

Chris Christie and Bridgegate

On the first school day of 2013, the majority of lanes entering the George Washington Bridge, the busiest bridge in the world, were suddenly shut down, causing a severe 8-hour traffic jam in which school buses and ambulances were at a standstill. Although originally inconspicuous, investigation by journalists eventually caught wind of involvement by the governor's office, of recently re-elected Republican Chris Christie.¹ Originally claimed to be a traffic experiment, subsequent investigation found what amounted to political retribution against the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee (NJ end of the bridge) who had endorsed Christie's opponent in the 2012 elections. Specifically, prosecutors found a specific email chain in which Christie's deputy chief of staff and the deputy executive director of the Port Authority (the operator of the interstate bridge) unambiguously colluded to cause the event. Missing at the time, however, was proof of Christie's personal involvement in the affair. Shortly after the scandal swarmed the state, Chris Christie came out to apologize for what had by that time been dubbed "Bridgegate":

"... I apologize to the people of Fort Lee, and I apologize to the members of the state legislature. I am embarrassed and humiliated by the conduct of some of the people on my team. All of the people who were affected by this conduct deserve this apology and that's why I'm giving it to them. I am heartbroken that someone who I permitted to be in that circle of trust for the last five years betrayed my trust. I had no knowledge of this, of the planning, the execution, or anything about it [um] and then I first found out about it after it was over ..."²

Although this speech act is unambiguously intended as a formal public apology, discourse theory on the matter will reveal that this passage has some key features which might distinguish the above from an idealized form of sincere apology.³

His body language and delivery of the address is, essentially, perfect. Christie's pace is slow and full of pauses; his voice breaks on several occasions. His eyes are lowered and seem not to be making eye contact with individuals in the audience, and he bites his lips before saying that he is embarrassed, while shifting his weight before every utterance. The only stone left unturned, so to speak, is the wringing of hands mentioned by Lakoff, uninterpretable due to the camera's cutoff mid-torso.

It is instead the content of the apology which deviates somewhat from a prototypical felicitous apology. Lakoff cites Fillmore (1971) for a list of inherent presuppositions of an apology:

- 1) X is bad for addressee
- 2) Speaker regrets X

¹ Blau, M. "Bridgegate trial explained: What to know". (2016, September 16). CNN.com.

² NJ.com. *Chris Christie bridge scandal: 'I apologize to the people of New Jersey*. (2014, September 4). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcRac4BjSxA>

³ Lakoff, R. "Nine Ways of Looking at Apologies: The Necessity for Interdisciplinary Theory and Method in Discourse Analysis." in: Schiffrin D., Tannen D., & Hamilton, H., (Eds). 2003. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Blackwell.

- 3) Speaker undertakes not to do X again
- 4) Speaker (or someone under Speaker's control) is responsible for X
- 5) Speaker could have done otherwise
- 6) Speech act puts Speaker on-down vis-a-vis Addressee

Here, Christie fulfills few criteria. He admits the harm of the fiasco on local inhabitants (1) and to the necessity of an apology to them (6). His body language, delivery tone, and expression of humiliation and regret all serve to fulfill an expression of regret (2). However, the remaining three criteria remain completely unfulfilled because he overtly does not take personal responsibility for the action, and instead places blame elsewhere. His acknowledgement of a cabinet member (under his power) as undertaking harmful action could plausibly be argued to fulfill criterion (5), but such an assertion quickly falls apart in light of him distancing himself from that member, and in fact placing himself as a victim of violation of trust.

Instead, this should be considered what Lakoff explicitly labels an “excuse”, where “the speaker denies either his or her own responsibility or ability to do otherwise.” (205) The actual implications of this theoretical distinction are not entirely clear, and to a degree, are incongruent with the subsequent evolution of Bridgegate. First, from a pragmatic standpoint, Christie overtly apologized and completed the speech act in the most unambiguous fashion possible by stating “I’m sorry,” without leaning on syntactic hedging in subordinate clauses or indirect implication of an apology taking place. Second, the mayor of Fort Lee, NJ, likely the most targeted recipient, publicly accepted Christie’s apology and called it “sincere.”⁴ In terms of public discourse and thought, this session was obviously an apology in name and consequence.

However, Christie’s avoidance of personal responsibility was indeed noted by the public.⁵ Accusations of insincerity were common, and some articles noted that the alleged scapegoating of his official was transparent. In this light, it is possible that the mayor of Fort Lee may have believed it insincere in private, but formally answered with the expected apology adjacency pair for the register and situation.

Two years later, witnesses came forward and discredited the core premise of Christie’s apology, namely that he was unaware of the plan to block the bridge. This was substantiated in federal court in 2016⁶, and has travelled up to the Supreme Court in early 2020, without verdict yet.⁷ Proof of the (former) governor’s personal involvement in the scheme exacts a heavy toll on the felicity of the apology, as insincerity about the core message that the affair was not in his control -- already somewhat infelicitous for an apology -- completely undercuts all the other points which may or may not have been felicitous, such as sincere regret. And yet, despite fulfilling likely none of the alleged theoretical requirements for an apology, Christie did apologize.

⁴ Memmot, M. “An ‘Embarrassed and Humiliated’ Gov. Christie Apologizes.” (2014, January 9). NPR.

⁵ Rice, A. “After the Bridgegate Verdict, Chris Christie Comes Off As the Guiltiest of All.” (2016, November 4). *New York Magazine*.

⁶ TODAY. *Chris Christie Knew About Bridgegate Traffic Jam, Witness Claims*. (2016, September 28). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pk8pa85awQI>

⁷ NJ.com. *Bridgegate case heard by U.S. Supreme Court*. (2020, January 14.) Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHxYresD0Bw>