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Are Explicit Apologies Proportional to the Offenses They Address?

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We consider here Goffman’s proposal of proportionality between virtual offenses and remedial actions, based on the examination of 102 cases of explicit apologies. To this end, we offer a typology of the primary apology formats within the dataset, together with a broad categorization of the types of virtual offenses to which these apologies are addressed. We find a broad proportionality between apologies and the offenses they remediate when the offenses to be remediated are minor; however, this relationship is not sustained among larger apologies and offenses. In the latter cases, relational and contextual contingencies are important intervening factors influencing apology construction.

“Whether one runs over another’s sentence, time, dog, or body, one is more or less reduced to saying some variant of ‘I’m sorry’.”

(Goffman, 1971, p. 117)

INTRODUCTION

According to Goffman (1971), we live in a world of virtual offenses: “Worst possible readings of an action that maximize either its offensiveness to others or its defaming implications for the actor himself” (p. 108). This circumstance, Goffman suggests, sets the scene for remedial actions conceived in terms of
distributive justice, “a sort of payment or compensation for harm done, the greater the harm the greater the recompense . . . for example, often a brief apology is given for a minor offense and a protracted apology for something bigger” (1971, p. 116). In this article we consider this proposal of proportionality, based on the examination of 102 cases of explicit apologies from the Apologies Data Set, as described in the editors’ introduction to this issue. To this end, we offer a typology of the primary apology formats within the dataset, together with a broad categorization of the types of virtual offenses to which these apologies are addressed.

**BACKGROUND**

In our initial approach to the dataset, we found it useful to make a distinction between “local” and “distal” problems addressed in apology sequences. Local problems are indigenous to the ongoing interaction and commonly arise out of difficulties of speaking, hearing, or understanding talk (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), together with exogenous contingencies that invade the production or coherence of contributions to talk and arrest its progressivity (Heritage, 2007; Schegloff, 1979, 2007; Stivers & Robinson, 2006). Distal problems, by contrast, consist of matters that are handled within the talk but concern past or future conduct that is construed to be problematic, for example, failing to meet previous obligations, declined requests, and so on.

This preliminary classification rapidly became associated with a second distinction between problems that were intrinsically available to both parties and those that were not. For example, problems of speaking, hearing, and understanding were, for the most part, immediately available to interlocutors and were rarely named. Exogenous contingencies of interaction, however, were often only available to the one experiencing the difficulty, especially in telephone conversations from which this dataset is very largely drawn. Similarly, the nature of past or future apologizables must typically be made available to a recipient through description, naming, indexing, or allusion (Cirillo, Colón De Carvajal, & Ticca, 2015; Margutti, Pugliese, & Traverso, 2015). As we demonstrate, the “local” versus “distal” distinction, together with the secondary “available” versus “nonavailable” classification, has a considerable influence on the design and extent of the turns-at-talk in which apologies are implemented.

**APOLOGIES: A SIMPLE TAXONOMY**

Here, we describe three main classes of apologies presented in terms of a putative ranking of their extent or “protractedness.”
“Sorry”

The most minimal apology format that we encountered is a bare “sorry.” In describing this format as “bare,” we mean to distinguish it from more expanded formats to be described below. The “sorry” format is recurrently found in local contexts such as self-repair and other-initiated repair (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1977). In the context of self-repair, for example, a bare “sorry” can open the repair space (Schegloff, 2013), as seen in excerpt (1): Giles replaces “any” in “of any site” with “all” in “of all sites.” The replacement operation is initiated with a downward-intoned “sorry” (line 5).

Alternatively, a bare “sorry” can be used following a repair proper, thus post-facing the closure of the repair space, as in (2) below where Giles replaces the word “promotion” with “concessionary payment” (line 4).

In cases of self-repair, the baseline virtual offenses involve a break in the progressivity of the turn and/or sequence that is occasioned by the repair proper and an associated lexical or phrasal misrepresentation that could momentarily mislead the recipient.

Finally, a bare “sorry” also frequently occurs as an “open class” initiation of repair (Drew, 1997), that, in contrast to alternatives such as “what?,” accepts responsibility (Robinson, 2006) for the problem it raises:
Although many cases of a bare “sorry” occur in the context of repair (Biassoni, Diadori, Fatigante, & Marazzini, 2015), other minor face-threatening contingencies can also occasion this type of apology. In the following case (4), Carol fails to recognize Leslie’s voice at the opening of the call (line 1):

(4) [Holt:2:2:2:1]
1 Leslie: .t I didn’t think you w’r going to _answer.
2 Carol: hhWho’s th(h)a(h)t.
3 Leslie: [mghh Me Leslie.
4 (0.7)
5 Carol: -> ↑↑Oh: sorry ih hih Ye:s,

After asking for, and discovering, the identity of the caller, Carol finds it necessary to apologize for her failure (line 5).

“I’m Sorry”

The “I’m sorry” format represents a minimal expansion on the first: Crucially, it includes an overt expression of agency through the use of the subject and contracted copula “I’m.”

In (5) below, “I’m sorry” is used following the provision of a repair proper. In this case Reginald replaces “address” (line 8) with “telephone number” (line 9).

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1 The use of the uncontracted copula verb in this context is rare. Contracted copula usages were 50 times as common as the uncontracted format.
Although this case is similar to (2) above in that the apology serves as a post-face to the repair proper, it is accomplished here through the fuller copula format.

In (6), by contrast, the repair sequence involves a more expansive form of repair. Here Josh’s effort to spell his interlocutor’s first name (line 6) attracts a full-fledged other-correction in line 8. Having made a minimal attempt at the registration (Goldberg, 1975) of the correction (“O:=pih”, line 9), Josh apologizes for his error.

In this case the apology also accepts responsibility (Robinson, 2006) for having misspelled a relatively common given name, together with the more substantial break in progressivity that is associated with this error and its correction.

**Expanded Apologies**

“(I’m) sorry” + named offense. As we suggested earlier, apologies that include a naming of the offense commonly deal with distal concerns arising out of past or future actions:

2 Although it is certainly possible to imagine that a stand-alone “I’m [intensifier] sorry” format is commonly present in conversational data, in fact this format rarely occurs in the present dataset except adjacent to additional apology components that name the offense and/or account for it.
Here, Rick simply names the apologizable—an apparently broken undertaking to call the previous evening—within the subordinate clause of the turn that carries the apology. In the absence of this naming, the apologizable might not be readily available to the recipient.

In case (8), the talk arises from a discussion of an unexpected visit by Ava’s son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. The family members arrived while Ava was out, and Jessie entertained them until she returned. Here Ava apologizes for the imposition.

Ava’s description of the apologizable “yih had th’m all on you Jessie like that” clearly conveys her understanding of the unexpected visit as an imposition (Margutti et al., 2015); it is this characterization that Jessie vigorously resists with an Oh-prefaced rejection of the description “↑Oh don’t be silly” (Heritage, 2002; Robinson, 2004) at line 3 and a diametrically alternative depiction of the visit in question “No: that w’z lovely it w’z a nice surpris:se” (lines 4 and 5).

The practice of naming the offense within the apologizing turn is not restricted to distal problems. In (9), for example, Lily has phoned Cora to ask her to babysit for a while with her little boy. However, it turns out that Cora has the flu (lines 1, 4 and 5). Cora is audibly unwell (line 2), and after a couple more turns-at-talk, Lily, who could not have known this in advance of the call, apologizes for “disturbing” her (line 9).
Similarly, the sequence below in (10) follows an extended discussion of a family known to both Gwen and Leslie.

(10) [Holt:J86:1:4:1-2,10-11]
1 Gwen: Yeh that’d be super.
2 You know if you hear anything
3 I’d really like to know becuz I’m (.)
4 you know very fond a’th’m really
5 a[ll of them.] [..hhehhh]
6 Leslie: [I kno:]w ye[s].
7 (0.3)
8 Leslie: hh Righto then=
9 Gwen: =Thanks ever so much
10 (.)
11 Leslie: Okal[y
12 Gwen: [Bye [then,
13 Leslie: -> [!Sorry t’be the bearer’v bad tidi!n[gs
14 Gwen: [Well
15 Gwen: you know it’s one’v those things p’raps it’s
16 better to know anyway becuz you know another
17 time I might’v said yes I’d’v gone alo:ng
18 thinking I tc’d (0.2) dump myself on the:m
19 you know,

In this call Leslie has played a primary role in conveying the troubles of the family in question, and at line 13 she alludes to this role as the “bearer’v bad tidi!n[gs” in an apology for this action (Maynard, 2003).

“(I’m) sorry” + account. In the cases in which an apology is associated only with an account, the apologizable is local and indigenous to the interaction, but its source is not available to the recipient. For instance, in (11) below Marshall has paused in his response to Joanne’s question in line 3. Then, at line 4, before Marshall has completed his turn, Joanne cries out in pain and describes its cause (lines 4–6).
Here, the progress of the conversation is disrupted across lines 4–12, for which Joanne apologizes in line 13. After a silence, Marshall resumes the sequence with the conjunction “but” (line 15), thereby apparently picking up from where he left off in line 2. In this case the talk is evidently disrupted, but the source of the disruption is not available to one of the parties and therefore is appropriately accounted for.

A similar contingency arises in (12), taken from a call to a Suicide Prevention Center in which the caller is concerned that her child is possibly suicidal. At lines 1 and 3 the agent asks the caller to hold the line. After a period of time he accounts for his request in terms of a competing call, which he suggests at lines 12 and 15 that he was obliged to attend to.
In overlap with the apologizing turn, the caller absolves the agent of any offense (line 14), and the agent resumes the topic of the call at line 16. In this case, like the previous one, a contingency that was unknown to one party and that severely impacted the progress of the call was subsequently accounted for in the apologizing turn.

Apology + named offense + account. Although naming or otherwise alluding to an offense may be necessary for an apology to achieve its object, accounting for an offense is surely not always essential. We may therefore hypothesize that apologies which include both a naming (or indexing) of the offense and an account of how the offense came to pass are a larger and more protracted form of apology, more likely to be addressed to distal apologies and possibly more major offenses.

In the following case (13), Dana has called in pursuit of a prior attempt to phone the previous day. After Dana identifies herself (line 3), Leslie (who was informed by Dana’s mother of the difficulty in a previous call) promptly begins an apology and explains why Dana’s previous efforts to call the previous day were unsuccessful.

(13) [Holt:SO88:2:10:1]
1  Leslie:  Hello↑↑?
2      (0.2)
3  Dana:  H’llo this’s Dana.
4  Leslie: ->.hh ↑Oh Dana I’m: ↑sorry it didn’t rin::g yesterday:
5 ->this: silly: thin:g the pin comes out of the ho:le.
6 .hhhh[Hhh
7 Dana: [eh heh [Ri(h)ght eh=
8 Leslie: [Aa-
9 Leslie: =An’ then people get ‘n engaged ↓signal.
10 Uh w’ll no: not engaged it ri:ngs
11 [but nobody a]:nswer: s it. ]
12 Dana: [B u t n o ] one’s the:re] yes that’s it,

Here Leslie indexes the virtual offense as “it didn’t rin::g yesterday:” and then immediately offers an account framed in terms of a defective phone jack (lines 4 and 5). Both the apologizable and its account are here mandated by Dana’s inability (hearing just a ringing phone) to have grasped the problem at her end of the line. The specific context in this case is that Leslie is planning to visit her son, Gordon, at a university some 200 miles away and Dana, Gordon’s girlfriend, clearly may have an interest in sending some communication with her. Dana’s mother described the situation the previous day to Leslie as “[Dana] rang you two’r three times but there wz no: one i:n.” and Leslie accordingly treats the problem as worthy of a detailed apology, which she presents immediately.
More problematic is the following example (14). The context of this call is that Gordon has phoned his girlfriend Dana close to midnight the previous evening and thoroughly alarmed Dana’s mother. Gordon was drunk at the time of that call (“I w’z out of my brain”, “I w’z pissed”, “pished”, “sozzled”; lines 7, 11–13), and had no valid or pressing reason to make it. As Dana describes before this sequence, her mother was quite upset, and Dana had to go to some effort to fabricate an explanation for the call:

(14) [Holt:88U:1:4:1-3,9-11]
1 Dana:     So I w’z really having fits.
2 Gordon: -> Ohh hI’m so(hh)rry
3     -> [ w’z p r o b l - it w’z ]
4 Dana:     ((You really made) me a ] blo:b=.
5 Gordon: -> =It w’z a bad mo:-ve. .pk.k.k[ .hh [.khhhh
6 Dana:     [It wa[:s.
7 Gordon: -> I w’z out of my brain at the ↓ti(hh)me
8     -> a(hh)nywa(hh)y. hhhh [hh
9 Dana:     [I thou-{:ght so.
10 Gordon:     [.hhhhhh
11 Gordon: -> .tlak I r- (0.2) .kn °hh° .pl I w’z pissed.
12     -> hhmhhh .ptchiklah .pished.h
13     -> .plk .k.khhhh[°sozzled.°
14 Dana:                   [(You see),
15 Dana: You see: I use to get these phone calls’n (0.5)
16 <i:t w’z really upsetting ’n mother use to have
17 fits c’z you see .hh (0.5) i-the only (0.2)
18 m:- if anyone rin:gs late at ni:ght mother
19 automatically assumes something’s happened to
20 eether me or Gordon.

In the course of his apology, Gordon begins by characterizing the offense as something that was “proble-” (line 3), likely headed toward “probably a bad move.” He then revises this to “It w’z a bad mo:-ve.” in line 5. After this, he accounts for his behavior with reference to his level of intoxication (lines 7, 11–13). Across this apology Dana comments in ways that aggravate Gordon’s offense: At line 4, just after the completion of “Ohh hI’m so(hh)rry”, she says “(You really made) me a blo:b.”; and after the gloss of his offense “It w’z a bad mo:-ve”, she responds with an agentive repetition “It wa:s.” (line 6) (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Stivers, 2005). It is notable that Gordon’s description of the virtual offense glosses over his agency in the misdeed (Margutti et al., this issue) and that his account in terms of drunkenness at the time is scarcely grounds for exculpation. Not surprisingly perhaps, Dana’s response to his apology withholds acceptance of the apology and absolution for the offense and instead reaggravates the offense by describing the background of her mother’s concerns (lines 15–20).
Goffman’s observation that remedial actions may be conceived in terms of distributive justice may be construed as a principle of proportionality expressible as the maxim that “little virtual offenses get little apologies.” In this section we pursue this idea by first considering the extent of apologies in local and distal contexts and then examine variations within these two primary classes.

In the dataset, 62% of explicit apologies addressed virtual offenses characterizable as local in character, the remaining 38% addressing distal virtual offenses. Notwithstanding Goffman’s (1955, p. 226) observation that “an unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgmental significance,” we began from the notion that distal virtual offenses are likely to be more problematic and ex hypothesi more likely to attract more expansive apologies. To this end, we compared apologies in local and distal circumstances, focusing on the contrast between cases in which the apologizer simply used the word “sorry” (with no further elaboration) and cases in which the apologizer said more than this (“sorry +”).

Table 1 clearly demonstrates a considerable difference between the two contexts of local versus distal. In a general context in which “sorry +” predominates among apology formats, it was universal in distal environments, whereas cases of bare “sorry” appear only in local contexts.

“Sorry” in the Context of Repair

To further investigate the use of a bare “sorry,” we focused on instances of repair. As Table 2 shows, 15 of 24 bare “sorry” cases are concentrated in the category of repair. Most of these implemented other-initiated repair sequences in which the repair initiator took responsibility for a failure of hearing (Robinson, 2006). In a small number of additional cases, “sorry” played a role in the implementation of self-repair, as described above.

“Sorry +” formats were predominantly used in the context of other-correction. Evaluating the repair cases as a whole against the correction cases, these differences are statistically significant (Fisher exact test [two tailed],

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Sorry”</th>
<th>“Sorry +”</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square test, 11.06, \( p = .0008 \).
Although it might be tempting to argue that a speaker’s previous commitment to something that subsequently required correction is a sufficient virtual offense to warrant a “sorry +” apology, we note that in three of the four cases, the correction in question concerns matters of gender or age, as illustrated in two examples below. In (15) a school official, calling to ask about a child with an unexcused absence from school, is misled by the low pitch of the mother’s voice into addressing her as “Mister Richards” (line 3).

(15) [Medeiros:JPP:1:1]
1  MOM:    Hello,  
2          (0.4)  
3  OFF:    Hello Mister Richards?  
4          (0.3)  
5  MOM:    Ah: this: Missiz Richards,=  
6  OFF:    Uh Missiz Richards I’m sorry this is Miss Medeiros fr’m Reedondo Highschool calling? [.hhhhh  
7  MOM:                                      
8  OFF:    Uh w’z Bra:d home fr’m school i:ll t’dAy? 

In (16), Niels commits himself (line 1) to what turns out to be a misrepresentation of the age of Alex’s child, using a [question + tag] format that indexes a relatively shallow epistemic gradient (Heritage, 2012). Having been informed that the child is “ni:ne,” (line 3), Niels overtly registers this as an informative correction before acknowledging the new information situation with “O kay.” (line 5) and subsequently “I see” (line 7). Finally, at line 9, Niels elaborates on his misapprehension “Ah thought ’ee was six” and apologizes for it.

(16) [Davey Riga:32-38]
1  Niels:    He’s very young isn’ih?  
2          (0.2)  
3  Alex:    °He’s ni:ne,°  
4          (.)  
5  Niels:    Oh he’s °ni:ne. O kay.  
6          (0.2)  
7  Niels:    I see  
8          (1.0)
Notably, in this case Alex strongly resists the suggestion that the child is six with the repeated “no no no” (Stivers, 2004) and a repeat of the child’s true age (line 10), insisting that the child is “big enough” (line 12), with which Niels is at pains to concur.

In the fourth case, (6) above, there is a failure to spell the recipient’s name correctly. It may therefore be suggested that in cases of other-correction involving matters of identity, a more expansive apology is warranted and appropriate. In our only case of other correction involving a bare “sorry,” the correction was embedded (Jefferson, 1987) and involved a relatively superficial misspeaking by the apologizer. In summary, these observations about repair rather directly support the proposal that “little virtual offenses get little apologies.”

“Sorry” Outside the Context of Repair

Considering cases of bare “sorry” outside the context of repair, we find a pattern that centers on trivial interactional infractions and relatively minimal virtual offenses. In (17), for example, Leslie, calling to request information about an order, initiates a “switchboard request” for “Mister Shorebridge” in line 3:

(17) [Holt:1:3:1]
1 Leslie: Oh hello
2 (0.2)
3 Leslie: Is uh Mister Shorebridge there?
4 (0.7)
5 Reception: Mister Shorebridge who sh’ll I say is calling,
6 Leslie: -> Sorry, .h ehm (. ) Well (. ) missiz Field
7 with a qu:ry about her order.
8 Reception: Missiz Poole.

In response to Leslie’s request, the receptionist asks for her name (line 5). In the context of a switchboard request, the requester should ordinarily volunteer his or her name rather than wait to be asked for it (Schegloff, 2007). Here Leslie apologizes in line 6 before responding to the receptionist’s question, thereby treating the apologizable as having priority over the provision of a response and her previous omission as a virtual offense that should be addressed promptly.

A similarly trivial virtual offense emerges in the following conversation between a boyfriend and girlfriend. In the course of telling a story about a
man who “lives with Steve”, Dana describes him as “the one with big ears” (line 2).

Gordon’s response “I c’n relate to this guy” in line 4 apparently targets Dana’s earlier remark about “big ears.” At line 6 Dana begins with a response that projects continuation of her story, which she abandons in favor of something intended as a playful insult: “Oh no they’re even worse th’n yours” (line 7). Encountering no responsive laughter across her subsequent “.t.h Uhm” and short pause, Dana offers a minimal apology in line 8. Table 3 shows just nine cases of bare “sorry” outside the context of repair, all of them occurring in local environments and addressing these minimal contingencies, together with a small set of somewhat expanded apologies (e.g., “I’m sorry,” “I must apologize”) that do not name or account for the virtual offense.

Our comparison of apologies implemented with just the word “sorry” with those implemented by “sorry +” strongly suggests that the principle of proportionality straightforwardly applies both in the context of repair and outside it. A bare “sorry” is ordinarily used to address the most minimal virtual offenses, primarily involving self-repair, other-initiated repair, and other comparatively minor interactional infractions. In sum, the results so far support the notion that local and intersubjectively available virtual offenses are treated minimally, whereas distal virtual offenses, addressing matters outside the here-and-now of the interaction, accrue more substantial apologies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apology Formulation, Excluding Cases of Repair</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Sorry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fisher exact test (two tailed), $p = .006$. 

TABLE 3
However, there remains a residue of puzzling cases, summarized in Table 4. Table 4 shows that among the local virtual offenses, which we have suggested will tend to be apparent to a recipient, 23 (63%) are nonetheless named, whereas 26 (67%) of the distal virtual offenses, which may be less apparent, are likewise named. The difference between these two outcomes is not statistically significant (Fisher exact test [two tailed], \(p = 0.37\)). This observation is not at all compatible with the principle of proportionality and invites an investigation of why such similar proportions of the two classes of virtual offenses should be named. Consideration of the presence of accounts invites a similar question as to why as many as 13 of 41 local virtual offenses (32%) should accrue an account, compared with 18 of 39 distal virtual offenses (46%). Again, the difference between these two outcomes is not statistically significant (Fisher exact test [two tailed], \(p = 0.25\)).

**NAMING AND ACCOUNTING FOR VIRTUAL OFFENSES**

**Names**

*Ex hypothesi*, local virtual offenses should not be named, whereas distal virtual offenses should be named. However, Table 4 shows this is clearly not the case. Under what circumstances are local virtual offenses named and distal virtual offenses not named?

Beginning with the 13 cases of distal virtual offenses in which the offense was not named, two circumstances exhaust the possibilities. First, and most obviously, the virtual offense was named in a preceding turn before the apology (Margutti et al., this issue). This occurs in 10 of 13 cases (77%) in the dataset. In the remaining three cases, the apologizer defers naming the virtual offense until later in the sequence or elides it altogether. The following case illustrates this second practice:

(19) [Holt:C85:3]
1 Leslie: ↑Are you thinkin:g of comin:g t’the meeting t’night
2 Myra: -> D’you know *I’m: terribly isorry.*
In response to Leslie’s question about coming to the meeting, Myra launches an apology that is elaborated with an extensive description of circumstances that suggest that Myra’s expected help with childcare will not be available (her husband Ben is unexpectedly away, her mother is going to a carol concert). The outcome of this, although inferable, is never explicitly stated, and, indeed, Myra defers her negative response for another several turns, finally stating: “I’ve just been t’fetch Amanda f’m her piano l’sn I w’z- e-on the way back I w’z thinking now how c’n I get round ↓ this. But I don’t think I can Leslie.”. It may be noted that even this negative response is mitigated with “I don’t think I can” and is offered as a response to her own question “How c’n I get round ↓ this”, thus presenting her response as the disappointing outcome of inward struggle rather than as a direct response to Leslie’s original question.

If unnamed distal virtual offenses can be explicated, there still remains the puzzle of named local virtual offenses. Three contingencies account for almost all of the cases in which an apology for a local virtual offense is accompanied by a naming of the offense. Just under half of the cases (11 of 23) involve some reference to the apologizer’s circumstances, of which the recipient will necessarily be unaware:

(20) [Holt:1:8:1]
1 Leslie: Hello:,=
2 Mum: = (Hello),
3 Leslie: -> I’m sorry tuh keep you, I’ve jus’ been stickin:г
4 -> .h something on thee front a’ thee: uhm
5 -> (cooker. .h because:: uh: (:.) the top a’ the
6 -> knob fell off.
7 Mum: Oh: I see:,

In response to Leslie’s question about coming to the meeting, Myra launches an apology that is elaborated with an extensive description of circumstances that suggest that Myra’s expected help with childcare will not be available (her husband Ben is unexpectedly away, her mother is going to a carol concert). The outcome of this, although inferable, is never explicitly stated, and, indeed, Myra defers her negative response for another several turns, finally stating: “I’ve just been t’fetch Amanda f’m her piano l’sn I w’z- e-on the way back I w’z thinking now how c’n I get round ↓ this. But I don’t think I can Leslie.”. It may be noted that even this negative response is mitigated with “I don’t think I can” and is offered as a response to her own question “How c’n I get round ↓ this”, thus presenting her response as the disappointing outcome of inward struggle rather than as a direct response to Leslie’s original question.

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In this case, the call was apparently answered by another member of the family, and Leslie is accounting for her delay in getting to the phone.

In the second substantial class of cases (7 of 23), an aspect of the recipient’s circumstances prompts an apology in which the local virtual offense is named. In case (21), Randall apologizes for imposing on Leslie by calling and by asking her to relay a message to her husband, Skip.

(21) [Holt:M88:2:3]
1 Leslie: Hello::?
2 (0.7)
3 Randall: -> Oh: Leslie sorry to (.)
4 -> beh to bother you? .h[h
5 Leslie: [Oh: right.
6 Randall: ^Could you a::sk Ski:p if-
7 .hm [at- when you go: to this meeting=
8 Leslie: [.p.k
9 Randall: =tomorrow .hm could’ee give Geoff: Haldan’s
10 aipologies through sickness?

Here, both the call and, by implication, its purposes are treated as amounting to a virtual offense, named as “bothering you” (line 4).

In the remaining five cases, apologizers use explicit naming to formulate some other aspect of the ongoing talk as a local virtual offense, as in the following sequence:

(22) [HG:II:10-11]
1 Nancy: Didja a’ready get the mai:l,=
2 Hyla: =.hhhh Yes, hh-hh-h[h,
3 Nancy: [Oh, hhhmh[hh
4 Hyla: [hh-hh
5 (.)
6 Nancy: -> Sorry I brought it _uhhp

Here, Nancy’s question in line 1 is understood as an oblique reference to (a lack of) correspondence between Hyla and her current boyfriend. Hyla’s unelaborated affirmative response is understood as implying that she has not received any mail from him, and Nancy subsequently apologizes for having “brought it _uhhp” (line 6).

Accounts

Accounts appear in broadly equivalent numbers in the context of both local and distal virtual offenses. Although the relevance for accounts for distal virtual offenses (18 of 39, 46%) requires little explanation, their appearance in
apologies for local virtual offenses (13 of 41, 32%) merits elucidation. In one subset of cases, a failure in the progressivity of the interaction occasions an account that is either preaced or post-faced by an apology, as in (23) below. Here, in a long and emotional conversation between Penny and Pat, whose house burned down the previous evening, Pat finds it necessary to curtail the call.

(23) [Frankel:II:21-22]
1  Pat: -> hhOkay, wai- Oh Penny, I’m sorry.
2    -> .hh they’re waitin’ f’the
3    -> insurance c-people [t’ ca:ll. ]
4  Penny: [.hhh Oh:]okay. Oh no.
5  Penny: I didn’ realize that,
6 (0.2)
7  Penny: [Awright. ]
8  Pat: [Oh that’s] awright.
9  Pat: .hhh I’ll[1 u:m, I’ll prob’ly be in touch=
10  Penny: [°.tch!°
11  Pat: =with you (again’n) I’m really happy
12    y’called. hh-huh-huh]

In this case Pat accounts for her need to bring the call with Penny to a close by reference to an anticipated call from the insurance company. And in the following case (24), an extended failure of progressivity in the opening of a telephone call, and one moreover in which Skip’s jocular opening is absolutely without reciprocation from his interlocutor, Skip is eventually obliged to self-identify at line 11.

1 Skip: .hhhh Hello you miserable ol’hhh
2 (0.6)
3 Skip: .t.hh hh .hhh Wotcha?
4 (0.5)
5 Hal: He’lllo?
6 Skip: .ph Hello Hal,h
7 (0.2)
8 Hal: Hell[oh?
9 Skip: [.hhhh
10 (0.3)
11 Skip: It’s Skip. ((flatly produced))
12 Hal: ↑Oh ‘t’s tyou ↓Skip=↓
13 Skip: =Ye(h)e[h
14 Hal: -> [Sorry didn’ reco’nize your
15 Hal: -> [ voice ] f’r a minute,
16 Skip: [y::Yehh] heh heh heh .hu:h
17 .hu:[h
18 Hal: [.hhh huh ↑ha:h ha:h huh he- .hheh heh .h
19 Hal: ↑T’nit ↓funny ‘ow you can’t reco’nize
20 voices occasion’ly.
Subsequently, Hal registers recognition of Skip at line 12 and then simultaneously both names and accounts for the problem in an apology that asserts his failure to recognize Skip’s voice.

It may be added that, in contexts of repeated failure in progressivity that prima facie expand the virtual offense, apologizers tend to account for the problem, as in the following case involving repeated failures in the transmission of a phone number:

(25) [FD:IV(IIIrd)44-53a:R:2]
1 Frank: Mi-ister Dodd’s number: is F E: three:, (0.2)
2 Frank: two: eight oh: ni:ne,
3 Frank: (0.4)
4 Operator: F E two:. eight oh?:
5 Frank: No?: F E three:,
6 (0.4)
7 Frank: two: eight, oh ni:ne.=
8 Operator: -> Sorry I can’t hear ( ),
9 (0.4)
10 Operator: Repeat ( ),
11 Frank: F E three:, two (. ) eight, (0.2) oh: ni:ne.

Finally, accounts may be produced when an exogenous disturbance hinders the progressivity of the talk, as in (11) above, in which a cat intervenes on Joanne’s side of the call.

CONCLUSION

Do little offenses get little apologies? The evidence presented here suggests they do. First, comparing the bare “sorry” format with all others, we find it is exclusively deployed in contexts where the difficulty is local in character (Table 1) and primarily involves issues of speaking, hearing, and/or understanding the talk (Table 2). Second, comparing the “sorry” with the “I’m sorry” formats, the “sorry” format is most common in cases of self-repair and in the other-initiation of repair where, in the latter case, it is used to assume responsibility for trouble sources in the talk that may not be the exclusive responsibility of the repair initiator (Robinson, 2006). “I’m sorry,” by contrast, primarily emerges in the context of other-correction (Table 2) and remedies intrinsically more face-threatening virtual offenses. Third, however, we characterized expanded apologies in terms of additional apology components in which the virtual offense is either named, or accounted for, or both. These expanded apologies present a more mixed picture (Table 4), largely because a variety of interactional contingencies other than the scale of the virtual offense may require naming or accounting for the situation in question. For example, where the nature of the local virtual offense (e.g., a cat
clawing the leg of one of the parties in a telephone conversation) is unavailable to a recipient, it may have to be named or accounted for. In distal contexts, by contrast, where the virtual offense has already been named, further naming of the offense may be redundant or elided (Margutti et al., this issue).

In some of these cases, of course, the elisions may be strategic, designed to avoid characterizing the virtual offense, and perhaps in a reflexive correlate of our maxim, to suggest, through a minimal apology, that the virtual offense is to be treated as minimal. This is to say that if, as we have suggested, there is a norm of proportionality in the relationship between virtual offenses and the apologies that address them, then this principle, in common with all other normative aspects of human communication, is amenable to reflexive manipulation.

REFERENCES


