

OUTLOOK

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Apologies: What It Means to Say 'Sorry'

By DEBORAH TANNEN

"Apologize! Pull out his eyes!" A small child is hounded by adults' threats in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." These injunctions came to mind as a chorus of media commentators expressed their disappointment in President Clinton's public statement following his grand jury testimony: They felt the president did not apologize sufficiently.

Why are some pundits, politicians and journalists clamoring for a better apology? What is it about apologies that makes them such a big deal—not only in public, but in our private lives, and the semi-private world of work? And if apologies are so often demanded, why do so many people resist uttering them? Why did British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli advise that statesmen should "never apologize, never explain"?

Let's start at home. A woman told me she was frustrated with her husband. She had asked him to drop off a suit at the cleaner's on his way to work, because she wanted to wear it to an important meeting later that week; when she asked him for the dry cleaning ticket, he admitted he had forgotten to make the stop. She was angry—not because he failed to do the errand (after all, anyone can make a mistake), but because he didn't apologize. Had their roles

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Deborah Tannen is a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. Her most recent book is "The Argument Culture" (Random House).

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been reversed, she would have fallen all over herself apologizing to him. But he simply announced his lapse and expected her to be forgiving. She needed to see that he was sorry before she could forgive.

This man's offense, from his wife's point of view, was a failure of feeling: He didn't seem to care that he had let her down. If he didn't care about the inconvenience he had caused her, how could she depend on him in the future? Seeming sorry is what provides assurance he will not do the same thing again. This explains, in part, why apologies are so important: Repentance can help restore trust.

But in the husband's view, apologizing would be pointless: It wouldn't change the fact that his wife didn't have her suit to wear to the meeting. Apologizing just wasn't in his repertoire.

This is true for more men than women. Several years ago, a National Public Radio feature reported on a new service called the Apology Line. For a basic fee of \$10, creator Willette Coleman would make a telephone call offering an apology on behalf of her customer. Coleman found that the majority of her clients were men, "because men truly seem not to feel comfortable apologizing to another person face to face." A man who used her service to make amends with a colleague explained, with a laugh, that this was "a good way to kind of say I'm sorry . . . and not have to say it."

This man discovered that issuing an apology—even through an intermediary—restored a collegial relationship at work. In doing research for my book "Talking from 9 to 5," I observed that women were more likely than men to offer apologies in the workplace.

Since then, I have noticed this pattern everywhere. I recall a photographer's assistant who responded, when asked by his boss for a particular lens, "that lens didn't come with us"—a clever alternative to saying "I'm sorry I didn't bring that lens."

There are women as well as men who avoid apologizing, but they may be judged more harshly. A woman once asked my advice: She had been told at work that she was too aggressive. I said, "Well, maybe you could check out how you're coming across. You could say to people, 'Look, I hope I'm not coming on too strong. You know how I mean it . . .'" She replied, "That would be apologizing! I couldn't do that!" I suspect that this attitude toward apology was one aspect of her style that came across as too aggressive.

It's pretty clear why men, on average, are more reluctant to offer apologies than women. Men tend to be more attuned to the power dynamics of conversations, and more inclined to avoid talking in a way that puts them in a one-down position: Apologizing entails admitting fault, and that weakens your position. Others could exploit that weakness in the future. This is surely what Disraeli had in mind.

Though many people resist apologizing because it appears weak, willingness to apologize can be a sign of strength, precisely because it shows that the apologizer is confident enough to risk appearing weak. This, too, surfaces at work. Several managers have told me that they learned, through experience, that saying "I'm sorry" or even "I apologize" when they made a mistake was like discovering a potion with magical powers to smooth ruffled feathers and make subsequent conversations easier.

All sorts of public encounters can be improved by apology. If your salmon is over-

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cooked in a restaurant, a wise waiter will apologize and offer to replace it. Consultants advise small businesses that customers who complain and are stonewalled in response will never again do business with that company. But if a complaint is met with an apology and an offer to make restitution, the company often ends up with a more loyal customer than one who never complained in the first place.

The power of an apology can be staggering. Brooks Douglass is an Oklahoma state senator whose family suffered an unspeakable tragedy. When Douglass was 16, two men broke into his home, murdered his parents, raped his 12-year-old sister and shot young Douglass in the back. Seven years later, Douglass wrote in *USA Today* that he hoped to achieve closure on these horrible events by witnessing the execution of one of the perpetrators. He found closure with the other perpetrator in a different way: In a dramatic face-to-face meeting, the murderer began, "I want you to know that I am so, so sorry about what I did to you and your family." Douglass was able to forgive his parents' murderer because the man seemed genuinely remorseful.

Providing closure is a frequent function of apologies. In the personal worlds of home and work, apologies can restore equilibrium to a relationship by allowing each person to play a part, like shaking hands after a fight. I apologize for my error, but I expect you to apologize for yours. If I say, "I'm sorry I blew my stack when you broke that glass; I overreacted," I expect you to say something like, "That's okay. I'm sorry I broke the glass." Many people resist acknowledging their part if they know the other person will not follow suit.

No one wants to take the whole rap if they feel they are not the only one at fault. Clin-

ton, no doubt, was thinking of all the others who will not offer matching apologies. He is not likely to hear, for example, from Kenneth Starr: "I'm sorry I shifted from investigating Whitewater to investigating your sex life," or from the Supreme Court, "We're sorry we ruled that the Paula Jones case could go forward while you are in office; we were wrong to think it would not distract you from your duties," or from the lawyers for Paula Jones, "We're sorry we used the discovery procedure to force Monica Lewinsky to testify against her will," or from whomever is responsible, "We're sorry we leaked grand jury testimony that was supposed to be sealed and secret." (The one contributor who has apologized is David Brock, the author of the *American Spectator* article that first mentioned "a woman named Paula," as part of an effort to dig up dirt on the president.)

The Japanese apologize in conversation far more frequently than Americans. In Japan, when two cars are involved in a minor accident, both drivers bow and apologize. Americans are instructed by insurance companies never to admit fault, so we don't apologize even when we want to. But in Japan, neither apology entails taking the blame, since both drivers offer them. Furthermore, litigation for even minor accidents is common here and highly unusual in Japan.

Fear of litigation was doubtless another factor in the president's reluctance to specify his offenses in his public address, or to admit his relationship with Lewinsky earlier. And he was not the only one who faced an indictment. As columnist Pete Hamill pointed out on "Good Morning America," had Clinton admitted having had a sexual relationship with Lewinsky before the independent counsel granted her immunity, he would have been putting her in line for an indictment as well.

In the end, the president was caught between the powers and liabilities of apologies: Some say that he'd be more likely to be forgiven if he had been more apologetic. But it's equally likely that being more apologetic would have further weakened his position, given our "argument culture": the current combative climate that values aggression more highly than conciliation.

Which brings us back to the uproar from professional commentators and journalists that the president did not really apologize. What, after all, constitutes a good apology? First, it has to include an admission of fault. That's why "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings" (in private) or "I'm sorry if my remarks offended anyone" (in public) fall short. They seem to want to masquerade as an apology without taking blame. Second, there has to be some promise of action to make amends. Finally, the apologizer has to seem apologetic—in other words, contrite. In his remarks, Clinton did admit fault ("it was wrong," "a personal failure") and did promise to make amends ("I must put it right and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so"). Though he didn't say the words "I'm sorry" and "I apologize," and went on to criticize the independent counsel investigation (which left an impression of anger that for critics replaced an impression of contrition), the president was remorseful nonetheless.

So, what Clinton offered was an apology. And indications are that over half of the citizens were satisfied with his statement. Maybe that's because they, too, were angry at the investigation and because the president, after all, has to go on being president. Since they do not think Clinton should be forced out of office, they would rather have a strong president than a weak one. And that probably explains why they were satisfied with the president's remarks.