

Mistakes Have Been Made: Evasion of Responsibility in Political Apologies

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Key words: political discourse, mediated political apologies, mitigation of blame and responsibility, CDA

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, increasing demands for public apologies from politicians have put public apologies at the centre of media attention. Apologies have been the object of a considerable amount of research within the fields of linguistic politeness and speech act theory, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Much of the research on apologies has been based on interpersonal apologies that involve face-to-face interaction between two individuals. While public apologies share some characteristics with interpersonal apologies, there are important differences between the two types of apologies.

Political apologies represent a highly mediated form of public discourse. They are often the result of a prior demand for an apology, and have layers of implied addressee.

Political apology is the result of a political calculus where the cost of a potential threat to the politician's public image is weighed against the benefits of restoring the politician's public image. As such political apologies are skilfully used as symbolic acts by politicians in order to restore their public image (Kampf, 2009).

The paper studies several newspaper articles, which report on political apologies following political scandals that shook the British public in 2008. The analysis is situated within the field of critical discourse analysis, and includes the analysis of the socio-political context in which the apology was made, as well as the explicit comments by journalists, who are responsible for mediating between the politician and the public.

The aim of this paper is to examine different linguistic forms (passive voice, inanimate agents, generic reference, impersonal use of pronouns) that politicians use in the speech act of apology as evasion strategies to minimize personal agency and responsibility for the offensive act. Findings suggest that the use of ambiguous and indirect message, which is a key pragmatic feature of political discourse (Obeng 1997), is inseparable part of political apologies.