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Cultural differences in the efficacy of apologies

Abstract

Extract:

Making an apology is not an easy thing to do, privately or publicly. Moreover, depending on the society in which they are made and one's position in it, making public apologies can be complicated by cultural and political variables.

Keywords

ethics, international relations, intercultural communication, apology

| Cultural Differences in the Efficacy of Apologies |

by Julian Ju and Mary Power¹

Making an apology is not an easy thing to do, privately or publicly. Moreover, depending on the society in which they are made and one's position in it, making public apologies can be complicated by cultural and political variables.

In mono-cultural societies such as Japan or Poland, finding common ground on ethical and moral principles is easier than in societies with competing ideologies. One knows essentially what to expect from the people who have formed the political and social compact in monocultures. Members know what to expect of one another. They know the code composed of meanings and rules by which that society functions. Common cultural origins produce proverbs, motifs, icons, symbols, nuances of language, nonverbal behaviors, and metaphors that are immediately understood and accepted by anyone in the group (Asante & Molefi, 1995). However, such commonality is more difficult to achieve once one moves to societies with a diverse population with different cultural backgrounds or to the global society of international relations.

Intercultural communication scholars such as Hofstede (1980) have distinguished between cultures on the basis of their relative individualism or collectivism. The United States is seen to be high on individualism, which favours individual effort and has less concern for the group as a whole, while collectivist societies such as Japan and Korea value group efforts and loyalty more highly than individual achievements. Hall (1977) labelled the communication style of collectivist cultures "High Context" and the style of individualistic cultures "Low Context". He explained the difference: "A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message" (p. 91) and a low-context message is the opposite, with the information explicitly coded in the message.

In this paper, two different cases of speeches of apology will be examined: one successful and one not successful; one in a Low Context society (the United States) and another one in a High Context society (Korea); one in which the audience is ego-involved and the other one without ego-involvement. The speeches will be compared and analysed to find out how two different cultures conduct, perceive and react to speeches of apology.

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Two cases of apologies

Apologies are important in human interaction at the corporate and governmental level as well as at the interpersonal level. A genuine expression of sorrow is the starting point of any healing process. An apology has to be followed by serious acts of contrition, but any attempt at reconciliation that begins without an apology cannot be taken seriously.

Apologies appear to be finding favour with politicians. They seem to believe there will be gains in public favour by wiping the slate clean by saying they and their governments are sorry.

In recent years a rash of apologies has been uttered by world leaders for the bad things done by the nations they lead. Chirac apologized for the help France's Vichy government gave the Nazis in deporting 320,000 French Jews to death camps during World War II. Yeltsin apologised for the Soviet army's massacre of 15,000 Polish officers in that same conflict. De Klerk apologized for apartheid, the system of racial separation used to oppress South Africa's black majority for nearly half a century. Blair made a public statement of remorse for the British government's foot-dragging response to the potato famine that took the lives of a million Irish people and the King of Norway apologized for his country's repression of one of its ethnic minorities. (DeWayne, 1997)

And in Sri Lanka "Buddhist organizations want to ban Prince Charles from ceremonies marking 50 years of independence unless he apologises 'for all the wrongs done' during British rule" (Wallace, 1998).

These apologies were all for past events. Politicians might need to be wary about apologising for present problems they helped cause. This paper will analyse apologies made by two world leaders: President Clinton of the United States of America and President Kim Young Sam of the Republic of Korea.

An apology that worked: Clinton apologises to the survivors of the Tuskegee study.

On Friday, 16 May 1997, Bill Clinton, the President of the United States, apologized formally on behalf of the government to a group of black men whose syphilis went untreated for decades as part of a U.S. Public Health Service study. ("Clinton apologizes", 1997)

President Clinton recognized the injustice done to the participants of the Public Health Service syphilis study in Tuskegee, Ala., and made a formal apology to survivors, their families and the nation for the unethical study that left approximately 400 African-American men untreated for syphilis. The PHS began the study in 1932 and did not end it until 1972 - many years after penicillin was available to treat the disease. (Tuskegee study subjects, 1997)

"The eight men who are survivors of the syphilis study at Tuskegee are a living link to a time not so very long ago that many Americans would prefer not to remember, but we dare not forget," Clinton told those gathered 16 May in the East Room of the White House (The White House, May 1997).

He began his remarks by thanking the five attending survivors and family representatives. Clinton continued,

To the survivors, to the wives and family members, the children and grandchildren, I say what you know: No power on earth can give you back the lives lost, the pain suffered, the years of internal torment and anguish. What was done cannot be undone. But, we end the silence. We can stop turning our heads away. We can look you in the eye and finally say on behalf of the American people, what the U.S. government did was shameful, and I am sorry. The American people are sorry ... for the loss, for the years of hurt. You did nothing wrong, but, you were grievously wronged. I apologize and I am sorry that this apology has been so long in coming ... To our African-American citizens, I am sorry that your federal government orchestrated a study so clearly racist. That can never be allowed to happen again. It is against everything our country stands for and what we must stand against is what it was. (The White House, May 1997)

“Amid tears and following resounding applause,” Clinton said the government would give a \$200,000 planning grant for building a Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care at Tuskegee. Minority students would benefit from bioethics fellowships. The National Bioethics Advisory Commission was extended until 1999. And he asked the Health and Human Services Secretary to draft a report outlining ways to better involve all communities, but especially minority communities, in research and health care (Ross, 1997).

The study ended in 1972 due to publicity it then received. After a lawsuit in 1973, the Government paid about \$10 million to the survivors, who each received \$37,500. About \$15,000 each was given to the heirs of the deceased victims. In addition to the money, the government also provided lifetime health care for survivors and some family members. But the money was not, in itself, enough. “While the government gave money, it did not apologise until Clinton acknowledged the wrong and promised to take steps to insure nothing like this would ever happen to African Americans again” (Will, 1997).

Clinton's apology did draw some negative comments for not going far enough and for not being done sooner.

The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr. said that the families deserved reparations as well as an apology for “the lineage of suffering from this genocidal experiment. While an apology is important, there needs to be a monitoring of the impact of this experiment and those families deserve reparations”. (“Tuskegee study subjects”, 1997). United States Senator Carol Moseley-Braun noted that an apology was “long overdue” (“Tuskegee study subjects”, 1997).

However, the speech was successful on a number of levels. First, the speech made people feel better. At the ceremony in the White House East Room, Clinton was thanked most sincerely by 94 year old Herman Shaw, survivor of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment who said:

We are delighted today to close this very tragic and painful chapter in our lives. ... On behalf of all the survivors who are here today and those who could not attend, and on behalf of (the heirs of) my fellow participants who have died, I wish to thank Mr. President Clinton--thank you, very much--for inviting us to the White House. ...

In my opinion, it is never too late to work to restore faith and trust ...

Mr. President, words cannot express my gratitude to you for bringing us here today, for doing your best to right this wrong tragedy and to resolve that Americans should never again allow such an event to occur again. (Clinton Apologizes, 1997)

Second, the speech also appeared positively to affect the nation's economy. On the same day, Friday 16 May 1997, two news items likely to affect the United States economy were published. One was a hostage crisis at the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, likely to impact on United States investments in Latin America. Another one was a budget deal in Washington.

A sell-off shook Wall Street the day before as the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost almost 140 points. The downturn was sparked by renewed fears of inflation and fears that the Federal Reserve could raise interest rates next Tuesday.

However, on Friday, all figures in Wall Street were not as bad as they expected. Dow industrials lost nearly 139 points, but was still up 25 points for the week. The American Exchange Index was up 3 1/4 points that day. For the week overall, it gained 12.94 - it was not a bad day for Wall Street at all. (Nightly Business Report - Friday, May 16, 1997)

Wall Street commentators were surprised that it was not such a bad day. It may not be too far-fetched to assume that good feelings generated by Clinton in his speech of apology and the gracious acceptance of it by the surviving victims of this racist study gave the United States a good feeling about itself, which played its part in elevating the national psyche and hence minimizing fallout resulting from negative news which also featured on that day.

President Clinton's speech was a success. The victims wanted him to say the words of apology and his saying sorry along with some measures he set in train to prevent such a thing happening again, together with earlier monetary recompense for pain and suffering, made people feel better. President Clinton did not cause the wrong but he did give public assurances that no government of the United States would let such a thing happen again.

Apologies do not always work for politicians: Kim Young Sam, the President of South Korea apologises

The Asian financial crisis finally arrived in South Korea in late 1997. Tens of thousands of large and small businesses were bankrupted and unemployment rates reached record high levels. Koreans who believed their hard work had transformed Korea into the world's 11th biggest economic power from the rubble of the Korean War felt ashamed and, eventually, angry, that the country now needed financial support from the International Monetary Fund to avoid bankruptcy.

On Thursday, 11 December 1997, Kim Young Sam, the President of South Korea, made a formal apology for his Government's financial mismanagement. He began his remarks by saying sorry to Korean families.

I am feeling intense anguish myself. I chastise myself every day thinking about the despair of the heads of families, whose businesses have gone bankrupt or who have lost their jobs. I must tell you frankly that I feel the same pain that you do and that I have

lain awake many a night agonizing over the situation. While feeling a grave sense of responsibility as President over the fact that our economy has reached this state, I cannot find words to express how sorry I am. (Kim Young Sam, 1997)

Kim continued, "I take this opportunity to make it clear that the responsibility for the current situation rests entirely with me. Now is the time for all of us to rally together to overcome the current plight". He promised to do his best to overcome the economic crisis, and asked each of his people to play an active part for him. However, he offered no particular strategy to overcome the crisis.

Kim's speech was a complete failure. Right after his speech, all-ordinary indexes in the share markets rapidly dropped 22.48 points ("Please stop", 1997). The next month his ruling party lost the presidential election for the first time since the Republic of Korea was set up in 1945. Kim's 45-year political career was finished after the speech.

Two cases of apology and their effects

Although the two speeches have individual differences of content and context and very different outcomes, they are similar in many ways. They were both delivered by the foremost leader of each country and both leaders clearly acknowledged responsibility for the harm that was done while promising that things would be done better in the future. (See Table 1)

	President Clinton	President Kim Young Sam
Position	The President of the United States	The President of Republic of Korea
Apology	<p>"The United States government did something that was wrong -- deeply, profoundly, morally wrong. It was an outrage to our commitment to integrity and equality for all our citizens."</p> <p>"The American people are sorry -- for the loss, for the years of hurt. You did nothing wrong, but you were grievously wronged. I apologize and I am sorry that this apology has been so long in coming."</p>	<p>"While feeling a grave sense of responsibility as president over the fact that our economy has reached this state, I cannot find words to express how sorry I am."</p> <p>"I take this opportunity to make it clear that the responsibility for the current situation rests entirely with me."</p>

Reparation	“Today I would like to announce several steps to help us achieve these goals. First, we will help to build that . . .”	“I promise my fellow citizens that I will do my utmost to carry out the following to overcome the economic difficulties during the rest of my tenure. First, I will ...”
Commitments	“First, we will help ...” “Second, we commit to ...” “Third, we commit to strengthen ...”	“First, I will closely consult with ...” “Second, the Government will ...” “Third, I hereby make it clear that ...”

Table 1. Comparing the two speeches

Observation of Table 1 shows that Clinton’s and Kim’s speeches follow a similar pattern. First there is a clear apology, consisting of an admission of wrong-doing and sorrow for the state of events. Second there is an announcement that things will change and that there will be a goal of reparation or improving the current situation. Third there is a list of what the speaker will do, a list of commitments which will lead to the fulfillment of the reparation goals.

Since the two speeches were similar in structure we could wonder why they had such different results.

We propose three possible explanations: First, apologies are good, but lose their effectiveness when needed too often; second, revealing mistakes causes a loss of credibility in High Context societies (see above) which don’t admire fallible leaders, and third, audience involvement in the issue makes a difference in how people view the apology.

Comparisons between the two speeches can be made at three levels. The first is in the rules of interpersonal behaviour. Public apologies essentially mimic the interpersonal. DeVito (1997) explains the basic process of preserving our image in the eyes of others through making excuses for our conversational transgressions:

At times you may say the wrong thing, but because you can’t erase the message (communication really is irreversible) you may try to account for it. Perhaps the most common method for doing so is the excuse. Excuses pervade all forms of communication and behavior. Although we emphasize their role in conversation, recognize that the excuse is applicable to all human behaviors, not just conversational ones (p. 281).

De Vito suggests a few tips for making good excuses. One of the tips is: “good excuse makers use excuses in moderation; bad excuse makers rely on excuses too often” (1997, p. 282). President Kim may have overdone it. He had already made official apologies several times. This speech was his fifth (and the last) apology during his

five years of presidency, and his last three apologies were made in the final year of his presidency ("Sorry", 1997. See Table 2)

Date	Kim's Apologies and Reasons
9/12/1993	Apology for opening rice markets. He promised Korean rice farmers to keep rice markets secure.
24/10/1994	Apology for a collapse of one of the biggest bridges in Seoul.
2/2/1997	Apology for a case of corruption by his second son.
22/11/1997	Apology for facing sudden financial crisis without any warning.
11/12/1997	The last apology.

Table 2. Kim's apologies

Kim had relied on excuses too often. People became sick of his apologies; consequently, his last speech failed.

The second level of explanation is cultural. As explained earlier, intercultural theorists classify the United States as a Low Context society, which means that you cannot tell a great deal from the context, the surroundings, the clothes or the occasion. Hence everything has to be made explicit, spelt out and written down. The written contract is the only certainty business allows. On the other hand, Korea is a High Context society where position, title, clothes, job description and even visiting cards say a great deal for the communicator. Because the society is more formal and follows strict rules or codes of behaviour, not so much needs to be explicitly stated or even written down. Therefore what is appropriate for a leader in a Low Context society may not be appropriate in a High Context society.

In a Low Context society, what is said has great significance; meaning is found in words. However, in a High Context society, words are less important. Amongst people in High Context societies, the highest form of communication competency is empathy - the ability to sense what others are thinking and feeling without their having to spell it out for you (Griffin, 1997). In other words, making formal speeches may not be a highly recommended method for persuading people in High Context societies.

Thousands of years-old Chinese literature points to a tradition that is cautious about thinking of speech or words as in any way final and stresses the ambiguity of words:

The way that can be spoken of
 Is not the constant way;
 The name that can be named
 Is not the constant name.

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth
The name was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of heaven and earth;
The name was the mother of the myriad creatures.
to have desires in order to observe its manifestations (Lao Tzu, 1963 Trans.).

According to many Asian traditions, a king - a political leader in modern terms- is chosen by God. Confucius (551 - 479 BC), the Godfather of philosophy in all East Asian High Context societies, suggests that action speaks louder than words for a leader, but also perhaps that the words of wise people ought to be considered before that action is taken:

"The Master said, "The gentleman is no vessel." (2:12)
Tzu-kung asked about the gentleman. The Master said, "He puts his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action." (2:13)
Confucius said, "The gentleman stands in awe of three things. He is awe of the Decree of Heaven. He is in awe of great men. He is in awe of the words of the sages. The small man, being ignorant of the Decree of Heaven, does not stand in awe of it. He treats great men with insolence and the word of the sages with derision." (16:8) (Confucius, 1979 Trans.)

The qualities desirable in a leader of a High Context society may be found in the Chinese classic, the *Doctrine of the Mean*. According to Chan's *Source Book* (1969: 107-8):

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.

People in a High Context society expect a "perfect man" as their leader. In a High Context society a leader of a nation is supposed to know everything; to understand everything without extensive conversation; to be charismatic so that he can persuade people without speeches, explanations or apologies. Of course, it is impossible for anyone to have such perfect qualities unless he is an almost-God. However, a leader of a High Context society, at least needs to try to behave like an almost-God or the ancient notion of Master/Gentleman. If he successfully keeps his charisma and behaves like a Master/Gentleman, he will be able to rule the nation with absolute power. However, the loss of charisma weakens such a leader in a High Context society.

The "perfect man", like a Master/Gentleman, never makes mistakes because he is almost a God; therefore, a leader of a High Context society with perfect qualities should make neither a mistake nor an apology. Once a leader of a High Context society makes a mistake or apologises, people of the society will no longer respect or trust that leader. Significantly, President Kim's 40-year political career ended completely right after his final official apology. On the other hand, Low Context societies, like the United States are sceptical about their leaders and expect them to be

flawed. (President Clinton's overall high "job rating" despite people's low views of his poor personal behaviour is a good example of this context).

The third level of explanation involves explorations of the process of persuasion involving social judgement (Sherif, Sherif & Nebergall, 1965). According to social judgement theory we perceive issues as falling into three "latitudes"- acceptance, non-commitment or rejection. Some issues we accept outright, some we are neutral or non-committed about and others we reject. Persuasion is a very difficult process if new information is judged to fall within the latitude of rejection. Moreover, if the person is ego-involved in the issue, then the latitude of rejection is larger than usual and persuasion is even more difficult (Booth-Butterfield, 1996).

Ego-involvement means how important the issue is to self-identity. An ego-involving topic is one that defines who we are and addresses critical aspects of our selves (Booth-Butterfield, 1996). Jobs and standard of living are such critical issues. People want secure jobs and high standards of living. Anything that affects those things is of vital interest to people. As President Kim's apology forecast job losses and a drop in the standard of living it was ego-involving for most Koreans. Consequently, the latitude of rejection was even larger than usual and persuasion was almost impossible, which accounts partly for the failure of President Kim's speech.

President Clinton apologised even though he did not personally do anything wrong. The incident happened several decades ago. The President made the apology to gain goodwill and with the expectation of boosting his popularity. Only a few very old survivors were directly ego-involved in the issue. So it was possible for the symbolism of apologising to right a wrong. The victims were satisfied with the apology which created a good feeling among others not so ego-involved that a wrong had been addressed.

On the other hand, President Kim made an apology for what *he* did wrong. Moreover, he warned his people that all people would need to suffer to overcome the economic crisis.

In this process, however, there will be many trials, including a temporary slowdown in economic growth, bankruptcies of companies that no longer have growth potential, high unemployment and a drop in standards of living. We will never be able to succeed in reform without bone-carving efforts on the part of us all: the government, businesses and workers. If this is the trial that we have to overcome to revive the economy and forge an advanced nation, we should share the pain together and endure it. (Kim Young Sam, 1997)

Conclusions

Both the official apologies we have examined were delivered by the President of the nation - of the United States and of South Korea. Although the cultural backgrounds of the two nations are very different, the two speeches were structured in a similar manner (Table 1). However, the two speeches had two completely different results - one succeeded and the other failed.

President Clinton's speech succeeded because in a Low Context society words mean a lot. The words of apology must be uttered before people feel able to "close the door" on the issue. Giving money is not enough if the words are not said. Second, apologising for racist policies in the giving or withholding of medical treatment did fall in the latitude of acceptance of the people, especially when the issue was so long ago that few who were highly ego-involved remained, so it was easy to persuade the general population that apologising was the right thing to do. The ensuing good feeling even appeared to buoy the stockmarket. Third, President Clinton had not at this time apologised too much.² So Clinton gained prestige because he was the person to actually say the words which effectively said, "I am sorry and we will put in place systems so that it doesn't happen again." Words mean a great deal in his culture, his apology would hardly have been rejected by anyone and it didn't "cost" much.

On the other hand President Kim's speech failed for three reasons. First, he failed because he had apologised too often. He lost credibility because he appeared to be apologising rather than acting to avoid having to apologise. Second, he failed because a leader's apology is not an appropriate persuasive strategy in a High Context society where a leader cannot risk losing charisma. Having lost his charismatic character through the abject nature of his apology and his admission that it would be the people who would have to bear the brunt of making up for his mistakes, he was no longer acceptable as leader in a High Context society. The third reason for Kim's failure was that his apology was for actions which had impacted on large numbers of people causing bankruptcies of companies and high unemployment. People were automatically ego-involved in the issue; therefore, Kim's message was bound to be rejected because it forecast a future laced with hard work and uncertainty in which the Korean people would have to pay heavily for what Kim was apologising for.

In conclusion, it is always hard to say sorry. Even with two very well written apologies delivered by two very persuasive speakers, the results can vary according to cultural expectations, the ego-involvement of the audience in the issue and the number of times the speaker has had to apologise before. When leaders feel they have to apologise they would be wise to weigh these three factors carefully.

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² Although after the Monica Lewinsky affair he may have reached his quota of credible apologies!

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