The flexible apology

Janet Holmes

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

BEN JOHNSON, the Olympic sprinter, was the target of prolonged bad press for having falsely denied taking steroids.

"I said I'm sorry," he complained. "What else can I say? I've lied and I admitted it. Life goes on."

But "sorry" was clearly not enough for his critics.

"Sorry" is a wonderfully flexible word. When you accidentally burp or laugh at an inappropriate moment, when you inadvertently step on someone's toe or bump into them in the street, "sorry" is an adequate response.

"Sorry?" requests a repetition when I didn't quite catch what you said and it may introduce a disagreement: "Sorry, I just can't go along with that."

So "sorry" can be used to apologise for a wide range of transgressions. But as the transgression becomes more serious it seems that there are different views about how adequate "sorry" is.

The Australian Government recently apologised for past mistreatment of Aborigines.

The media noted that unlike his predecessor John Howard, who merely expressed "deep and sincere regret" for past injustices, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd used the word "sorry" three times.

From the positive reaction this received, it seems "sorry" was regarded as both a crucial and adequate component of an authentic apology.

In New Zealand, however, a formal apology is apparently expected to be more elaborate. Prime Minister Helen Clark demanded a "government-to-government apology" from Israel after the imprisonment of two Israeli intelligence agents in Auckland for attempting to fraudulently obtain a New Zealand passport.

She said that an apology ("We are sorry about this matter") issued by Israel's Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom in a radio broadcast was not enough. Miss Clark herself formally apologised twice last year on behalf of the nation, first to the Chinese community for the harsh government entry tax imposed till 1930, and later to the Samoan community for New Zealand's treatment of Samoans during colonial times.

Both apologies were expressed very formally: "I wish to offer today a formal apology to the people of Samoa ... and to express sorrow and regret for those injustices."

SOCIOLINGUISTS have identified components of a full apology. They go something like this: explicitly express regret, provide an excuse or explanation for the offence, acknowledge responsibility, promise forbearance.

What this means in real life is something like this: "I'm so sorry. I couldn't find a park anywhere. I've made us late. I promise I'll allow more time in future."

You can imagine this scenario as you rush in late to meet someone for a show.

Elaborate apologies are especially required when the person offended is important, or when the offence is a big one, as in this example recorded by one of my students.

He had forgotten a lunch date with his uncle, a source of advice and also of financial support.

"Look, I'm so sorry, Uncle Tim. What can I say? I just forgot — I should get a diary, I know. What a nerd. My memory's collapsing. Please forgive me. Let's make another date please."

Interestingly, when we know people well almost any one of these components can serve the function of an apology combined with an appropriately contrite expression: "I didn't allow for rush hour!" "It won't happen again, I promise!" "Sorry sorry sorry!" and so on. Even "Oops!", said with an appropriately apologetic tone of voice as you bump into a close friend, can serve as an apology.

As the Australian and New Zealand comparison indicates, the rules for apologies often differ cross-culturally.

In a newspaper article about British apology norms, Linley Boniface surmised that the British abhor apologies because they involve loss of face.

She describes how a bus driver knocked her down in the street and then, instead of apologising, furiously pursued her, even winding down his window so he could swear at her more effectively.

Different cultures use different ways of apologising too. Indonesians, for instance, ask for forgiveness (maaf) rather than expressing regret with a term such as sorry.

North Americans use "excuse me" in many contexts where New Zealanders prefer "sorry".

A New Yorker will say "excuse me" after bumping into someone in a supermarket aisle or accidentally interrupting someone before they have finished speaking, contexts in which New Zealanders would almost certainly say "sorry".

So though sorry is not always enough, it is nonetheless a valuable expression for New Zealanders in a multitude of social contexts.

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