

Amber Kolar

Dr. Goldsmith

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An Issue Among Apologies

Over time, the word *sorry* has evolved and taken on many definitions, making it easier for individuals to communicate varying levels of sympathy and remorse, but—as ironic as it may seem—one of the word’s newer definitions is harming meaningful discussion among the United States. This specific definition comes in the form of an acknowledgement: in the United States, when a conversing individual is unhappy, the person this individual is speaking to can say *sorry* to establish that they recognize the speaker’s emotional state. If used thoughtfully, the expression can be a step toward helping the speaker feel validated and comfortable being open. However, it is all too easy—and all too common—for people to take advantage of this definition in order to manipulate a speaker’s train of thought, steer conversation, and escape uncomfortable (yet still useful and sometimes necessary) situations. This general view of the definition must be modified so that the word—in general—is used constructively, rather than evasively.

When having a conversation with a person who finds the current topic emotionally challenging, it is important to try to understand the upset person’s perspective. Conversations heavy in pathos only arise only when there is an issue troubling at least one person. Though, many issues do not have obvious solutions. Often, challenges that individuals face involve buried, personal components that make it difficult for those other than the individuals facing these issues to entirely know what is being experienced. Therefore, deciding on the best course

of action necessary to alleviate a person's heightened emotional state can be difficult if little is known about the troubled individual's actual perspective: coming up with a solution generally requires knowing the problem first. This simple fact means that deeper, more personal discussions are a necessity in troubling situations, assuming one's goal is to create an emotionally-positive environment. However, these meaningful discussions can be uncomfortable for those who are less experienced at having them and using *sorry* as an acknowledgement gives these people an easy way to continue avoiding experiences which would challenge them, force them to grow, and help others in the process.

Saying *sorry* as an acknowledgement can shorten meaningful dialogue by creating a flimsy, false conclusion to a bigger conversation. This American definition of *sorry* is comparable to saying *okay* or *alright* to let a person know they were heard. *Sorry* has become a direct substitute for these words in situations where *okay* would sound too impersonal or heartless. However, if it is not appropriate to respond to an upset individual with a curt *alright*, what makes it okay to do the exact same thing with a different throwaway word instead? Some may argue that using *sorry* is different because it helps with quickly expressing sympathy or remorse for an individual, while other words do not. However, while it is true that *sorry* has these empathetic connotations tied to it, saying one or two words will never uncover the same vital nuances of a distressed person's experience that a full discussion will. Also, although using *sorry* as an acknowledgement is not a lie (A person can not lie by saying they have recognized another's emotional state.), it can absolutely be a manipulative tactic. When a person has their feelings verbally acknowledged, they may—in the moment—feel obligated to let an issue drop, for fear of ranting on when the other person already knows what they are going through. However, it is highly unlikely for any person to know precisely what another is experiencing without having a

full conversation first. *Sorry* as an acknowledgement should not be used as if it is a quick and easy conclusion for an issue, because it is anything but one. In order to provoke more effective conversation, the term should instead only be used as a gateway into more meaningful discourse. Unfortunately, the United States has a long way to go before this becomes a norm.

In the United States, the acknowledgement form of *sorry* is constantly cutting uncomfortable conversations short, and this is not a healthy way for the society to operate. A common example occurs at businesses: when a customer runs into an issue with a service, they can sometimes be left in frantic or frustrating situations. If a customer has recently been in a frustrating situation created by an issue had with a service, this customer may decide to express their outrage to an employee unrelated to their issue. Often, an employee put in this situation will acknowledge the upset customer's feelings with a quick *sorry* to pressure the customer into moving on. This makes work much easier for the employee because they then do not have to worry about working through the various roots of the customer's emotions. However, this ultimately results in the employee missing out on a chance to grow and the customer being left feeling unheard and perhaps even more unhappy. Interestingly, from an American perspective, the idea of the employee in this example talking the customer through their feelings seems wrong and foreign. This demonstrates that—in some cases at least—this is a society where individualism can be taken to its extreme. Many individuals are moving in the direction of making it habitual to close themselves off to others, wanting to handle issues on their own and figuring others ought to as well. However, the fact that the acknowledgement definition of *sorry* exists is proof that an individual will not always have all the answers on their own: the definition's existence implies that people are upset, and people being upset implies that there are still issues that individuals need other people to help them tackle. Sometimes, people need each other; it is better for

everyone when *sorry* is used not only to recognize a person is experiencing distress, but also to initiate a conversation meant to uncover the source of said person's distress as well.

Currently, the definition of *sorry* that acknowledges emotional hardship is widely used by Americans to block meaningful discussions from occurring. This is harmful because it prevents significant solutions to personal issues from ever being reached. In the long run, if a healthier American environment is to be created through vocabulary, this definition should be repurposed so that it opens up conversations more often than it closes them. This new view of the acknowledgement definition of *sorry* would force Americans to think a little more about one another before turning each other away.