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A Critical Analysis of Holmes' Scale of Seriousness

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Apologies are speech acts typically used following an offence to avoid or mitigate possible threats to the face projected by the addressee. The function is that of redress, providing a means of restoring social harmony through expressions of respect and acknowledgement of the face threatening quality of the transgression (Holmes, 1995: 154). In line with Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, apologies are regarded as negative politeness devices that attend to the needs of the individual's negative face and the accompanying desire to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded' (1978: 129). With this in mind, Janet Holmes has put forth the theoretical generalisation that as the degree of face threat, or the weighting of the face-threatening act increases, so will the appropriate degree of politeness', thus implying that the elaborateness and depth of the apology is typically proportionate to the level of the offence (1995: 164).

It is interesting at this point to assess Holmes' scale of offences in which she ranks the seriousness of a violation as either light, medium or heavy (1995: 171). According to Holmes' previously stated assertion, and as supported by a number of studies concerned with the pragmatics of apologies (Fraser 1981, Holmes 1990: Schlenker and Darby 1981), one would presume that heavy offences incite the most complex style of apology whilst lighter transgressions, such as interrupting another as they talk, can be remedied with a more basic apologetic formula. Conversely, as propounded by McLaughlin, O'Hara and Cody (1983), this does not always appear to be the case since they maintain that a 'severe offence might evoke no response at all (Meier, 1998: 218). This divergent critical understanding draws attention to the fact that whilst Holmes' scale does provide an effective guideline to enable categorisation of offence by weightiness, and thus helps to gauge the extent of remedial face work required by the offender, it cannot be used to definitively classify transgressions or predict the resultant form of apology that a particular offence will elicit. It must be remembered that the process of apologising is an extremely subjective aspect of politeness theory. The same offence can often be weighted at divergent levels, due to differential views of the seriousness of the misdemeanour and the influence of the various contextual circumstances that surround it. When viewed independently of the affecting factors voiced initially by Brown and Levinson, Holmes' model fails to explicitly account for, and consequently overlooks, the level of intention of the wrongdoing and the frequency with which the misdemeanour is performed. It is important to note how the same offence can easily shift on the scale from medium to heavy if it becomes a recurrent incident, if it is understood to be a purposeful attempt to damage an individual's face, or if there exists a significant social distance between the two interlocutors. It is evident therefore that when applied over time, Holmes' scale does not quite capture the essence of all forms of apologies since it is very much geared towards the categorisation of singular offences, at a single moment in time.

Taking all this into account, this essay will aim to assess the complexities involved in the process of apologising. It will utilise Austin's assertion that 'standards of the inacceptable vary contextually' (1979: 194) to call in to question the rigidity of Holmes' scale of

seriousness (1995: 171) and its failure to account for the influence of the context in which the offence occurs. Viewed in conjunction with Holmes' adoption of Brown and Levinson's belief that 'reparation should be of an appropriate kind and paid in a degree proportionate to the breach' (1987: 236), it will explore the difference between apologies made in both the public arena and the private domain to show how this 'rule of thumb' is more of a generalization than a set criterion that must be met in the composition of the speech act. Ultimately, it will consider the possibility of amending Holmes' scale of seriousness so as to accommodate the differing understanding of levels of weightiness exhibited in public and private offences, taking into account the influence of these divergent circumstantial contexts.

It is important to first consider the pragmatics of apologies in isolation from the context of the wrongdoing. As identified by Zohar Kampf (2009), the tripartite relationship under inspection here is that between speech act theory (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969), Erving Goffman's consideration of face (1967) and the joining of the two under the umbrella concept of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Starting with John Searle's speech act theory, apologies have been classified as 'expressives' due predictably to the expression of emotion in the utterance felt by the speaker, which is in this instance most frequently that of regret (Holmes, 1990: 169). It is a form of politeness that derives from Goffman's work on face (1967) in which he identifies a person's face to consist of two parts, negative and positive, both of which play a universal role in day to day interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62). Whilst speech acts such as compliments and invitations attend to the needs of an individual's positive face and 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62), apologising is a face redressive strategy used typically to make amends following a breach of social customs that define respectful conduct. Janet Holmes has characterised the offences that can impinge upon a person's face needs as follows:

1. Space offences: e.g. bumping into someone, queue jumping
2. Talk offences: e.g. interrupting, talking too much
3. Time offences: e.g. keeping people waiting, taking too long
4. Possession offences: e.g. damaging or losing someone's property
5. Social gaffes: e.g. burping, coughing, laughing inappropriately
6. Inconvenience offences/ inadequate service e.g. giving someone wrong item

(Holmes, 1995: 167)

All communication revolves around the protection of our own face and the maintenance of the chosen self identity projected by our fellow participants, and so it is the speaker's acknowledgement of the threat they have posed to the face others have presented them with that generally elicits an apology (Wardhaugh, 2010). Goffman succinctly encapsulates the primary purpose of the speech act through his acknowledgment of its positive intent. He asserts that an apology should be regarded as a remedial utterance that accomplishes the restoration of social relations by disarming the threat contained within the offensive statement or action (Coffman, 1971: 140). Since protocol dictates that the addressee should accept the apology so as to preserve the face of the offender, it is clear that the process of apologising is very much an 'other-orientated' interchange and for this reason, the speech act is consequently regarded as a 'Face Supportive Act (FSAs) (Holmes, 1995: 184).

As identified by Holmes, studies concerned with politeness theory and the pragmatics of apologies have tended to focus on the 'relationship between the complexity of the apology and the weightiness of the offence which elicited it' (1990: 156). Since the amount of politeness applied to the speech act, which in turn governs the complexity of the apology, is

dependent upon the perceived weightiness of the violation (Eelen, 2001: 4), Holmes' scale (1995) does provide a helpful guideline for the relative assessment of

1. the varying levels of seriousness at which specific social transgressions can be classified:
2. *Light offences:* e.g. bumped into someone accidentally, forgot to return a library book on time.
3. *Medium offences:* e.g. broke someone's stapler, kept someone waiting so they were late.
4. *Heavy offences:* e.g. knocked someone over so they were hurt, inflicted serious
5. damage on someone's car, insulted someone in public.

(Holmes, 1995: 171)

The usefulness of the model lies with the inclusion of examples against which offences can be compared and categorised accordingly. For instance, when viewed in a simplistic manner Holmes' scale dictates that if someone accidentally trod on another person's toe the offence should be regarded as light. Since the offending action is deemed to be accidental and the damage inflicted is unlikely to pose any permanent or serious threat to the wellbeing of the impinged individual, the theorised proportionate relationship between weightiness of the offence and complexity of the apology indicates that a simple but explicit expression such as 'sorry' would be of adequate politeness to ensure that the needs of the addressee's negative face are attended to.

This draws attention to the circumstantial aspect involved in the gauging of all social misdemeanours. It is a fair assertion to state that Holmes' scale looks only at the skeleton of any offence. In reference to the above example, if the type of offence and level of intent remained unaltered, but the impinged individual happened to be someone of superior status or in a position of authority, then etiquette dictates that the same offence would elicit an increasingly elaborate form of apology. It is at this point that the model shows how it is not as widely applicable as perhaps anticipated, especially when viewed in conjunction with Holmes' rule of thumb' (1995: 164) derived from Brown and Levinson's politeness theory that 'reparation should be of an appropriate kind and paid in a degree proportionate to the breach' (1987: 236). As previously asserted Holmes' scale does not explicitly take into consideration the contextual circumstance of the offence.

Accordingly, the ruling of Holmes' model states that the accidental invasion of space arising from treading on someone's toe would always be weighted as a light offence, since the scale disregards the effect that the altering relations of power between the offender and the offended can have on the perceived weightiness. Although the degree of reparation would outwardly befit the seriousness of the offence if regarded independently of the changing social distance between those involved, when this factor is brought into the equation it is clear that an apology strategy formulated without consideration of the relationship between the two interlocutors has a limited universal applicability. Since the scale is merely descriptive in its account and comparative in its approach to categorising an offence, it does not explicate a means of quantifying the seriousness of a misdemeanour. Ultimately, the use of this model in the assessment of an offence is dependent upon a general understanding of Brown and Levinson's (1987) widely applied politeness theory that states 'the greater the social distance between those involved, the more politeness is required towards the other person' (Holmes, 1995: 178).

However, as identified by Harris et al, Brown and Levinson themselves (1987: 2) warn 'against making use of their strategies as the basis of quantitative research' (2006: 718).

It is important to consider the huge variability arising from individual differences in the extent to which an offence is regarded as serious and thus perceived to necessitate an apology. According to Meier (1998), the research objective of applied linguistics (Olshtain, 1989; Crishtain and Weinbach, 1987) has long attempted to identify a 'speech-act specific 'sociopragmatic set' of social and contextual factors' that inform the choice of apologies (Harris et al, 2006: 718). A body of research has highlighted the difficulty of such a proposal due to the influence that cultural values, attitudes and norms have upon the consideration of offences believed to be worthy of the reparative speech act. The studies have drawn attention to the inconsistency of apology behaviour across gender (Holmes, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003), hierarchical relationships in the work place (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), and also within individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Park and Guan, 2009). Taking Janet Holmes' corpus of '183 naturally occurring remedial interchanges' between New Zealand women and men to illustrate this point, an analysis of the apology data categorised by Holmes' scale of seriousness divulges the differential perceptions that men and women have about the kind of behaviour that requires an apology and also the perceived weightiness of offences. Women's apologies were for a greater proportion of light weighted offences, whilst it is suggested that men show a greater propensity to apologise for heavy offences than their female counterparts (Holmes, 1995: 171). Holmes' research also confirms how the correlation between greater social distance and increased politeness can never be used as a quantitative approach to categorising the appropriate seriousness of an apology, as she states how men generally perceive upward apologies as an uncomfortable form of social interaction due to the manner in which they emphasise the existing power difference' and are regarded as 'admissions of inadequacy' by the male sex (1995: 176). By only having light, medium and heavy as offence severity, the scale may result in an over simplification of the true nature of this aspect of human social interaction, meaning that the apologiser can either over or under compensating for the damage to face that they have inflicted., It is a fair assertion to state that the rigidity of Holmes' scale does not lend itself well to the differing viewpoints of the two sexes, as it is evident that classification of offence level varies as a function of gender. In light of this it may be more useful for the scale to be based upon a continuum, as opposed to a 'trichotomous' classification of one of three strengths.

It is evident that apologies given in informal situations are very much dependent upon the nature of the individual and the influence of numerous cultural determinants. For the most part, this means that informal apologies are unpredictable in the form that they take. Conversely, the utilisation of this speech act in the public domain follows a carefully orchestrated formulaic structure. Regarded at a superficial level, there appears to be very little difference in the aim of apologies voiced in the public and private spheres of society since both attempt to make amends following a breach of social norms and customs that define respectful conduct. However, as stated by Luke, political apologies 'provide us with evidence of a "fear" of the power of the word' (1997: 366). This draws attention to the mass audience at which this type of red ressive speech act is aimed, alongside its function as a means of seeking forgiveness and its dual purpose as an act of reassurance of the trust of those who have invested their belief in the high profile public figure. The possible repercussions of a misinterpretation would be extremely serious, and so the effectiveness of the formula of the speech act is paramount. The process of making a public apology is a highly strategic act that typically contains both an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) and 'an expression which indicates acceptance of responsibility and/or blame' (Harris, Grainger and Mullany, 2006: 721).

Throughout the course of this essay, Brown and Levinson's 'rule of thumb' has been at the forefront of analysis as their assertion that 'reparation should be of an appropriate kind and paid in a degree proportionate to the breach' (1987: 236) has played a prominent role in

the critical evaluation of the usefulness of Holmes' scale of seriousness. Yet it is at this point that we see how the scale is rendered redundant when applied to the categorisation of public apologies. First and foremost, every offence that requires a public apology is most probably going to be weighted as heavy, thus showing how there is no need for the scale in the assessment of perceived weightiness. Furthermore, a misdemeanour of a public figure could be categorised as heavy by the general public and by those who it personally affects. Taking the infidelity of Tiger Woods to exemplify this point, the perceived weightiness of the offence in the public eye would be regarded as heavy due to his responsibility as an icon for young children and the sporting world. To his wife, there is no doubt that the offence would constitute an irreparable breach of the sacrament of marriage, but it would be heavily weighted in a different manner. Therefore, Holmes' scale of seriousness should be modified so as to accommodate the differing understanding of levels of perceived weightiness of public and private offences and the apologies that they elicit. For public apologies there needs to be a split scale of seriousness, one that can gauge offences on a personal level and another that can assess them in a more general manner.

A critical analysis of the process of apologising has confirmed that it is a highly complex aspect of politeness theory. As identified by Eelen, 'politeness is subject to cultural expectations arising from cultural norms' (2001: 125) and it is apparent that a lot of research is taken up with the description of the affecting contextual factors that inform the construction of this speech act. From this essay it is clear that social distance, level of intent and frequency of misdemeanour all play an important role in the perceived weightiness of an offence, and for this reason it has been suggested that Holmes' scale is very much geared towards the categorisation of one off offences, at a single moment in time. The proposed improvements draw upon existent research, calling in to question the influence of gender and hierarchical relationships. Due to variability arising from individual differences, it is clear that an assembly of a clearly explicated sociopragmatic set of factors that influence the construction of an apology would prove extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Holmes' scale is clear in its intent. Whilst it cannot be used in a quantitative manner, the categories provide a helpful guideline for the relative assessment of the varying levels of seriousness at which specific social misdemeanours can be classified.