Language in the news

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THE SUBTLE ART OF THE POLITICAL APOLOGY

It is well recognised in linguistics that when we use language, we are doing things with words. That is, we are trying to bring about some form of action. The way that linguists explore how language brings about action is called 'speech act theory'. There are very many different speech acts (and very many linguists with their own views on what constitutes a speech act!), but some common speech acts are requests (how we get people to do things for us) and promises (where we commit ourselves to some future course of action). We all use language to bring about some action in the world, and in order for these speech acts to be actionable, linguists analyse, among another things, the conditions that have to be met in order for the speech act to affect the desired action or change in the world. These conditions are what the language philosopher J. L. Austin termed 'felicity conditions'. For example, if two actors in a marriage scene in a film deliver the line 'I do', they are not actually entering into a marriage because the person marrying them doesn't have the right to officiate a marriage and the actors do not intend to enter into marriage. We can also analyse the felicity conditions of common speech acts like promising. For example, if I make a promise but do not intend to carry out that promise, then the speech act is infelicitous, as it does not meet the necessary felicity conditions.

One type of speech act that has dominated the news in recent weeks in the UK is the apology, specifically the political apology. The headlines centred around an apology that Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave after it came to light that he and several of his staff had a party in the Downing Street garden during lockdown - just the latest report of parties held by politicians during this time. Headlines reporting on Johnson's apology included "Boris Johnson's non-apology underlines his utter contempt for the British public" (The Guardian), "Boris Johnson: Please accept my [carefully worded and painfully lawyered] apology" (Evening Standard) to "Boris Johnson's apology was 'a load of old waffle and I don't believe it', says Somerset care home resident" (Sky News). What all of these headlines have in common is the view that Johnson's apology was not sincere.

But what was it about Johnson's

apology that led people to believe that it wasn't sincere, and can linguistics shed any light on why this is?

One study of the structure of apologies, conducted by linguists Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House and Gabriele Kaspar, states that apologies typically feature some form of formulaic expression, e.g. 'I am sorry', or 'I want to apologise'. Knowing this, Johnson's apology appears to follow a fairly canonical apology structure:

> "Mr Speaker, **I want to apologise**. I know that millions of people across this country have made extraordinary sacrifices over the last 18 months."

However, in addition to the formulaic expression, Blum-Kulka et al. found that apologies typically include the other strategies for performing a speech act. These include: (1) an explanation or description of the thing that caused offence, (2) an expression of responsibility, (3) an offer of repair and (4) a promise of 'forbearance'. Looking at the rest of Johnson's speech, we can see that while he does appear to use some of these strategies, he adopts other linguistic strategies that negate the apology. If we look for evidence of strategy (1), Johnson does appear to offer some explanation of what happened:

> "I know the rage they feel with me and with the government I lead, when **they think that in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed** by the people who make the rules."

However, Johnson's decision to use the verb 'think' implies that there is a situation in which Johnson and his aides *were* following the rules. This suggests that in contrast to the point in (1), Johnson isn't aware of the thing that caused offence.

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If we turn our attention to (2), it does appear that Johnson takes responsibility:

> "t**hough I cannot anticipate the conclusions of the current inquiry**, I have learned enough to know **there were things we simply did not get right and I must take responsibility**."

However, again Johnson offers some mitigation prior to accepting responsibility, i.e. that the ongoing enquiry into the party has not yet stated that it was in breach of Covid rules. Moreover, the use of the general term 'things' rather than a direct reference to a party works to make the cause of the offence vague. Further, Johnson's use of 'we' instead of 'I' distances Johnson from the cause of the offence, which seems to counter his admission of responsibility.

Johnson's speech includes no obvious reference to strategies (3) and (4). The closest thing in the speech to an offer of repair and promise of forbearance is in the following lines:

> "when I went into that garden just after six on the 20th of May 2020 [...] before going back into my office 25 minutes later to continue working, **I believed implicitly that this was a work event** [...] with hindsight **I should have sent everyone back inside, I should have found some other way to thank them, and I should have recognised that even if it could be said technically to fall within the guidance, there would be millions and millions of people who simply would not see it that way.**"

However, as we saw earlier in the speech, Johnson opts to provide mitigation for his decision to break the rules and socialise during lockdown (i.e. that he believed it was a work event and that it was part of his work day). Conveniently, it is impossible to falsify what someone does or does not believe, meaning that it is hard to prove that Johnson consciously broke lockdown rules. Furthermore, he does not offer a repair for his future actions; instead, he offers an alternative course of action for his part in past rule-breaking. Moreover, he again provides information that counters his apology, i.e. that the party "could be said technically to fall within the guidance". While what Johnson is doing here looks on the surface to be an apology, there are very many linguistic clues that it is not felicitous and is not sincere. If we rephrase what Johnson is saying here, we are left with something like 'I'm sorry that you (the public) don't understand the rules and therefore that you think I've broken them'.

Where does this leave us? Well, looking again at some of those headlines about Johnson's apology, all the linguistic evidence suggests that, indeed, 'Boris Johnson's non-apology underlines his utter contempt for the British public'. ¶