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Public Apologies and Relationship Maintenance Practices in a Francophone Online Community

Bernard Mulo Farenkia[1]

[1] Cape Breton University, Canada
Email: bernard_farenkia@cbu.ca

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Abstract

This article examines public apologies produced in digitally mediated public spaces within a Francophone African online community. Drawing on a corpus of 51 apologies issued by actors from the media, political, religious, sports, and corporate spheres, the study investigates how speakers negotiate accountability, repair damaged identities, and restore social legitimacy following public transgressions. Grounded in postcolonial pragmatics, the analysis combines insights from speech-act theory, face and politeness theories, and image repair theory to explore the strategies through which apologizers express regret, assume or mitigate responsibility, justify their actions, and seek reconciliation. The findings reveal that public apologies are complex socio-pragmatic performances shaped by local cultural norms, communal values, religious beliefs, and the affordances of digital communication. Beyond conventional apology strategies, apologizers frequently mobilize rapport-building resources such as invoking family solidarity, expressing empathy and respect, and religious discourse to foster trust and social cohesion. The study contributes to research on public apologies, digital discourse, and postcolonial pragmatics by highlighting the culturally situated nature of accountability, reputation management, and relationship repair in Francophone African online communities.

Keywords: Public Apologies, Postcolonial Pragmatics, Digital Discourse, Accountability, Image Repair, Francophone Africa

Introduction

Apologies are a universal means of addressing transgressions, restoring social harmony, and managing interpersonal relations. In the public sphere, however, apologies extend beyond interpersonal repair to become strategic acts of accountability, reputation management, and image restoration. Public figures and institutions use apologies not only to acknowledge wrongdoing and express regret but also to negotiate responsibility, regain legitimacy, and secure public acceptance. In contemporary digital environments, where public statements are rapidly disseminated, scrutinized, and contested, apologetic discourse

has become a particularly recurrent form of public communication. Research in pragmatics, intercultural communication, and politeness has demonstrated that apologies are socio-culturally situated speech acts whose realization varies across linguistic and cultural contexts.

While research on public apologies has expanded considerably over the past three decades, it continues to exhibit a pronounced linguistic and geographical bias. Existing scholarship has concentrated primarily on English and a limited number of other languages (Benoit, 1995; Kampf, 2011; Beaudin, 2018; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Yang, 2024), whereas studies of French-language public apologies remain comparatively scarce and largely restricted to European and Canadian contexts (e.g., Turbide, 2017, 2018). As a result, public apology practices in Francophone African digital spaces remain significantly underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, scholarship on public apologies has largely concentrated on their reception, credibility, and persuasive effects, while devoting considerably less attention to the socio-pragmatic strategies through which apologizers construct regret, negotiate responsibility, manage blame, and restore legitimacy in the aftermath of public transgression.

This article addresses these gaps through a socio-pragmatic and discourse-analytic investigation of public apologies disseminated on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, within the French-speaking Cameroonian speech community. Drawing on face and politeness theories (Goffman, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987), Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory, and the perspective of postcolonial pragmatics, the study examines how apologizers construct regret, negotiate accountability, acknowledge or mitigate responsibility, justify transgressions, redistribute blame, and seek moral rehabilitation in the public sphere. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which speakers mobilize culturally salient resources, including communal values, religious references, expressions of respect, and appeals to solidarity, in their efforts to repair damaged relationships and restore social legitimacy. By focusing on public apologies produced in a multilingual and postcolonial African setting, the study expands current understandings of apology practices beyond the linguistic and geographical contexts that have dominated the literature. More broadly, it contributes to research on public apologies, digital discourse, image repair, and variational pragmatics by demonstrating how processes of facework, reputation management, and public accountability are locally negotiated through culturally situated communicative practices in digitally mediated environments.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Section 3 describes the data and methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses the discursive strategies identified in the corpus, highlighting their socio-pragmatic functions and cultural significance. The final section summarizes the principal findings, discusses their theoretical implications, and suggests directions for future research.

Theoretical Background

Apologies are conventionally defined as expressive speech acts through which speakers acknowledge a perceived offense and convey regret to those affected. Embedded within a remedial sequence involving a transgression, an apology, and a response (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998), they serve as key mechanisms for repairing social relationships, restoring trust, and re-establishing interactional equilibrium (Goffman, 1973). Yet apologies are intrinsically face-sensitive acts. While they seek to redress damage inflicted upon the recipient, they simultaneously threaten the speaker's own face by requiring an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and responsibility (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Consequently, apologizing involves a delicate process of face negotiation in which speakers attempt to demonstrate remorse without excessively undermining their own social standing. This tension is particularly pronounced in public apologies, where reputational stakes are high and accountability is subject to public scrutiny. In such contexts, apologizers strategically combine expressions of regret with explanations, justifications, responsibility-taking, corrective actions, and promises of non-recurrence in order to repair both interpersonal relationships and public image. The use of these strategies is shaped by socio-pragmatic variables such as offense severity, power asymmetries, social distance, cultural norms, and the affordances of the communicative medium.

Research in intercultural and cross-cultural pragmatics, particularly within the CCSARP tradition (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), has consistently shown that apologies are culturally situated practices whose realization, interpretation, and evaluation are shaped by local norms of face, accountability, relational obligations, and morality. Studies of French and Cameroonian discourse further highlight how sociocultural values, multilingual resources, and contextual expectations influence both the production and reception of apologies. Public apologies are especially revealing in this regard, as they function simultaneously as acts of relational repair, public accountability, and image management. By acknowledging wrongdoing and seeking to restore damaged relationships, they can rebuild trust, legitimacy, and credibility. Yet public apologies are inherently risky because they also revive the offense in public memory (Kampf, 2009). To navigate this tension, apologizers employ a range of discursive strategies, including mitigation, justificatory accounts, responsibility negotiation, offense redefinition, and commitments to corrective action, seeking to balance accountability with the preservation of public image.

In digitally mediated environments, however, the effectiveness of apology strategies depends not only on how apologies are formulated but also on how they are received. Public apologies are fundamentally interactional events whose meanings and consequences are co-constructed through audience responses. Online users may accept, contest, reinterpret, ridicule, or reject apologetic discourse, transforming apologies into

arenas where responsibility, sincerity, and moral legitimacy are publicly negotiated (Turbide, 2017). Consequently, rather than serving as a definitive act of reconciliation, public apologies often trigger ongoing processes of evaluation, contestation, and accountability. Beyond their remedial function, public apologies constitute important sites of ethos (re)construction (Maingueneau, 2022), through which speakers attempt to renegotiate their public persona, restore damaged credibility, and reposition themselves in relation to the values and normative expectations of their audience. Yet the ethos they attempt to construct remains subject to public scrutiny and reinterpretation. Audience reactions ultimately determine whether the apology enhances credibility and restores reputation or, conversely, deepens reputational damage and undermines the speaker's moral legitimacy.

Socio-, intercultural, and cross-cultural pragmatic research has consistently demonstrated that apologies are complex, culturally embedded communicative practices rather than universally realized speech acts. Conceptualized as a *speech act set* (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) or, more broadly, as a *communicative act* (Trosborg, 1995), apologizing involves a cluster of interrelated strategies through which speakers negotiate responsibility, express remorse, repair relationships, and restore social equilibrium. These strategies typically include explicit expressions of apology, explanations or justifications, acknowledgements of responsibility, offers of repair, and promises of forbearance, often accompanied by supportive devices such as self-blame, expressions of concern, appeals for understanding, and various mitigating or intensifying moves.

While these pragmatic resources recur across languages and cultures, their selection, sequencing, and interactional functions vary considerably across sociocultural contexts. Such variation reflects differing conceptions of face, politeness, accountability, social harmony, and interpersonal obligation. Cross-cultural studies have documented contrasts between direct and indirect communicative traditions, speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented apology practices, and individualistic and collectivistic cultural orientations (cf. Ogiermann, 2009; Kenny, 2020; Aleassa, 2023; Kirchner-Häusler et al. 2025). These differences shape not only how offenses are acknowledged and repaired but also how sincerity, appropriateness, accountability, and forgiveness are evaluated by recipients. Consequently, apology strategies cannot be understood as universally equivalent means of redress; rather, their meanings, effectiveness, and social consequences are contingent upon locally situated norms of interpretation and evaluation.

Complementing cross-cultural research, variational pragmatics has demonstrated that apology behavior exhibits substantial variation not only across languages and cultures but also within the same language. This line of inquiry examines how pragmatic practices are shaped by macro-social factors such as region, age, gender, ethnicity, and social identity. Research on pluricentric languages has documented significant differences in the use of apology strategies, politeness resources, modification devices, and responsibility-

management practices among speakers of different regional varieties, including English (Barron, 2009, 2022), French (Schölmberger, 2008), and Arabic (El-Dakhs et al., 2023). Such findings underscore that apologies are locally situated communicative practices whose realization reflects regionally specific sociocultural norms rather than uniform patterns shared by all speakers of a language.

Despite the important contributions of cross-cultural and variational pragmatic research, much of this scholarship remains grounded in theoretical frameworks largely derived from Western communicative norms and interactional assumptions. While these approaches have generated valuable insights into face, politeness, accountability, and relationship management, they pay less attention to the ways communicative practices are shaped by colonial histories, multilingual repertoires, indigenous epistemologies, religious worldviews, and locally constituted moral orders. In postcolonial contexts, where multiple linguistic and cultural traditions intersect, apologies may serve functions and convey meanings that extend beyond the assumptions embedded in dominant pragmatic models. It is in this respect that postcolonial pragmatics (Anchimbe & Janney, 2011; Anchimbe, 2018) provides a particularly fruitful framework for the study of apology discourse in multilingual and culturally diverse societies such as Cameroon. Rejecting the universalization of Eurocentric pragmatic theories, this approach situates communicative practices within their historical, sociocultural, and ideological contexts and emphasizes the interactions among language, culture, identity, history, and power. Rather than viewing apologies as universally interpretable speech acts governed by fixed pragmatic principles, postcolonial pragmatics highlights how their production, interpretation, and evaluation are shaped by locally grounded systems of values, beliefs, social relations, and moral expectations. Meaning thus emerges not from abstract pragmatic universals but from the sociocultural realities within which communicative practices are embedded.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the Cameroonian context, where communicative practices emerge at the intersection of indigenous cultural traditions, colonial linguistic legacies, religious beliefs, communal social structures, and contemporary digital cultures. In such an environment, the meanings and evaluations of public apologies cannot be fully explained through universalist models of facework or politeness alone. Rather, they must be understood as culturally situated performances through which speakers negotiate accountability, legitimacy, moral personhood, social belonging, and public authority. The findings of this study suggest that public apologies in Cameroon function as important sites for the articulation and negotiation of broader cultural conceptions of community, reconciliation, and social order. Consequently, apologetic discourse is shaped by sociocultural values and communicative logics that extend beyond the individualistic assumptions often associated with dominant Western pragmatic models. One recurring pattern is the frequent invocation of symbolic kinship and communal solidarity through expressions such as « mes frères et sœurs » (*my brothers and*

sisters), « chers compatriotes » (*dear compatriots/fellow citizens*), « fils et filles de la nation » (*sons and daughters of the nation*), « mon grand frère » (*my big brother*), « prenez-moi comme un frère » (*consider me a brother*) and « nous sommes une seule famille » (*we are one family*). Such expressions discursively construe the relationship between the apologizer and the audience through idioms of kinship, national belonging, proximity, and collective identity. These formulations construct audiences as members of a shared moral community and frame reconciliation as a collective rather than purely interpersonal undertaking. Accountability is thus negotiated not only between offender and offended party but also within a wider network of obligations and expectations. A second prominent feature is the central role of religious discourse in the performance of repentance and accountability. References to God, divine mercy, prayer, forgiveness, blessing, and spiritual transformation function as resources for explaining wrongdoing, expressing remorse, and seeking rehabilitation. Apologies are therefore embedded within broader moral and spiritual frameworks that associate reconciliation with redemption, humility, and moral renewal. In many cases, apologizing appears not only as a response to public criticism but also as an act of moral realignment before both human and divine audiences. A third recurrent pattern in the data is the emphasis on values such as unity, fraternity, peace, social harmony, national cohesion, mutual respect, and collective well-being. These references indicate that public apologies are oriented not solely toward repairing individual reputation but also toward restoring relationships and reaffirming the social bonds considered essential to collective life. Apology discourse thus serves a broader social function, contributing to the re-establishment of group harmony disrupted by the offense.

Moreover, our analysis of public apologies is informed by recent developments in postcolonial pragmatics, which emphasize that communicative behaviour can only be fully understood in relation to the socio-cultural contexts in which it is produced. In particular, we draw on Anchimbe's (2026) framework of fixed and fluid analytical components, which are considered indispensable for the study of communicative practices and social interaction in postcolonial communities. Guided by this framework, we examine apology practices in relation to a range of salient socio-cultural factors, including identity, age, religion, social status, and kinship networks. Attention to these components provides valuable insights into the ways public apologies are shaped by, and embedded within, the social realities of French-speaking Cameroon.

This perspective also resonates with Nwoye's (1992) critique of the individualistic assumptions underlying dominant politeness theories. Rather than being primarily concerned with individual autonomy or personal face, the public apologies in our corpus reveal orientations toward communal relations, reciprocal obligations, collective solidarity, and the restoration of social harmony. Accountability, legitimacy, forgiveness, and reconciliation emerge as fundamentally relational achievements negotiated within community-based frameworks of morality and social order. Public apologies in the French-

speaking Cameroonian context thus constitute culturally embedded socio-pragmatic performances through which speakers seek to repair social bonds, reaffirm common values, reclaim moral standing, and facilitate social reintegration. Understanding these practices consequently requires a contextualized pragmatic approach that places local conceptions of community, morality, religion, authority, and social cohesion at the centre of analysis, thereby extending prevailing understandings of apology discourse beyond the assumptions of dominant Western paradigms.

Overall, the findings advance postcolonial pragmatics by showing that public apologies in Cameroon are shaped by locally grounded moral, cultural, religious, and historical frameworks, supporting Anchimbe's (2018) call to theorize African communicative practices on their own terms.

To illustrate these theoretical considerations empirically, the following section presents the methodology adopted in this study. The selection of the corpus and the analytical procedures was informed by the premise that public apologies are socially and culturally situated practices whose meanings can only be understood within the specific historical, moral, religious, and communal contexts in which they are produced and interpreted.

Data and Methodology

Corpus

This study analyzes a corpus of 51 public apologies published on social media platforms, primarily Facebook and YouTube, by French-speaking Cameroonians between 2018 and 2025. The corpus was designed to capture contemporary public apology practices across major sectors of public communication. It comprises 33 apologies issued by media, cultural, and entertainment figures, including influencers, comedians, actors, bloggers, journalists, musicians, athletes, and media executives; 9 apologies produced by political, administrative, and academic actors; and 9 apologies issued by organizations and institutions in sectors such as broadcasting, telecommunications, sports, air transportation, and public utilities. The offenses prompting these apologies include personal attacks, defamation, hate speech, tribalistic discourse, misinformation, false public announcements, disrespectful comments, poor athletic performances, and failures in service delivery. The corpus encompasses diverse speaker profiles, institutional settings, and offense types, providing a robust foundation for examining socio-pragmatic variation in public apology practices in Cameroon. Data were selected according to three criteria: (1) public accessibility, (2) the presence of an explicit apology through expressions of regret, acknowledgment of responsibility, or requests for forgiveness, and (3) the existence of a publicly salient transgression that generated controversy or public reaction. The apologies were collected from social media platforms, online news sources, official statements, and

other digital outlets. This sampling strategy ensures analytical comparability while capturing the discursive processes through which responsibility, remorse, and image repair are negotiated in Cameroon's contemporary public sphere.

Data Analysis

The study adopts a qualitative pragmatic and discourse-analytic approach to examine how public apologies are constructed and deployed in the data. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each apology was analyzed to identify its internal organization and distinguish core apologetic acts from supportive acts that contextualize, justify, intensify, mitigate, or otherwise shape the apology's interpretation. Second, apology strategies were identified and classified using the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), which distinguishes five principal components: (1) explicit apologies (IFIDs), (2) explanations or accounts, (3) acknowledgements of responsibility, (4) offers of repair, and (5) promises of non-recurrence. To capture the complexity of public apologetic discourse, the analysis was extended to include supportive acts (Manno, 1999a, 1999b) and tactical manoeuvres (Trosborg, 1995), such as self-defence, emotional appeals, compliments, expressions of respect and empathy, and appeals for forgiveness. Particular attention was paid to mitigation, justification, blame redistribution, and the externalization of responsibility, given their importance in reputation management. Third, a broader discourse-pragmatic analysis examined apologies as macro speech acts serving ethos reconstruction and image repair. This stage focused on recurring patterns of self-presentation, responsibility management, victim positioning, and audience alignment.

Results

Apology Strategies

The apology strategies identified in the corpus can be grouped into several major categories. The discussion begins with direct apologies, the most explicit and prototypical form of apologetic behavior, through which speakers openly express remorse and seek to repair damaged relationships.

Direct Apologies

Expressions of Regret

Expressions of regret constitute one of the most frequent and salient direct apology strategies in the corpus. Through explicit statements of sorrow, remorse, or disappointment, apologizers acknowledge the harm caused and signal awareness of the moral implications

of their actions. In other words, these utterances communicate the speaker's emotional and moral stance toward the transgression. Unlike explanations or justifications, which shift attention to surrounding circumstances, expressions of regret foreground the wrongdoing itself and signal acknowledgment of harm. In highly visible public contexts, they also serve an important rhetorical function by projecting sincerity, accountability, and moral awareness, thereby enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of the apology. In doing so, they perform a central restorative function, seeking to rebuild trust, repair relationships, and recover public legitimacy. Regret is commonly expressed through lexical items such as *regretter* ('to regret'), *être désolé* ('to be sorry'), *déplorer* ('to deplore'), and *exprimer ses regrets* ('to express one's regrets'). Typical examples include *« Je regrette donc très sincèrement cette situation et vous remercie de recevoir mes excuses »* ('I sincerely regret this situation and thank you for accepting my apology'), *« Je regrette tout ce qui s'est passé »* ('I regret everything that happened'), and *« Je suis sincèrement désolé pour les préjudices causés »* ('I am sincerely sorry for the harm caused'). Such formulations place remorse at the forefront of the apology and explicitly recognize the negative consequences of the offending act.

Regret expressions may occur as standalone apologies or combine with other remedial strategies such as responsibility-taking, requests for forgiveness, offers of repair, and promises of non-repetition. In these contexts, they reinforce the apologetic message and enhance its persuasive force. A notable feature of the corpus is the frequent use of intensifiers, as in *« Je regrette très profondément et sincèrement les événements qui se sont produits »* ('I deeply and sincerely regret the events that occurred') and *« Je présente mes plus sincères et plus profondes excuses »* ('I offer my sincerest and deepest apologies'). Through adverbial intensification, evaluative adjectives, and lexical accumulation, speakers amplify the illocutionary force of their apologies and project sincerity. Such intensification is particularly significant in highly mediatized contexts, where apologies are subject to public scrutiny and authenticity is often questioned. By emphasizing the depth of their remorse, apologizers seek to demonstrate genuine contrition and facilitate symbolic reconciliation with their audiences.

Requests for Forgiveness

Requests for forgiveness represent one of the most direct apology strategies in the corpus. Unlike expressions of regret, which communicate remorse, they explicitly appeal to the offended party's willingness to pardon the transgression and restore the relationship. Such requests are highly interpersonal acts that recognize the victim's moral authority to accept or reject reconciliation. By explicitly seeking pardon, apologizers position themselves as accountable and vulnerable, thereby increasing the face-restorative potential of the apology. Common realizations include *demander pardon* ('to ask for forgiveness'),

pardonner (‘to forgive’), *implorer le pardon* (‘to implore forgiveness’), and *solliciter l’indulgence* (‘to seek indulgence’). Examples include from the data *« Je demande pardon à tous ceux et celles que j’ai offensés »* (‘I ask forgiveness from all those whom I have offended’) and the emphatic *« JE DEMANDE PARDON AUX CAMEROUNAIS ! »* (‘I ASK THE CAMEROONIAN PEOPLE FOR FORGIVENESS!’). In many cases, the request is preceded by an acknowledgment of fault, as in *« Je me suis trompé, alors je demande pardon »* (‘I made a mistake, so I ask for forgiveness’), thereby establishing a direct link between wrongdoing and the plea for pardon. The corpus also reveals frequent use of intensifiers such as *sincèrement* (‘sincerely’), *humblement* (‘humbly’), and *profondément* (‘deeply’), as well as emotionally charged verbs such as *implorer* (‘to implore’), as in *« Je demande sincèrement pardon »* and *« J’implore humblement votre pardon »*. These devices strengthen the illocutionary force of the request and project an ethos of humility, sincerity, and genuine contrition, thereby enhancing the persuasive effectiveness of the apology.

The corpus also contains metapragmatic statements that explicitly present apologizing as a moral obligation. Utterances such as *« Quand on se trompe, il faut savoir demander pardon »* (‘When one makes a mistake, one must know how to ask for forgiveness’) frame forgiveness-seeking as the socially appropriate response to wrongdoing. By aligning themselves with norms of accountability and social repair, speakers reinforce the legitimacy and moral credibility of their apologies. Requests for forgiveness are sometimes realized through indirect and affectively charged appeals that emphasize the recipient’s generosity rather than explicitly demanding absolution. For example, *« Je vous invite à trouver dans votre grand cœur une place pour me pardonner »* (‘I invite you to find a place in your generous heart to forgive me’) combines a mitigated request with positive-face enhancement, portraying the audience as compassionate and magnanimous. Such formulations reduce coerciveness and present forgiveness as a voluntary act of benevolence, thereby strengthening the reconciliatory orientation of the apology. A notable feature of the corpus is the multimodal realization of forgiveness requests in digital communication. Apologizers frequently accompany verbal expressions of contrition with emojis, as in *« Je demande sincèrement pardon* 🙏 ». The prayer-hands emoji functions as a paralinguistic marker of humility, supplication, and remorse, reinforcing the speaker’s self-lowering stance and enhancing perceptions of sincerity. This illustrates how digital affordances expand the expressive resources available to apologizers and intensify the interpersonal force of apologetic discourse. Overall, requests for forgiveness emerge as one of the most powerful direct apology strategies in the corpus. By explicitly recognizing the recipient’s authority to grant or withhold forgiveness, they move beyond the expression of remorse to engage directly in the process of reconciliation. Whether realized through performative statements, normative claims, affective appeals, or multimodal resources, they play a central role in restoring trust, repairing relationships, and rebuilding public legitimacy.

Offers of Apology

A third category of direct apology strategies is offers of apology, through which speakers explicitly apologize without directly requesting forgiveness. Unlike requests for forgiveness, which seek absolution from the offended party, offers of apology primarily acknowledge wrongdoing and initiate symbolic repair. They are therefore less directive and particularly common in formal, institutional, and public contexts. In the corpus, this strategy is typically realized through performative expressions such as *s'excuser* ('to apologize') and *présenter ses excuses* ('to offer one's apologies'). Examples include *« Je viens humblement présenter mes excuses les plus sincères »* ('I humbly offer my sincerest apologies') and *« Je tiens à présenter mes sincères excuses à toutes les personnes concernées »* ('I wish to extend my sincere apologies to all those concerned'). Such formulations foreground the speaker's acknowledgment of wrongdoing and commitment to restoring social equilibrium rather than directly soliciting forgiveness. Offers of apology are frequently reinforced through intensifiers such as *humblement* ('humbly'), *sincèrement* ('sincerely'), and *profondément* ('deeply'), as well as evaluative expressions such as *les plus sincères excuses* ('the sincerest apologies'). These modifiers amplify the illocutionary force of the apology and project an ethos of sincerity, humility, and accountability.

The corpus also contains nominalized apology formulas, particularly in institutional and written discourse, such as *« Mes excuses les plus sincères »* ('My sincerest apologies') and *« Toutes mes excuses »* ('My apologies'). By omitting the performative verb, these conventionalized expressions ritualize the apologetic act and emphasize the acknowledgment of fault rather than personal emotion. Overall, offers of apology function as explicit acknowledgments of wrongdoing that prioritize recognition and redress over direct appeals for forgiveness. Through performative expressions, intensification, and conventionalized formulas, they contribute to image repair and the restoration of social order while projecting responsibility and accountability.

Conditional Apologies

The corpus contains a substantial number of conditional apologies, in which regret is expressed only if an offense has occurred. Such apologies function as face-saving devices that balance two competing goals: responding to public criticism while protecting the apologizer's image. They display regret and sensitivity to audience concerns but limit the extent of accountability assumed. Consequently, while they may be effective for damage control, they generally possess less restorative and persuasive power than unequivocal apologies that openly acknowledge fault and responsibility. Typical formulations include *« Si j'ai offensé certaines personnes, je leur présente mes excuses »* ('If I have offended anyone, I offer my apologies') and *« Si mes propos ont été mal*

interprétés, je m'en excuse » ('If my remarks have been misinterpreted, I apologize'). By framing the offense as hypothetical or contingent on others' perceptions, speakers acknowledge a possible grievance while avoiding an unequivocal admission of responsibility. Several examples illustrate this pattern: *« Si j'ai offensé quelqu'un, du plus profond de mon cœur je m'en excuse »* ("If I have offended anyone, I sincerely apologize from the bottom of my heart ") and *« Si moi j'ai blessé quelqu'un, je m'en excuse »* ("If I have hurt anyone, I apologize"). Although the performative expression *je m'en excuse* constitutes a direct apology, the conditional clause simultaneously weakens responsibility by presenting the offense as possible rather than established. The use of indefinite references such as *quelqu'un* further generalizes the injured party and distances the speaker from a specific victim. As a result, these apologies occupy an intermediate position between full responsibility-taking and denial.

Indirect Apology Strategies

Acknowledgement of Responsibility

Acknowledgement of responsibility is a central indirect apology strategy through which speakers explicitly recognize their wrongdoing without necessarily employing a conventional apology formula. By admitting fault, apologizers demonstrate accountability, validate the grievance, and strengthen the credibility of their remedial efforts. In the corpus, this strategy is realized through several subtypes, the most salient of which is accepting blame.

Accepting Blame

Accepting blame represents the most explicit form of responsibility-taking. It involves a clear and unqualified admission of fault, leaving little room for denial, justification, or mitigation. By openly recognizing their role in the offense, speakers signal accountability and reinforce the sincerity of the apology. The corpus contains numerous examples of this strategy, including statements such as *« Je me suis trompé »* ('I was wrong'), *« Je m'étais trompé »* ('I had been wrong'), and *« J'avais trop surestimé mes compatriotes »* ('I had greatly overestimated my compatriots'). These utterances constitute direct acknowledgements of error and responsibility, with no attempt to shift blame or downplay the transgression.

Accepting blame functions as a powerful face-restorative device because it validates the offended party's grievance and demonstrates the speaker's willingness to be held accountable. By explicitly recognizing fault, apologizers enhance perceptions of honesty, sincerity, and moral responsibility, thereby increasing the reparative potential and persuasive effectiveness of the apology. In public contexts, where audiences often

scrutinize the authenticity of apologetic discourse, unequivocal admissions of error represent one of the strongest indicators of genuine contrition and commitment to reconciliation.

Self-Deprecation and Self-Blame

A closely related form of responsibility acknowledgement is self-deprecation and self-blame, whereby speakers explicitly attribute the offense to their own shortcomings, poor judgment, or personal failings. Unlike simple admissions of fault, these strategies involve negative self-evaluations that foreground the speaker's responsibility and moral accountability. By coupling responsibility-taking with critical self-assessment, they strengthen the credibility of the apology and project an ethos of humility, sincerity, and ethical awareness. The corpus contains numerous examples of this strategy. Some speakers acknowledge error through statements such as *« Je me suis trompé »* ('I was wrong'), *« J'avais trop surestimé mes compatriotes »* ('I had greatly overestimated my compatriots'), or *« Je reconnais que je n'ai pas su maîtriser suffisamment mes émotions »* ('I acknowledge that I failed to exercise sufficient control over my emotions'). In these cases, the source of the offense is located within the self rather than attributed to external circumstances, thereby reinforcing the speaker's accountability. In other instances, self-blame is accompanied by an explicit moral evaluation of the offending conduct. One apologizer admits: *« Je me rends compte aujourd'hui que mes actes étaient inappropriés et contraires aux valeurs que je suis censé incarner »* ('I realize today that my actions were inappropriate and contrary to the values I am supposed to uphold'). Here, the speaker not only acknowledges wrongdoing but also condemns the behavior as inconsistent with the ethical standards associated with their public identity. The apology therefore functions simultaneously as an admission of fault and a reaffirmation of shared moral norms. More elaborate forms of self-deprecation involve retrospective self-criticism and reflection. For example, one speaker states: *« Avec le recul, je reconnais que mon comportement a manqué de discernement et qu'il a porté atteinte à la discipline et au respect des institutions auxquels je suis profondément attaché »* ('Looking back, I recognize that my conduct lacked judgment and undermined the discipline and respect for institutions to which I am deeply committed'). Such formulations portray the offense as the result of a personal deficiency and demonstrate a process of moral self-examination, thereby increasing the perceived sincerity of the apology. The corpus also contains blunt self-condemnatory statements such as *« J'ai fait preuve d'une grande irresponsabilité »* ('I acted with great irresponsibility') and *« Mon comportement a été inacceptable et je l'assume pleinement »* ('My behaviour was unacceptable, and I take full responsibility for it'). By openly criticizing their own actions, speakers go beyond mere fault admission and engage in explicit moral self-censure. From a pragmatic perspective, these strategies represent some

of the strongest forms of responsibility-taking, as they combine acknowledgment of wrongdoing with evaluative self-criticism, thereby enhancing the restorative and persuasive force of the apology.

Admission of Culpability

A more forceful form of responsibility acknowledgement involves admissions of culpability, whereby speakers explicitly assume responsibility for both the offense and its consequences. Unlike simple admissions of error, these formulations foreground agency and accountability, leaving little ambiguity about the source of the wrongdoing. From a pragmatic perspective, admissions of culpability represent one of the strongest forms of responsibility-taking in the corpus. By clearly acknowledging agency, rejecting self-exonerating explanations, and often coupling responsibility with commitments to corrective action, they project sincerity, accountability, and moral integrity. Consequently, they possess substantial restorative potential, enhancing the credibility of the apology and contributing to the reconstruction of public trust, legitimacy, and reputation. This subtype is realized in many different ways in the data. For example, one apologizer declares, *« Je prends l'entière responsabilité des actes qui ont été posés et j'ai déjà pris les mesures nécessaires pour les corriger et éviter qu'ils ne se reproduisent »* ('I take full responsibility for the actions that were taken, and I have already taken the necessary measures to correct them and prevent them from happening again'). Similarly, statements such as *« Je suis seul responsable de cette erreur »* ('I alone am responsible for this mistake') and *« J'assume entièrement les conséquences de mes actes »* ('I fully accept the consequences of my actions') constitute unambiguous acknowledgements of culpability and reinforce the speaker's commitment to accountability. The corpus also contains instances of what Benoit (1995) terms *mortification*, namely the explicit admission of wrongdoing coupled with the rejection of excuses or mitigating circumstances. Examples include *« Rien ne peut justifier les propos inappropriés que j'ai tenus »* ('Nothing can justify the inappropriate remarks I made') and *« Aucun prétexte ne saurait excuser mon comportement »* ('No excuse can justify my behaviour'). By explicitly dismissing potential justifications, speakers attribute the offense entirely to themselves and affirm their moral responsibility.

Partial Responsibility and Mitigation Strategies

Alongside unequivocal admissions of fault, the corpus contains numerous instances of partial responsibility, in which speakers acknowledge wrongdoing while simultaneously mitigating their accountability. These hybrid constructions reflect the tension between demonstrating remorse and protecting one's public image. For example, one apologizer states: *« Mon message a été sorti de son contexte et certains passages ont*

peut-être été mal compris. Je comprends que cela ait pu choquer ou déranger certaines personnes et je le regrette sincèrement » ('My post was taken out of context, and some passages may have been misunderstood. I understand that this may have upset or disturbed some people, and I sincerely regret it'). Through the passive construction *a été sorti de son contexte* and the hedge *peut-être*, responsibility is partially shifted to audience interpretation, while expressions of empathy and regret acknowledge the harm caused.

Similarly, the statement *« Je les ai involontairement associés à quelque chose qui ne reflète pas leurs valeurs »* ('I unintentionally associated them with something that does not reflect their values') accepts responsibility for the outcome but attenuates culpability by emphasizing the absence of intent. Such formulations combine acknowledgment of harm with mitigating explanations that reduce the speaker's degree of blame.

These strategies balance responsibility and self-exoneration, allowing speakers to address criticism while protecting their public image, but with less restorative force than unequivocal responsibility-taking.

Shifting Responsibility through Reference to Interpretation

Another recurrent mitigation strategy involves shifting responsibility from the offending act to its interpretation by the audience. Rather than acknowledging that their conduct was problematic, speakers attribute the controversy to misunderstanding, misreading, or misinterpretation. Typical examples include *« Mon message a été interprété comme une attaque déguisée »* ('My post was interpreted as a covert attack') and *« Mes propos ont été mal compris »* ('My remarks were misunderstood'). Such formulations foreground audience reception rather than speaker intention, thereby relocating the source of the problem from the production of the message to its interpretation. Such utterances constitute only a partial acknowledgement of responsibility. While they implicitly recognize that harm or offense occurred, they suggest that the negative outcome resulted primarily from misunderstanding rather than from the speaker's actions. As a consequence, responsibility is mitigated and partially transferred to the audience or communicative circumstances. These strategies enable apologizers to respond to criticism while preserving their public image and avoiding a full admission of fault. However, their restorative potential is often limited. Because they focus on interpretation rather than wrongdoing, they may be perceived as evasive, defensive, or blame-shifting. Consequently, they are generally less effective than unequivocal admissions of responsibility in fostering trust, demonstrating accountability, and facilitating reconciliation.

Denial of Malicious Intent

A particularly frequent mitigation strategy in the corpus involves denying harmful

intent. Speakers acknowledge that an offense may have occurred while insisting that no harm was intended. For example, one apologizer states: *« J'ai peut-être agi dans un moment d'euphorie ; mon intention n'a jamais été d'offenser ou d'insulter qui que ce soit. Mon objectif était simplement d'informer mes partisans de ce qui se passait déjà »* ('I may have acted in a moment of euphoria; my intention was never to offend or insult anyone. My intention was simply to inform my supporters about what was already happening'). This formulation separates the act from any malicious intent. The denial *« mon intention n'a jamais été d'offenser ou d'insulter »* mitigates culpability by focusing on the speaker's motives, while the reference to *« un moment d'euphorie »* introduces emotional circumstances that may have affected judgment. The subsequent claim that the speaker merely sought to inform others further reframes the contested behavior as well-intentioned rather than harmful. In Benoit's (1995) terms, this strategy reduces offensiveness by redefining the purpose of the act. From a pragmatic perspective, however, the strategy remains ambiguous. While it may lessen perceived culpability by distinguishing intention from outcome, it can also be interpreted as a reluctance to assume full responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. Its effectiveness therefore depends on whether audiences prioritize intentions or effects when evaluating public misconduct.

Justification of the Offense
Contextualized Explanations and Discursive Recontextualization

Justification of the offense constitutes a major strategy of indirect apology. Rather than directly assuming responsibility, speakers provide reasons or contextual explanations for the offending act, thereby inviting recipients to reassess its meaning and seriousness. One of the most common forms is discursive recontextualization, whereby speakers relocate a contested statement within its original context of production to promote a more favorable interpretation. Expressions such as *« Mon message a été sorti de son contexte »* ('My post was taken out of context'), *« Étant donné les circonstances dans lesquelles ces propos ont été tenus »* ('Given the circumstances in which these remarks were made'), or *« Ces déclarations doivent être replacées dans leur contexte »* ('These statements must be reconsidered within their context') exemplify this strategy. By emphasizing contextual factors, speakers shift attention from the allegedly offensive act to the conditions under which it was produced and interpreted. Within Benoit's (1995) framework, this constitutes a form of offensiveness reduction, while in politeness terms it serves to protect the speaker's face by limiting direct exposure to blame.

A representative example is the following: *« Je voudrais apporter une importante clarification concernant mes récentes déclarations, qui ont malheureusement été mal comprises. Lorsque j'ai évoqué la responsabilité dans le décès de Muta Penda, mon intention n'était aucunement de formuler une accusation malveillante ou mystique. Je*

souhaitais simplement exprimer mon regret face à ce que je percevais comme un manque de vigilance ou de présence dans son rôle de père spirituel durant sa maladie » ('I would like to provide an important clarification regarding my recent remarks, which were unfortunately misunderstood. When I referred to responsibility in the death of Muta Penda, my intention was not to make a malicious or mystical accusation. I simply intended to express regret concerning what I perceived as a lack of vigilance or presence in his role as a spiritual father during Muta Penda's illness'). In this example, the claim that the remarks were *« mal comprises »* ('misunderstood') partly transfers responsibility to the reception process, while the denial of malicious intent redefines the original statement as an expression of concern rather than an accusation. Such strategies seek to clarify the speaker's intentions and reduce the perceived seriousness of the offense. However, their effectiveness remains ambivalent. While contextual explanations may facilitate understanding, they can also be interpreted as attempts to externalize responsibility, thereby weakening the apologetic force of the discourse.

Autobiographical Narratives

Another recurrent justificatory strategy involves the use of autobiographical narratives, whereby speakers draw on personal experiences to explain or contextualize the offense. They contextualize the contested act within a broader life narrative that invites empathy. For example, one apologizer explains: *« Lorsque j'étais jeune, j'ai reçu très peu d'amour et la vie n'a pas toujours été tendre avec moi. Au fur et à mesure que ma carrière avançait, je n'ai pas su comprendre ni gérer la vague d'hostilité dirigée contre moi »* ('When I was young, I experienced very little love, and life was not particularly kind to me. As my career progressed, I was unable to understand or cope with the wave of hostility directed against me'). By linking present behavior to earlier emotional experiences, the speaker constructs a biographical explanation for the offense. References to hardship and hostility also create a partial narrative of victimhood, portraying the speaker not only as the agent of the transgression but also as someone shaped by adverse circumstances. Such autobiographical narratives serve to humanize the speaker, reduce the perceived offensiveness of the act (Benoit, 1995), and contribute to facework by facilitating the reconstruction of a more favorable public image. However, like other forms of justification, they remain inherently ambiguous. While they may foster understanding and empathy, they may also be interpreted as attempts to rationalize or externalize responsibility, particularly when personal circumstances overshadow acknowledgment of the offense itself.

Self-Victimization and Vulnerability

Another justificatory pattern identified in the corpus is self-victimization, whereby

speakers portray themselves as being affected by external pressures, attacks, or adverse circumstances that contributed to the offense. Rather than denying the transgression, they explain it through a narrative of vulnerability and personal suffering. For example, one apologizer states: *« J'ai pris conscience des attaques répétées dont je fais l'objet, aussi bien sur les réseaux sociaux qu'ailleurs. Ces attaques m'ont profondément affecté et ont influencé plusieurs de mes prises de parole ultérieures »* ('I have become aware of the repeated attacks against me, both on social media and elsewhere. These attacks deeply affected me and influenced many of my subsequent statements'). By emphasizing persistent criticism and its emotional consequences, the speaker presents the offensive behavior as a reaction to external adversity rather than as a wholly autonomous act. This strategy mitigates responsibility by situating the offense within a broader chain of causal circumstances. At the same time, it contributes to ethos reconstruction by portraying the speaker as emotionally affected and deserving of empathy. However, its effectiveness remains limited and context-dependent. While references to personal suffering may foster understanding, excessive emphasis on the speaker's victimhood may be perceived as an attempt to divert attention from those harmed by the offense, thereby weakening the reparative force of the apology.

Interpretive Justification and Denial of Malicious Intent

Another recurrent justificatory strategy combines interpretive justification with the denial of harmful intent. Through this strategy, speakers challenge the audience's interpretation of the offensive act while dissociating its consequences from their intentions. Expressions such as *« Mes propos ont été mal compris »* ('My words were misunderstood'), *« Ce n'est pas ce que je voulais dire »* ('That was not what I meant'), or *« Il y a eu un malentendu »* ('There has been a misunderstanding') reframe the offense as a problem of interpretation rather than one of production. This strategy is often accompanied by explicit denials of malicious intent. For example, one speaker states: *« Mon intention n'a jamais été de blesser ou de diviser qui que ce soit. Mes propos ont été sortis de leur contexte et prononcés sous le coup de l'émotion. Ils ne reflètent en rien le respect et l'estime que je vous porte »* ('My intention was never to hurt or divide anyone. My words were taken out of context and were spoken in a moment of emotion. They do not reflect the respect and esteem that I have for you'). The denial *« Mon intention n'a jamais été de blesser »* emphasizes the absence of harmful intent, while references to decontextualization and emotional circumstances further mitigate responsibility by presenting the offense as the result of misunderstanding or temporary emotional strain. The final statement reaffirms the positive relationship between speaker and audience and helps restore the recipient's positive face.

This strategy allows speakers to acknowledge that harm may have occurred while

resisting full moral blame for its consequences. It therefore functions simultaneously as an explanation, a defense, and a relational repair mechanism. However, its effectiveness depends on whether audiences accept the distinction between intention and effect or instead view it as an attempt to avoid full responsibility.

Commitments to Corrective Action

Another major form of indirect apology is the commitment to corrective action, through which speakers pledge to take concrete steps to remedy the consequences of an offense or prevent its recurrence. Unlike strategies centered on the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, commitments to repair are future-oriented, shifting attention from the transgression itself to corrective action and resolution. By linking words to deeds, they enhance the credibility of the apology and contribute to image restoration and trust rebuilding. In the corpus, this apology strategy is realized through explicit commitments such as *« Je prendrai les mesures nécessaires pour que cela ne se reproduise plus »* ('I will take the necessary measures to ensure that this does not happen again'), *« Nous réparerons le préjudice causé »* ('We will repair the harm caused'), and *« J'ai pris des mesures pour corriger la situation »* ('I have taken measures to correct the situation'). In institutional apologies, such commitments are often expressed collectively through formulations such as *« Nous nous engageons à… »* ('We are committed to…'), thereby emphasizing organizational accountability and responsiveness. A particularly illustrative example is: *« Je reconnais que le terme que j'ai utilisé était inapproprié et a pu semer la confusion, ce qui m'a conduit à retirer immédiatement la vidéo concernée »* ('I acknowledge that the term I used was inappropriate and may have caused confusion, which led me to immediately remove the video in question'). Here, the speaker complements the acknowledgment of fault with a specific and verifiable corrective action. The immediate removal of the offending content serves as tangible evidence of remediation, while the adverb *immédiatement* underscores the promptness of the response and reinforces perceptions of responsibility and accountability. Commitments to repair are among the most effective restorative strategies in the corpus because they extend beyond symbolic expressions of regret to include concrete remedial measures. Their persuasive power, however, depends largely on the visibility and credibility of the actions undertaken. Concrete and verifiable interventions are more likely than vague promises to restore trust, rebuild legitimacy, and demonstrate genuine commitment to change. As such, commitments to repair play a crucial role in reconciling speakers with their audiences and re-establishing public credibility following a transgression.

Promise of Non-Recurrence

The promise of non-recurrence is a major indirect apology strategy through which speakers commit themselves to preventing similar transgressions in the future. Unlike expressions of regret or responsibility-taking, which focus on past wrongdoing, this strategy is future-oriented and seeks to reassure audiences that the offense will not be repeated. As a commissive speech act, it binds the speaker to a future course of action and strengthens the restorative force of the apology.

In the corpus, promises of non-recurrence are realized through formulations such as *« Cela ne se reproduira plus »* ('This will not happen again'), *« Je m'engage à agir différemment à l'avenir »* ('I commit myself to acting differently in the future'), and *« J'ai pris les mesures nécessaires pour éviter que de tels incidents ne se reproduisent »* ('I have taken the necessary measures to prevent such incidents from recurring'). A representative elaborate example is *« Je suis responsable des actes qui ont été posés […] et j'ai déjà pris des mesures pour les corriger et faire en sorte qu'ils ne se reproduisent plus jamais »* ('I am responsible for the actions that were taken […] and I have already taken measures to correct them and ensure that they never happen again'). By combining responsibility-taking, corrective action, and future commitment, such statements project accountability and reinforce trust-restoration efforts.

Promise of Change

A particularly salient form of non-recurrence is the promise of personal change, whereby speakers commit themselves to modifying their behaviour, attitudes, or communicative practices. Rather than merely pledging to avoid a specific offense, they portray themselves as undergoing a broader process of self-transformation. Typical examples include *« Je serai plus prudent dans mes propos »* ('I will be more careful in what I say') and *« Je m'engage à communiquer avec davantage de respect »* ('I commit myself to communicating more respectfully'). A more elaborate example is: *« À partir d'aujourd'hui, je promets que je ne fatiguerai plus vos yeux avec mes longs écrits […] Je serai calme, gentil et véritablement modeste »* ('From today onward, I promise that I will no longer burden you with my lengthy writings […] I will be calm, kind, and truly modest'). Here, the speaker not only promises to avoid future offenses but also reconstructs their public persona by presenting a revised model of conduct. Such commitments function as forms of discursive self-regulation, portraying the speaker as capable of learning from past mistakes and adapting to social expectations. Overall, promises of non-recurrence are powerful face-restorative devices because they project responsibility into the future and provide audiences with assurances of behavioural change. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the credibility of the commitment and the extent to which promised actions are

subsequently fulfilled. When perceived as sincere and achievable, they contribute significantly to rebuilding trust, restoring legitimacy, and rehabilitating public image following a transgression.

The analysis also reveals the recurrent use of internal modifiers in both direct and indirect apologies. Embedded within the apologetic act, these linguistic devices calibrate the speaker's level of remorse, responsibility, sincerity, and emotional involvement, thereby shaping the illocutionary force and credibility of the apology. A prominent pattern is intensification, realized through adverbs, evaluative adjectives, and affective expressions such as *« Je suis profondément désolé »* ('I am deeply sorry'), *« Je présente mes sincères excuses »* ('I offer my sincere apologies'), and *« Du fond du cœur, je m'excuse »* ('From the bottom of my heart, I apologize'). These forms amplify the expression of regret and project a strong ethos of sincerity. By contrast, mitigating and subjectivity markers mitigate responsibility through uncertainty and personal evaluation, as in *« Peut-être ai-je réagi sous le coup de l'émotion »* ('Perhaps I reacted emotionally') and *« Je pense avoir mal géré cette situation »* ('I think I handled this situation poorly'). Such formulations acknowledge wrongdoing while limiting full commitment to a definitive interpretation of the offense. Internal modification further includes discourse-framing expressions such as *« Je tiens à présenter mes excuses »* ('I wish to offer my apologies') and *« Je ne peux que présenter mes excuses »* ('I can only apologize'), which foreground the apology as a deliberate act of redress or a moral obligation. Finally, evaluative and relational language reinforces accountability and relationship repair. Negative self-assessments, such as *« mes remarques étaient déplacées et irréfléchies »* ('my remarks were inappropriate and thoughtless'), signal recognition of wrongdoing, while positive relational expressions, such as *« je vous exprime mon profond respect »* ('I express my deep respect for you'), enhance the recipient's face and foster reconciliation. Collectively, these modifiers strengthen perceptions of sincerity, accountability, and trustworthiness in public apologetic discourse.

While the previous section focused on the core architecture of public apologies through direct and indirect apology strategies, the following sections explore the relational and interactional resources that contribute to their effectiveness. The analysis specifically investigates rapport-building strategies, highlighting how apologizers seek to restore damaged relationships, attend to face concerns, rebuild credibility, and re-establish social cohesion.

Rapport-Building Strategies

Beyond the apologetic act itself, speakers mobilize a range of rapport-building strategies aimed at repairing damaged relationships, restoring trust, and facilitating reconciliation. These accompanying acts enrich the apology by introducing cognitive, emotional, moral, and relational dimensions of repair. Functioning as external modifiers,

they contextualize the offense, reinforce or mitigate accountability, contribute to the reconstruction of the speaker's public image, and address the face needs of both the apologizer and the audience. The corpus reveals several recurring strategies, including terms of address, expressions of solidarity and respect, empathy, gratitude, acknowledgement of harm, and religious references. Through these resources, apologizers move beyond the mere expression of regret to actively rebuild interpersonal bonds, reaffirm shared values, and re-establish social cohesion.

Nominal Forms of Address

Nominal forms of address constitute a prominent rapport-building strategy in public apologies. Typically occurring in the opening sequence, they serve not merely to attract attention but to establish a relational framework that emphasizes solidarity, shared identity, and collective belonging. The corpus contains frequent use of vocatives such as *« Chers frères et sœurs »* ('Dear brothers and sisters'), *« Peuple camerounais »* ('People of Cameroon'), *« Mes précieux compatriotes »* ('My precious compatriots'), and *« Chers concitoyens »* ('Dear fellow citizens'). These forms of address function as symbolic markers of inclusion, positioning the apologizer as a member of the very community affected by the wrongdoing. For instance, the expression *« Chers frères et sœurs, peuple camerounais »* invokes both familial and national identities, constructing a moral community grounded in fraternity and shared citizenship. This collective positioning is reinforced by subsequent acts of responsibility-taking (*« Je reconnais vous avoir déçu »*) and appeals for understanding (*« tout le monde fait des erreurs »*), which frame forgiveness as a collective process of reintegration rather than an exclusively individual response. Similarly, vocatives such as *« mes précieux compatriotes »* and *« chers concitoyens »* foreground civic solidarity while attending to the audience's positive face. The affective adjective *précieux* ('precious') conveys appreciation and esteem, thereby enhancing the audience's social value and creating a more receptive context for the apology. In these cases, the relational work performed by the address terms is often reinforced by explicit admissions of wrongdoing and deferential requests for forgiveness, such as *« J'implore néanmoins votre pardon »* ('I nevertheless implore your forgiveness'). Overall, nominal forms of address function as more than introductory devices. They are strategic relational resources through which speakers reaffirm their membership in the offended community, reduce social distance, and strengthen bonds of solidarity. By invoking shared family, civic, or national identities, apologizers frame face restoration as a community-mediated process that fosters audience identification and positions forgiveness as a collective pathway to social cohesion.

Appeals to Family Solidarity and Reconciliation

Appeals to family solidarity and reconciliation constitute a prominent rapport-building strategy in the corpus. By construing the audience as members of a symbolic family, apologizers seek to repair the relational rupture caused by the offense and frame forgiveness as a collective process of reintegration rather than a purely individual act. This strategy is evident in statements such as *« Mon intention n'a jamais été de diviser (...) Nous sommes une même famille »* ('My intention was never to divide (...) We are one family'). Through the family metaphor, the speaker redefines the conflict as a temporary disruption within an enduring community bound by shared values, mutual obligations, and collective belonging. The emphasis on unity and togetherness encourages the audience to interpret the transgression not as a permanent breach but as a conflict that can be overcome through understanding and reconciliation. A similar dynamic emerges in *« Quand on se trompe, il faut savoir demander pardon. Je me suis trompé, alors je demande pardon. Prenez-moi comme un frère »* ('When one makes a mistake, one must know how to ask for forgiveness. I made a mistake, so I ask for forgiveness. Consider me a brother'). Here, the explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing is strengthened by an appeal to fraternity that symbolically repositions the apologizer within the audience's moral community. By inviting recipients to regard him as a *frère* ('brother'), the speaker frames forgiveness as an expression of solidarity and mutual support toward a member of the same social group. More broadly, appeals to family solidarity reduce social distance, foster collective identification, and activate values commonly associated with kinship relations, including compassion, understanding, loyalty, and mutual care. In the Cameroonian sociocultural context, where communal interdependence and collective identity occupy a central place in social life, such appeals are particularly powerful. They recast the offense as a disruption of group harmony rather than merely an individual transgression and present reconciliation as a shared responsibility. By invoking fraternity, unity, and common belonging, apologizers seek not only to obtain forgiveness but also to reaffirm their membership in the offended community and contribute to the restoration of social cohesion.

Religious Discourse as A Resource for the Moral Legitimation of Repentance

Religious discourse emerges as a significant rapport-building strategy in the corpus. Through references to God, prayer, mercy, humility, and forgiveness, apologizers embed their apologies within a transcendent moral framework that extends beyond the immediate interpersonal context. Repentance is thus constructed not only as an obligation toward the offended party but also as an act of accountability before a higher spiritual authority. By invoking shared religious values, speakers seek to legitimize their remorse,

strengthen their moral credibility, and encourage reconciliation. This strategy is exemplified in the following extract: *« Devant Dieu et les hommes je regrette cette situation malheureuse (...) Malika, toi dont la dignité et l'honneur ont été bafoués, je te demande pardon (...) Je prie le Seigneur de te fortifier (...) Dans ta miséricorde et ta bonté infinie, tu pardonnes toujours »* ('Before God and before humankind, I regret this unfortunate situation (...) Malika, you whose dignity and honour have been violated, I ask for your forgiveness (...) I pray that the Lord may strengthen you (...) In your mercy and infinite goodness, you always forgive'). The expression *« Devant Dieu et les hommes »* establishes a dual framework of accountability by placing the offense under both social and divine judgment. Simultaneously, the acknowledgment of the victim's suffering and the invocation of prayer function as symbolic acts of empathy, concern, and moral reparation. A distinctive feature of this discourse is its reliance on religious ideals such as humility, mercy, redemption, and moral renewal. Expressions such as *« Je prie le Seigneur »* ('I pray to the Lord') and *« Je me tourne humblement vers le Seigneur »* ('I humbly turn to the Lord') portray the speaker as morally reflective and spiritually accountable. References to divine forgiveness further frame reconciliation as a shared ethical and religious value, while images of kneeling before God reinforce a posture of humility, submission, and contrition. More broadly, religious discourse performs several interconnected functions. It legitimizes repentance by grounding it in a transcendent moral order, contributes to ethos reconstruction through the display of humility and moral accountability, and promotes reconciliation by presenting forgiveness as both a spiritual virtue and a social ideal. In doing so, it transforms the apology into a quasi-confessional act that combines acknowledgment of wrongdoing, moral self-examination, and the quest for redemption. As a result, religious discourse serves as a powerful resource for ethical positioning and symbolic repair, enabling speakers to portray their repentance as morally authentic, socially meaningful, and worthy of forgiveness.

Reaffirming Awareness of Harm and Repair-Oriented Closure

A further rapport-building strategy identified in the corpus involves the explicit acknowledgment of the harm caused by the offense coupled with the projection of values associated with reconciliation, respect, and social cohesion. Unlike justificatory discourse, which foregrounds intentions and circumstances, these formulations focus on the consequences of the transgression and the speaker's commitment to repairing the damaged relationship. In doing so, they signal both awareness of the offense and a willingness to engage in restorative action. This strategy is exemplified in statements such as *« Conscient de l'impact de mes propos, je tiens à réaffirmer mon attachement à l'unité, à la fraternité et au dialogue. Veuillez accepter ces excuses comme un geste sincère de réconciliation. Avec tout mon respect »* ('Aware of the impact of my statements, I wish to reaffirm my

commitment to unity, fraternity, and dialogue. Please accept these apologies as a sincere gesture of reconciliation. With all my respect'). The opening expression, *« Conscient de l'impact de mes propos »*, explicitly recognizes the consequences of the offense and demonstrates sensitivity to the audience's experience. This acknowledgment is followed by a reaffirmation of values such as unity, fraternity, and dialogue, which enables the speaker to realign with socially approved norms and present the transgression as inconsistent with his or her broader moral commitments. The apology is thus framed not merely as an admission of wrongdoing but as a renewed commitment to the principles that sustain harmonious social relations.

A similar orientation is evident in statements such as *« Mon intention n'a jamais été de diviser. Au contraire, je crois en l'unité, en la paix et en la solidarité »* ('My intention was never to divide. On the contrary, I believe in unity, peace, and solidarity') and *« Nous sommes une même famille, portée par l'amour de notre pays et le respect des autres »* ('We are one family, united by our love for our country and our respect for others'). In these examples, reconciliation is constructed as more than the resolution of a specific dispute; it becomes a process of reaffirming shared values, collective identities, and community bonds. Such references contribute to the speaker's moral repositioning by emphasizing commitment to social harmony and collective well-being.

Repair-oriented discourse is often reinforced through respectful closing formulas such as *« Avec tout mon respect »* ('With all my respect'), *« Je vous remercie pour votre compréhension »* ('Thank you for your understanding'), and *« Je vous prie d'accepter mes excuses »* ('Please accept my apologies'). Although highly conventionalized, these expressions perform important interactional work. They function as ritualized markers of closure that restore mutual recognition, reaffirm respect for the audience, and bring the apologetic sequence to a conciliatory conclusion. By projecting deference, gratitude, and goodwill, they help transform the apology from a simple acknowledgment of wrongdoing into an act of relational repair.

Overall, the combination of harm acknowledgment, value reaffirmation, and respectful closure constitutes a powerful mechanism of rapport management. Through these resources, apologizers demonstrate awareness of the consequences of their actions, reassert adherence to shared moral principles, and create discursive conditions conducive to forgiveness, trust restoration, and the re-establishment of social cohesion.

Expressions of Affection, Respect, Gratitude, and Ethos Construction

Expressions of affection, respect, and gratitude constitute important rapport-building strategies in public apologies. Beyond the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, these supportive acts attend to the recipients' positive face, reinforce social bonds, and contribute to the reconstruction of the apologizer's public image. By displaying appreciation,

deference, and relational concern, speakers seek to project an ethos of humility, sincerity, and moral accountability, thereby enhancing the persuasive and restorative force of their apologies. One recurrent strategy is the expression of gratitude toward the audience or the victim, as illustrated by *« Je regrette sincèrement cette situation et je vous remercie d'avoir accepté mes excuses »* ('I sincerely regret this situation and thank you for accepting my apologies'). Such formulations explicitly recognize the recipient's willingness to engage in the repair process and portray forgiveness as an act of generosity and goodwill. By acknowledging the audience's positive response, the speaker not only expresses appreciation but also fosters a cooperative interactional climate conducive to reconciliation and trust restoration. Similarly, expressions of respect function as powerful relational resources in the management of face and the repair of damaged relationships. Consider the statement *« Je réitère mon profond respect pour Fingon Tralala et demande humblement pardon pour le tort que ces propos ont pu causer »* ('I reiterate my deep respect for Fingon Tralala and humbly ask forgiveness for the harm these statements may have caused'). The phrase *« profond respect »* positively evaluates the recipient and enhances his or her social value, while the adverb *« humblement »* signals deference and self-lowering. Together, these elements reinforce the speaker's recognition of the recipient's dignity and strengthen the interpersonal orientation of the apology. More broadly, expressions of affection, gratitude, and respect play a central role in ethos construction. By foregrounding appreciation, esteem, humility, and concern for others, speakers seek to re-establish a morally credible identity after a reputational threat. These rapport-building acts complement the apology proper by demonstrating that the speaker is not only willing to acknowledge wrongdoing but is also committed to restoring mutual respect, repairing interpersonal bonds, and rebuilding trust. As such, they function as important resources for relational repair, enhancing both the credibility of the apologizer and the restorative potential of the apology itself.

Empathy and Acknowledgment of Harm

Empathy and acknowledgment of harm emerge as particularly salient rapport-building strategies in the corpus. Rather than limiting the apology to an acknowledgment of wrongdoing, speakers frequently demonstrate awareness of the emotional consequences of their actions and explicitly recognize the suffering experienced by those affected. Through such formulations, they validate recipients' feelings, foreground the victims' perspective, and present themselves as sensitive to the interpersonal impact of the offense.

This strategy is illustrated by statements such as *« Je peux imaginer votre colère et votre souffrance »* ('I can imagine your anger and your suffering'), *« Je comprends la déception et la peine que mes paroles ont pu provoquer »* ('I understand the disappointment and distress that my words may have caused'), *« Je mesure la douleur que cette situation*

a causée à vous et à vos proches » ('I realize the pain that this situation has caused you and your loved ones'), and *« Je sais que beaucoup d'entre vous se sont sentis blessés, trahis ou profondément affectés par mes actes »* ('I know that many of you felt hurt, betrayed, or deeply affected by my actions'). By explicitly naming emotions such as anger, disappointment, pain, betrayal, and suffering, speakers acknowledge the legitimacy of the recipients' reactions and signal a heightened awareness of the harm inflicted. These empathic formulations perform several important interactional functions. First, they validate the emotional experiences of those affected and symbolically restore their dignity by recognizing the seriousness of the harm endured. Second, they enhance the perceived sincerity of the apology by demonstrating concern not only for the transgression itself but also for its psychological and social consequences. Third, they reduce interpersonal distance and foster emotional alignment between the apologizer and the audience, thereby creating conditions more conducive to forgiveness and reconciliation. More broadly, empathy functions as a powerful mechanism of relational repair. By foregrounding the victims' suffering and explicitly acknowledging their emotional reality, speakers project an image of moral awareness, compassion, and genuine remorse. In doing so, they strengthen their credibility and reinforce the restorative potential of the apology.

Appeals to Human Fallibility

A further rapport-building strategy identified in the corpus is the invocation of human fallibility. Through this strategy, speakers frame the offense as the consequence of human imperfection rather than deliberate malice, thereby situating the transgression within the broader condition of human vulnerability, learning, and moral development. While responsibility is not denied, the offense is interpreted as part of a process of growth rather than as evidence of a fundamentally flawed character.

This strategy is exemplified in the statement: *« Comme tout être humain, vous vous en doutez bien, avec les attributions que vous venez de me donner, je suis à une autre école de la vie »* ('Like any human being, as you can well imagine, and given the responsibilities you have entrusted to me, I am learning from life's experience'). Here, the speaker presents himself as an ordinary individual who, despite occupying a position of responsibility, remains subject to the limitations and errors inherent in the human condition. The wrongdoing is thus reframed as a moment of learning and self-development rather than an intentional act of misconduct.

Appeals to human fallibility serve several interconnected functions. They act as mitigating devices by reducing the perceived severity of the offense while preserving acknowledgment of error. By emphasizing that mistakes are a universal aspect of human experience, speakers establish common ground with their audience and invite understanding, empathy, and tolerance. The expression *« je suis à une autre école de la vie*

» is particularly revealing in this respect, as it presents the incident as a formative experience from which valuable lessons can be drawn. At the same time, this strategy contributes to ethos reconstruction. By emphasizing reflection, learning, and personal growth, apologizers portray themselves as individuals capable of self-criticism and moral improvement. The offense is therefore framed as an isolated lapse rather than a reflection of enduring character deficiencies. In this way, appeals to human fallibility allow speakers to balance accountability with self-humanization, fostering empathy while encouraging recipients to interpret the transgression as a forgivable error rather than an intentional wrongdoing.

Overall, references to human fallibility function as important resources for rapport management and image repair. By invoking a shared human condition marked by imperfection, learning, and resilience, speakers seek to reduce blame, strengthen identification with their audience, and facilitate reconciliation.

Multi-Audience Orientation

Another salient rapport-building strategy in the corpus is the extension of apologies to multiple audiences. Rather than addressing only the immediate victim, apologizers frequently broaden the scope of their discourse to include wider communities, supporters, family members, fellow citizens, and, in some cases, God. This expansion reflects an awareness that public transgressions often have consequences that extend beyond direct interpersonal relationships, affecting collective identities, public trust, and the speaker's standing within the broader community. Consequently, public apologies are constructed not merely as acts of interpersonal repair but as attempts to restore relationships across multiple spheres of accountability. This strategy is illustrated by statements such as *« Devant Dieu et les hommes je regrette cette situation malheureuse (...) Malika, toi dont la dignité et l'honneur ont été bafoués, je te demande pardon »* ('Before God and before humankind, I regret this unfortunate situation (...) Malika, you whose dignity and honour have been violated, I ask for your forgiveness'). Here, the speaker simultaneously addresses the direct victim, the wider public, and a higher moral authority. The apology therefore operates on several levels, acknowledging personal harm while also recognizing broader social and ethical responsibilities. Through this multi-layered address, repentance is presented as a public act of accountability rather than a purely private expression of regret. A similar dynamic is evident in *« Chers frères et sœurs, peuple camerounais (...), je reconnais vous avoir déçu, j'en appelle à votre clémence »* ('Dear brothers and sisters, people of Cameroon (...), I acknowledge that I have disappointed you, and I appeal to your clemency') and *« Mes précieux compatriotes, chers concitoyens (...), je vous présente très sincèrement mes excuses »* ('My precious compatriots, dear fellow citizens (...), I offer you my most sincere apologies'). In these examples, the apology is directed to a national

audience and the offense is framed as a breach of collective trust and solidarity rather than solely an individual grievance. By explicitly recognizing the disappointment experienced by a broader community, speakers construct the apology as a form of public redress aimed at restoring communal harmony. Addressing multiple audiences performs several important interactional and rhetorical functions. First, it broadens the scope of repair by acknowledging both direct and indirect victims of the offense. Second, it contributes to ethos reconstruction by demonstrating sensitivity to the concerns of the various constituencies affected by the controversy. Third, it underscores the inherently public and performative nature of apology discourse, positioning repentance as an act of accountability before a wider moral community. Through this strategy, speakers seek not only to repair interpersonal relationships but also to rebuild collective trust, reaffirm shared values, and restore their legitimacy within the social groups to which they belong. In this sense, multi-audience address functions as a powerful mechanism of relational and symbolic repair, enabling apologizers to reconnect simultaneously with individuals, communities, and broader systems of moral judgment.

The preceding analysis has shown that public apologizers rely on a range of interpersonal and relational resources to foster reconciliation and restore social bonds.

Conclusion

This study has shown that public apologies constitute complex discursive performances through which speakers negotiate accountability, repair damaged identities, and restore social relationships in the public sphere. Far from being limited to formulaic expressions of regret, these apologies operate as macro-speech acts that combine direct and indirect strategies, including apologies proper, requests for forgiveness, acknowledgements of responsibility, explanations and justifications, corrective actions, and promises of non-recurrence. The strategic articulation of these moves enables apologizers not only to address wrongdoing but also to manage the reputational and relational consequences of public transgression.

The analysis further demonstrates that the effectiveness of public apologies depends heavily on a range of rapport-building strategies that complement the apologetic act itself. Through expressions of empathy, gratitude, respect, fraternity, religious commitment, and appeals to shared values, speakers actively engage in relational repair. These supportive moves contribute to the reconstruction of ethos by projecting images of sincerity, humility, accountability, and moral awareness while simultaneously addressing the face needs of victims, audiences, and the broader community. Public apologies thus emerge not simply as instruments of remedial action but as interactional processes aimed at restoring trust, rebuilding social bonds, and facilitating reconciliation.

The findings also highlight the deeply sociocultural nature of apologetic discourse

in the Cameroonian society. The recurrent mobilization of solidarity, social belonging, religious morality, kinship metaphors, and collective values suggests that public apologies are embedded within broader cultural understandings of personhood, responsibility, and social harmony. Apologies function not merely as responses to individual offenses but as mechanisms of relational restoration and social regulation through which speakers seek to repair ruptures affecting the wider moral community.

The findings underscore the explanatory value of postcolonial pragmatics. First, apologizers consistently invoke collectivist values and relational identities through expressions such as *« Nous sommes une même famille »*, *« Prenez-moi comme un frère »*, and *« Chers frères et sœurs »*. Such formulations foreground interconnectedness, mutual obligations, and communal belonging, reflecting a conception of social relations that extends beyond the individual-centered assumptions underlying many dominant pragmatic models. Accountability and reconciliation are therefore framed primarily as collective rather than exclusively interpersonal concerns. Second, the corpus reveals the central role of religious discourse in the construction of repentance and accountability. References to God, prayer, divine mercy, and spiritual redemption situate apologies within a moral order that transcends the immediate interaction between offender and victim. Responsibility is negotiated simultaneously before the public and before a higher spiritual authority, demonstrating how locally grounded religious values shape pragmatic norms and expectations surrounding apology and forgiveness. Third, the findings show that relational repair often outweighs individual face concerns. Invocations of unity, solidarity, peace, reconciliation, and national belonging frame public apologies as mechanisms for reconstituting social bonds and collective cohesion. In this respect, apologies are best understood not simply as remedial speech acts but as practices of social reintegration through which individuals seek reacceptance within the community. Fourth, the corpus illustrates hybrid forms of ethos construction characteristic of postcolonial communicative environments. Apologizers combine globally recognizable apology conventions with culturally specific resources, including symbolic kinship, communal solidarity, religious morality, and respect-based relational norms. This hybridity reflects the coexistence of local cultural values, inherited colonial languages, and contemporary digital communication practices, producing forms of accountability that are simultaneously global and locally situated. Finally, the frequent extension of apologies to multiple audiences, including victims, supporters, fellow citizens, communities, and God, points to a broader conception of responsibility than that typically assumed in conventional speech-act approaches. Public wrongdoing is constructed as affecting an entire moral community, and apology becomes a performative act aimed at restoring legitimacy, social belonging, and collective trust. Viewed from this perspective, public apologies in Cameroon are not merely expressions of regret but culturally situated practices through which speakers negotiate moral standing, relational membership, and social reintegration in digitally

mediated public spaces.

Overall, by examining public apologies in an underrepresented African Francophone context, this study contributes to scholarship on public apologies, image repair, rapport management, and intercultural pragmatics. More importantly, the study demonstrates the explanatory value of postcolonial pragmatics by showing how culturally grounded notions of accountability, morality, and social relations shape apology practices beyond dominant Western frameworks. Future studies could build on these findings by exploring audience responses to public apologies and by comparing apology practices across different African sociocultural and linguistic settings.

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