

## SPORTS AND POLITENESS: APOLOGIES AS A UNIVERSAL RITUAL

### Sport și politețe: Scuzele ca un ritual universal

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#### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to describe the meaning and function of apologies in sports. Observations have been made on the verbal and non-verbal behavior of athletes in tennis, table tennis, volleyball, billiards etc. On the basis of the analysis made, the universality and the ritual character of the apologies in certain situations, as well as their relation to the sport's etiquette, are postulated. Their specificity is also outlined in terms of the pragmatic determinants described by Renate Rathmayr: 'the person who caused some damage'; 'the injured person who has suffered harm'; 'the damage itself'.

**Keywords:** communication, politeness, speech act, apology, sports

#### Introduction

Analyzing sports games from a communicative perspective is maybe unusual, but not groundless, as every human interaction can be viewed through the prism of communication.

According to Renate Rathmayr, the typical code of manners is not valid for sports games. She argues that unlike other activities related to human interaction, in sports each contestant (team) strives for victory using the opponent's weaknesses, taking advantage of the situation, etc. Besides, in sports it is customary for the players not to take a possible loss as a personal affront, and the actions of the opponent as specifically directed against them.

On the other hand, it can be said that rivalry and competition are integral elements of many human activities. What makes them different from the ones we see in sports is the existence of strict rules, which regulate the acceptable and inadmissible actions in any sports challenge.

Like many other fields, sports games are also characterized by some acts of purely ritual nature. Among these is the lining of footballers as the national anthems are performed before international matches, the pre-game or post-game handshaking between the opponents in tennis, volleyball, box, snooker and other sports. The apologies (both verbal and nonverbal) used in specific situations also fall within the category of such ritualistic acts.

This article is an attempt to analyze sports-related apologies with the purpose to prove that despite the specificity of communication in sports, it also reveals some universal principles, mostly determined by etiquette-based behavior.

#### Types of apologies

Depending on the seriousness of the occasion Rathmayr divides the apologies into *conventional ones* and *apologies in essence* (the latter being used when significant real damages have been caused).

In sports games, although sometimes the inflicted damage may have grave consequences (heavy injury, loss of a crucial point or even losing the entire game) the offered apologies are most often of the conventional type.

### ***1. Apologies for non-penal foul***

Outside of sports, the unintended body contact is considered an invasion of personal space, which in most contemporary cultures is seen as violation of the social etiquette. In situations like these, the customary compensatory activity by the „offender” is to offer an apology.

In many sports (for instance football, basketball, handball, hockey, etc.) physical contacts are an integral part of the game. In basketball, for example, non-penal fouls are even intentionally committed to stop the opponent’s attack. That is why it is safe to say that not every physical contact between the players requires an apology. However, an apology is called for upon the making of a foul (usually unintentional), which has resulted in a significant physical „damage” of the opponent.

### ***2. Apologies for mistakes***

In Rathmayr’s classification of apologies, an important role is played by the so called *apologies for lack of attention and clumsiness*. The situations, in which such apologies are offered, are extremely diverse and cover all spheres of everyday communication. They are a standard speech strategy in the communication between relatives and friends, as well as between strangers (e.g. upon ignoring a customer in administrative services or commercial outlets, a spilt beverage on a customer or next-table guest in a restaurant, mistakenly taking someone else’s book in the library, etc.).

In collective sports, the individual play in a situation, where a teammate would expect a pass, or a far-off passing of the ball to a teammate can be likened to the above-described cases, as the reaction of the blameful player is most often an apology to the „affected” one.

### ***3. Apologies in the absence of guilt***

These are the only apologies, which don’t have analogy in the non-sporting world. In the above-cited study, Rathmayr argues that inflicting damage or disappointment to someone may become a cause for apology only „*due to the cognitive act of attribution of guilt*” (Rathmayr 2003:52). If the perpetrator does not feel guilt for the incident, he or she usually resorts to explanation, accusation (toward the affected or another person) or some other speech strategy.

Things are different in sports games such as tennis, table tennis and badminton, when a player wins a point with the help of the net. In this particular case he/she has no guilt for the damage sustained by the opponent. However, adhering to the rules of sports etiquette he/she offers an apology.

### **Apologies in sports games – culturally specific or universal?**

In linguistic pragmatics there is a deeply rooted notion that cultural differences determine the use of apology as a speech strategy. In American culture, for example, apologies for engaging the others with one’s personal issues are very common. To many Europeans (incl. Bulgarians and Romanians) such apologies sound quite strange, and for the Mediterranean cultures they are completely incomprehensible.

On the other hand, there are situations where the offering of apology does not depend on the cultural identity of communicants. This category includes, for instance, apologies for caused disturbance, for inflicted serious material or non-material damage, etc. These are defined as universal and their offering is motivated mostly by the individual qualities of the giver of apology and his/her assessment of the situation. The above described sports-related apologies can also be placed within the category of universal apologies. Regardless of the existence of undeniably important cultural differences between Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Romanians, Bulgarians, etc., apologies for non-penal fouls, for mistakes, as well as apologies in the absence of guilt are used on a regular basis during national and international games.

### Other characteristics of sports-related apologies

Unlike other speech acts (for instance, requests), which can be realized successfully (Searle, J., 1969), only in the presence of correctly defined social and/or situational asymmetry between the participants in communication, apologies are used with no limitations across the three basic types of social interaction: when the giver has a higher position in the hierarchy than the receiver ( $P_x > P_y$ ), when the giver stands below the receiver ( $P_x < P_y$ ) and when the two parties are socially and/or situational equal ( $P_x = P_y$ ).

This context determines the specifics of sports-related apologies. The interaction in sports games presupposes equality of opponents and teammates alike. This means they have identical situational roles (as players taking part in a game). Moreover, from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics, their interaction is characterized by clearly manifested role symmetry ( $P_x = P_y$ ). Therefore, all speech acts during the game, incl. apologies, are expressions directed to a receiver having the same situational role as the giver.

Another distinctive feature of sports-related apologies is that they are always *retrospective*, or *apologies post factum*. This means they are offered after the performance of the action that has triggered the apology, and not prior to it, as is the case with the so called *preemptive apologies* (for example: *We apologize in advance for the inconvenience that the incoming repair works may cause you!*).

### Linguistic and nonverbal expression of apology

One of the most important issues concerning apologies is their linguistic expression. All languages feature different conventional formulas, which the damage perpetrator may use to apologize to the affected person (for example, *Excuse me, Sorry, My apologies, Pardon me for...* in English; *Excuse-moi / Excusez-moi, Pardonne-moi / Pardonnez-moi* in French; *Scuze / Scuzați, Iartă-mă / Iertați-mă, Regret* in Romanian; *Izvinyavay / Izvinyavayte, Proshtavay / Proshtavayte, Sazhalyavam* in Bulgarian). These can be supplemented by various modal extensions (intensifiers), which increase the illocutionary force of the speech act, i.e. reinforce the apology (for instance, *I'm very sorry, I'm deeply sorry, I'm terribly sorry*, etc.).

Apart from the explicit apologies, another type can also be used depending on the relations between the interlocutors and the cause of apology, namely the indirect (collateral) apologies, which may involve the admission of responsibility and/or guilt, the expression of negative self evaluation, a proposal for compensation of the inflicted damage, a reassurance that the speaker hasn't had bad intentions, etc.

The diversity of formulas expressing apology is substantially reduced when it comes to sports. The use of short phrases is predominant in such cases, and these are uttered immediately after the occurrence of the respective cause for apology. In English such phrases are: *Sorry; It's my fault*; in French: *Pardon; Désolé(e)*; in Romanian: *Scuze, nu am vrut; (Este) vina mea; Îmi pare rău*; in Bulgarian: *Izvinyavay; Moya greshka, Sorry*. If a foul is committed, the apology can be accompanied by holding out a hand to the „affected” opponent. In case of a damage, for which the benefiting player has no fault whatsoever (e.g. in tennis), his/her apology is usually nonverbal (raising a hand).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the apologies in sports are a universal speech strategy, used after the infliction of damages to an opponent or a teammate in specific situations. There are both similarities and important differences between the apologies in everyday life and the sports-related apologies. The latter are usually conventional and are offered in the pragmatic framework of situational equality between the participants in the speech interaction. It should also be noted that they are always retrospective. Their offering involves the use of a small number of formulaic expressions, which are the most important element and basic precondition for the successful realization of the speech act of apology.

**References**

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