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I'm Sorry: A Cross-cultural Exploration of Apologizing

Michael Ziesing

"I want to say again to the American people how profoundly sorry I am for what I said and did to trigger these events and the great burden they have imposed on . . . the American people. . . . I know that my actions and the events they triggered have made your work even harder; for that I am profoundly sorry" ("Clinton Apologies," 1999).

"On 6 December 1991 Korean women who identified themselves as "military comfort women" filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government for violating their human rights. They demanded an official apology With this action these women finally started to break their silence and disclose the sexual war crimes committed by the Japanese Imperial Army almost fifty years ago" (Kazuko, 1994).

Introduction

Probably no language function has been in the news more lately than the function of apologizing. Week after week, the famous as well as the infamous stand before the public and apologize or, in any case, receive demands for apologies. Hardly a week goes by without some apology or other making the news – often times even the front pages.

Of course Bill Clinton and his "inappropriate behavior" generated a series of lies followed by apologies and then a seemingly endless analysis of the apologies. Whether his apologies were adequate is still a matter for debate.

More recently, the Pope's apologies to women, Jews and non-Catholics were in the news for a considerable length of time. The issues of the U.S. apologizing to Japan for dropping the atomic bomb, Japan apologizing to Korea for sexually abusing women during World War two, President Clinton apologizing to African Americans for slavery and, well, it should be pretty clear that apologizing is not something to be taken lightly.

The broad landscape of political and religious apologies only serves as a backdrop to this paper. They frequently do, however, make excellent examples. Here, the primary issue at hand is less dramatic,

but perhaps more practical. What is an apology? When should we apologize? How should we apologize?

Definitions

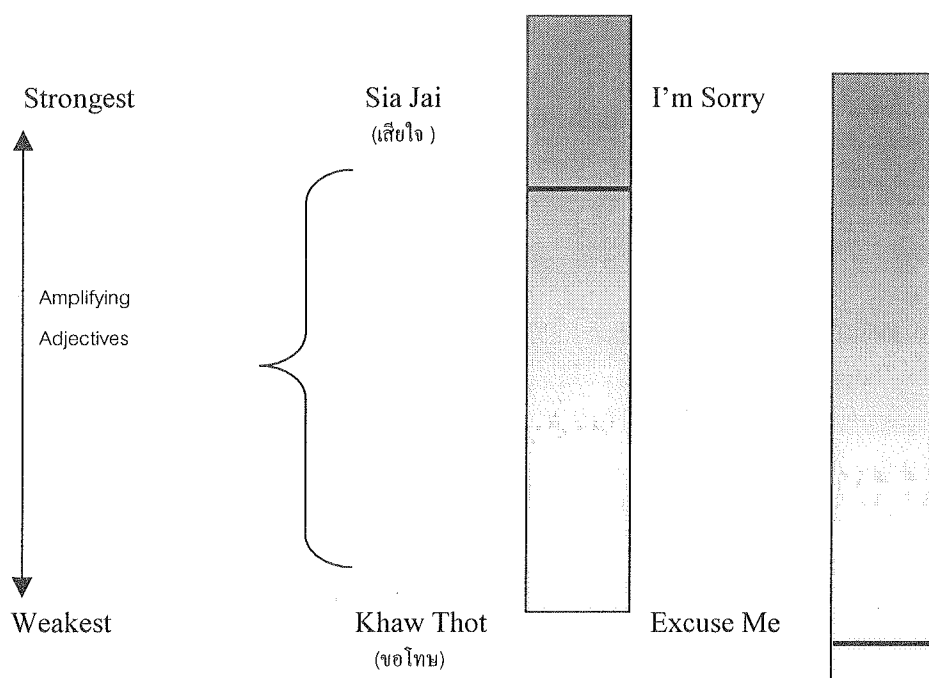
An apology is essentially an expression of regret, sympathy or fault. Usually there is some degree--sometimes quite small, sometimes quite large--of sorrow, guilt or shame. "Degree" is rather important here because it significantly affects how we apologize.

As a first step, let's compare the Thai word for apologizing, to the English word that most dictionaries give as a translation

Thai-English dictionaries usually tell the unsuspecting and naive newcomer to Thailand that the way to say "sorry" is *sia jai* (เสียใจ).¹ Thus, after living in Thailand for

only a couple of weeks and accidentally bumping into a person at the supermarket, this writer said "*sia jai*." The response from the Thai, of course, was surprised followed by laughter – because one does not say *sia jai* in such a case even though one might very well say "I'm sorry."

By the same token, you will almost always find "excuse me" rendered as *khaw thot* (ขอโทษ); another highly misleading translation. Consider, for example, a case where you accidentally run into the person in the supermarket, knock them down, fracture their arm and knock out three teeth. Many Thais that I know would say *khaw thot* and, in this case it would most certainly not be "excuse me." It would be much closer to "I'm sorry." Perhaps the following diagram helps illustrate what is happening.



¹ See, for example, Gordon Alison, *Mini English-Thai and Thai-English Dictionary*, Chalermit Press, Bangkok, 1979 or ดร. วิทย์ เทียนบุญธรรม, Ph.D., LL.B, *The Conversation Dictionary of the Thai Language*, สำนักพิมพ์บำรุงสาสน์, Bangkok, 2531.

Comparison of the Strength of Thai and English Apologizing Functions.²

Thus *Khaw Thot* is vague but versatile, applying to a wide range of circumstances. *Sia jai* is more precise and applies to a limited number of circumstances – those requiring the strongest sort of apology. English is the opposite. “Excuse me” applies to a fairly limited number of misdeeds – all minor. “I’m sorry,” on the other hand, is used for a wide range of things from quite minor to extremely serious. In the case of vague words, of course, both languages use adjectives to be more precise.

Perhaps the illustration above is useful up to a degree. It helps to illustrate that Thais, as people the world over, express regret and apologize; they just do it differently than westerners. In addition, it rather pointedly shows the limits of dictionaries and direct translations. What it does not do is explicate the notion of degree – that is when a “weak” or “strong” apology is in order.

Characteristics Determining How Strongly to Apologize

First, let’s raise the question of whether we only apologize for things we *do*. The answer, of course, is that we often apologize for things that we do *not* do. We say we’re sorry for missing someone’s birthday party, for example. Thus we have errors of *omission* and errors of *commission*.

Second, what about responsibility? Do we only apologize for things that we are responsible for? Responsible, in this sense, means that through our own free choice, we bring something about. Not responsible means that the result was completely out of our own control. In addition, because there

are gray areas here, we need to add the notion of intentionality. That is, some things we are responsible for, but they were accidents. Other things we are responsible for we intend to do.

Suppose I walk behind a row of students and accidentally touch one of them on the head. In English, I might say “sorry.” I am responsible for touching their head but I did not do it intentionally.

If we have a car accident and seriously injure someone we would give a strong apology, perhaps repeat it, give gifts, or compensation and so forth – even if it was unintentional.

If we intentionally kill someone, the strongest and deepest kind of apology would be required. Tentative research shows that many Thais think that *sia jai* is appropriate only for this most serious kind of offence – ones that have both serious consequences and were done intentionally. Twenty randomly selected Thais were presented with the following situation:

While backing out of the driveway of their home, a woman accidentally runs over and kills her husband. The first time she sees her mother-in-law, what should she say, *sia jai* or *khaw thot*? Twelve of the twenty people said *sia jai* and eight said *khaw thot*. In addition, some Thais, in a pilot study conducted by the author, suggested that there were times when *sia jai* would be appropriate for situations of regret (mom’s death), inability to render assistance or not having time to come to a party. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, *sia jai* should be thought of only as dealing with acts of commission. Further study needs to be done in the area of the uses and misuses of *sia jai*.

² The author thanks Ajarn Mark Jones for his suggestions pertaining to this illustration and many other aspects of the paper.

In regard to acts of commission, it has been suggested that “repentance” is one translation for *sia jai*.³ Repentance implies a form of apology so strong that, in English, it has religious connotations. Indeed, in English, it is closely connected with the word “sin.” In the Pope’s apology, he talked about the sins of the Catholic Church against, for example, women.

There are some other interesting aspects relative to the concept of repentance, which should be mentioned as an aside. Consider what William Rice (2000) has to say about “repentance.”

The word repentance as used in the King James Bible was completely misinterpreted by the original translators. The original Greek word *metanoia* means much more than simply feeling sorry. In fact, the idea implies a complete reversal of a person’s whole outlook on themselves and their relationship with that which is greater than themselves. It means seeing oneself not as an ego-bound entity scrambling for control within a subjective frame of reference of his or her own creation, but rather as a conscious participant within a larger frame of reference with a unique roll to play, no matter how insignificant it may seem to himself or herself or the world at large.

Notice not only the heavy spiritual connotation but also its applicability to Buddhism – particularly with reference to the self not being an “ego-bound entity.”

Third, sometimes we create situations for which we were responsible and where we acted intentionally; for example, the manager who cancels an employee’s holiday because the company is short of staff. It would also include the birthday party which we remembered but did not go to.

Fourth, there are cases where we say we are sorry for things that we had nothing to do with. We might say, for example, “I’m so sorry your sister died” or, on the weak end of the scale, “I’m sorry there are no vacancies.” These are expressions of sympathy. We can note that in such cases we use the word “sorry,” not “apologize.” We do not say, “I apologize for your brother dying” unless there is some sense in which we were responsible. We might say, however, “I apologize for giving you an F for English, but you were absent 28 times and failed the midterm and final exam.”

Finally, another aspect of apologizing should be mentioned. An apology can be formal or informal. Perhaps the most formal sort is written and the least formal sort is non-verbal. A nod of the head if we cut someone off in traffic, a handshake or possibly a hug are examples of non-verbal apologies. A few possible combinations as well as examples are given in the chart below:

³ Thanks to Dr. Ruja Pholsward for this suggestion as well as help and encouragement with the project in general.

RESPONSIBLE			NOT RESPONSIBLE		
Intentional or Unintentional Cancel Holiday Accident	Written or Verbal Apology	Formal	Unintentional American does something bad to a Thai Death of friends' relatives	Written or verbal apology	Formal
Intentional or Unintentional Give student an F Cut someone off in traffic	Verbal or Nonverbal Apology	Informal	Unintentional Friend gets an F	Verbal or Nonverbal Apology	Informal

Chart of Factors Influencing Type of Apology

We can use some famous examples to amplify the chart above. First, the Pope's apology for the crusades, treatment of Jews, women and others was a formal verbal (and written) apology for something he was not responsible for and did not intend to bring about.

Bill Clinton's apology for Monica was a formal verbal apology for something he was responsible for and intended to do. Presumably he made informal verbal and non-verbal apologies to his wife. His formal apology for bombing the Chinese embassy in Kosovo was for something he was (presumably) responsible for but did not intend (according to him). He may have

made informal verbal and non-verbal apologies as well.

Formal apologies are interesting in that they frequently involve situations where a representative or figurehead is apologizing not only for something that they didn't do, but also for something that is often in the distant past.

Consider another apology by Bill Clinton, this time for research on syphilis being done on African-Americans during the 1940s. This research was done without their knowledge or consent. Clinton said:

The United States government did something that was wrong, deeply, profoundly, morally wrong. To the survivors, to the wives and family members, the children and the

grandchildren, I say what you know: No power on earth can give you back the lives lost, the pain suffered, the years of internal torment and anguish. What was done cannot be undone. But we can end the silence. We can stop turning our heads away. We can look at you in the eye and finally say on behalf of the American people, what the United States government did was shameful, and I am sorry (Thomas, 1999).

Notice that Clinton did not take responsibility. Thus, at first blush, such apologies might seem pointless. Some, however, think they are quite useful. Naomi Wolf (1998) says, "An apology in this case is not an expression of personal guilt." She goes on to say:

Apologies between groups matter for the same reason they matter between individuals in intimate relationships: They help keep the relationships healthy. The recent wave of international apologies speaks to the power of this fact. Why should we care whether Switzerland returns what are often insignificant amounts of money to Jews? Not because of the money but because of the lingering denial. Why did the pope's semi-apology for the Catholic Church's collusion with Nazism reinforce Jewish distrust of Catholicism? Precisely because of its tone of self-exoneration. In contrast, France's unstinting apology for its collusion with the Vichy government and Australia's

wholehearted Sorry Day, in which the entire continent expresses regret for separating Aboriginal children from their parents, will both go a long way toward genuine healing -- the kind we in this country should note with envy.

Formal apologies are nearly always quite strong. Interestingly, they frequently involve cases where the person doing the apologizing was not responsible for the act they are apologizing for. Apologies of the strong sort -- which we can consider *sia jai* apologies or acts of repentance -- always involve responsibility and intentionality. Obviously, it would be absurd for the Pope to repent for the Crusades. It is quite appropriate for Bill Clinton to repent for his "inappropriate behavior," however.

From both a personal perspective and a political or group perspective, it is quite clear that the graver the deed, the stronger the apology. From strictly a personal perspective, however, a strong apology is appropriate only in the context of responsibility and intentionality. The strongest form of apology is repentance. In such cases, the apology carries with it some or all of the following:

1. A willingness to accept the negative consequences of the deed.
2. A desire to make reparations of some kind.
3. An admission of weakness of some kind: egotism, sinfulness or something of that nature.
4. Humility in the face of such weakness -- such that one may, for example, "beg for" forgiveness.

In the Gothic cathedral of Soissons in Northeastern France, there is an interesting

example of a non-verbal apology that is also, perhaps, an act of repentance. A stained glass window in the cathedral is, according to some, an apology from King Philip Augustus of France to his wife, Ingebourg of Denmark. It seems that Pope Innocent III blamed the king for a series of famines, floods and fires – the result, said the Pope, of the king repudiating Ingebourg. The queen was officially reinstated in 1201 and King Philip gave the window, which depicts a genealogical map of Jesus according to Isaiah 1.11, to the Queen as a gift (Pastan 1999).

Again, *sia jai* or repenting apologies are only for the most serious, personal apologies. Apologies of lesser degrees require weaker adjectives and, as we have seen, can even be non-verbal.

In addition, hierarchy and submission play roles in the strength or weakness of an apology. Stronger apologies involve higher degrees of submission. That, of course, adds a degree of interest to King Philip's apology.

Frans de Waal (1999) sees an apology as a temporary submission. "Normally, submission is shown by lower ranking individuals; it signals that they're afraid or seek to appease the dominant. Human apologies use signs of submission but are not strictly bound by the hierarchy (although apologies do also in our species come a lot more difficult to dominants than to subordinates)."

An apology and reconciliation, according to de Waal (1999), are not necessarily the same thing. Reconciliation does not imply submission. "Many animals survive through cooperation," he says. "In order to maintain cooperative relationships despite occasional conflict, some way of repairing relationships is needed. Many animals are far too smart to simply 'forget' what happened between them, so they need a more active process of repair. It involves a complex psychology that we often assume to be uniquely human. But I believe it's much more ancient than we assume."

What this means is that reconciliation – often in the form of something non-verbal (including gifts) – is not necessarily identical to an apology. It may, however, be a part of an apology.

Conclusion

Apologizing is one of the most important language functions. Its appropriate use can mend broken relationships, prevent conflicts, put age-old feuds to rest and smooth the road of life and love considerably. An ability to understand how and when to apologize in a cross-cultural context can, indeed, help bring peace to an ever shrinking world, reduce culture shock and help us be happier, more productive individuals.

The Author

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