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Speech act attenuation in the history of English: The case of apologies

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This paper develops a new theoretical framework to describe the long diachrony of speech acts. Such an undertaking requires a careful reconsideration of some of the basic properties of the nature of speech acts. It requires a clear differentiation between the functional profile, or illocutionary potential, of a speech act, the range of expressions that are typically used to perform it, and the metacommunicative expressions that are used to talk about it. It also requires a clear understanding of the integrity of the speech act in order to make it comparable across different time periods. It is suggested that the diachronic development of speech acts is both a gradual process with limited short-term effects that – over a long period – lead to more substantial differences and a process of attenuation, i.e. a progressive weakening of its illocutionary force. As an example, this paper traces the long diachrony of apologies in the history of the English language, from Old English up to Present-day English. Apologies originate in Old English penitential acts and confessions to God which in the course of time underwent a process of attenuation that first turned them into secularized appeals to a human addressee for forgiveness, subsequently to expressions of regret and eventually to speech acts that are often no more than a token acknowledgement of some minor infraction. The final section gives an outline of how this new theoretical framework of speech act attenuation can be applied to other speech acts, such as promises and greetings.

Keywords: Historical pragmatics; speech acts; apologies; diachrony; attenuation

1 Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of speech acts have been investigated from a diachronic perspective. How were they realized at a particular point in the history of a language, and how did they change in the course of time? Such investigations immediately expose a range of important theoretical issues about the ontological status of speech acts that need to be addressed. To what extent can a speech act from the fifteenth century, an apology, let us say, be compared to a speech act in the twenty-first century? Does it make sense at all to use the same (Present-day English) term to refer to both of them? And does the comparison concern the linguistic elements with which these speech acts are realized or does it concern the functional profile of the speech act itself? In what situations did speakers use this speech act then, and how do these situations differ from the situations in which it is used today?

So far, our knowledge about trajectories of individual speech acts is still disjointed and fragmentary and only a small number of speech acts have been investigated from a diachronic perspective at all (see Section 3 below). However, the corpus-linguistic tools that are necessary to trace speech acts systematically in large corpora are currently being developed with increasing success. This makes diachronic investigations more feasible and allows us to tackle the necessary theoretical issues.

It is the aim of this paper to contribute to the ongoing discussion by pulling together a range of recent research efforts investigating one particular speech act, viz. apologies at various points in the history of the English language, and by suggesting an integrated theoretical framework that combines these limited scope efforts into a more comprehensive understanding of the long diachrony of apologies. It transpires that apologies have undergone, and are still in the process of undergoing, a process of attenuation. What used to be a weighty and sincere act of admitting guilt and expressing remorse in a religious context has, via a series of steps, been weakened into a token acknowledgement of a minor mishap, such as, for instance, accidentally bumping into somebody on a crowded platform of a railway station. The older type of apologies still exists but the new types of fleeting and sometimes non-serious uses of apologies have been added, and they significantly increase the overall frequency of apologies.

In the following, I will first discuss some of the theoretical issues that are involved in the description of a long speech act diachrony, in particular the issue of the integrity of a speech act in the course of time and the *tertium comparationis*, i.e. the question of how much has to stay the same across the time periods in order to warrant a comparison. After that I will introduce the illustrative exemplar for this study, the apology, and suggest five stages of its diachronic development. In a final discussion section, I will add histories of some other culturally salient speech acts – in particular promises and greetings – which provide corroborating evidence for the suggested diachronic stages of development even if their histories have not yet been investigated in the same detail and over the same diachronic distance as apologies. At this stage, however, the claims about the range of application of these findings have to be modest. Our knowledge of the diachronic development of individual speech acts rests on a small number of culturally salient speech acts. It is still unclear how large the number of all possible speech acts might be for any given language (see Levinson 2015 for a discussion of the issue). But only some of them are salient enough for a speech community to develop terms, i.e. speech act verbs, to talk about them, and only a small number of these, so far, have attracted the attention of linguists and language historians.

2 Theoretical issues

An investigation of a speech act across time presumes that the speech act in question is – in some significant way – the "same" in its earlier and its later instantiations. To what extent can we still assume that we are talking about the same speech act in spite of the changes? What is the *tertium comparationis*, i.e. the element that stays the same for all instances that are compared with each other? What is the *tertium comparationis* of an apology in the fourteenth century that is compared with an apology today? Can we rely on the descriptive labels in a language, i.e. the metacommunicative expressions? It turns out that the noun "apology" is not attested in the English language before the sixteenth century (OED Second edition, apology, n). Does this mean that the speech act of an apology did not exist previous to the existence of the term? And how do we account for semantic changes in the meaning of the metacommunicative label? In order to tackle these questions, it is first necessary to disentangle the different aspects of a speech act; its functional profile, the metacommunicative expressions and the expressions and phrases that are employed to perform it.

The functional profile corresponds largely to what Searle (1969: 30) called the illocutionary force of a speech act. Bertuccelli Papi (2000: 58) talks of the illocutionary potential. Searle captured the illocutionary forces of specific speech acts by a range of felicity conditions, i.e. those conditions that must obtain for us to agree that a certain speech act has been successfully performed. A promise, for instance, needs to talk

about (i.e. predicate) something that the speaker wants to do at some point after the time of uttering the speech act and which he or she deems to be in the interest of the addressee. If this future action is not in the addressee's best interest, we would not want to call this speech act a promise, but perhaps a warning or a mere assertion of a plan. Searle used philosophical tools to come up with such felicity conditions which create profiles of specific speech acts. Such profiles are not always very precise and they sometimes conflict with our everyday understanding of these speech acts. Questions, for instance, are a case in point. According to the felicity conditions proposed by Searle, the speaker asking the question does not know the answer (in the case of real questions) or wants to know whether the hearer knows the answer (in the case of exam questions). In everyday usage there seems to be a wide variety of additional questions with varying degrees of the speaker's ability to predict the answer, not only in the case of teachers asking exam questions but also in journalistic interviews, police or courtroom interrogations and so on. And the felicity conditions for advice could also apply to recommendations or suggestions.

In more recent work on speech acts, researchers use different terms to talk about their functional profiles but generally they still define a range of conditions that must obtain to talk about a specific speech act in order to delimit the object of investigation (see Section 4 below for a discussion of the defining elements of apologies). But in some cases, researchers also adopt a more discursive approach, i.e. they do not provide a predetermined set of conditions but they investigate how the members of a speech community themselves talk about a particular speech act and how they negotiate it, that is they investigate the metacommunicative expressions that are used to talk about speech acts, such as, in the case of apologies, *apology, apologize* or *apologetic*. Such metacommunicative expressions, in particular in their form as verbs, have often been used to establish elaborate classifications of the speech acts themselves (e.g. Verschueren's 1985 or Traugott's 1991 early work in this respect; see also Taavitsainen & Jucker 2007).

The third aspect to consider at this point is the range of linguistic forms and expressions that can be used to carry out a particular speech act. Expressions that are regularly used come to be recognized as conventional means of carrying out a particular speech act. They become conventionally associated with it and, therefore, serve as what has come to be known as illocutionary force indicating devices, or IFIDs for short (Levinson 1983: 238). Speech acts differ considerably in the extent to which they make use of conventionalized expressions, presumably in relation to the routine nature of the speech act itself. In Present-day English, greetings and farewells, for instance, appear to be heavily conventionalized, apologies and compliments somewhat less and assertions not at all.

Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of how the three elements are related. A metacommunicative expression is used to talk about a speech act with a specific functional profile or illocutionary potential, and IFIDs are one possible way of performing such a speech act. In some cases, IFIDs also function as metacommunicative expression, as for instance the verb *apologize*, which can be used both to perform and to refer to this particular speech act ("I apologize" versus "No need to apologize").

In the course of time, typically all three elements are subject to change. The functional profile may shift. Some felicity conditions may no longer be equally important, while new ones may be added, and – as a result – a particular speech act may increasingly be used in situations that differ from earlier contexts of use. These changes may be reflected in concomitant shifts in the meaning of the metacommunicative expressions or in the adoption of new metacommunicative expressions to refer to this now modified speech act. And parallel to these developments the linguistic resources available to the speakers to perform this speech act may change as well.
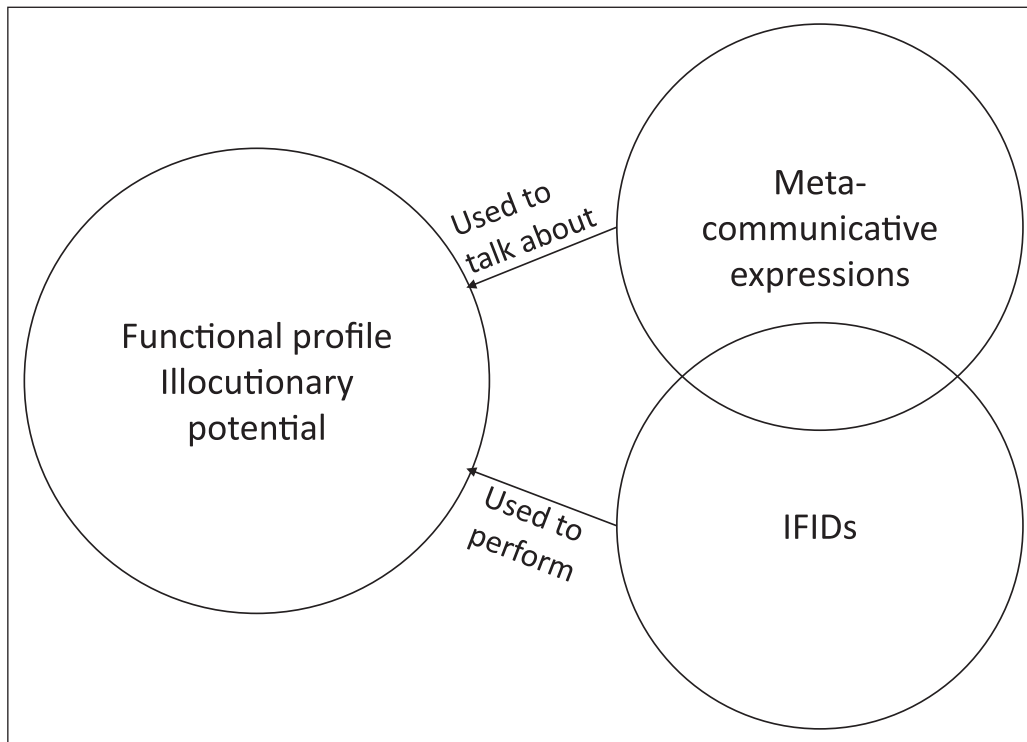
Figure 1: Relation of functional profile, metacommunicative expressions and IFIDs.

Such a perspective presumes a prototype approach, that is to say speech acts are considered to be fuzzy entities with definitions that include not only focal instantiations but also instantiations that are less focal and more peripheral to the definition (see Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000). In a long diachrony the assumption cannot be that a speech act in a previous century is exactly the same as it is today. It is more likely that the functional profile has gradually shifted. Some of the previously defining elements perhaps have become less important, have fallen away or have been replaced, and others have perhaps been added. Only some defining elements are affected at a time while others stay in place and make the speech act comparable across short diachronies even if the development over many centuries may lead to a speech act that is only vaguely related to its long-term ancestor. The change in the semantics of the metacommunicative expressions and the adoption of new expressions reflects at least to some extent these gradual changes of the functional profile. It is such a dynamic view of the nature of speech acts that allows a long diachronic perspective as will be illustrated with the case of apologies below.

3 Previous speech act histories and diachronic processes

Work on the history of specific speech acts so far has focused on a relatively small number of speech acts which have in common that they are culturally salient and have metacommunicative expressions that are used by members of the speech community to talk about them, and in most cases they show a relatively high level of routinization, i.e. they can be carried out by a small range of conventionalized expressions. One obvious reason for this focus is that culturally salient speech acts are perhaps more likely to attract the attention of researchers. Moreover, metacommunicative expressions and conventionalized IFIDs help to locate these speech acts in historical data.

Directives, for instance, have received a fair amount of attention, especially requests. See, for instance, the work by Busse (2002; 2008), Kohnen (2002; 2004a; b; 2008a; b), Culpeper & Archer (2008) and Moessner (2010). Advice giving also falls into the larger group of directives (e.g. Fitzmaurice 2002: Chapter 4; Milfull 2004). Commissives in the

form of promises have also received some attention, e.g. by Arnovick (1994a; b; 1999), Alonso Almeida & Cabrera-Abreu (2002), Pakkala-Weckström (2002; 2008), Del Lungo Camiciotti (2008) and Valkonen (2008).

Most work, however, seems to have been focused on expressives, such as greetings and farewells (Arnovick 1996; 1999; Grzega 2005; 2008; Jucker 2011a; b; 2017), apologies (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2008; Kohnen 2017a; b; Williams 2018; Jucker 2018b), compliments (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2008), thanking (Jacobsson 2002), and in particular swearing and insulting (Hughes 1991; Arnovick 1995; Jucker 2000; Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000) and cursing (Danet & Bogoch 1992; Arnovick 1999).[1]

But there is also some historical work on less culturally salient speech acts which lack an everyday metacommunicative expression, for instance the opening moves in Middle English courtly literature (Honegger 2000), or work on speech acts that do not fit easily into a Searlian speech act classification system, for instance refusals, which by definition are not initiating but reactive speech acts (see Martínez-Insua 2010).

Most of this work tends to take the functional profile of the speech act as a starting point and investigates the ways in which it is performed in specific historical contexts and, in many cases, how the realizations change in the course of time. In some of this work, specific diachronic processes have been identified that are of larger theoretical interest, in particular the processes of pragmaticalization and subjectification. They will briefly be introduced in the following.

The term "pragmaticalization" describes the process in which lexical material undergoes a diachronic process of "becoming pragmatic" or "becoming more pragmatic" (see Claridge & Arnovick 2010), that is to say that a certain linguistic element loses at least some of its semantic transparency and increasingly needs a specific context of use for its interpretation. The farewell greeting *goodbye* may serve as an example (see Arnovick 1999; Claridge & Arnovick 2010). In Early Modern English, the phrase *God be with you* was regularly used in the double function of a blessing and a courteous closing of a conversation as in the following examples taken from the *Early English Books Online* (EEBO).

(1)   (EEBO, 1567)
       what, sayde Skelton: is the winde at that doore? and sayd: god be with you my
       Lorde: and Skelton with his capons went hys way

(2)   (EEBO, 1654)
       and espying capt: watson on horse back putting off his hat said to him, god be
       with you sir, god reward you sir

In both cases, the double illocution is clear from the context. *God be with you* is both a sincere blessing and a formula closing the conversation to which the addressee often responds with a similar blessing (Claridge & Arnovick 2010: 174). In the late sixteenth century, the phrase starts to appear regularly in contracted forms. The OED provides a long list of such contracted forms, e.g. *godb'w'y, godb'w'y', godb'w'you, goodb'wy, godb'w'ye, goodbwi't'ye*. In conjunction with this contraction, the closing function of the phrase becomes dominant. Claridge & Arnovick (2010: 175) date this shift to the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. They cite extract (3) as an example in which the blessing function was no longer apparent.

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[1] Historically it may be misleading to list cursing among the expressive speech acts because in many instances they clearly had performative power (see below). They were meant to have a direct effect on the addressee rather than to express the speaker's feelings.

(3)   (Thomas Otway, *The Souldiers Fortune* (1681): 5.1.70; Arnovick 1999: 104;
         Claridge & Arnovick 2010: 175)
         Sir Davy. If I can possibly, I will.
         Sir Jolly. Well **God b'w'y**
                 Exit Sir Jolly
         Sir Davy. **God b'w'y** heartily good Neighbor

In a second step the form *good* was substituted for *God*. According to the OED, this probably happened in analogy to similar forms as in *good day* or *goodnight*. In this reduced form, and even more so in the further reduction into *bye*, any trace of the original blessing disappeared. And today, the form is fully pragmaticalized. This interpretation is reinforced by the re-appearance of the full form *God be with you* as a sincere blessing, a function that can no longer be fulfilled by *goodbye* as in extracts (4) and (5).

(4)   (COCA, fic, 2017)
         The wagon jolted into motion. Giacomo pulled off his hat and called, "And may God be with you and your beautiful bride!" # "Auguri" yelled the siblings.

(5)   (COCA, fic, 2007)
         I'll watch you. Live on, sister! # May God be with you! # This is a great day! # She hugs her.

Arnovick (1999: 116) argues that the term "pragmaticalization" might be inadequate to describe the diachronic processes involved because in this case the process did not start with lexical material that adopted pragmatic meanings but it started with pragmatic, or rather illocutionary, material.

> Although it is inelegant, I offer the coinage "discursization" to label the process observed in *Good-bye*'s illocutionary "smoothing" and subsequent highlighting of discourse function. Increased organizational clarity can be supposed to motivate the discursization of *God be with you*. (Arnovick 1999: 117)

In other words, the term pragmaticalization describes processes affecting the linguistic material used to perform a speech act, while the term discursization describes the process that affects the speech act itself, or rather its illocutionary potential. I prefer the term attenuation for this process, as I will show below, because it makes a stronger claim about the way in which the process affects the illocutionary potential of a speech act and because it makes a claim that this kind of diachronic development is not unique to apologies but has wider applications.

The term "subjectification" applies to the motivation underlying diachronic processes and describes the way in which meanings turn from objective descriptions to expressions of the speaker's internal perspective or attitude. It has been proposed as a description of the motivations for grammaticalization (Traugott 1989; 1995; López-Couso 2010). It generally proposes that meanings shift from an objective description of the situation to meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation and finally to the speaker's subjective believes and attitudes towards the proposition expressed. The classic example for this is the Old English phrase *þa hwile þe* 'at the time that', which diachronically changed into a temporal connective *while* meaning 'at the same time as' and finally to a concessive marker *while* meaning 'although'.

But subjectification has also been argued to be the motivation underlying processes of pragmaticalization, for instance in the case of curses. According to Arnovick (1999: 77) the extant material suggests that cursing in Old English was invested with spiritual power.

Curses were a serious matter. They "were not performed lightly or indiscriminately". Danet & Bogoch (1992) study a set of such curses in Old English legal documents. The curses were intended to protect the document from interference and clearly were intended to have performative power, as for instance in example (6).

(6)   Danet & Bogoch (1992: 135)
        and who so þis awende: god awende his ansene frm him on domesday.
        'And whoever alters this, may God turn His face from him on the Day of Judgment.'

These curses are formulated as conditionals, consisting of a "whoever" clause specifying what the writer wants to prevent and a second clause that spells out the punishment that will fall on anybody who violates this condition and tampers with the document or interferes with its execution. If the condition in the "whoever" clause is fulfilled, the curse is activated. It has what Arnovick calls deontic power. For the period of Middle English, Arnovick (1999: 85–87) identifies both religious curses that maintain some of this deontic power including a desire for God's wrath on some wrongdoer and more expressive curses that indicate the speaker's exasperation. The religious impact of curses is increasingly diluted. In Present-day English, cursing increasingly turns into cussing, i.e. into a more personal and more subjective expression of anger or annoyance. As Arnovick (1999: 90) puts it, "when someone in *fin de siecle* Vancouver, British Columbia yells, 'Damn you,' he or she does not usually wish actual damnation on the hearer."

In this paper, I focus on the process that affects the functional profile of a speech act rather than the metacommunicative expressions or the IFIDs. The relatively detailed history of apologies (understood in a dynamic and prototypical sense) shows a process of attenuation, that is to say their force becomes increasingly weaker, and at the same time the linguistic resources used to perform the speech act undergo a process of reduction and conventionalization. In its early form the speech act is semantically explicit and spells out its illocution while later it is reduced to a conventionalized expression that requires increased pragmatic processing for its interpretation. Figure 2 gives a schematic representation of the stages that I will illustrate for the case of apologies in Section 4. In Section 5, I will provide supporting evidence from a range of other speech acts which also move along at least part of this scale even if not all of it.

The scale in Figure 2 accounts both for the diachronic weakening of the illocutionary force and for the increasingly conventionalized expressions used to perform the speech act. It is, of course, not meant to suggest that all speech acts originate in a speech act to God. This is clearly implausible. But in the following I want to show that apologies, as one culturally salient speech act can be argued to have gone through all five stages of this development. Other speech acts, e.g. salutations, can be argued to have early examples that correspond to a stage 2, and so on. But the claim is that several culturally salient speech acts can be shown to move from left to right somewhere along this scale, and they
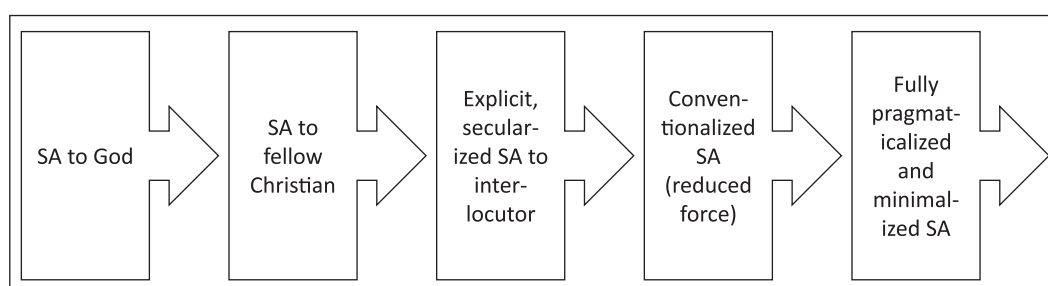

Figure 2: Scale of speech act attenuation.

do not move in the opposite direction. Figure 2 also does not claim that once a certain stage in the development is reached, earlier stages can no longer be accessed. The different stages can clearly co-occur synchronically. But the claim is that the stages to the right of the scale are later additions than the ones on the left.

4 The case of apologies

In the case of apologies, a long diachrony is emerging from recent research on its history. Kohnen (2017a; b) investigated apologies in Old English, Williams (2018) extended the perspective from Old to Middle English, Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008) covered the Early Modern period (from 1500 to 1660) and Jucker (2018b) looked at the last two hundred years. For Present-day English we have a rich literature on apologies using a variety of frameworks and methodologies, for instance Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) cross-cultural work on apologies based on discourse completion tasks, Trosborg's (1995) work based on role plays and role enactments, and Deutschmann's (2003) work based on the spoken part of the *British National Corpus*. More recent work on apologies by Lutzky & Kehoe (2017a; b), Aijmer (2019) and Haugh & Chang (2019) might already be pointing towards the future of apologizing in English. Together these studies provide a fairly detailed long diachrony of one specific and culturally salient speech act, in spite of the data limitations for the early centuries and some missing periods (in particular the eighteenth century).

The functional profile (or illocutionary potential) of an apology has often been described in the relevant literature. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun *apology* as follows:

> An explanation offered to a person affected by one's action that no offence was intended, coupled with the expression of regret for any that may have been given; or, a frank acknowledgement of the offence with expression of regret for it, by way of reparation. (OED Second edition, apology n. 3)

The relevant elements are an offender who takes responsibility for some action, someone who was offended by this action or who was perceived by the offender to have possibly been offended, the offence or perceived offence itself and the speaker's acknowledgment of the offence coupled with an expression of regret. See Figure 3 (Deutschmann 2003: 44–47).
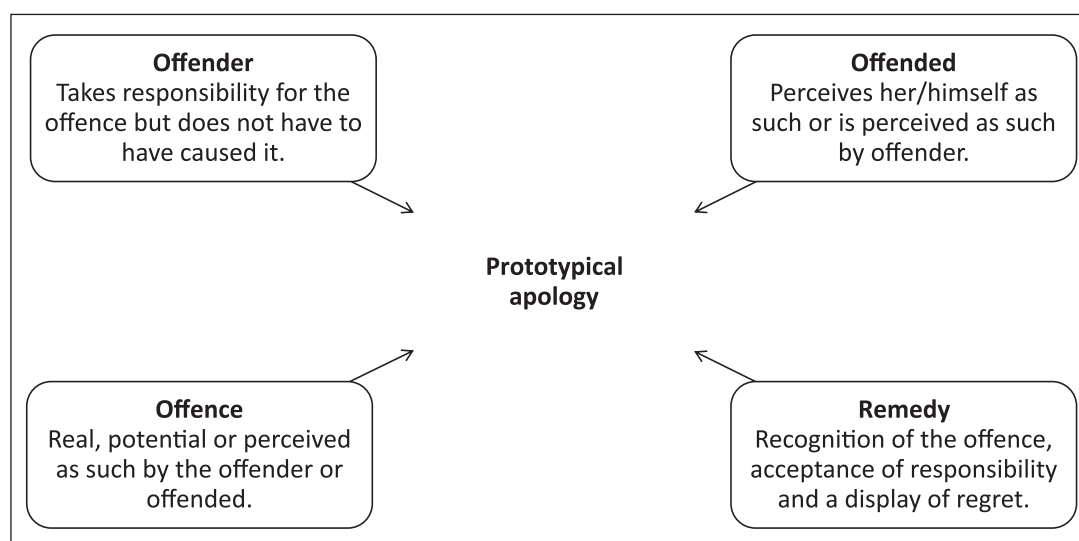

Figure 3: The prototypical apology according to Deutschmann (2003: 46).

In a narrow interpretation of what an apology is, or for a prototypical apology, all four conditions must be met. If the speaker does not take responsibility for the offence, if he or she does not display any regret, or if the speech act is made not to the offended party but to somebody else, the speech act is no longer an apology, or – as I would prefer to see it – it may still be an apology albeit not a prototypical one. Apologies clearly shade off into neighboring speech acts within a multidimensional pragmatic space (cf. Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000 on the notion of pragmatic space). If the speaker does not take any responsibility for the event, the speech act may turn into a general expression of regret or a spill cry[2] as in the examples (7) and (8).

(7)   (COCA, fic, 2016)
        And I am sorry for your loss

(8)   (COCA, spok, 2017)
        CASSIDY: I'm not hearing anything.
        CAVUTO: Oops. Can you hear us, Senator?

In both cases, the context leaves it open whether the speaker takes responsibility for what has happened. It is, of course, possible that the addressees had a clearer idea than the researcher inspecting the transcript whether the speaker meant to take responsibility or not, but in both cases, it does not seem to matter very much, and in fact, as I will argue, this is how speech acts change their illocutionary potential. Some of their felicity conditions become fuzzy; they may no longer be part of a narrow definition of the original speech act. Up to a point this may either go unnoticed or it may draw the attention of language purists. It is not unusual today to hear somewhat disapproving comments about people who apologize for things they have not done.

In the following, I will show how apologies started out as a very serious speech act addressed to God, and then gradually, by slowly changing some of the felicity conditions, turned into highly pragmaticalized and conventionalized speech acts that in some cases seem to be no more than spill cries.

4.1 Speech act to God

Kohnen (2017a; b) and Williams (2018) both investigated the earliest instances of apologies in the English language, and both of them conclude – on the basis of slightly different methodologies – that apologies in our sense did not exist in the earliest periods of the English language. Kohnen (2017a: 45) finds that none of the relevant authoritative dictionaries of Old English list any speech act verbs corresponding to "apologize". In addition, he used the *Thesaurus of Old English* to explore the relevant vocabulary that might lead to apologies in the available corpora of Old English texts. He extracted expressions referring to sad feelings, regretting, excusing and forgiving from the thesaurus and used them for his comprehensive corpus searches. However, he reports that a careful inspection of all the hits retrieved did not reveal any instances in which a speaker asks another human being for forgiveness or expresses regret for their past action to another human being. Apologies in today's sense could not be found. Instead, the searches retrieved cases in which speakers address themselves to God and express regret for their sins, as for instance in extract (9) and (10).

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[2] For the notion of spill cry see Goffmann (1978: 801). He defines them as cries that "are emitted to accompany our having, for a moment, lost guiding control of some feature of the world around us, including ourselves." As an example, he gives a person who utters *Oops!* when dropping a piece of meat through the grill to the coals below (see also Stange 2016).

(9)   (ArPrGl 1 (Holt-Campb) C23.1; Kohnen 2017a: 48, 2017b: 314)
         Penitet mihi domine quicquid feci 5 cogitavi contra precepta tua et contra tuam
         sanctam voluntatem
         ofhreoweþ me swa hwæt swa ic dyde oþþe geþohte ongen bebodu þine & ongen
         þinne haligan willan.
         'I repent whatever I did or thought contrary to your commandments and contrary
         to your holy will.'

(10)   (PsFr A24; Kohnen 2017a: 48; b: 314)
         Miltsa me, drihten, hæl mine sawle, forðon me hreoweð nu þæt ic firene on ðe
         fremede geneahhige.
         'Take pity on me, Lord, cure my soul, because I now repent that I committed
         wicked deeds against you in abundance.'

These cases do not correspond to the functional profile outlined above unless we accept
God in the role of the offended. Kohnen argues that such instances constitute acts of repent-
ance or penitence but not apologies. Moreover, all such examples appear in documents
with a Christian background. They are not attested in the Germanic literature with a
non-Christian background, as for instance in the heroic literature or in the *Anglo-Saxon
Chronicle*. He concludes that in an Anglo-Saxon warrior society, apologizing seems to have
been unnecessary or even inappropriate.

> Heroes do not seem to apologise. (…) It seems that in Anglo-Saxon society a
> transgression was either expunged by vengeance and retribution or by a payment
> specified in the several law codes. Once this was done, there was no need for further
> action. Apparently, there was no space for a speech act whose aim it might have
> been to regulate and rebalance the intersubjective relationship between people
> once the objective circumstances had been restored and the regulations had been
> followed. (Kohnen 2017a: 49; see also Kohnen 2017b: 313)

Kohnen also notes that the Old English precursor of the adjective *sorry*, i.e. *sarig*, never
collocates with a first-person pronoun (Kohnen 2017a: 48).

Williams (2018) investigates the concept of sincerity in Medieval English language and
literature, and he also describes the origins of the Present-day apology as speech acts
originally addressed to God and only later extended to fellow Christians. Devotional con-
fessions were acts in the process of asking for forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

> As we simply do not have evidence for what we might describe as 'everyday' Old
> English, one cannot prove that your average Anglo-Saxon (whatever that means)
> would not have expressed their being 'sorry' as a way of maintaining sociability
> after having accidentally knocked into someone on a footpath (for example).
> However, given what evidence the many OE texts we do have provide, it seems
> certain to me that to do so would probably have sounded very strange to an
> Anglo-Saxon. (Williams 2018: 127–8)

He also stresses that apologies do not occur in Old English literary narratives. Heroic warriors
do not apologize. Situations of reconciliation and forgiveness are rare. And even in saints'
lives there are no apologies. The heathen tyrant does not apologize for his misdeeds even
when he is converted to Christianity by the saint. It was in the homilies and penitentials
that sincere forgiveness was introduced in communication with God. It certainly seems
prudent to follow Kohnen's and Williams' example to be cautious with far reaching con-
clusions about the non-existence of apologies in Old English, but the combined evidence
of their research suggests that apologies in the modern sense did probably not exist.

The Christian act of penitence and repentance can thus be seen as a pre-cursor of the modern apology, or – as I would like to argue – as the first stage in the development of apologies. It is a speech act with considerable weight. It is addressed directly to God and an admission of what the speaker sees as serious wrong-doing. It is an appeal to God to forgive his or her sins, and for these early Christians, serious consequences not only for the here and now but indeed for the afterlife as well hinged on whether or not God forgave them.

Such a speech act differs very considerably from an apologetic nod or a quick "sorry" after accidentally bumping into a stranger in a crowd of people but – as the following stages will show – the process of speech act attenuation ultimately leads from the former to the latter. At this first stage, the formulations are explicit and elaborate even if some phrases may have been used repeatedly and, therefore, been somewhat conventionalized. The available evidence suggests that in Old English and in Middle English these acts of repentance or penitence – or proto-apologies – did not co-exist with apologies in our modern sense.

4.2 Speech act to fellow Christian

As a second step in the development, an act of repentance is addressed not to God but to a fellow Christian. The offence itself is no longer a sin in the religious sense but a transgression against a fellow human being. Kohnen (2017a: 50) quotes a reference to such a "pre-apology", as he calls it, from an Anglo-Saxon religious instruction.

(11)   (LibSc C 15; Kohnen 2017a: 50)
         Humilitas est si quando peccauerit in te frater tuus antequam ille peniteat indulseris ei
         eadmodnyss ys gif þænne syngað on þe broþor þin ærþam þe he behreowsige þu forgifst him.
         'Humility is if, when your brother has sinned against you, you forgive him before he repents.'

Kohnen (2017a: 50) notes, however, that for the Old English period there seems to be only little evidence of such acts of penitence addressed to fellow human beings rather than to God. Williams (2018: 120) also views apologies as "a secular appropriation of an originally devotional speech act that comes to form part of the linguistic-pragmatic repertoire of late medieval courtesy wherein religious devotion overlaps with sociability."

Williams provides a similar example from the *Ancrene Wisse*, a text written in the thirteenth century for female anchorites as guidelines for their spiritual and daily lives as recluses. In this passage, the author writes about the devotional act of *venia*, which is a devotional act performed before God to acknowledge a transgression against God, such as being inattentive in the reciting of prayers (see Williams 2018: 137). But in this example, he describes the *venia* to be appropriate also as a devotional act that they should require their maidservants to perform before their mistresses to acknowledge transgressions that they might have committed.

(12)   Williams (2018: 138)
         ear ha drinken oþer eoten makien hare Venie o cneon dun biuoren hire, ant seggen Mea culpa, ant underuon þe penitence þet ha leið upon hire, lutinde hire lahe
         'Before they eat or drink, they should perform Venia on their knees before her, and say mea culpa, and accept the penance that she lays upon her, bowing low to her' (VIII.31).

And indeed, the maidservants should perform the same act before one another in cases of disputes between them in order to re-establish social order. Thus, there is evidence

that acts of confession, penitence, *venia* or more generally the acknowledgment of transgressions against God were transferred to situations in which transgressions were committed against fellow humans and for which forgiveness was requested not from God but from the human being affected by the transgression, or in the terminology of a modern apology, from the offended. "As one is meant to defer to God, so too one should defer to one's monastic and secular leaders, and then ideally to all fellow Christians" (Williams 2018: 139). Transgressions against fellow human beings, are also transgressions against God, but in this context, forgiveness is sought from the offended human being. The transgressions at stake, therefore, appear to be somewhat less serious. The extension of such devotional speech acts to communication between human beings can be seen as a necessary step for their secularization and eventual development into the speech act of an apology in the modern sense.

4.3 Explicit, secularized speech act

According to Williams (2018: 154) there is little evidence for affective-expressive apologies, i.e. apologies in the modern sense, before the late Middle Ages in any genre of English texts. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1533 as the first attestation of the noun "apology", when it is used with the meaning "The pleading off from a charge or imputation, whether expressed, implied, or only conceived as possible; defence of a person, or vindication of an institution, etc., from accusation or aspersion." (OED Second edition, "apology", n., sense 1). The first quotation provided by the OED for the use of the noun "apology" in the modern sense dates from the end of the sixteenth century in a quotation by Shakespeare.

  Williams (2018: 143) cites a passage from Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* as one of the first occurrences of the phrase *I am sorry* as an apology. There is no suggestion of any canonical sin in this case. The Dreamer and I-narrator apologizes to the Knight, whom he has just encountered, for having disturbed him in his thoughts, and the Knight immediately accepts the apology because nothing untoward had been said or done.

(13)   (Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*: lines 521ff)
        "A, goode sir, no fors," quod y,
        "I am ryght sory yif I have ought
        Destroubled yow out of your thought.
        Foryive me, yif I have mystake."
        "Yis, th' amendes is lyght to make,"
        Quod he, "for ther lyeth noon therto;
        There ys nothyng myssayd nor do."
        (http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/mect/mect49.htm)

Williams also discusses the phrases *me repenteth* and *I am sorry*. Both express the speaker's subjective and affective feelings of regret for some wrongdoing, but they often have an ambiguous status between descriptive and apologetic speech acts. Among others he discusses the following example taken from *foure sonnes of Aymon*, in which Reynawde is threatened by Charlemagne, and Reynawde states that he is sorry for this.

(14)   Williams (2018: 145)
        'Holde your peas thenne,' sayd charlemagn, '& beware of me/for otherwise gete ye noo peas wyth me'/'Syr,' sayd reynawd, 'I am sory for it, for
        we be noo men that oughte to be cast from your servyse; and sith that ye defye me, I shall deffende me […]'

The passage fails to state clearly whether Reynawde expresses his regret for having to resort to violence or whether he apologizes for doing so.

   Williams draws a clear distinction between excuses and apologies. With an excuse the speaker cites external facts as being responsible for the offence, with an apology the speaker expresses affective involvement and takes responsibility for the transgression. "Excuses require facts, apologies require emotions" (Williams 2018: 157). He quotes the following two examples from the late fourteenth-century Paston letters as evidence. In the first, a letter from 1464, John Paston III wrote to his father and justified the lack of correspondence his father received on the negligence of a servant, while in the second, a letter from 1475, John II wrote to his mother and apologized for being late with the repayment of a sum of 20 pounds that he had borrowed from her.

(15)   Williams (2018: 157)
        besechyng yow to haue me excusyd þat ye had no wrytyng fro me syth þat I departyd from yow, for so God me helpe, I send yow a lettyr to London a-non aftyr Kandylmas by a man of my lordys and he for-gat to delyuer yt to yow (letter 321).

(16)   Williams (2018: 157)
        I ame sory þat ye be no bettre payd off þe xx li. þat I had off yowe […] my wyll is that ye sholde have yowre holl xx li. ageyn and nott lose j d. […] for as God helpe me I wolde be sory þat ye lost moore for me (letter 291).

Thus, for Williams only the extract in (16) constitutes an apology because John Paston II takes responsibility for what has gone wrong, i.e. the offence, and expresses his remorse, while John Paston III in the extract in (15) blames somebody else. However, I prefer to recognize both as apologies in the broad sense as outlined above.

   Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008) provide further evidence for the secularization of apologies. They study apologies in the Renaissance period (1500–1660) on the basis of fiction and drama texts. At this point, there already appears to be ample evidence of apologies but in contrast to Present-day apologies they are relatively complex, including terms of address, prefatory phrases, such as "I pray you", "I beseech you" or "I hope" (see Jucker & Taavitsainen 2008: 237). A simple apology expression did not seem to be sufficient. Extracts (17) and (18), cited from Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008: 238), are relevant examples.

(17)   (*LION*; Anon, *Marianvs* (c. 1641): Chap. XVII, page 159)
        Most gracious Princesse, how much I grieve to see your discomfort, J cannot say, but hope your Grace will **pardon me**, which have been more bold (presuming on your favour) then beseemeth me

(18)   (*LION*; Anon., *VVestward for Smelts* (c. 1620): page 13)
        and but I would not be counted vnciuill amongst these Gentlemen, I would giue you the reply that approued vntruth deserueth, you know my meaning, Sir: construe my words as you please: **excuse me**, Gentlemen, if I be vnciuill: I answere in the behalfe of one, who is as free from disloyaltie, as is the Sunne from darknes, or the fire from cold.

In both cases the speaker asks the addressee for forgiveness, and in this sense, they are addressee-oriented apologies. Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008) do not provide statistical support but they report that such addressee-oriented apologies appear to be more frequent than speaker-oriented apologies in which the speaker expresses his or her feeling of regret

or remorse (with phrases such as *I am sorry*). Renaissance apologies appear to be more like an appeal to the addressee to be generous and forgive the offence in contrast to Present-day apologies in which the speaker refrains from imposing on the addressee but merely states his or her own regret. Williams summarizes the development over what I call stages one, two and three, as follows.

> Within this framework, expressions that began as Christian affective practice in linguistic performances of contrite confession to God underwent a mimetic process of cultural reinterpretation and generalization in the secular context with the function of maintaining courteous sociability, which is markedly apparent in later texts. Phrases to the effect of 'I feel sorrowful' in English went from being descriptive (in OE) to serving as 'I feel sorrowful *for sin*' with a directive implication of 'forgive me' in confessional rituals. Then, in the later Middle Ages, these expressive utterances were transferred or copied in relational contexts with other people where the speaker was responsible for a transgression, but not necessarily a sin. In this context, an added in-group meaning, or social inference was 'I am courteous'. Finally, and probably only after the Middle Ages, the social function comes to dominate, and these utterances were conventionalized. This is clear by late Modern English when we first see evidence of pragmaticalized shortenings, e.g. *sorry*, which often imply the message 'please don't think I'm rude' as a socially coded meaning. (Williams 2018: 159; highlights original)

To some extent the quotation already looks ahead to the development to Present-day English as well, but in the following I will disentangle this further development and distinguish two further stages.

4.4 Conventionalized speech act (reduced force)

In the early nineteenth century, apologies still tend to be complex, and a range of apology expressions is available to realize them. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, apologies have become far more frequent. Most of the apology expressions from the early nineteenth century are still in use but they are used only rarely with the exception of *sorry*, which has spread and become far more frequent. At the same time, apologies have become simpler and more conventionalized. Examples (19) to (22) provide typical early nineteenth-century examples.

(19)   (COHA, fic, 1824)
        I beg pardon for not expressing my admiration sooner of your performance.

(20)   (COHA, fic, 1834)
        I am truly sorry to have forgotten one who styles himself my friend.

(21)   (COHA, fic, 1825)
        I hope your honour will excuse my being here. I just stepped down to see how things looked.

(22)   (COHA, fic, 1831)
        I have done wrong. Forgive me, my gentle Alice.

Jucker (2018b) provides statistical evidence that supports these claims on the basis of data from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), which covers the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (1810–2009). The searches are restricted to fictional material

because apologies are much more frequent in this part of the corpus than in the other three COHA genres (news, magazines and non-fiction books). The paper combines two different search methods. In a first step, the normalized frequencies of a range of apology expressions are traced over the two centuries, and in a second step, apologies are retrieved with the help of the metacommunicative expression *apolog** (i.e. forms such as *apology, apologize, apologetic* and so on). In both cases extensive manual editing of the retrieved hits was needed to remove false hits and to categorize the valid hits. Both ways of approaching the data revealed a steady and significant increase of apologies over the two centuries of the COHA leading to a doubling of their frequency, and – even more interestingly – a clear shift from addressee-oriented apologies to speaker-oriented apologies, thus confirming the earlier claims by Jucker & Taavitsainen (2008). In the earliest decades apologies were based in almost equal proportions on the three expressions *pardon, excuse* and *sorry* with very few others. In the most recent decades, on the other hand, *sorry* outnumbers all the other expressions by almost three to one (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 only plots the frequency of apology expressions across the four half-centuries of COHA. It shows a doubling of the total frequency of apology expression from roughly 100 per million words to more than 200 per million words. The frequency of the expression *sorry* increased from 26 to 157 per million words while all other expressions decreased in frequency. The results presented by Jucker (2018b) are further corroborated by searches with the largest available corpus, i.e. the *Google Books Corpus* accessed via the *Ngram Viewer* (five million books containing a total of 361 billion words), which shows an even more pronounced increase in the frequency of phrases such as "I'm sorry" and "I apologise/I apologize" (see Jucker 2018a: 28; O'Keeffe 2018: 594).

Deutschmann (2003) investigated Present-day apologies in the spoken part of the *British National Corpus*. In spite of the fact that he looked at spoken British English rather than written American English fiction, his results are relatively similar to Jucker's (2018b). *Sorry* is by far the most frequent apology expression. It accounts for about 60 per cent of all the apologies in his data. This is followed by about 25 per cent for *pardon* and about ten per cent for *excuse* (Deutschmann 2003: 51). He also found that about three quarters of all the apologies in his data were what he called detached apologies, i.e. simple forms such as *sorry, pardon* or *excuse me,* or expanded forms such as *I am sorry*. A further 17
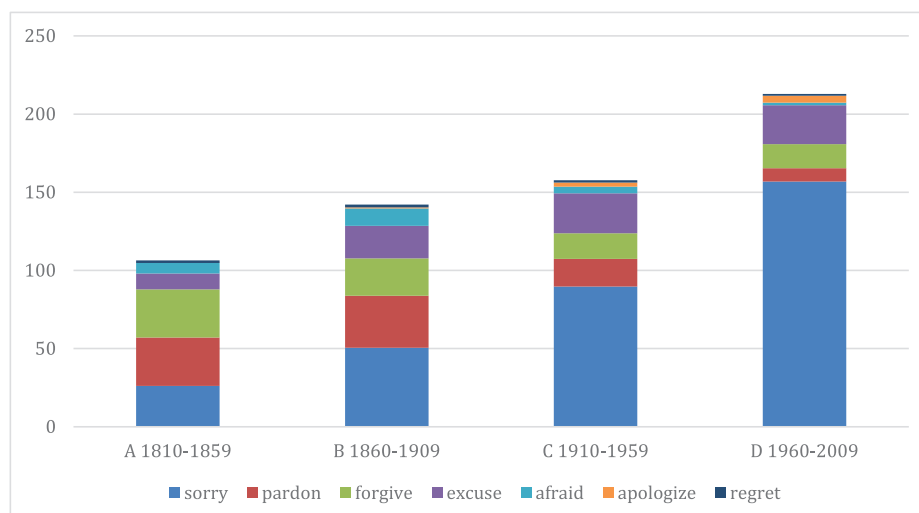

Figure 4: Combined frequency of performative apology expressions (IFIDs) in the four half-centuries in the fiction section of COHA (per million words) (Jucker 2018b).

per cent of his apologies included a marker, such as an interjection (*Oh, sorry*), a name (*Sorry Bob*) or *please* (*Forgive me please*). Less than ten per cent of all the apologies had syntactically complex forms, such as *I'm sorry about that* or *I'm afraid I was a long time* (Deutschmann 2003: 53).

The evidence of the steady increase of apologies in the available data and of the predominantly reduced nature of apologies in Present-day English strongly suggests that apologies have been routinized and conventionalized and at the same time they seem to have lost their force. In the early nineteenth century, many apologies come across as sincere requests for the addressee's generosity to forgive or overlook the offence perpetrated by the speaker. *Sorry*, which as an apology expression encodes the speaker's regret, occurred in only about a quarter of all the apologies (see Figure 4). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these apologies make up three quarters of the much higher number of apologies. The sincere requests for the addressee's forgiveness have receded and have been replaced by expressions of the speaker's regret.

4.5 Fully pragmaticalised and minimalised speech act

The previous section has shown that in Present-day English, in the early twenty-first century, apologies are far more frequent than they were at any other time in the history of English. Part of the reason for this increase is certainly the diversification of apologies. They are used for a much broader range of situations than in previous centuries.

> "Present-day English-speaking culture is extensively apologetic, and we use apologies for the most minor of everyday social infractions (e.g. if one accidentally bumps into a stranger on the train) as well as for more serious wrongs committed against those closest to us (e.g. forgetting a spouse's birthday)" (Williams 2018: 121–122)

Thus, in Present-day English apologies for minor infractions co-exist with much weightier ones, and indeed, equivalents of apologies described at all the earlier stages still exist, including devotional confessions and acts of penance. At this point, however, I want to focus on the large number of apologies that are performed after minor everyday infractions. Their illocutionary potential has been maximally weakened, i.e. attenuated, and they are fully pragmaticalized, i.e. the semantic transparency has largely been lost and their interpretation increasingly relies on the specific context in which they occur.

This can be shown with many of the widespread examples of *sorry*, which very often occurs on its own both in fictional texts and in transcriptions of spoken interactions. See extracts (23) to (26), all taken from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA).

(23)   (COCA, fic, 2001)
        Leon displays the pipe Emil found on the stairs. Korfin shines the flashlight on Leon to look at the pipe. LEON (CONT'D) Mind not shining that light in my eyes? # KORFIN # Sorry, bro.

(24)   (COCA, spok, 1992)
        RIVERA: Let's take a little break. LIZ: I mean, what do I think? RIVERA: Please. LIZ: Sorry. RIVERA: I'm getting depressed.

(25)   (COCA, fic, 2003)
        PATRICK # Oh. (long pause) So I was just wondering if I could bum a cigarette, mister. # JOEL # No, I don't smoke. Sorry.

(26)   (COCA, fic, 2011)
         "Mamm passed away last night." Miriam's voice broke on the last word. Covering her
         mouth with her hands, she choked back a sob. "Oh no." Abby encircled her in a
         hug. "I'm so sorry." "I can't believe it," Miriam choked through her sobs.

In extracts (23) and (24), *sorry* constitutes a turn on its own, or almost on its own with the
addition of *bro* in (23). It is up to the addressee to use contextual clues to figure out how
serious the expression of regret really is. To some extent, the apologizee has to figure out
whether the apologizer considered the offence to be serious enough to warrant a sincere
display of remorse or whether it was so minor that the *sorry* was no more than a token
acknowledgment of a minor infraction. In (25), the speaker does not apologize for not
smoking, as the utterance in which *sorry* occurs might suggest, but he apologizes for not
being able to offer his addressee a cigarette, and again it is difficult to tell how deep his
feeling of remorse really is. The situation in (26) is quite different. Here the speaker uses
sorry not to apologize but to express her feelings of condolence about the passing away of
Mamm, in spite of the fact that the formulation looks like a sincere apology. Its illocution
has to be derived – at least partly – from the context.
    In a recent paper, Aijmer (2019) looks at how teenagers use apologies and notes that they
often use them not as real apologies but "non-sincerely" in contexts of mock politeness or
mock impoliteness. Based on data from the COLT Corpus (the *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage
Language*) collected in 1993, she found that teenagers "overuse" apologies in comparison
with adults. The frequency of apology expression as considerably higher than in the *London
Lund Corpus of Spoken English* or in the BNC2014, which both record spoken conversation of
adult speakers of English. For the teenagers, apologies "functioned as a solidarity strategy
establishing a relationship of rapport" (Aijmer 2019: 1) thus providing evidence for the
increased frequency and concomitant weakening or attenuation of apologies.
    The same point can be made by a number of new expressions that have recently been
recruited as IFIDs for apologies, in particular *oops, whoops* (and spelling variants), *my bad*
and *soz* (see in particular Lutzky & Kehoe 2017a; b). The OED defines *oops* as follows:
"Expressing apology, dismay, or surprise, esp. after an obvious but usually minor mistake"
(OED Third edition, oops, int. and n.). In corpus data, such as the COHA, it is often dif-
ficult to tell whether it is a mere spill cry (Goffman 1978; Stange 2016) or whether it also
has some apologetic force. In some cases, as for instance in the examples (27) and (28),
it occurs together with a traditional apology element. In (27), this is another apology
expression, *sorry,* and in (28) the speaker takes responsibility (*I forgot*) and offers a repair
(*I'll do it now*) (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Jucker 2018b for these categories). In these
cases, *oops* seems to have at least some apologetic force.

(27)   (COHA 2003)
         Davis Mason had followed her so closely down the hall that he was only a pace
         behind her when she came to a sudden stop. He bumped awkwardly against her.
         "Oops, sorry." He caught his balance. "I wasn't paying attention." "My fault."
         With what she hoped was an unobtrusive movement, she eased out of the door-
         way back into the hall.

(28)   (COCA 2011)
         "Did you remember the list?" Dixie asked. Today was Dad's birthday, and Dixie
         wanted him to write down some gift ideas. She would be shopping with her older
         sister, Karen. # "Oops, I forgot. I'll do it now. Look for it on the kitchen table."

With the next two examples this is less clear. In these cases, *oops* occurs on its own, and it might just be a mere spill cry. In both cases, *oops* acknowledges a mishap, but it is up to the addressee to understand this as an expression of regret or not.

(29)   (COCA, 2002)
        Then he went about ten paces into the brush, tipped the bucket up and – click – emptied it onto the ground! Walking back across the road, the man swung the empty bucket easily with one hand, and Jackie got a picture of that, too. "Dad!" "What!" Her dad sat up too fast and beeped the horn on the steering wheel. "Oops!" he said. The man with the empty bucket turned to look, and Jackie quickly put her camera down in her lap and smiled at him.

(30)   (COCA, 1992)
        "I don't share hotel rooms. I can't believe a company as cheap as this." "I'd rather have my thousand-dollar bonus than a private room, I'll tell you that," said Glass. Step looked at him oddly. "A thousand dollars?" "I wasn't supposed to tell," said Glass. "Oops." "How often do you get this?" asked Step.

In (29) Jackie's father exclaims *oops* after accidentally beeping the horn of his car by sitting up too fast. There is no explicit indication that he meant this as an apology, but, as is clear from the wider context of this example, he drew the attention of a stranger and thus prevented his daughter from taking more pictures of the stranger. And in (30), Glass accidentally reveals the amount of the bonus the company pays him, and again it remains unclear whether he actually feels sorry for this or not.

   An apology expression which Lutzky & Kehoe (2017a; b) do not discuss, even though it does occur in the *Birmingham Blog Corpus* is *soz*. The OED labels it as British slang and defines it as "frequently in the language of electronic communications: = sorry adj. 3" and adds, "typically used alone, rather than predicatively with a verb" (OED Third edition, soz. adj.). The OED provides an example, taken from a Usenet user group, from 1993. But so far, the expression does not seem to have made it into the large standard corpora. There appears to be only one clear instance in the 560 million words of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), probably because a British expression is not very likely to make an appearance in an American corpus and because data from computer-mediated communication may be underrepresented in this corpus, but it does occur in the *Global Web-Based English Corpus* (GloWbE), particularly, but not only, in the GB part.

(31)   (BBC)
        This is just going to be a short post readers, soz. Not everything I write turns into epic flowing prose.

(32)   (BBC)
        Probably not the help you're after, soz, but can't wait to see what you come up with!

(33)   (BBC)
        Oops just realised eryl already said that … soz!

(34)   (GloWbE GB)
        everys help and views will be well aprishiated (soz have not got a clue how that last words spelt lol)

(35)   (GloWbE GB)
       One of them, we're not sure which one, soz, says: "Nothing can prepare you for
       the scale of it.

(36)   (GloWbE US)
       We pay them for their deeds, literally. # (soz for the off topic rant, but i also
       feckin love this debate, a

In spite of the limited context that is accessible through these corpora, it appears to be clear that the apologizers do not attach much weight to the offence for which they are apologizing. In fact, most of the instances come across as somewhat playful or even ironic.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The above case study has illustrated how the proposed new theoretical framework of speech act attenuation can help to trace a long diachrony of apologies. In the course of time, the illocutionary potential has changed very considerably, and in fact the early examples from Old English in the form of acts of repentance for sins committed before God show only a very faint resemblance to the minimalized expressions of regret that often enough appear to be less than heart-felt and sincere but merely token acknowledgments of minor infringements or perhaps just spill cries. But they are linked through a succession of stages with relatively minor differences from one stage to the next. The analysis presumes a dynamic definition of the speech act of apology which is based on a prototypical set of conditions but does not assume that all these conditions need to be fulfilled at all times. On the contrary, it is the shift in individual conditions which leads to a gradual attenuation of the speech act and ultimately to a significantly modified profile.

Figure 3 listed the four aspects of a prototypical apology: the offender, the offended, the offence and the remedy. We can now see that the speaker always identifies him or herself as the offender, where "offender" has to be understood in a very broad sense. The other three aspects undergo considerable changes. In the first period, described in Section 4.1 above, the offender is a Christian sinner who takes responsibility for serious wrongdoings before God and expresses emotions of deep remorse. In the second period (Section 4.2), the offended is no longer God but a fellow human being. In the fully secularized third period (Section 4.3), the offender, who has offended against a fellow human being, implores the offended to pardon and forgive. In the fourth period (section 4.4), there is a shift in focus from asking for forgiveness to expressing feelings of regret. And in the last period (Section 4.5), especially if we think of the examples given in (29) to (36), the "offender" is now someone who playfully draws attention to a minor infraction, such as an unorthodox spelling, which is not really presented as an offence, and it is left unclear who, if anybody, might have been offended by this.

To date there does not appear to be any other speech act whose diachronic development has received enough scholarly attention to test the theory of speech act attenuation in a similarly comprehensive way. However, from the different accounts of promises in the history of the English language, we can deduce a related story. In Present-day English, promises seem to have a bad press, not only those made by politicians during an election campaign. They are often dismissed as insincere and devoid of any great commitment of the speaker to actually carry out what he or she promised. Extract (37) may be typical in the sentiment that it expresses about promises.

(37)   (COCA, news, 2009)
        I'm voting for COPE. We tried ANC, but it was promises, promises, every day, and
        they did nothing.

In Old English, however, the situation was very different. "Statements of intended future action have the force of vows, utterances not lightly made. Promises thus entail obligations which must be honored even if death is the route to their successful fulfilment." (Arnovick 1999: 58). Pakkala-Weckström (2002; 2008) focuses on Middle English promises in the context of Chaucer's work. She identifies binding promises that result in an irreversible obligation by the speaker even in cases in which the promise was made in jest. As a particularly telling example, she gives Dorigen's promise in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale. While her beloved husband, Arveragus, is absent, Dorigen tries to get rid of an unwanted suitor, Aurelius, by promising him that she will love him if he can remove all the rocks on the coast of Brittany. Against her expectations, Aurelius, who secures the help of a magician, manages to let the rocks disappear. On his return her husband agrees that the distraught Dorigen must keep her promise because "trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (Franklin's Tale V (F), 1479). It is only Aurelius himself who can release Dorigen from her promise once he realizes the true love between Dorigen and Arveragus.

This contrasts very considerably with today's promises. Today it often seems necessary to reinforce the speaker's intention to keep the promise by combining several formulations (see Arnovick 1999: 61–61). Extract (38) gives a relevant example from a recent American Soap Opera.

(38)   (SOAP, Days of Our Lives, 2009)
        Listen, I'm sorry. I promise you that I will never do it again. I swear to you, it
        won't happen.

The words *I will never do it again* do not seem to be sufficient to convince the addressees of the sincerity of the speaker's commitment. Thus, promises appear to undergo a very similar process of attenuation from a speech act with considerable weight to one that often is perceived as having very little weight and which needs to be reinforced appropriately if it is to be taken seriously.

Jucker (2017) has looked at greetings and farewells. They are largely defined by their occurrence at the boundaries of conversations, either at the opening or at the closing, and they are often claimed to have very little propositional content. In the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), the most frequent expressions used as greetings at the beginning of the nineteenth century were *good morning* and *how are you?* The most frequent leave-taking expression was *farewell*. Today it is the expressions *hi* and *hello* as greetings and *goodbye* and *bye bye* as farewells. He uses *how are you?* and *how do you do?* to investigate the claim that these are just conventionalized and empty formulae without any propositional content and finds that both at the beginning and at the end of the period covered by COHA these forms could be used both as serious questions about the well-being of the addressee or as formulaic openings of a conversation that do not require any explicit answer that goes beyond responding to the greeting. However, in recent decades the form *how do you do?* has come to be restricted to relatively formal introductions between strangers and for both forms it is often left to the addressee to interpret it as formulaic or as a serious request for information. These forms, therefore, add further evidence for the unidirectionality of change from a situation in which the formulation of a speech act was regularly interpreted at face value, i.e. in this case as a real question, to a situation in which contextual information is required to pragmatically interpret the utterance which may still have its full semantic weight or may have lost it altogether in favor of a maximally attenuated speech act.

Our understanding of the long term diachronies of promises and greetings is not as detailed as it is for apologies, for which research published in the last few years has provided access to a more or less step by step development from Old English up to Present-day English. But the limited knowledge that we have appears to be supporting the analysis of a continuous diachronic attenuation. The speech acts lose their earlier weight, at least in some of their applications. What used to be strong commitments turned into increasingly weaker and less imposing expressions of the speaker's attitude. In Section 3 above, I mentioned the cases of the farewell greeting and curses. In both cases, there is a clear religious, or at least spiritual, origin which again parallels the development of apologies. *Goodbye* developed out of the farewell blessing *God be with you*, and today's cussing developed out of the Anglo-Saxon curses that in a very real sense were meant to protect legal documents by afflicting anybody who tampered with them. And even if the parallelisms are not identical developments in any strict sense, they are certainly sufficiently similar to create a strong curiosity to learn more about the long diachronies of other speech acts and to further explore the similarities and differences between them.

Data sources

Birmingham Blog Corpus (BBC): https://wse1.webcorp.org.uk/
British National Corpus: https://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/
Corpus of American Soap Operas: https://corpus.byu.edu/soap/
Corpus of Contemporary American English: https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/
Corpus of Historical American English: https://corpus.byu.edu/coha/
Early English Books Online: https://corpus.byu.edu/eebo/
Global Web-Based English (GloWbE): https://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/
Google Books Ngram Viewer: https://books.google.com/ngrams/

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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