

**Non-performative Apology:** A different way to avoid an explicit apology is to realize a non-performative apology, which does not consist of an active verb formulated in present tense ("I hereby apologize"). This category consists of three sub-categories: expressing a will or duty to apologize, promising to apologize, or referring to past apology. In all of these cases, public speakers violate the maxim of manner (Grice, 1975), and as a result, avoid the negative consequences attached to the realization of a felicitous apology.

The first tactic to avoid performativity is to express **willingness or duty to realize an apology**. This was the case of the German Free Democratic party representative, Jürgen Möllemann, who declared his willingness to apologize after accusing the deputy leader of the Central Council of Jews, Michel Friedman, of inspiring anti-Semitism through his behavior:

> If I have injured the sensibilities of Jewish people, then <u>I would like to apologize</u>. (NYT, 7.6.02).

Möllemann's self-face saving non-apology helped him avoid dismissal by the party leader, Guido Westerwelle. In addition to undermining the very existence of an offense ("If I have injured…"), Möllemann preceded the apology verb in the second clause with the modal *would* and in doing so undermined the performativity of his utterance.

The second and third tactics of avoiding performativity—**a promise to apologize** and **referring to a previous (non) apology**—were used by Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the Italian National Alliance (NA) party (the political successor of the Fascist party) before and during his visit to Israel in 2003. As in other cases in which political leaders used apologies in order to purify themselves from a dismal past, Fini also used the rhetorical genre in order to dissociate himself from the words of praise he poured a decade before on Benito Mussolini. Several months before his visit to Israel, and in the context of the Israeli political left's criticism of the right wing Likud party's willingness to host the Fascist party's

representative, Fini was interviewed by *Haaretz* journalist Adar Primor and promised to apologize in the name of all Italians for their past misdeeds.

> Primor: …Could you accept a declaration worded, "We, the Italians, accept responsibility for the crimes committed by the Fascist regime?"
> Fini: (committed) between 1938 and 1945, of course.
> Primor: If so, could you denounce Fascism with no qualifications, denounce Fascism as a movement, as an ideology?
> Fini: Of course, it smashed our democracy…
> Primor: Will you ask for forgiveness [slicha][4] from the Jewish people during your visit in Israel?
> Fini: Of course, of course (*Haaretz*, 13.9.02: 43-48).

Notice how Fini replies positively, using the modal *of course* in each one of his responses to Primor's formulation of the Israeli demands. In approving the journalist's words, Fini appeases his host without uttering an acknowledgment of responsibility, denunciation, or apology himself. Indeed, the promise to apologize was one of the main factors that paved the way for Israel's foreign ministry to approve Fini's visit (*Haaretz,* 25.11.03).

During Fini's visit to Israel, political figures and journalists anticipated his historical apology (*Haaretz*, 23.11.03), and when it was replaced by a mere denunciation of "shameful pages in history," some expressed their resentment. In response, *Haaretz* journalist, Adar Primor, initiated a second interview in which he inquired why Fini's apology had become a mere denunciation of Fascism.

> Primor: What happened to the promised apology [hitnazlut]?
> Fini: I denounced, denounced Fascism today again.
> Primor: But there is a difference between denunciation…and a historical apology [hitnazlut].
> Fini: I think I have already apologized [hitnatzalti], in the interview, for example. (*Haaretz*, 25.11.03)

With an awareness of the heated controversy in the Italian public discourse over his apologetic gesture (*Haaretz*, 24.11.03), Fini avoided an explicit apology, pointing to his denunciations and former promise to apologize as a felicitous request for forgiveness. This evasive solution to the avoidance conflict was rewarding from his point of view. Few Israeli

[4] The apology word presented here as it was translated from Italian by *Haaretz*.

politicians accepted his gestures and treated his public statements as a felicitous apology (Haaretz, 26.11.03). In addition, a few months later, Fini's historical purification was finally achieved when he was nominated for the position of the Italian minister of foreign affairs.[5]

**5.2 Offense and the Discourse of Responsibility**

Compared to the other components of an apology, the issue of responsibility for committing the act itself must be dealt with cautiously by the apologizer, because the words he chooses may determine his liability for the offense. As we shall see, there are five ways to lessen the responsibility of the transgressor even in cases in which he includes an *ifid* in his utterance. He can (1) apologize while undermining the claim that he offended someone; (2) apologize for the outcome (and not for the act); (3) apologize for the style (and not for the essence); (4) apologize for a specific component of the offense (and not for the entire occurrence); and lastly, (5) apologize while using syntactic and lexical means to downgrade his responsibility.

**Apology without an Offense:** The "strangest" utterances in the corpus were those in which the offender apologized for a transgression while denying its very existence. Despite their rareness in interpersonal discourse (Owen, 1983; Holmes, 1990), this type of apology is quite common in public discourse (Lakoff, 2001). Lakoff suggests that in spite of their infelicitous form, this type of apology illustrates the institutional agent's power to realize and signify utterances that in any other context would be conceived as illogical. They are conceived as such because, as it is argued by *face* theorists (Brown and Levinson, 1987), the self and other face needs are treated in a rational way by speakers. But rationality can vary across social and

[5] Another tactic for avoiding the apology verb is to realize a "good excuse" (Weiner et al, 1987) without using an *ifid*. Accordingly, accounts or clarifications may be interpreted as carriers of the illocution of apology by recipients who are "motivated" to forgive. See for example the case in which the mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, expressed his regret before Labor Party chairman Shimon Peres for his 1996 election slogan "Peres will divide Jerusalem": "With perspective of time and in the context of the last elections, there was a need to formulate the criticism in different way." The interpretation of *Haaretz*'s editor of this expression of regret was "Olmert apologized [hitnatzel] before Peres for his slogan 'Peres will divide Jerusalem'" (Haaretz, 15.8.97, A6).

cultural contexts. In the public arena, there is a different type of rationality that transforms such utterances into meaningful expressions. As elaborated above, the frequent credibility tests that consist of avoidance conflicts obligate speakers to realize creative forms of apologies. These forms are the outcome of maneuvering between appearances of taking responsibility and denying it in the same utterance, and as such, they are compatible with the logic that rules in the public arena.

One example of this type of non-apology occurred in the Israeli public arena in 1997 after Minister of Finance Yaacov Neman labeled the Israeli workers' union leaders who called for a strike "self-made bombs" (*Haaretz*, 2.12.97). In response to harsh public criticism that focused on his inappropriate use of a metaphor, Neman realized the following utterance:

> I didn't call the workers 'bombs'. If there is a worker who understood me in that fashion, despite the fact that I didn't say this, I must apologize [lehitnatzel] to him (*Haaretz*, 3.12.97).

Neman used several strategies of non-apology in his utterance. He defended his political face by explicitly denying twice the very occurrence of the offense (I didn't call… I didn't say). In addition, by using the conjunction *if*, he undermined the possibility that anyone was offended by his words (see "undermining the existence of the offended" tactic below). In the same clause he also used a misunderstanding type of justification (Semin and Manstead, 1983), which places the blame on the offended party for misinterpreting his words, a misinterpretation that led to the eruption of the *talk scandal* (Exstrom and Johansson, 2008). Neman also supported the victim's *face*, by using the tactic of declaring a general agreement to apologize. He did so by incorporating the modal *must* in his last clause, signaling his willingness to comply with the moral discursive standard that calls for apologizing for the alleged offense. In formulating such a complex utterance of non-apology, Neman reduced

the potential threat to his political face while simultaneously enhancing his face by creating the image of a person who behaves in moral manner.[6]

In the following three sections, I will demonstrate how different options of selectivity in apologizing—that is, apologizing for one component of the transgression—can serve as a tactic for reducing the extent of responsibility and guilt for a misdeed.

**Apology for the Outcome (and not for the Act):** One option of selectivity is to apologize for the (unintended) outcome of the act, whether it caused physical or emotional harm. This tactic was used several times by Israeli army spokesmen and Israeli politicians in response to the killing of Palestinian civilians during the second Intifada. The following statements, the first made by the IDF spokesman and the second by PM Ariel Sharon, demonstrate how Israeli representatives use an *ifid* of "sorry" (which itself can serve as a way to evade responsibility) regarding the byproduct of the act, while defining the army operation which led to the outcome as "successful."

> The IDF is sorry [mitsta'er] if civilians were injured, <u>but not for the successful operation</u> (*Haaretz*, 8.10.02).

> We have no interest in hurting civilians, and we are sorry for [metserim] the civilians that were injured, <u>but this operation is one of our biggest successes</u>. (*Haaretz*, 23.7.02)

Both the IDF spokesman and PM Sharon take responsibility for the act itself, but through the use of the negative conjunction *but,* they reject the guilt that is allegedly attached to the act that brought about the killing.

This tactic was also frequent used in responding to transgressions which led to emotional harm and distress. Apologies, according to Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986), are appropriate gestures for dealing with transgressions which are related to dignity and respect and for feelings of humiliation, embarrassment, and anger. An apology's ability to treat these

[6] In spite of his linguistic creativity, or maybe because of it, Neman's (non) apology was rejected by the union workers leader, Amir Peretz, who declared a workers strike several days later.

negative feelings is a crucial factor in restoring relationships and bringing about forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991; Govier and Verwoerd, 2002). Nevertheless, when the apology is oriented solely toward emotional harm and not toward the act itself, it serves as a non-apology because it evades full responsibility for the act that led to the injury. Moreover, apologizing for the victim's wounded feelings and not for the offender's act may be understood as a conversational implicature of blaming the victims for being too sensitive, a state of mind which led to the framing of the act as a transgression in the first place. In this manner, the offender shifts the blame for the emergence of the conflict to the offended party.

An example of using this tactic occurred in the Israeli public discourse in 1999. The events began with a series of insults ("racist" and "anti-Semitic") made by MK Avigdor Lieberman toward Deputy Inspector General Moshe Mizrahi, the police officer responsible for the fraud inquiry filed against him. As a result, a demand was made to remove Lieberman's political immunity as a first step in the process of putting him on trial. The Knesset committee and the attorney general discussed the incident and raised the possibility of Lieberman apologizing and, in return, charges against him for insulting a public officer would be dropped (*Haaretz*, 14.3.00). After a period of negotiation on the "right" form (see Kampf, 2008), Lieberman delivered the following apology:

> On April 19, 1999, *Yediot Acharonot* published an article that included, among other things, harsh language against Deputy Inspector General Moshe Mizrahi that was allegedly used during a party convention. The timing of things was due to great anger that I felt then regarding malicious publications whose source, I assumed, was the Israeli police. I was informed that the article and its content insulted the police chief, and for this, I am sorry [mitstaer] and apologize [mitnatzel] for the distress he felt (*Haaretz*, 28.2.01).

Instead of focusing on the act itself and apologizing for the insults, which included taboo phrases (for example, “anti-Semitic”), Lieberman apologized only for the emotional harm. He included in his text several excuses (such as "malicious publications whose source…was the Israeli police”) and undermined the very occurrence of the transgression

("harsh language… allegedly used"). Even the act of hurting the Deputy Inspector General's feelings was not obvious for Lieberman, and this is evident in the clause in which he declares that only after the act was he "informed that the article and its content insulted the police chief." This last addition includes two possible face saving implications. First, Lieberman was not aware that he had offended someone and, thus, the alleged harm may be the outcome of the offended party's over-sensitivity. Second, after learning from external sources about the harm, he is apologizing, and therefore one should treat him as a public representative who behaves according to ethical codes.

**Apology for the Style (and not for the Essence):** The second tactic of selectivity, which is exclusive to language-based transgressions, is to apologize for the style or the tone of the words one said and not for the content and/or the apologizer's intentions. An example of the use of this tactic in the Israeli public discourse happened in 2001 in the context of the fragile relations between the Israeli police and the Arab population in northern Israel. In his retirement speech, Alik Ron, the police commander of the northern region (and the person in charge during the 2000 events in which 13 Israeli Arabs citizens lost their lives) recalled the harsh language he had used in the past against Umm al-Fahm mayor, Raaed Salah, calling him "nasty" (*Haaretz*, 2.7.01). Ron expressed his sorrow for his style by saying:

> In essence, I do not regret [mitstaer] anything I have said. <u>There are things for whose style I am sorry [mitstaer] about</u> (*Haaretz*, 2.7.01).

In his statement, Ron made a distinction between his intentions and his (too) adversarial style, suggesting that the former is more important than the latter. Thus, his words depict an interesting version of the common perception in politics that "words are cheap" (Lakoff, 1990). Because words are not always capable of conveying our specific intentions properly, the latter are the essential attribute that should capture our attention. Thus, the hierarchy that Ron created between intentions and the way they are communicated can be regarded as a tactic of acknowledging a small failure while failing to apologize for the contents and

intentions that aroused the conflict in the first place. Indeed, this is an efficient means of creating the appearance of reconciliation without posing a severe threat to one's public image.

**Apology for a Component of the Offense (and not for the Entire Occurrence):** The third tactic for selectivity is to apologize for one out of several components that comprise the transgression. As in the latter case, the rationale for using such a tactic is the relatively low cost to the apologizer's public face, compared to the costs of apologizing for the whole transgression. This tactic was implemented in the Israeli public discourse after a scandalous interview published in the newspaper *Yediot Acharonot* with Israeli mainstream singer Meir Ariel who called gays and lesbians "perverts who spread diseases." Several weeks later, Ariel was interviewed again in the magazine edition of *Haaretz*. During the interview, journalist Neri Livne tried to obtain a statement of regret from the singer and in response Ariel said:

> Ariel: Not that I am taking back what I said, no chance, except for one thing that I said about gay people, that they are incubators for disease. At one point, I just wasn't paying attention and the studies I read were out-of-date, and that's the reason I thought that most of the people with AIDS are gay people. I found out later that I made a mistake and there is no connection between AIDS and homosexuality. <u>And for this mistake I apologize [mitnatzel]</u>.
> Livne: Do you also apologize [mitnatzel] for saying that gays and lesbians are perverts?
> Ariel: No, no way… (*Haaretz*, 11.9.98).

Ariel chose one statement from his earlier interview and apologized for it. He also explained it with a "good excuse" (I just wasn't paying attention . . .), ascribing his mistake to his "lack of knowledge" (Semin and Manstead, 1983). When Livne attempted to clarify whether his apology also applied to the second component of the transgression ("gays and lesbians are perverts"), she received a forthright negation ("No, no way"). In this manner, Ariel selectively apologized for one specific component, while negating the need to apologize for the entirety of the scandalous interview.

**Apology which Blurs the Offense:** The last tactic for reducing one's responsibility for misdeeds has previously been discussed by Bavelas (2004), who analyzed in detail texts of six apologies offered by Canadian churches to indigenous peoples. While Bavelas showed how the use of a passive verb and other forms that describe actions can blur the nature of the offense,[7] in this paper I focus on the ways in which apologizers title transgressions with different names in order to reduce their responsibility. I show that replacing the exact description of the offense with generic names can serve as a tactic for blurring the nature of the wrong.

**Incident**: When an apologizer labels his offense an "incident," he refers only to the dismal event, and not to his offensive act, blurring the act's negative and problematic meaning. In addition to blurring one's responsibility for acting inappropriately, such a use can serve as a means of avoiding mentioning an offense in cases of extreme embarrassment. An example for the latter case happened in 1997 when the manager of the Berlin Opera apologized after one of the actors signed a check in an Israeli café with the name "Adolph Hitler":

> On behalf of orchestra, I apologize [mitnatzel] for the <u>incident</u>, which stands in sharp contrast to the intention of our visit to the opera house in Tel Aviv (*Haaretz*, 1.6.97).

Mentioning the name of Nazi leader again could have caused further emotional distress among the Jewish recipients of the apology. Thus, using the generic noun *incident* served as an elegant way of avoiding the negative connotations attached to the name.

Hurt\harm\damage: A second way of blurring the nature of the offense is to substitute the act with its outcome—whether it be physical injury or emotional harm—and to apologize only for hurting the victim. An example for this tactic can be found in the way in which MK Zahi

[7] Compare, for example, apologizing in a simple active voice, "[We] have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ," with apologizing while omitting the actions made by the transgressor, "disciplinary practices that were foreign to Aboriginal peoples" (quotes from Bavelas, 2004).

Hanegbi reflected on his obligation to apologize before PM Ehud Barak, after falsely accusing him of leaving wounded soldiers in the field without medical treatment:

> The correct thing to do then was to express my sorrow [tsa'ar] for the harm that I caused Ehud Barak and maybe also his family (*Haaretz*, 20.5.99).

**Words**[8]: In contrast to the terms I discussed above, the term "words" describes the action itself, frequently describing a transgression of politically correct norms or other language-based transgressions such as insults or slanders. An example for such use can be found in the non-apology of Israeli minister Effi Eytam to the Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer for insulting him during a radio interview in 2002:

> If the words I said about the Defense Minister were taken as a personal insult, I take them back (*Haaretz*, 21.10.02).

**Mistake**: Another popular way to describe an offense is by using the noun "mistake," about whose function there is a controversy in the pragmatic research of apology. Whereas several studies discuss the use of the noun as a means of acknowledging responsibility for an offense, others perceive it as a way of minimizing responsibility (Meier, 1998). This study perceives the use of the noun as a type of "good excuse" (Weiner et al, 1987) mitigating the offense through an implication of unforeseen consequences when performing the deeds. Thus, when the apologizer uses the form "apologize for the mistake," he is admitting wrongdoing while, in the same breath, minimizing his guilt. This tactic was used by the chief of the Israeli army's personnel department, General Yehuda Segev, when apologizing to bereaved parents for burying their children in a religiously inappropriate way:

> The IDF lowers its head and apologizes [mitnatzel] for the mistake… (*Haaretz*, 16.7.99).

**About that:** According to Owen (1983), the formulation "sorry about that" can be regarded as another tactic for evading full responsibility for an offense. Reiter (2000) disagrees with

[8] The term 'words' is a translation of the Hebrew word 'devarim'. It seems that the closest conventionlized apology formula in English is "I am sorry for what I said".

this interpretation, claiming that it is usually accompanied by another form of naming the offense, and the corpus of apology utterances gathered for this study corroborates Reiter's claim. In fact, there was not even a single occurrence in which "about that" was used exclusively for describing the offense. In most cases, it was placed at the end of the apology utterance as an anaphoric reference to the offense, which was specified in one way or another in the first clause. One example of such use can be found in the apology utterance that appeared in a letter sent by the Belgian ambassador in Israel to Israeli minister Effi Eytam, after calling him a "Fascist" in an interview:

> If any harm was done to your reputation, I regret [mitcharet] and am sorry [mitstaer] about that (*Haaretz*, 4.11.02).

**5.3 The Victim and the Discourse of Responsibility**

The third cluster of tactics of avoiding responsibility centers on drawing a question mark regarding the identity of the offended party. In doing so, the apologizer undermines one of the basic premises of the remedial act: an acknowledgment that the act caused harm to a specific victim. Without the existence of a specific victim, there is no real damage caused from the act, and thus it cannot be framed as a transgression. Three tactics for undermining the offended party were found in the corpus: (1) Undermining the existence of the victim, (2) Selecting a specific victim, and (3) Blurring the identity of the victim.

**Undermining the Existence of the Victim:** In addition to the option of undermining the fact that a transgression occurred, apologizers may incorporate the conjunction *if* in their utterances in order to undermine the claim that anyone was offended by their acts. It seems that using conditional illocutionary act (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985) is one of the most popular strategies applied by public figures when they are required to restore their image. The non-apology made by the publicist Samuel Shnitzer, after calling the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel "apostates and carriers of diseases", utilized this tactic:

> If someone was hurt by the column I wrote, I am very sorry [mitstaer] about that (*Haaretz*, 25.4.97).

The undermining of the preparatory condition of the apology, which demands the existence of victims, is performed in this case in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Whereas quantitatively Shnitzer implies that few, if any, were hurt by his words, qualitatively he implies that no one should be offended. Thus, framing the act as an offense is the outcome of wrong interpretation, and of over-sensitivity, and through this implication he attributes some of the blame for the talk scandal to the offended party.

The frequent use of this form in public life demands further explanation in regard to its power and affordances. The advantage of using this formula, from the speaker's point of view, can be understood through Clark and Carlson's (1982) claim that public speech acts consists of two different types of illocutions: the traditional, that is, of apology or sorrow, and the informative, which informs side participants of the realization of a specific illocution. The order of the clauses in the aforementioned utterance reveals this structure in an explicit manner. In the first part, the speaker appeals to all of its audience with the pronoun *someone,* requesting from "anyone" to verify whether she includes herself with the group of the alleged victims. However, by using the conjunction *if*, the speaker conditions his appeal and undermines the possibility that in fact one should regard herself as such. Only after performing the informative illocution does the speaker go on to realize his apology, but this apology is already infelicitous because it has no actual recipient. In this manner, the speaker significantly reduces the guilt that accompanies the offensive act.

**Selecting a Specific Victim:** A different way to undermine the existence of a victim, which also serves as a fourth tactic of selectivity, is to pick one specific victim (out of a group of at least two) and realize an apology toward her (and only her). In doing so, the apologizer not only selects a victim he wants to placate, but he also selects a specific offense which he wants

to regret. Moreover, in using this tactic, he reduces his responsibility for the entire offense and, in turn, lessens the threat to its public face. One example of using this tactic occurred in the Israeli public discourse when one of the senior figures of the religious political party Shas, Rabbi David Benizri, was asked by journalists to respond to slanders he made against immigrants from Russia in a public speech:

> This is not Israel BaAliya (a political party that focused on representing the interests of Russian immigrants), but Gentiles BaAliya. They are flooding the country with hundreds of thousand of gentiles. I apologize [mitantzel] to the Jewish immigrants but not to the Gentiles…we are heading toward a spiritual Holocaust (*Haaretz*, 24.11.99).

In choosing to apologize, Benizri realized the "right" response to the public demands for accountability. However, by addressing his apology only to the Jewish immigrants, he stood by his former offensive claim (gentile immigrants from Russia are undermining the Jewish identity of Israel) and expressed fidelity towards the ideology of his political party.

**Blurring the Identity of the Victim:** The last tactic found in the corpus for blurring the victim's identity is the substitution of his specific name or social group with generic names. Avoiding calling the victim's name can serve as another way to violate the preparatory condition that calls for apologizing to a specific recipient. One example of such use occurred when Israeli artist Uri Lifshitz apologized for saying in an interview that there is no room in the developing Israeli society for handicaps and autistic people (*Haaretz*, 16.10.98). Three days later, in response to the scandal that erupted, Lifshitz apologized by saying:

> I understand that I have hurt many people. It was not my intention to hurt any individual or any group of people, and I sincerely apologize [mitnatzel] (*Haaretz*, 19.10.98).

In spite of admitting his fault for wrongdoing, realizing a "good excuse" ("It was not my intention"), and incorporating a sincerity marker in his apology, Lifshitz avoided mentioning the specific groups he had offended. The reasons for this avoidance can be, on the one hand, an unwillingness to mention once more the name of the victim (and save him

from feeling the grief again), or, on the other hand, a tactic to avoid apologizing toward a specific recipient.

**5.4 The Offender and the Discourse of Responsibility**

The last cluster of tactics to reduce responsibility and guilt in the apology utterance is focused on the offender. Several tactics for avoiding agency have already been considered by Bavelas (2004) who analyzed the way in which apologizers position themselves as the grammatical subject of acts described in their utterance, using simple active voice to admit agency and passive voice or omitting the agent all together to avoid agency. In this paper, I discuss two more tactics that reduce the agent's responsibility and, as in the last category of the "victim," violate the preparatory condition which demands the existence of a specific wrongdoer: (1) Denying responsibility and (2) Omitting or blurring the offender.

**Denying Responsibility:** This tactic that incorporates a "bad excuse" in the apology utterance (Weiner et al, 1987)—which attributes the full responsibility for committing the transgression to an external source—serves as a means of total exculpation from responsibility and/or guilt. Israeli general Shaul Mofaz used this tactic after he was quoted in the press as opposing the defense minister's policy in the occupied territories in 2001:

> I am sorry [tsar li] if someone was offended and <u>if my words were formulated and understood in contrast to my intention</u> (*Haaretz*, 16.10.01).

In this statement, Mofaz expresses sorrow for the potential damage that his words caused, but at the same time, he does not accept responsibility for saying the offensive words. In claiming that his words were reformulated and misunderstood, he is shifting the blame both to the journalist (who quoted his words) and to the offended party (the minister of defense), exonerating himself from any wrongdoing.

**Omitting or Blurring the Agent:** Despite the fact that the act of omitting the agent can be a stylization device, especially in cases in which it is obvious from the context who is the

agent, many see this tactic as a useful means of avoiding responsibility (Fairclough, 2000). One such omission was found in the apology of the deputy attorney general, Malkiel Balas, which was made after he called the initiators of the Geneva agreement (the informal peace agreement between Israeli and Palestinian public figures) "provocateurs" in a formal letter:

> I am sorry [tsar li] if anyone from the Geneva initiators was hurt by the letter or by the wrong interpretation it received (*Haaretz*, 22.10.04).

Instead of apologizing for writing the offensive letter, Balas created a dichotomy in his words between the agent (himself) and the offensive product (the letter). In an act of personification, he positioned the letter at the center of his apology utterance, and in this way attributed the responsibility for the damage to the product and not the agent responsible for its creation.

**6. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of 354 apologies made in the Israeli public discourse between 1997-2004, I demonstrated 14 tactics which can be categorized into four main categories of minimizing responsibility: compromising the apology's performative verb, blurring the nature of the offense, questioning the identity of the offended or questioning the identity of the offender. As I have argued, the use of these tactics allows public figures to withstand *avoidance conflicts* that are common in contemporary *politics of trust*, without losing their face, freedom of future action, or status within the political field or public arena. Moreover, they allow public figures to appear as moral personas who conform to the moral discursive standard that is becoming customary in the *age of apology*.

Common to all of the forms I have demonstrated in this paper is their manifest lack of sincerity. Each one consists of one sort or another of lessening the amount of responsibility taken by the offender. Nevertheless, as Kampf (2008) showed, most of those formulas of non-apology tend to be accepted by their recipients. He explains this finding by demonstrating the way in which the traditional felicity conditions are replaced in the political

arena by the 'embarrassment condition', that is, the extent to which the gesture is perceived by the forgiver as threatening the apologizer's political image. Other reasons suggested are less dependent on the judgment of the linguistic performance than on the various interests on the part of the forgiver. In cases in which the interest of the offended party is to detract from the symbolic power of his/her rival, even a full and humble apology may be refused. Inversely, even an incomplete form may be accepted if the offended is motivated to forgive.

As demonstrated above, the exploitation of the moral nature of apologies by public figures produces a struggle over the kind of affect that "non-apologies" have on the quality of public discourse. The opponents perceive non-apologies as "hollow" statements, which allow political figures to escape from punishment with a minimal price paid for their misdeeds. Non-apologies act as a catalyst for superficiality and contaminate public discourse. In contrast, the advocates focus on their potential for change in the social, political, and moral arenas. From this optimistic point of view (which ignores the question whether they act was realized felicitously or not), non-apologies contribute to the quality of public discourse since they oblige public figures to ratify norms, values, and codes upon which a society is built. It seems that beyond this discursive struggle, non-apologies demonstrate that public figures are still compelled to "perform" normative language behavior, and therefore must design verbal public expressions that meet moral standards. Their basic commitment to such standards strengthens them in a dialectical process and may serve as a kind of catalyst for moral behavior in public life.

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