



Developments of Political Apologies over the Last Two Decades: A Sociopragmatic Perspective

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Received: 2025/03/30

Accepted: 2025/06/09

Abstract: Political apologies serve as high-stakes communicative acts, addressing collective wrongdoing while seeking to repair damaged relationships between governments and affected groups. This study explored the evolution of political apologies in the 21st century, analyzing their role as public speech acts that respond to shifting societal and political norms. Despite their increasing prevalence in global politics, limited research has examined how these apologies have adapted linguistically and structurally over time to meet evolving public expectations. This research bridged this gap by employing a diachronic pragmatic approach. A corpus of 222 state-level political apologies, spanning two decades, was analyzed using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework, augmented with emerging pragmatic elements. Categorized into five sociopolitical periods, these apologies were coded and analyzed with Atlas.ti to identify shifts in their structural and linguistic components. The findings revealed a consistent use of Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), alongside a growing emphasis on Explanation or Account and META (Reaffirmation). Novel elements, such as Commemorative Apologies and Forward-Looking Statements, demonstrated how political apologies are increasingly tailored to address systemic injustices and public demands for accountability and reconciliation. Theoretically, the study could enrich pragmatic frameworks by identifying new components of political apologies. Practically, it offers insights for crafting effective apologies that resonate with diverse audiences. This research underscored the adaptability of political apologies, positioning them as tools for fostering societal healing and advancing justice in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Applied Pragmatics, Diachronic Pragmatics, Political Apologies, Speech Acts, Reconciliation Strategies.

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Introduction

This study examines political apologies through the framework of speech act theory, viewing them as ‘extended’ phenomena embedded within interactions (Edmondson & House, 1981; House & Kádár, 2021b). Political apologies, typically following negotiations between the apologizing government and affected groups (Renner, 2015), mirror Goffman's (1956) definition of apology, wherein the apologizer presents both a guilty side and a side empathizing with the blame. This study will show that acknowledging guilt, accepting responsibility, and expressing regret are, accepting responsibility, and expressing regret are essential components of political apologies, underscoring their public nature and ritualistic role in reintegration (Turner, 1969). Political apologies are inherently public rather than interpersonal (Kádár et al., 2018) and can foster reconciliation, though this outcome is not always assured. Tavuchis (1991) argues that publicity is vital to political apologies, defining them as “for the record,” intended to reach both the apologizer’s public and the victimized group. As reintegrative rituals, these apologies aim to mend relationships, bringing the offending party, usually a nation or its representatives, back into the broader community. These acts are highly conventionalized, recurrent, and emotionally charged, delivered by authorized individuals at specific times and places (Kádár, 2017). However, these structures and strategies shift over time, shaped by changing political norms and public expectations. This study will investigate how political apology practices evolved, especially in response to broader sociopolitical changes over the past two decades. A diachronic pragmatic analysis with applied pragmatic elements will explore the evolution of political apologies in the 21st century, identifying established and emerging pragmatic components in this genre. The corpus includes 222 apologies from the Political Apologies Database (PAD), an inventory of political apologies issued by states or representatives addressing collective responsibility for past wrongs. Each apology is presented in its original language or in an official English translation for consistency and accuracy.

The selected apologies are categorized across five distinct periods: the early 21st century (2000–2004), the rise of social media (2005–2010), heightened social movements (2011–2015), political polarization (2016–2019), and global crisis and accountability (2020–2022). This segmentation allows a comparative analysis of apology components within each sociopolitical and cultural context. Using Atlas.ti, the analysis applies free coding to both established categories from prior frameworks, such as Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (e.g., acknowledgment of wrongdoing, expression of regret), and emergent elements specific to political apologies. Given its diachronic focus, this study will track how political apologies

have responded to shifting contexts and public expectations. Theoretically, it will expand existing frameworks by exploring the evolution of apology practices, and practically, it will offer insights on crafting political apologies that resonate with contemporary audiences and foster reconciliation. This integration of theoretical and practical approaches enriches our understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and political communication.

Literature Review

Foundations of Political Apologies and Speech Act Theory

Political apologies—especially those addressing war crimes and historical injustices—have received interdisciplinary attention from fields such as journalism, anthropology, history, and political science (Celermajer, 2009; Gibney et al., 2008; Marrus, 2007; Horelt, 2019). These studies have illuminated the moral and symbolic dimensions of apology but often frame them ideologically, offering limited insight into their linguistic-pragmatic structure. This has led to a tendency to treat apologies as performative gestures rather than as structured speech acts that adapt over time to communicative norms. To address this gap, the present study adopted a diachronic pragmatic perspective, focusing on how political apologies evolve linguistically across changing historical and institutional contexts. Pragmatic studies have provided valuable insights into the communicative function of political apologies. For example, Harris et al. (2006) explored how apologies shape political relationships through performative discourse, while Kampf (2008, 2009) identified rhetorical strategies that allow political actors to appear contrite while managing reputational risk. While these works underscore the strategic nature of apology, they have largely examined synchronic moments, overlooking how such strategies shift in response to longer-term cultural and institutional transformations.

A foundational model for analyzing apology components is the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), which identifies five key elements: IFID, responsibility-taking, explanation, repair, and forbearance. Further refinements by Edmondson and House (1981) introduced modifiers like upgraders and downgraders that calibrate emotional tone and social distance. While these models offer robust tools for analyzing apology content, they tend to treat these components as static and universal, with limited attention to the sociohistorical pressures that reshape them over time. This limitation is especially evident in CCSARP's focus on interpersonal apologies, which does not fully account for political apologies as ritualized, strategic, and multi-audience acts. Existing models often overlook the ways political apologies are staged in response to evolving public expectations and media dynamics, reducing their ability to explain how form

and function adapt in changing socio-political environments. Philosophical and ethical approaches further contribute to the literature by emphasizing the symbolic weight of apology in contexts of moral harm. Govier and Verwoerd (2002) examine apology's role in reconciliation, while Margalit (2002) explores the ethics of memory and collective guilt. Although normatively rich, these perspectives provide little engagement with the linguistic structure or pragmatic adaptation of apology across time—leaving a gap this study addresses. In sum, while existing scholarship has enriched our understanding of apology's ethical and symbolic meaning, it falls short of tracing how political apologies evolve pragmatically in response to broader historical shifts. The field still lacks a framework that captures political apologies as dynamic, strategic, and culturally contingent acts of speech. This study seeks to fill that gap through a diachronic pragmatic analysis, revealing how apology components shift structurally and functionally across the 21st century.

Cross-Cultural and Strategic Dimensions of Political Apologies

Kampf and Löwenheim (2012) argue that political apologies often function as tools for negotiating power and legitimacy in both domestic and international contexts. Kampf (2012) further highlights the strategic use of terms like “regret,” which allows politicians to express remorse without admitting full responsibility. These studies underscore how linguistic choices in political apologies are carefully calibrated to balance ethical accountability with institutional self-preservation. Recent contrastive pragmatic research expands this view. House and Kádár (2021b), in their analysis of German and Japanese war crime apologies, identified culturally specific components such as META (reaffirmation of values) and intensified expressions of guilt. Their findings demonstrate that apology strategies are shaped by national identity and historical memory rather than by universal norms. While they touch on diachronic trends, the mechanisms through which these strategies evolve—especially across broader geopolitical contexts—remain insufficiently theorized.

Politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, offers a valuable framework for understanding how face-saving tactics operate in political apologies. Such strategies are especially salient where leaders must convey accountability while preserving credibility. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) and Holmes (1995) further show how cultural and sociopolitical norms shape the realization and reception of speech acts, including apologies. These findings illustrate how apology effectiveness hinges on cultural alignment and audience perception. Norris (2004) extends this view with a multimodal lens, showing that gestures, tone, and gaze often enhance or undermine spoken apologies—especially in

televised or public political settings. However, despite these contributions, most research remains synchronic, focusing on isolated cases without tracing how apology strategies shift in response to evolving political climates. While House and Kádár (2021a) acknowledge diachronic variation, their scope remains culturally narrow. Likewise, politeness and cross-cultural theories rarely consider how apology strategies adapt over time to changing public expectations, media dynamics, or institutional pressures. As a result, there is a lack of integrated insight into how culturally embedded, strategic elements of political apologies evolve longitudinally. This study addresses that gap by adopting a diachronic and applied pragmatic approach. Rather than examining only variations across cultures, it investigates how political apologies develop and evolve within cultures over time—shedding more light on the evolving interplay of strategy, culture, and communicative norms.

Diachronic Developments in Apologetic Discourse

Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008) provided a foundational perspective on the diachronic evolution of apologies by examining how broader historical, cultural, and political shifts influence their linguistic realization. Their work emphasized that apologies are not static or formulaic acts, but rather contextually responsive expressions that reflect prevailing ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural expectations. This approach established a crucial foundation for understanding apologies as historically situated acts of communication—particularly within the political sphere, where issues of identity, legitimacy, and morality are foregrounded. Despite its importance, diachronic analysis remains underutilized in pragmatic research on political apologies. Jucker and Taavitsainen's focus was largely on the development of apology forms in general English over centuries, without extending their framework to institutional or state-level contexts. Their analysis offers conceptual tools for understanding historical shifts but does not directly address how apology strategies evolve in political discourse or how new components emerge in response to contemporary public demands.

Seoane and Suárez-Gómez (2019) advanced this perspective by applying a corpus-pragmatic approach to editorials from *The New York Times* between 1860 and 1979. Their study demonstrated how linguistic shifts—such as reductions in formality and greater alignment between speaker and audience—mirrored democratization processes and evolving power relations. Their methodology, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative interpretation, provided an effective model for tracing ideological change through language. However, while their work illuminates how language indexes power and democratization, it

does not specifically address the speech act of apology or its strategic components, particularly in relation to state-level responsibility.

House and Kádár's (2021b) contrastive diachronic analysis of German and Japanese war-crime apologies marked a rare application of diachronic pragmatics to political apologies specifically. Their study introduced emerging components such as META (reaffirmation of shared values) and intensified expressions of guilt and shame, highlighting both temporal and cultural variation. Yet their comparative scope, while rich in depth, remains limited in breadth—focused primarily on two national contexts and a historically specific genre of apology. Broader longitudinal patterns in political apologies across multiple states, cultures, and decades remain largely unexplored. Other longitudinal studies such as Koesten and Rowland's (2004) study of rhetorical shifts in apology strategies and Lazare's (2004) psychological exploration of the anatomy of apologies have offered valuable insights into performative sincerity, emotional resonance, and strategic ambiguity. Tavuchis (1991), from a sociological perspective, emphasized the role of apologies in institutional and collective reconciliation. These studies underscore the multifaceted nature of public apologies as acts of emotional repair, identity negotiation, and societal healing.

However, despite these important contributions, most existing diachronic studies fall short in one or more key areas: they either lack a specific focus on state-level political apologies, fail to integrate pragmatic component analysis or limit their scope to particular cultural or historical moments. The role of apology elements such as explanation, reaffirmation, or forward-looking statements—and how their prevalence has changed in response to global political events, public discourse norms, or digital communication platforms—remains insufficiently studied. This study responds directly to these gaps by conducting a large-scale, diachronic pragmatic analysis of political apologies issued over the past two decades. By identifying both established and novel components, the research not only expands our understanding of how apologies are structured but also explores *why* certain components gain prominence over time, reflecting shifts in accountability politics, public sentiment, and global norms of reconciliation.

Empirical and Applied Pragmatic Approaches to Political Apologies

Empirical research has significantly advanced our understanding of political apologies by examining how they function in real-world contexts. These studies consistently highlight their strategic nature, showing how apologies are crafted to appeal to both domestic and international audiences while balancing political expediency with perceived sincerity. Kampf

(2013) identified three core features of public apologies: revealing mindset, documenting intent, and meeting public expectations—framing apologies as responsive, reputational tools. Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory likewise offers rhetorical strategies such as mortification or evasion to manage public perception. However, both approaches remain focused on isolated episodes, lacking a diachronic perspective on how these strategies shift across time. Murphy (2015) added a qualitative lens by analyzing British political apologies across contexts, emphasizing the use of symbolic language and strategic ambiguity. Her study reveals how apologies may prioritize image repair over moral clarity, but it does not explore how these strategies evolve with public or ideological shifts. Kádár et al. (2018) introduced “public ritual apologies,” analyzing 150 cases across geopolitical contexts. They found that Asian apologies often stress collective guilt, while Western ones emphasize individual accountability. Despite its robust cultural analysis, the study did not address how these rhetorical preferences change over time or across political climates.

Kitagawa and Chu (2021) brought a psychological dimension, showing through survey experiments that apologies may improve international perception but provoke nationalist backlash at home. While revealing in terms of reception, their findings are temporally bounded and not focused on structural changes in apology discourse. Case studies from Lind (2008), Nobles (2008), and Barkan (2000) examined U.S. and international apologies for slavery and colonialism, highlighting their symbolic and diplomatic roles. Yet these works focus more on content and historical context than on how apology structures shift pragmatically over time. More recent studies address the role of digital platforms. Page (2014) and Zappavigna (2012) examined how Twitter's immediacy and interactivity affect the delivery and reception of apologies. Moreover, Georgakopoulou (2016) emphasized how audiences shape apology narratives online. These contributions reveal how digital affordances influence apology dynamics, but rarely examine how core components like IFIDs or repair evolve in digital contexts. Psychological research, including Blatz et al. (2009) and Hornsey and Wohl (2013), shows that apology effectiveness increases when aligned with group identity and justice perceptions. These studies offer insight into reception but do not analyze how apology language develops structurally in response to evolving values or crises. Together, these empirical and applied contributions illuminate the strategic, cultural, and psychological functions of political apologies. Yet most are synchronic or case-bound, with little attention to the structural evolution of apology components across time. This leaves unresolved how apologies adapt linguistically to shifting public norms, institutional expectations, and technological mediation. This study addresses that gap through a

diachronic, component-based pragmatic analysis of 222 political apologies spanning two decades. By tracking the frequency and strategic use of elements such as IFIDs, explanation, commemorative framing, and future-oriented language, it offers a more integrated view of political apologies as adaptive, historically situated communicative acts.

Need for a Diachronic Pragmatic Study

Political apologies have undergone significant transformations in the 21st century, shaped by shifting socio-political contexts, heightened public accountability, and evolving communicative practices. While existing research has provided valuable insights, it has largely done so through synchronic analysis—offering snapshots of apology strategies within specific historical or cultural moments. A diachronic pragmatic approach is essential for tracing how these strategies develop over time and identifying which apology components gain or lose prominence in response to changing norms and expectations. The value of diachronic pragmatics has been demonstrated by studies such as [Jucker and Taavitsainen \(2008\)](#), who documented how apologies in English evolved from routinized, lexicalized expressions in Old English to more nuanced, context-sensitive forms. However, their work focused primarily on general historical English usage, without addressing the specific challenges of state-level political apologies or the strategic motivations embedded within them. Similarly, [Sun and Shen \(2018\)](#) showed how metaphor clusters in political discourse adapt to sociopolitical changes, but their focus remained on metaphor, not apology as a speech act.

[Seoane and Suárez-Gómez \(2019\)](#) illustrated how democratization processes are reflected in pragmatic language shifts over time, offering a valuable model of corpus-pragmatic analysis. Yet their study centered on *editorials* rather than political apologies, and did not examine the structural and interpersonal features of apologies themselves. [House and Kádár \(2021b\)](#) offered a rare diachronic analysis of state-issued war crime apologies in Germany and Japan, uncovering culturally specific patterns and emerging components such as META (reaffirmation of values). However, their work was limited in temporal scope and comparative breadth, focusing narrowly on historical war-related apologies within two national contexts. In contrast, the current study addresses these limitations by offering a broad, two-decade diachronic analysis of 222 state-level political apologies from diverse geopolitical settings. By focusing on structural and pragmatic components such as IFIDs, explanations, forward-looking commitments, and novel elements like Broader Harm Acknowledgment and Commemorative Apologies—this research identifies both enduring

and emerging patterns. Unlike earlier studies, it integrates applied pragmatics with diachronic analysis to bridge theoretical models and real-world communicative practices, highlighting how political apologies evolve in response to contemporary demands for justice, transparency, and reconciliation. Therefore, this study intended to fill a potentially critical gap: it brings together the structural rigor of component-based speech act theory, the temporal insight of diachronic analysis, and the real-world relevance of applied pragmatics to offer a comprehensive understanding of political apologies in the 21st century. Accordingly; the researchers formulated the following three research questions:

- **RQ1:** Which apology elements are present or absent in political apologies, and how might these choices reflect shifts in public expectations and political norms over time?
- **RQ2:** Has the inclusion or exclusion of apology elements evolved over time, and in what ways?
- **RQ3:** Are there unique pragmatic components in political apologies that do not align with interpersonal apology frameworks, and if so, what are they?

Methods

Corpus

The corpus for this research included 222 political apologies drawn from the Political Apologies Database, part of the ERC Consolidator Research Project. This database comprised significant apologies issued by states or state representatives to collectives in response to past human rights violations. Apologies were selected based on their state-level responsibility and collective impact, excluding personal apologies made by individual politicians. To ensure linguistic accuracy and consistency, only apologies available in their original language or with official English translations were included. Spanning diverse cultural and political contexts, the dataset provided a robust foundation for examining trends and shifts in political apologies over two decades. The decision to use this curated database was informed by its systematic categorization of apologies addressing substantial public and political wrongs which was aligned with the study's focus on apologies of broad social and institutional significance.

Theoretical Framework and Coding Procedure

This study employed a coding framework grounded in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by [Blum-Kulka et al. \(1989\)](#), further extended by [House and Kádár \(2021b\)](#) in their analysis of political war crime apologies. These foundational models

provide conventional categories essential to understanding the pragmatic structure of apologies, including Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and offers of repair. Building on these foundations, this study adopted a diachronic pragmatic approach to examine the evolving linguistic and rhetorical features of state-level political apologies. A qualitative coding procedure was applied to the full corpus, combining deductive coding based on established categories with a grounded, inductive strategy to capture emerging components. Components initially labeled as “Unclassified” were revisited through iterative passes and team discussion. Those found to recur with consistent rhetorical or strategic functions were formally defined and integrated into the framework. These novel components—including Broader Harm Acknowledgment and Commemorative Apologies—represent meaningful extensions of traditional taxonomies and reflect evolving expectations for public accountability, national memory, and symbolic justice. The complete set of components used in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A Framework for the Analysis of Components in Political Apologies

Component	Description	Source
Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	Explicit linguistic markers of apology (e.g., "I apologize").	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
Taking on Responsibility	Acknowledgment of guilt or responsibility for wrongdoing.	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
Explanation or Account	Providing a rationale or explanation for the offense.	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
Offer of Repair	Commitment to address or rectify the harm caused.	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
Promise of Forbearance	Assurance to prevent the offense from recurring in the future.	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
META (Reaffirmation)	Statements reaffirming shared values or relationships, reinforcing solidarity.	House & Kádár (2021b)
Upgrader	Amplifiers that intensify the apology (e.g., "deeply regret").	House & Kádár (2021b)
Expression of Guilt and Shame	Emotional expressions signaling regret and moral accountability.	House & Kádár (2021b)
Unclassified	Novel components or patterns that do not fit within established categories.	This study

This integrated framework provided the analytical foundation for tracking changes in apology structure and function across the five time periods, enabling a nuanced exploration of how political apologies have adapted to shifting cultural, political, and communicative landscapes.

Coding Procedure and Reliability

To ensure analytic rigor and reduce subjectivity, the coding process was carried out collaboratively by two researchers working within a shared analytical framework derived from CCSARP and its subsequent adaptations. Both coders participated in coding the full dataset, applying predefined categories as well as identifying emergent components. Consistency in code application was reinforced through regular discussions and joint calibration sessions during the initial stages of coding. To further validate coding reliability, a subset of 15% of the corpus was independently double-coded by both researchers and inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, resulting in a coefficient of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus, with coding definitions clarified and updated as needed. This collaborative and iterative approach enhanced the transparency and reliability of both predefined and emergent component identification across the corpus.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved dividing the corpus into five distinct time periods: the early 21st century (2000–2004), the rise of social media (2005–2010), heightened social movements (2011–2015), political polarization (2016–2019), and global crisis and accountability (2020–2022). This temporal segmentation allowed for a nuanced exploration of apology structures and components, reflecting shifts in political norms, public expectations, and communication strategies. Additionally, this division enabled the study to investigate the potential influence of socio-political contexts and global events—such as social justice movements and political polarization—on the evolution of apology structures. All apologies were downloaded and reformatted as necessary for consistency within Atlas.ti. To facilitate comparative analysis, each text was organized and labeled according to its time period and socio-political context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, which facilitated systematic organization, visualization, and frequency analysis. Shifts in apology components across the five time periods were tracked using the software's visual mapping and frequency analysis features. The analysis also included a comparative examination of apology structures across different countries or political systems, though cross-cultural variation was not the primary focus of this study. For RQ1, the study investigated which apology components were present or absent in public political apologies, analyzing their alignment with evolving public expectations and political norms. For RQ2, a diachronic comparison identified significant shifts in apology practices over time, linking these changes to political, social, or cultural events. Addressing RQ3, the study focused on identifying pragmatic components that did not align with traditional interpersonal apology frameworks. Unclassified elements were reviewed to determine whether they represented new patterns or components unique to political apologies. These novel components, if found, were introduced and categorized as part of this study's contribution to expanding the pragmatics of apologies in political contexts. Although the study did not explicitly focus on cross-cultural variation, any notable differences in apology structures between countries or political systems were documented, providing additional context for understanding the global dimensions of political apologies.

Results

Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs): Prevalence and Role

Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) were the most frequently occurring component in the corpus, appearing in 206 of the 222 political apologies (92.8%), as shown in Table 2. Their near-universal presence across all five periods highlights their central role in signaling an explicit act of apology. A chi-square test confirmed that IFID usage remained statistically stable over time ($\chi^2 = 29.03$, $df = 32$, $p = .618$), underscoring its continued foundational role in apology formulation. IFIDs serve as the formal marker of the speech act itself—phrases such as “I apologize” or “we regret”—and are essential for signaling the speaker's recognition of wrongdoing. Their function, however, is not purely formulaic. Many IFIDs are embedded within emotionally resonant language or intensified through accompanying modifiers, known as Upgraders. For example, U.S. President Bill Clinton's 2001 apology for the No Gun Ri massacre includes the phrase, “I deeply regret that Korean civilians lost their lives at No Gun Ri.” This instance not only utilizes an IFID (“regret”) but also features an Upgrader (“deeply”), enhancing both emotional tone and sincerity.

Such formulations illustrate how IFIDs can simultaneously perform acknowledgment and signal deeper affective engagement. Although their structural presence is consistent, the strategic deployment of IFIDs—in tandem with components like Taking Responsibility, META, or Explanation—has become more layered over time. Early 21st-century apologies often relied heavily on IFIDs and minimal elaboration. By contrast, recent apologies increasingly embed IFIDs within complex rhetorical frameworks that include reaffirmation of values, contextual explanations, and symbolic gestures. This suggests a qualitative shift in how accountability is linguistically performed, even if the statistical frequency of IFIDs remains unchanged.

Table 2. Apology Components

Apology Components	2000–2004 (n=50)	2005–2010 (n=53)	2011–2015 (n=43)	2016–2019 (n=54)	2020–2022 (n=22)	Totals (n=222)
IFID	45 (90.0%)	51 (96.2%)	38 (88.4%)	50 (92.6%)	22(100.0%)	206 (92.8%)
Taking on responsibility	18 (36.0%)	26 (49.1%)	29 (67.4%)	35 (64.8%)	18 (81.8%)	126 (56.8%)
Explanation or account	14 (28.0%)	33 (62.3%)	29 (67.4%)	42 (77.8%)	19 (86.4%)	137 (61.7%)
Offer of repair	13 (26.0%)	21 (39.6%)	26 (60.5%)	25 (46.3%)	8 (36.4%)	93 (41.9%)
Promise of forbearance	4 (8.0%)	18 (34.0%)	20 (46.5%)	25 (46.3%)	10 (45.5%)	77 (34.7%)
META (Reaffirmation)	21 (42.0%)	30 (56.6%)	29 (67.4%)	41 (75.9%)	19 (86.4%)	140 (63.1%)
Upgrader	26 (52.0%)	25 (47.2%)	24 (55.8%)	32 (59.3%)	12 (54.5%)	119 (53.6%)
Expression of guilt and shame	15 (30.0%)	20 (37.7%)	17 (39.5%)	31 (57.4%)	12 (54.5%)	95 (42.8%)
Unclassified	13 (26.0%)	27 (50.9%)	25 (58.1%)	32 (59.3%)	15 (68.2%)	112 (50.5%)

Temporal Trends in Apology Components

Table 2 illustrates how the use of apology components has evolved over time. While Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) remained consistently high across all five

periods (above 88% each), several other components showed notable increases. Taking Responsibility rose from 36.0% in 2000–2004 to 81.8% in 2020–2022. Explanation or Account increased even more dramatically, from 28.0% to 86.4%, indicating a growing emphasis on transparency, narrative framing, and justification. Similarly, META (Reaffirmation) rose from 42.0% to 86.4%, reflecting the strategic incorporation of shared values to reinforce solidarity. These trends suggest a shift from minimal, often symbolic expressions of regret toward more comprehensive rhetorical structures that integrate acknowledgment, justification, and reaffirmation. While a chi-square test of independence showed that these increases were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 29.03$, $df = 32$, $p = .618$), the descriptive patterns reveal a qualitative evolution in how political apologies are structured and delivered over time. In contrast, some components like Offer of Repair peaked in the middle period (60.5% in 2011–2015) but declined slightly afterward (36.4% in 2020–2022), possibly reflecting changing attitudes toward material redress or institutional capacity for tangible compensation. The scope of political apologies also appears to have expanded. Earlier apologies focused primarily on historical events—such as wartime atrocities or colonial injustices—whereas more recent statements increasingly address contemporary systemic issues, including LGBTQ+ rights, institutional discrimination, and commemorative justice. For instance, the U.S. Congressional apology for slavery not only acknowledged past wrongdoing but also emphasized forward-looking commitments to equality, illustrating a rhetorical move toward collective responsibility and systemic reform. These patterns are central to RQ2 and RQ3, indicating both an evolution in the use of conventional apology elements and the emergence of novel components tailored to modern socio-political demands. The rise of explanation, reaffirmation, and future-oriented framing reflects changing public expectations for accountability, justice, and inclusive discourse.

Unique Pragmatic Components in Political Apologies

The growing complexity of political apologies in the 21st century has given rise to distinctive pragmatic components that extend beyond traditional speech act models. These components emerged inductively during coding and were validated through repeated review and cross-referencing. They reflect the evolving communicative demands placed on political actors, including the need to address institutional accountability, historical injustice, and public expectations for emotional and symbolic resonance. This section addresses Research Question 3, identifying apology elements that diverge from interpersonal norms and respond to the strategic, cultural, and institutional pressures shaping modern political discourse.

One key emergent category is Broader Harm Acknowledgment. Unlike traditional apologies that address a specific injured party, this component extends concern to indirect stakeholders such as institutions, national identity, and social trust. For instance, in a U.S. apology, the speaker expressed regret not only for the immediate harm caused but also for the reputational damage to “the armed forces, the president, the Congress, and the American people.” Such formulations align with [Kampf’s \(2013\)](#) argument that political apologies document intentions and fulfill symbolic expectations rather than serve purely interpersonal functions. A second category includes Commemorative Apologies, which link sorrow with forward-looking aspirations for unity and peace. These apologies often take place during ceremonial or historical anniversaries and serve a dual function: acknowledging the past and reaffirming a collective commitment to a reconciled future. A prominent example is Emperor Naruhito’s WWII apology, where he conveyed a “deep and renewed sense of sorrow” and expressed hope for peace and reconciliation (see Figure 1). This kind of apology functions as a reintegrative ritual, in line with [Turner’s \(1969\)](#) framework of symbolic social repair.

Another rhetorical innovation is the Repeated Apology as Upgrader, in which repetition of phrases like “I am sorry” or “We sincerely apologize” intensifies emotional resonance. This technique amplifies perceived sincerity, helping speakers meet heightened public demands for genuine contrition. In a 2021 Canadian apology, this pattern was used extensively by the defense minister, reflecting a strategy of emphatic humility and affective engagement. Some components emphasize future-oriented action. For instance, Commitments to Education and Remembrance embed apologies within practical, long-term initiatives such as the construction of memorials, curricular reforms, or institutional acknowledgments. These moves transform the apology from a momentary act into a sustained effort toward reconciliation and public education. Similarly, Forward-Looking Statements envision peace and social progress, positioning the apology as a starting point for broader transformation. One such statement proposed turning a historically significant island into “a symbol of peace for Korea, Northeast Asia, and the world.” Cultural Adaptations also illustrate how political apologies align with national rhetorical styles. In Japan, apologies often employ emotionally dense language—such as “deep remorse”—to signal humility and national responsibility. In contrast, U.S. apologies tend to include legalistic framing, with clauses like “whereas” providing historical context and political justification, as seen in the 2008 Congressional apology for slavery. These variations reflect the cross-cultural insights of [Blum-Kulka et al. \(1989\)](#), demonstrating that apology structures are deeply embedded in local communicative norms and institutional traditions.

Lastly, the Commitment to Peace and Reconciliation component extends apologies beyond acknowledgment and into sustained diplomatic or community-building processes. These apologies focus on repairing long-term relationships and signal ongoing efforts to build trust, often involving intergroup dialogue, policy reform, or symbolic gestures aimed at previously marginalized communities. Collectively, these components reveal a broader rhetorical evolution in the genre of political apologies. They move beyond simply saying “sorry” to construct messages that are emotionally resonant, culturally calibrated, and strategically aligned with institutional objectives. In doing so, they respond to the increasing public demand for authenticity, restitution, and social transformation, expanding the apology from a reactive gesture into a proactive tool for societal healing.



Figure 1. Emperor Naruhito's Expression of “Deep and Renewed Sense of Sorrow” to Victims of WWII as an Example of a Commemorative Apology

These findings suggest that political apologies are no longer governed solely by the structural norms of interpersonal discourse. Instead, they are shaped by institutional imperatives, historical memory, and evolving public expectations for accountability and social transformation. Taken together, the results address all three research questions: they identify the presence and absence of apology components over time (RQ1), demonstrate how their usage has evolved across periods (RQ2), and reveal the emergence of novel, context-specific elements that do not align with traditional interpersonal apology frameworks (RQ3). These pragmatic innovations reflect the shifting role of political apologies as tools for moral leadership, symbolic justice, and public reconciliation. The following table summarizes these emergent components, offering concise definitions, representative examples, and theoretical insights into their rhetorical and institutional significance.

Table 3. Unique Pragmatic Components in Political Apologies

Component	Description	Examples	Key Insights
Broader Harm Acknowledgment	Apologies extend beyond direct victims to address indirect stakeholders, institutions, or societal trust, highlighting the ripple effects of wrongdoing.	"I deeply regret the damage... to the reputation of the armed forces, the president, the Congress, and the American people..."	Highlights the ripple effects of wrongdoing, aligning with Kampf's (2013) observations about documenting intentions and fulfilling political expectations.
Commemorative Apology	Combines sorrow with forward-looking commitments to prevent recurrence and promote unity.	Emperor Naruhito expressed "deep and renewed sense of sorrow" for WWII victims and hoped for peace and reconciliation.	Serves as a reintegrative ritual (Turner, 1969) by linking historical reflection with aspirations for societal healing and unity.
Repeated Apology as Upgrader	Intensifies sincerity and emotional resonance through repetition and emphasis.	Canada's defense minister (2021): "I apologize," "I am sorry," "We apologize," "We sincerely apologize," etc.	Amplifies emotional resonance and authenticity, meeting heightened public expectations for genuine contrition.
Commitments to Education and Remembrance	Integrates actions like establishing memorials or initiatives to ensure enduring acknowledgment of past wrongs.	"I agree that this should be done and intend to engage directly with representative groups to create an appropriate memorial."	Embeds apologies in broader efforts for historical accountability, fostering long-term reconciliation, education, and collective memory.
Cultural Adaptations	Tailors apologies to societal norms and traditions, reflecting cross-cultural variations in political apologies.	Japanese apologies: Use "deep remorse"; U.S. apologies: Use "whereas" clauses for historical context (e.g., 2008 apology for slavery).	Demonstrates how political apologies adapt to cultural norms and institutional frameworks (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Component	Description	Examples	Key Insights
Forward-Looking Statements	Expands apologies to address future aspirations and societal progress.	"Let this peaceful island help bring about peace in Korea, Northeast Asia, and the world."	Positions apologies as instruments of education, collective memory, and social transformation.
Historical Reflections	Contextualizes apologies within narratives of justice and equality while expressing hope for future cooperation.	"I have no doubt that our children and grandchildren... will not only lament slavery but also live in a moment of privilege."	Challenges traditional apology models by embedding apologies in broader narratives, emphasizing accountability and aspirations for equity.
Commitment to Peace and Reconciliation	Focuses on ongoing efforts and steps to promote reconciliation and trust.	"That initiative was also taken in order to contribute to reconciliation and better trust between the authorities and the Romani people."	Demonstrates commitment to building trust and reconciliation through proactive, sustained initiatives rather than immediate reparative actions.

Discussion

Political apologies have transformed into strategic, emotionally calibrated tools that reflect evolving public expectations and institutional pressures. The findings of this study reveal how certain components—particularly Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), Explanation or Account, and META (Reaffirmation)—anchor this evolution. Rather than serving as isolated acknowledgments of wrongdoing, apologies now operate as complex rhetorical structures responding to broader societal demands. One enduring feature is the near-universal use of IFIDs, appearing in 92.8% of the cases analyzed. Their consistency across time periods underscores their foundational role in public acknowledgment and perceived sincerity. As [Jucker \(2019\)](#) notes, apologies have evolved from penitential acts into modern communicative strategies, and IFIDs continue to signal the performative core of these acts. Their ubiquity also reinforces [Blum-Kulka et al.'s \(1989\)](#) framework, establishing IFIDs as essential to both interpersonal and institutional apologies. In political contexts, where the legitimacy of the speaker and the clarity of the message are paramount, IFIDs

provide linguistic certainty that an apology is indeed being issued. Yet political apologies are increasingly layered with additional components that reflect rising societal expectations for transparency, justification, and emotional resonance. One striking trend is the increasing use of Explanation or Account, which rose from 28.0% in the early 2000s to 86.4% in 2020–2022. This component reflects a rhetorical shift toward providing context for wrongdoing—often linked to systemic issues rather than isolated missteps. As [Seoane and Suárez-Gómez \(2019\)](#) argue, language evolves alongside democratization processes; this study's findings extend that insight by showing how political apologies now embed explanatory strategies that legitimize institutional responsibility while acknowledging past harm.

Similarly, META (Reaffirmation) has emerged as a central component of modern apologies, offering speakers a way to reassert shared values and collective identity. These statements serve a dual function: they signal alignment with public morals while subtly restoring institutional credibility. The increasing prevalence of META—from 42.0% in 2000–2004 to 86.4% in the most recent period—suggests that reaffirming democratic, inclusive values has become a normative expectation in political apology discourse. These shifts indicate a deeper strategic adaptation of apologies in response to the demands of a media-saturated, politically polarized landscape. Components like Upgraders and Promise of Forbearance play an important supporting role by intensifying emotional tone and signaling a long-term commitment to reform. For instance, the U.S. Congressional apology for slavery did not merely express regret but also emphasized future commitments to racial equality—illustrating how apologies function as public pledges aligned with contemporary movements for justice and inclusion. This evolving structure also reflects expanded scope and ambition. Early apologies often addressed discrete historical injustices; today's apologies increasingly engage with systemic harms, including LGBTQ+ rights, institutional discrimination, and indigenous injustices. As [Turner \(1969\)](#) theorized, apologies can serve as reintegrative rituals—symbolic acts that reaffirm social cohesion. Political apologies now go beyond acknowledgment, offering visions for collective healing and forward-looking reconciliation.

Importantly, the emergence of underexplored elements like META and Upgraders highlights how apologies are used to navigate both emotional and institutional expectations. These novel components support what [Kampf \(2013\)](#) describes as the documentation of intent and sincerity in public apologies. They also serve a dual audience: emotionally engaging affected communities while signaling to broader publics that institutional change is underway. As [Chilton \(2004\)](#) argued, linguistic choices reflect political strategy—and in this context, apologies function as legitimating acts that bridge guilt, governance, and reform.

In sum, the findings illustrate that political apologies have evolved from relatively simple expressions of regret into multi-dimensional performances. They now address historical memory, emotional resonance, institutional accountability, and future commitment—reflecting both public pressure and political calculation. These trends confirm the continued relevance of speech act theory while also demanding expanded models that can account for the unique rhetorical pressures of 21st-century political life. Political apologies have grown beyond their traditional function of acknowledging discrete acts of harm. In contemporary practice, they operate as strategic, future-oriented instruments that address institutional relationships, public trust, and social transformation. This section explores three overlapping dimensions of this evolution: the expansion of apology scope to broader harms, the deepening of cultural and emotional resonance, and the integration of forward-looking commitments as tools for long-term societal change.

One of the clearest shifts in modern political apologies is the emphasis on broader harm acknowledgment—addressing not only direct victims but also indirect stakeholders such as public institutions, collective identity, and societal trust. This reflects an evolution in the scope and purpose of apologies, aligning with [Jucker and Taavitsainen's \(2008\)](#) observation that speech acts have developed from lexicalized expressions of personal regret into socially routinized performances in political discourse. Where interpersonal apologies typically aim to restore relationships between individuals, political apologies respond to complex ripple effects of harm. These acts, as [Kampf \(2013\)](#) suggests, serve to document intention and fulfill the broader expectations of democratic publics. In doing so, political apologies offer symbolic restoration for institutional breaches of trust, reinforcing the social contract between state and citizen. Commemorative apologies similarly demonstrate how political actors engage with historical memory as a tool for societal reintegration. These apologies not only mourn past injustices but project aspirations for unity and peace, embodying [Turner's \(1969\)](#) concept of reintegrative rituals. By combining sorrow with preventive intent, they reaffirm shared values and contribute to social healing. In this way, political apologies become vehicles for both retrospection and forward-looking national narratives—a duality that earlier pragmatic frameworks often overlooked. Another innovation in political apologies lies in their emotional and cultural adaptation. The strategic repetition of apology phrases—such as “I am sorry,” “We sincerely apologize”—serves as a rhetorical intensifier, addressing heightened public skepticism and expectations for sincerity. This pattern illustrates what [Chilton \(2004\)](#) called the “linguistic response to sociopolitical expectations,” wherein the performative dimension of political discourse adapts to media scrutiny and emotional

demand. Repetition thus becomes a tool for reinforcing authenticity, particularly in high-stakes political contexts.

At the same time, cultural adaptations shape how apologies are structured and delivered. Japanese political apologies often rely on profound emotional expressions and humility, while U.S. apologies frequently use formal legalistic phrasing, including “whereas” clauses that establish historical context. These culturally embedded forms support [Blum-Kulka et al.’s \(1989\)](#) framework on speech act variation and reveal the extent to which political apologies are shaped by the rhetorical norms of their national contexts. This flexibility allows apologies to resonate across distinct audiences while preserving their pragmatic function as acts of recognition and institutional accountability. Perhaps the most significant development is the emergence of forward-looking components that transform apologies into commitments for systemic reform. Vision statements, such as pledges to promote peace, and historical reflections that embed apologies within broader justice narratives, illustrate how apologies now participate in shaping a shared moral trajectory. As [Goffman \(1956\)](#) proposed, apologies not only acknowledge guilt but also offer rectification—this study finds that in modern politics, that rectification often takes the form of imagined futures and aspirational outcomes. In addition, Commitments to Education and Remembrance are becoming institutionalized within apology discourse. These include the establishment of memorials, public education initiatives, or curriculum reforms—acts that anchor the apology in ongoing public life. This shift aligns with [Jucker’s \(2019\)](#) and [Sun and Shen’s \(2018\)](#) argument that diachronic change in speech acts reflects evolving social norms and institutional roles. Political apologies thus move beyond symbolic gestures to serve as infrastructures for collective memory and historical accountability. Finally, the focus on reconciliation and sustained peace highlights the proactive and strategic nature of contemporary apologies. Unlike earlier apologies that aimed at immediate moral repair, today’s apologies often signal longer-term commitments to structural change and inclusion. [Jucker and Taavitsainen \(2008\)](#) note that earlier apologies emphasized penitence; now, they function as public pledges for justice and societal transformation. This shift reflects not only increased awareness of systemic injustice, but also rising public demands for ongoing accountability and policy-level change. These broader impacts and future-oriented dimensions reveal how political apologies have evolved into complex, culturally responsive, and forward-facing acts. They no longer merely repair past wrongs—they actively shape the conditions for future trust, reconciliation, and institutional legitimacy. These findings position

political apologies as dynamic tools in democratic societies—rituals of repair that are as much about collective futures as they are about past transgressions.

Conclusion

Political apologies are no longer confined to expressions of regret. As this study demonstrates, they now function as multifaceted acts that blend acknowledgment, explanation, emotional resonance, and forward-looking commitments. Analyzing diachronic shifts across two decades, this research highlights how political apologies have evolved to meet rising public expectations for transparency, accountability, and justice. By incorporating novel components such as Broader Harm Acknowledgment, Commemorative Apologies, and META (Reaffirmation), these apologies transcend interpersonal speech acts and become strategic instruments of reconciliation and reform. The findings reaffirm the enduring relevance of foundational elements such as Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), while also revealing the expansion of apology structures to accommodate increasingly complex social and political demands. These evolving forms support the idea that political apologies are adaptive performances—rituals that respond to the shifting moral landscapes of modern publics and institutions.

Despite the strengths of this analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. The dataset focused primarily on high-profile, publicly recorded apologies in English-speaking and Western contexts. While this enabled in-depth diachronic analysis, it may limit generalizability to less-represented cultures or non-institutional forms of apology. Additionally, the study's macro-level focus on diachronic trends may overlook subtle shifts during shorter political crises or transitional moments. These constraints underscore the need for future research that includes more culturally diverse, localized, or informal political apologies, as well as studies that examine how specific apology strategies perform in real-time media and diplomatic contexts.

Future research could build on this study in multiple ways through cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison, longitudinal studies of public reception and trust, or experimental analysis of audience responses to different apology formats. Such studies would help refine the framework presented here and deepen our understanding of how apologies function not just rhetorically, but also socially and politically. Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research also carries practical relevance for political communication professionals, policymakers, and institutional speechwriters. By identifying both conventional and emerging components of political apologies, this study offers a diagnostic and generative framework—

a tool for analyzing past statements and crafting future ones that are context-sensitive, culturally attuned, and strategically effective.

For those involved in reconciliation, transitional justice, or international diplomacy, the study's insights into apology structure and reception may inform how institutions navigate the delicate balance between acknowledging historical wrongs and projecting a commitment to inclusive governance. The growing importance of reaffirmation and future-oriented messaging suggests a new standard for political apology—one that not only addresses past failures but also signals an active investment in ethical leadership and long-term repair. Ultimately, political apologies serve as rituals of public accountability. They reflect and shape collective memory, institutional legitimacy, and societal values. As publics demand more transparency and moral clarity from their leaders, the role of apologies will likely continue to expand. This study provides a foundation for understanding that evolution—and for ensuring that future apologies resonate not just as rhetoric, but as meaningful acts of repair and commitment.

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