

# **A HISTORICAL PRAGMATIC STUDY OF APOLOGIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE ESSEX PAUPER LETTERS (1731–1837)**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, the realizations of apologies as evidenced in the Essex pauper letters of 19<sup>th</sup> century England are explored. The paper takes a critical look at the forms and functions of apologies, arguing that apologies in such texts are conventionalized in form. Taking into consideration the social norms of writing specific to this speech community, the study makes a distinction between two main functions of apologies and argues that apologies under scrutiny are not a politeness device that repairs and redresses an offence; rather, they exemplify a politic behavior that helps in the negotiation of interpersonal relationships and the attainment of the writers' discursive goal.*

## **Introduction**

Over the past three decades or so, pragmatics have sought to explore, elaborate, and compare and contrast the differences in apologies across cultures, as produced by both native and non-native speakers (see, for example, Bergman and Kasper 1993; Blum-Kulka, House, and

Kasper 1989; Olshtain and Blum-Kulka 1985; Reiter 2000; Trosborg 1987). These studies have shown that what counts as an apology, how it is realized and when it is called for vary in different speech communities. Furthermore, much of the research on apologies has been influenced by Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Holmes (1998: 217), for example, clearly links the function of apologies to politeness, contending that "the apology is quintessentially a politeness strategy."

While studies on this type of speech act abound, they are all synchronic, and to date, there has been only one historical pragmatic study of apologies (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2008), aiming to compare the realizations of apologies in two different periods of English, namely, Early Modern and Present-day English. It is argued that a diachronic analysis of speech acts may be viewed as a contrastive analysis which investigates two or more stages of the same language, instead of two or more languages or cultures. While the aim of this paper is not to contrast different periods of English, it nevertheless pursues the line of research on apologies in the history of the English language further by examining the ways in which interlocutors in late eighteenth to early nineteenth-century England realized apologies and deployed them to achieve their communicative goal, asking such questions as "How did the members in this particular speech community use language to express apologies?", "What forms did apologies take?", and "What pragmatic functions did the apologies serve in the context under investigation?"

To such end, the present study has chosen a group of the Essex pauper letters (1731–1837), preserved in Sokoll (2006), as the

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source of data. The pauper letters are an excellent source for a historical study of apologies. For one reason, they preserve authentic language used by a particular group of people who shared more or less similar communicative goals and context, thereby allowing access to spoken language of the past (see further discussion of the socio-historical background of the Essex pauper letters in Section 3). Drawing upon a corpus of seven hundred and fifty-eight letters to answer the above questions, this article finds that apologies show a fairly small inventory of syntactic forms, and those forms are highly conventionalized and embedded within a larger syntactic unit. In the context under investigation, the writers apologized for two primary reasons: to repair an offence for which the writers take responsibility, and to show politic behavior in observance of genre-specific norms of writing. Although such a claim about the historical use of apologies is brought to bear only in the context of the Essex pauper letters, this pilot study certainly contributes to future historical study of apologies or of other types of speech acts and, thus, can be used as a basis for further research and a larger study.

This article is organized as follows. In Section 2, I provide a detailed discussion of apologies, as doing so will help ensure that a present-day theoretical framework on apologies can be applied to historical data—a problem known as the *tertium comparationis* (Krazeszowski 1984 and 1989, as cited in Jucker and Taavitsainen 2008: 229). In Section 3, I discuss relevant socio-historical background of my corpus and proceed to explain my methodology in Section 4. In Section 5 and Section 6, I examine, respectively, the forms in which apologies are realized and the pragmatic functions that these apologies serve in the texts, paying particular attention to the

relationships between the interlocutors and their communicative goal.

### Apology: A speech act

An apology is issued to acquit oneself of a wrongdoing and as a plea for forgiveness. The main function of an apology is to support the hearer who is eventually adversely affected by a violation (Olshtain 1989: 156). In rendering an apology, the speaker is willing to humble himself or herself and to concede the mistake and responsibility, aiming to restore a harmonious relationship with the interlocutor.

In their diachronic analysis of apologies, Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008) draw upon the criteria provided by Deutschmann (2003) and Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) to identify apologies. Such criteria will be critically discussed, reviewed, and expanded on below. According to Deutschmann (2003: 44–47), an apology includes the following components:

- an “offender”, who takes responsibility for some offence or who feels directly or indirectly responsible for something,
- an “offended”, who is affected, potentially affected or just perceived to be affected by the offence,
- an “offence”, which may be real, potential or only perceived as an offence, and
- a “remedy”, which is “a recognition of the offence, acceptance of responsibility and a display of regret.”

According to Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008: 230), cross-culturally (or even within a culture), speakers may differ with respect to any of the above components. For example, what is perceived as an offence by the speaker may vary: some

speakers render apologies because they feel directly or indirectly responsible for a particular act although they have not committed such an act. Tannen (1995) reports on women's frequent use of apologies, arguing that for women, apologizing with "I am sorry" means more than regret for a past event, as it is also part of a ritualized means of expressing concern, while for men, doing so is seen as putting the speaker in a one-down position.<sup>2</sup>

Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 290), on the other hand, give a comprehensive list of strategies consisting of a potential range of strategies that constitute an apology. These strategies can be used one at a time or in combination:

- Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) (i.e. routinized, explicit expression of an apology),
- Taking on responsibility (i.e. expressing responsibility for the offence which creates the need to apologize, such as explicit self-blame, lack of intent, justification, etc.),
- Explanation or account (i.e. covering any external mitigating circumstances offered by the speaker)
- Offer of repair (i.e. offering a way to repair the offence)
- Promise of forbearance (i.e. offering a promise that the offensive act will not happen again)

The first two of these are general and explicit ways of apologizing, while the other three are situation-specific and will reflect the content of the situation. Vollmer

and Olshtain (1989: 198) comment that either of the first two, or both, are likely, though not always, to occur in almost any kind of apology situation, while the others, which can be used in lieu of the main ones, are much more situation-dependent. Furthermore, these strategies are subject to being modified by several means of linguistic expressions that either emphasize or soften the violation of the offence (Vollmer and Olshtain 1989: 199), such as downtoners ("possibly", "perhaps"), hedges ("kind of/sort of", "somehow"), mental state predicates ("I suppose", "I think") or intensifiers ("I'm terribly sorry"). The strategies above can be seen in operation in the following example (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989: 290):

- 1) I'm sorry (IFID), I missed the bus (RESPONSIBILITY), and there was a terrible traffic jam (EXPLANATION). Let's make another appointment (REPAIR). I'll make sure that I'm here on time (FORBEARANCE).

What can be observed from the above example is that each strategy, when used in isolation, is a speech act in its own right, but when used together in a particular context, is comprised of a combination of individual speech acts that together constitute a speech act of apology. Murphy and Neu (1996) term this combination "a speech act set", which itself can be embedded in a larger unit, known as a "speech event".<sup>3</sup> Although differing in specific terminology used, Cohen and Olshtain (1981) also argue along the same

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<sup>2</sup> See also Holmes (1989), who also finds gender differences in the use of apologies as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I use the concept of a speech event to refer to a larger unit, which can consist of several speech act sets (Hatch 1992).

lines that an apology should be viewed as a speech act set.

While the above suggestions are useful in identifying apologies, several difficulties present themselves in historical speech acts. Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000: 69–70) acknowledge, for example, that what counts as a particular speech act function may have changed through time, and that speech acts are vague or ambiguous as to what their illocutionary forces are. In the case of apologies, for example, it is possible to use “sorry” merely as an expression of regret, as in “I am sorry that you have been ill”, without implying any sense of personal responsibility. One way to solve such problems, according to Kohnen (2000: 238), is to “base our analysis on a deliberate selection of typical patterns which we trace by way of a representative analysis throughout the history of English”. This approach has been taken by Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008), who identify apologies mainly through their routinized forms or IFIDs.

In this paper, I adopt such a method and use these forms as the main search keys for my corpus investigation of apologies in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England, while at the same time, I also consider the illocutionary force behind each instance of apology as well (which admittedly may be subject to interpretative subjectivity, but this will be acknowledged as such). Relying on IFIDs has two advantages: an IFID represents what Taavitsainen and Jucker (2007: 112–113) call the “performative use” of speech act verbs, i.e. “direct evidence of the speech acts in their prototypical form”, and because, as discussed above, it is very likely to occur in almost every kind of apology situation

as well.<sup>4</sup> Typically, these direct apologies are those forms that include sorry-based units or some form of “apologize” as a performative verb. Although it is possible that “many speech acts, perhaps most, are not realised with an explicit speech act verb” (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2007: 110), I believe that the inventory of apologies in my corpus are sufficient and can offer insight into how apologies function in the texts. In the following section, I proceed to provide relevant socio-historical background of my corpus.

### **Socio-historical background: The Essex pauper letters**

In studying language use of the past, a researcher is bound to face “the bad data problem” (Labov 1994), which refers to the fact that historical linguists have to rely on written evidence, as they do not have direct access to real speech data. What this means for a study of speech acts is that there are no informants who can provide information about apologies or can answer a questionnaire on the use of apologies.

However, research studies in the last decade or so (for example, Biber and Finegan 1992; Hope 1993; Kryk-Kastovsky 2000; Moore 2002) have shown that such a problem can be overcome, for there are data that serve as a better class of data, namely, those types of data that are speech-based, such as court records, dialogues in plays, church sermons, and personal letters. Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008), for example, rely on the Renaissance fiction and drama sections of *LION*, the Chadwyck Healey on-line

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<sup>4</sup> This concept of a speech act set is widely applied in other speech acts as well. See, for example, Chen (1996) on refusals and Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) on complaints.

Corpus (1500–1660), to collect instances of apology. Although not instances of real speech, these examples provide representations that are closer to real speech than other forms of written language.

In this paper, I use a different type of data for my examination of apologies in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century England. The pauper letters are products of the Poor Law system in England, which, functioning much like the social security system in the USA today, was a system and method that dealt with and provided relief to the poor in England. These letters were used as a means of communication between poor people who lived and located outside of their original parishes (i.e. local units of government) and the overseers in the original parishes. The poor wrote these letters to request financial assistance as allowed by the Poor Law, and “apart from a few exceptions, pauper letters were always sent from elsewhere” (Sokoll 2006: 11). The pauper letters, thus, documented requests for assistance made by the poor “often under conditions of extreme necessity, privation and despair” (Sokoll 2006: 4).

The pauper letters were important for historical pragmatics and sociolinguists because of their proximity to speech and their unadulterated content. Their speech-related property is due to the fact that when the writers, who, belonging to the lowest strata of the society, put their own words in writing (if they could do it at all), their writing would take the shape of what otherwise they would have said in words, as Sokoll (2006: 5) puts it: “For once, therefore, the labouring poor were in a position where they could justifiably write just as they spoke.” The letters, thus, “represent oral pieces of writing, produced by people who were quite obviously acting along the boundaries between the spoken

and the written word” (Sokoll 2006: 7). However, at the same time, there may be similar patterns, especially in terms of rhetorical moves, that can be observed amongst these letters, as it is possible that a writer may have written his or her letter based on a model letter, or that people were familiar with this specific genre of writing.

Furthermore, in comparison to court records, the pauper letters were unadulterated data, thus forming a better class of “bad data” for at least two reasons. First, these letters were not edited: the morphological endings or the address formulae were in the same forms as they were written in. Second, they were not “second-hand” data in the sense that they were linguistic products of the poor themselves, unlike court records in Early Modern England, which were almost always written by professional scribes or someone from a higher socio-economic class and background who was literate and employed to do the work. Thus, although we had court records where the speech of lower-class people was said to be preserved, those records were at best made by the hands of others, and not the poor’s, let alone the faithfulness of such data. Even though certain poor people applying for aid did not know how to write and even though a letter may exhibit more than one hand of writing, they were likely to seek help in writing the letter from people of the same social standing, as they could not afford to hire a professional scribe to write the letter for them. Still, the letters were linguistic products of the poor.

While these letters, as explained above, are valuable for our study, we have to bear in mind some important issues. To begin with, since the main purpose for the composition of a pauper letter is to request financial aid, each letter bears a request, which itself is a different type of speech

act from apologies. However, this should not affect our examination of apologies in these letters for at least two reasons. First, the speech act set of apology can be further embedded within a larger speech unit (i.e. speech event), and such a unit can be a request. Second, although differing in illocutionary force, requests and apologies can be related and can share the same semantic formulae. Coulmas (1981) reports, in his typological examination of apologies and thanking, that the common link between the two is indebtedness; that is, expressions of thanks convey a speaker's indebtedness as a recipient of a benefit whereas apologies express the speaker's indebtedness to his or her interlocutor for having performed an action detrimental to the hearer. This close relationship between apologies and thanks has also been observed in Japanese, where the expression "sumimasen" is used for expressing thanks and apologies (Ide 1998; Kotani 2002). Thus, in our case, we can scrutinize the speech act of apology as manifested in the pauper letters in its own right, as long as we bear in mind the nature of this genre of writing and the ways in which it may interact with apologies. The second caveat is that I do not claim that these pauper letters provide us with an exhaustive set of forms and functions of apology expressions in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, as apologies lodged within the speech event of request may be relatively limited. Nonetheless, they offer us a fairly substantial set of apology expressions in this period and show us how apologies function within a larger speech event. Thus, like other studies of this incipient nature, this study should be taken as a preliminary study on apologies from a historical perspective.

## Methodology

For this study, I manually analyze a corpus of 758 pauper letters, as presented in Sokoll (2006). This edition provides a strictly diplomatic transcription, without any correction or standardization, as it intends to reproduce the original. Since an electronic corpus of these letters is not yet available (see, however, Laitinen (2003), who is currently compiling such a corpus), my approach represents a text-driven methodology. In other words, I go through the corpus "hunting" for expressions relating to apologies. I adopt the criteria suggested by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 290) discussed earlier, paying special attention to the occurrences of "excuse", "pardon", "I beg your pardon", "I am sorry", "forgive", and their variants. These expressions, Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008: 233) argue, represent a substantial set of lexical elements that function as apologies in earlier periods of English. Finally, I examine the structure of apology expressions and discuss their pragmatic functions as well as their use in negotiations of interpersonal relations. The findings are discussed in the following sections.

## Forms of apologies in the pauper letters

In my corpus, apologies are found to occur in isolation; that is, there are no instances of detached apologies, consisting of only the IFID (Deutschmann 2003). However, some instances can be argued to be more detached than others:

- 2) Gentlemen pardon the Liberty we  
take in Writing to you so Often but

Necessity obliges Us to do so from the grate distress we are...(231/191)<sup>5</sup>

- 3) Forgive me the Liberty, Sir, I have taken of writing...(391/419)

In these two examples, “pardon” and “forgive me” are not fully detached because they are followed by nominal complements, but they are the closest to being detached apologies and resemble real speech data, as they are commands. Notice also that each instance occurs with a term of address, “gentlemen” and “sir”, as if the writers were speaking with the addressee.

Most of the apologies, however, are embedded in an expanded group of sentences, with the following pattern: “I am sorry” followed by an infinitive:

- 4) I am Sorry to inform you that I am at this time in grate distress Owing to a bad state of health for above 4 months and my daughter is still worse being afflicted with fitts... (96/7)
- 5) I am Sorry To write this but I am Forst Sir I have done my best Endeavor to gett my Brother a plase but Trade is so Dull that I am sorry to <say> that I cannot gett him one...(109/22)
- 6) Sir I am Soray to put you to thes truble but I reseved a letter from the Jantlmen and the told me hat the could not alou me anay thing for my boay...(524/600)
- 7) Sir I am sorry to say I have got a very bad breast it has been coming nearly this three years and I am Nothing else to expect but what it

is a cancer and I am not been able to do anything for a month and I hope the Gentlemen will consider my affliction and send me a little money...(243/210)

While the apologetic expression “I am sorry” is identical in form, as each is followed by an infinitive in examples 4) to 7), semantic differences exist. In 4), the writer apologized for informing the recipient of a potentially troublesome piece of news, in 5) for writing the letter, and in 6) for bringing trouble to the recipient. Examples 4) and 7) are interesting in that while it was possible that the writer only expressed regret without implying any sense of personal responsibility, it is more likely that the writer apologized for being burdensome and for their need of assistance, due to illness and other family problems. In this sense, these instances can be considered apologies.

The same expression can also be followed by a *that* clause:

- 8) I am sorry I have To wright to you the Second time...(177/108)
- 9) I am sorry that my particular distress forces me to trouble you for relief as I am very ill and not able to do any work for this long time...(273/257)
- 10) I am very Sorry that I have to trouble you for assistance But I Cannot Do without any longer for I am Not abel to Do any thing at Present and I have No money... (167/96)

In examples 8) to 10), the expression “I am sorry” is followed by a complement clause. Considering the complement clauses in 8) and in 10), it can be seen that the writers blamed themselves in their

<sup>5</sup> All examples of apologies from the pauper letters are taken from Sokoll (2006) and will be referred to by the page number and the number of the letter. For example, 96/7 represents page 96, letter no. 7.

apologies, while in 9) the writer shifted the blame to “my particular distress”. In doing so, the writer in 9) strategically exploited “my particular distress” to his or her advantage to linguistically disassociate himself or herself from the imposition.

The writers can also use more embedded forms of apologies:

- 11) I hope you will excuse my freedom and parding my Liberty I Take in wrighting to you As want and Necessity Forsess me So to Do... (238/202)
- 12) Your goodness I Hope, will Excuse my writeing to you...(391/419)
- 13) You will Excuse me in writeing to you, you are not a Stranger to my Application...(395/423)
- 14) I have to beg your Excuse, for again troubling you, with a few Lines...(394/422)

In 11), the apology is prefaced by the interpersonal plea: “I hope”, and it is interesting that the writer uses the second person pronoun “you” and the modal “will.” This can be regarded as an attempt to pre-empt the possibility that the addressee will be offended by the freedom the writer took in writing the letter, while in 12), the interpersonal plea is a parenthetical verb (Urmson 1952), and here the writer cast as the subject “your goodness”, which again can be seen as a pre-emptive strategy. Because the addressee had the goodness, he would excuse the writing. In the same fashion, 13) also demonstrates this pre-emptive attempt, albeit without the interpersonal plea and is more direct in that the writer apologized for writing. Example 14) is different in that the writer used the semi-modal “have to” and the speech act of apology is a

complement of the verb “beg”. In this case, “excuse” is realized as a nominal.

Other apology expressions include the verb “regret” and the impersonal construction “it is with regret/sorrow that...”, as in the following examples:

- 15) I regret I was not at home when you Called had I been at home I would have taken you to my Marsters... (140/64)
- 16) It is with severe regret that I must now address you on a subject– the most galling and distressing to my feelings...(196/137)
- 17) It is with great grief and sincere regret–that I am again obliged to apply to you for pecuniary aid ... (206/154)

In 15), the speaker apologized through the verb “regret”, while in 16) and 17) he did so through the nominal form. In all these cases, the responsibility was realized in a complement clause.

While examples 2) to 17) show that the writers expressed apologies for different reasons, depending on what they perceived to be the cause of offence, these apologies unite in their rhetorical move: the writers acknowledged responsibility in their invasion of the addressees’ freedom or privacy in one way or another. Thus, these instances can be argued to represent true apologies, not only declarative statements of the writers’ state of the mind.

Having identified and examined the patterns of apology expressions in isolation, let us now move on to show how the IFIDs interact with other speech acts that comprise the speech act set of apology in the pauper letters by way of examples:



<p>Gentlemen,</p> <p>I am sorry to be under the necessity of troubling you again, but I can get no sort of employment, and am destitute of necessities. – During the Haytime and Harvest I have been employed by Mr. Lee, a Gentlemn in this parish, who has no more for me to do now. I have walked all round this part and cannot get a Job. The fact is, there are so many poor who belong to the parishes, that those who do not can get no work; There is an opening here now, which if I had a trifle to begin with, I think I could maintain myself and family, at least thro' the winter, and then I hope I should not have to trouble you again, It is by buying and selling small wares such as Skins &amp;c Oysters Henings &amp;c as it is a considerable neighbourhood; If I can get nothing, I must with my wife and children come home. Gentlemen I wait your answer, and am</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Your obedient, humble servant, Abraham Stuck (135/56)</p>	<p>Salutation/ Address term</p> <p>IFID RESPONSIBILITY</p> <p>EXPLANATION</p> <p>PREPARATOR FOR REQUEST REQUEST</p> <p>FORBEARANCE EXPLANATION</p> <p>CONDITION</p> <p>REQUEST</p> <p>SUBSCRIPTION</p>
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After formally addressing the recipient, the writer started off with a speech act of apology, which is typical in most of the pauper letters. In this case, the writer apologized for having to bother the addressee. The reason for so doing was unemployment. The writer then went on at length to explain the job market situation and smoothly transitioned into the request with the use of a preparatory. Having politely requested “a trifle” of money, the writer promised that he would not need to bother the addressee once again, an offence for which he apologized in the beginning.

The letter then proceeds to support the forbearance with his future plan before ending on a strong note that pre-empted the denial of request.

While the above letter is typical in that the writer often rendered an apology only once in the beginning for the inconvenience that his or her writing might cause, other writers might apologize several times during the course of writing, as in the following example;

19)

<p>Sir</p> <p>Your goodness I Hope, will Excuse my writeing to you, I am Sorry to trouble you, or to be under the Necessity, to make any Application for relief, I know you are not in Office, but if you can Consistantly speak for me, it will proberbly be of some service to me, &amp; my family, your past kindness, I thank you for, and as my friend, I am induced to write to you.</p> <p>I wrote to Mr Carr, some short time back, stateing to him, my Uncomfortable situation, the Ill state of health of my Wife, since the first three weeks, of coming to Chelmsford, and the continued Ill state of my Daughter...I find I am totally unable to support, and what to do I know not...let me Intreat with all humbleness if Possible, something to be done for us...</p> <p>Forgive me the Liberty, Sir, I have taken of writeing I humbly pray for some advice to be given, to releave our minds...</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sir, Your Humble Servt W James</p> <p style="text-align: center;">...</p> <p>I am aware I should pay the Postage, you will Excuse it, as I really have not six pence to pay it with</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(391/419)</p>	<p>Salutation</p> <p>Apology Apology Responsibility Request</p> <p>Explanation</p> <p>Request</p> <p>Apology Responsibility, Request</p> <p>Subscription</p> <p>Responsibility, Request Explanation</p>
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In this letter, although we do not see such strategies as forbearance or repair, we see several instances of IFIDs. The first three (i.e. "excuse my writeing", "I am Sorry", and "Forgive me") were arguably rendered for a similar purpose, namely, to apologize for writing the letter. The last instance ("you will Excuse it"), however, was given for a different purpose, in which case the writer apologized for not having

paid the postage. It is interesting to note that the responsibility was realized through a direct acknowledgement of the guilt and an obligation "I am aware I should pay the Postage." In doing so, he attempted to establish common ground with the addressee, conveying to him or her that he would have paid the postage if it had not been for his lack of means.

From the examples shown above, it can be seen how apologies and other strategies that comprise the speech act set are embedded and function together with other speech acts such as requests. It seems that for at least a large group of writers, apologies are an integral part of successful request letters. Instead of straightforwardly requesting financial assistance, the writers felt the need to include apology expressions in their letters. This will be explained further in the following section, where the pragmatic functions that these apology expressions served are discussed.

### **Functions of apologies in the pauper letters: Politic and polite behavior**

In examining the functions of apologies in the pauper letters, Holmes (1995: 155) is a useful point of departure. She argues that “an apology is a polite speech act used to restore social relations following an offence. Apologies therefore redress face-threatening behaviour, and they acknowledge the need of the addressee not to be imposed upon or offended.” Thus, for Holmes, apologies are a politeness strategy for avoiding conflict, and they function to maintain the fabric of interpersonal relations.

Holmes’ premises are rooted in Brown and Levinson’s theory of linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). In their framework, it is assumed that all individuals have “face”, or social self-image, that any speech act is potentially face threatening, and that speakers employ linguistic strategies in order to avoid or limit the effects of such threats. In other words, linguistic interaction is always potentially face threatening, and polite behavior is primarily a way of avoiding

any conflicts that result from linguistic interactions.

However, in the case of the pauper letters, while some of the apologies function as repairs (see example 19) above, where the writer apologized for not having paid the postage fee), I argue that most apologies do not function as repairs by which social relations are maintained through the redressing of an offence, and thereby do not represent a polite speech act. Adopting Watts (1992) proposal, I argue that these apologies should be regarded as politic, rather than polite linguistic behavior, as they were expected and anticipated in this communicative context, and as a result, the writers, having been aware of such an expectation, felt the need to render apologies.

According to Watts (1992: 50), politic speech refers to the norm of language use in a particular situation, for such behavior is unmarked.<sup>6</sup> Polite speech, on the other hand, is that which is in excess of this politic speech that contributes to “an enhancement of *ego*’s standing with respect to *alter*.” Thus, politeness, in Watts’s framework, is always (positively) marked as it goes beyond the expectations of the encounter, and at the same time it is also relative, as “what counts as polite behaviour depends entirely on those features of the interaction which are socially marked by the speech community as being more than merely politic” (Watts 1992: 50).

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<sup>6</sup> Watts (1992: 50) defines politic speech as “socio-culturally determined behavior directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group, whether open or closed, during the ongoing process of verbal interaction.”

Although Watts's notion of politeness is different from Brown and Levinson's, it is not incompatible with the notion of face or with the notion that politeness is strategic. In the words of Locher and Watts (2005: 10):

Brown and Levinson's framework can still be used, however, if we look at the strategies they have proposed to be possible realizations of what we call relational work.

Here, Locher and Watts see politeness as merely a part of relational work—the work that individuals invest in negotiating interpersonal relationships with others as they pursue their goals. Therefore, it can be said that relational work, which encompasses not only politeness but also other aspects of social interaction such as (in)direct, (im)polite, or (in)appropriate behavior, is a broader view of face work and is more suitable for explaining social interaction.

Unfortunately, Watts (1992) does not give specific criteria for use in classifying which linguistic behavior is politic and which is polite, but this absence of criteria is to be naturally expected, as these concepts are situation-sensitive (see, for example, Pan 2000) and perceptions of these concepts vary across native speakers of a language, who more or less share certain thresholds of appropriateness as dictated by social norms (Eelen 2001). Moreover, it should be noted that for Watts, polite behavior is one species of politic behavior or, at the very least, overlaps with it. Thus, in this way, one and the same linguistic behavior may be politic or polite, relative to some kind of situation-specific social norms. These norms are essentially expectations about what a speaker should show he thinks of

others or about what he should show he thinks of himself in relation to others. If one behaves according to such norms, his behavior will be unmarked and politic behavior will arise, but if his behavior is in excess of such norms, his behavior will be marked and will be considered polite. For example, if in a given situation, such as in a conversation between a child and a mother, there is the expectation (or anticipation based on the part of the interlocutor) that the child will always say “please” and “thank you”, then these speech acts should be considered politic, rather than polite. On the other hand, if there is no such expectation, then both speech acts would be considered polite.

Based on Watts's distinction between politic and polite behavior discussed above, let us consider in detail why apologies under scrutiny should be considered politic, rather than polite. I begin with the following examples:

- 20) I beg pardon for the Libberty I  
have takin In wrighten to you but  
As my moaney Is stopt this Last  
Week I feale very much hurt as my  
Famileay Is very Large and my  
husbands Irnasings are so small  
that I find It hard to git my children  
brad a lone...(529/606)
- 21) I am sorry, and it is painfull to me,  
to trouble you again, you will  
pardon me for so doing—it is  
pressing Necessity, Compels me to  
state, that I have made every  
possible Effort, in my power, to  
procure a maintainance, and  
support... (417/454)

In 20), the writer apologized for taking the opportunity to write to the addressee, while in 21), the writer did so for having to trouble the addressee. Both of these are

apologies, for they have explicit IFIDs and declarations of responsibility. However, the apologies are not repairs for politeness for two reasons. As to the first, we have to bear in mind that, as explained earlier in the socio-historical background section, under the Poor Law, all parishes in England were statutorily required to relieve their poor, and thus it was the duty of the overseers to take care of the poor as they were taking advantage of the right to relief. It was not, arguably, their fault to ask for relief by means of letters, and the addressers were there to facilitate the process.

Second, although a detailed quantitative analysis is not possible at this point without a computerized corpus, a claim can still be made, based on my observation, that apologies in the letters occur with such sufficient regularity that they can be said to be a norm of writing in this, for lack of a better term, speech community. It is also interesting to note that this pattern remains the same across the period. Such a pattern can be seen not only in their forms (see the above section regarding the forms of apology expressions) but also their prevalence. Sokoll (2006: 59) points out that there is “the frequent use in the pauper letters of rhetorical devices, particularly in the opening gambits, which are replete with rather conventional apologetic phrases”. Sokoll (2006: 57–58) traces the pattern of the pauper letters back to the Classical model of petition writing, in which the writer begins first by greeting the recipient (*salutatio*), and by appealing to his or her goodwill (*captatio benevolentiae*). Then, he or she turns to an account of a particular case (*narratio*), moves to a specific request (*petitio*), and finally brings the letter to a close by polite subscriptions (*conclusio*). Although it was

unlikely that the pauper writers were formally exposed to Classical rhetoric or to any manuals aimed to teach the art of letter writing, “people reproduced that model even if the ordinary letter writer would not normally have been aware of it” (Sokoll 2006: 57). If so, it can be said that apologies were something that was expected by language users in this speech community.

These conventional apologies, furthermore, reflect the writers’ and the addressees’, to use term, *habitus*, or shared value system, defined in Bourdieu (1990: 53):

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adopted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

Certainly, Bourdieu’s dispositions include linguistic dispositions such as writing norms and conventions (be it words or grammatical constructions), and such knowledge is tacit and not something one has rational control over, as *habitus* is acquired by means of experience and socialization within other members in a speech community. Owing to the reasons above, therefore, the majority of apologies found in the pauper letters did not function to repair any particular offence and were unmarked expressions (almost to the extent of being formulaic) that became one of the writing conventions for this

particular group of writers and addressees, thereby passing unnoticed when used.<sup>7</sup>

As a form of politic linguistic behavior, apologies in the pauper letters, which exhibit the writers' attempt to follow a linguistic norm, function as a strategy that the writers deployed to construct themselves as concerned individuals who was responsible for the potential inconvenience that the act of writing or the message might cause, and to express regret even though it is, arguably, not directly the writers' fault. In other words, these apologies are instruments for their negotiation of financial assistance. The norm was followed not only because it was customary for people in the period to do so as Sokoll (2006) suggests, but also because the adoption of such a norm shows that the writers attempted to achieve a perlocutionary effect; in this case, the writers hoped that by adhering to the accepted norm, they would likely increase the chance of achieving the discursive goal (i.e. the granting of the request).

Conversely, if the norm was violated, writers would face the risk of putting themselves, along with their request, in an unfavorable position, for the absence of an apologetic expression would attract attention and be perceived as a (negatively) marked behavior in this speech community. For those letters that did not begin with an explicit apology (i.e. routinized IFID), the writers acknowledged

invasion of the addressee's freedom or privacy in one way or another, thus not violating the norm:

22) I hope you will not offended  
at my troubling you  
concerning an affair that I wish  
very much to have settled  
(258/233)

23) I have made free to Trouble  
you and the Rest of the  
Gentlemen With a few Lines  
to Inform you that I am Not in  
Constent Employe...(267/247)

24) I am very Unpleasantly, and  
totally contrary to my  
Inclination, under the necessity  
of writeing again...(459/511)

In examples 22) to 24) above, despite the absence of apology expressions, the writers did not push their request over to the negatively marked category; on the contrary, they still show politic behavior in writing, and these declarative sentences function in the same way as apologies would otherwise do in this context.

To sum up this section, I have considered possible functions of apologies as used in the pauper letters. While some apologies are truly repairs intended to redress an offence, thus serving to express politeness, most apologies demonstrate the writers' politic behavior in following the norm of writing. In this way, these apologies emerge as one of the safest bets the writers could use to attain their discursive goal of writing.

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<sup>7</sup> This does not imply that polite apologies would have other forms that differ from the writing norms. But, it is that in this speech community, apologies were regarded as one of the writing norms, thus a politic speech act. In other words, language users in this community were (tacitly) aware of what apologies were conventionally used for.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to explore both the forms and functions of the speech act of apology in an earlier period, and in doing so, have exhibited that apologies, as manifested in the pauper letters, consist mostly of routinized and formulaic expressions identifiable through IFIDs such as “I am sorry” or “It is with regret that...”. As to their functions, I have suggested that in the context under investigation, most apologies are not polite expressions intended as repairs in the way Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness suggests. More likely, the function of apologies comes to light only when distinctions are made between politic and polite behavior, as suggested by Watts’s model of politeness. Under this view, conventional apologies are best viewed as a politic behavior that, when adopted, turns out to be a strategy that the writers used in negotiating and constructing a smooth, harmonious interpersonal relationship with their interlocutors.

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