ISSA Proceedings 2014 – The Sliding Scales Of Repentance: Understanding Variation In Political Apologies For Infidelity

Abstract: This paper investigates the apologies of four US politicians whose marital infidelities were made public. The paper notes the variations in the use of religious language, representations of the transgressions, and metadiscourse. These variations can be calibrated to political ethos, the nature of the transgression, and the amount of repair work required. Thus, generic qualities of the personal political apology are best interpreted as existing on a sliding scale relative to the situation.

Keywords: Anthony Weiner, Eliot Spitzer, ethos, image restoration, Mark Sanford, Mark Souder, metadiscourse, political apology, representations of social events, stance.

1. *Introduction*

Apologies abound in everyday life as important speech acts that support saving face, maintaining relationships, improving *ethos*, and righting wrongs. Over the years discourse scholars have studied public apologies, identifying various shared characteristics. They have been particularly interested in how political apology works rhetorically to repair relations among different parties and repair the image of the one apologizing.

While the majority of studies have helped define the genre, a few have pointed out variations in public apologies due to cultural resources and speaker roles. In this paper, I also investigate variations, but do so by looking at apologies from similar rhetorical situations. I limit the variables of difference by investigating personal political apologies – those made for personal indiscretions – in these cases, marital infidelity by US elected politicians: Mark Sanford, Eliot Spitzer, Mark Souder, and Anthony Weiner. These speech events share the same cultural context, speaker roles, transgression, and mass media dissemination. By limiting the variables of these selected speeches, I sought a more detailed understanding

of the linguistic and rhetorical choices made by the speakers and thus, a more nuanced understanding of apologetic practices. The analysis revealed variations in the use of religious language, representations of the transgressions, and the use of metadiscourse. These differences can be calibrated to the speaker's established political ethos, the nature of the transgression, and the amount of repair work required of the speaker. I will first provide an overview of apology, then discuss characteristics shared by the apologies investigated for this study, and finally, I will examine their variations.

2. *Apology*

For the ancient Greeks, *apologia* referred to an orator's speech of self-defense in a trial (Cooper, 1997). Today, apology is commonly understood as a speech act in which speakers try to repair the damage done to a relationship by acknowledging and expressing regret for some perceived offense or failure. An offense can cause doubt in the offender's ethos along various lines, such as moral integrity, faithfulness to a commitment, or competency in a given task. According to Lazare, a genuine apology must "acknowledge [the] offense adequately … express genuine remorse, [and]…offer appropriate reparations including a commitment to make changes in the future (2004, p. 9). Such an apology necessarily places a speaker in a reflexive position in which she is enacting one version of herself (the one who is sorry) who is commenting on and repudiating another version of herself (the one who committed the offense), with the hope that the newer apologetic version is accepted as authentic.

Benoit identified five strategies public figures use for image restoration in apologies:

1. denial,
2. evasion of responsibility,
3. reducing offensiveness,
4. corrective action and
5. mortification, which entails admitting the wrongdoing and asking forgiveness (1997, p. 253).

His last two strategies, corrective action and mortification, are particularly relevant to public apologies in America with its roots in Protestant Christianity. When studying the public apologies of several US politicians, Jennifer Jackson argued that "the political apology performance … presupposes… a doxic

acquaintance to the Christian doctrine of Original sin and the performed Protestant Christian personal testimonial" (2012, p. 48). Such testimonials frame "within the single narrative event multiple instantiations of the Self across time to distinguish between the past sinning Lost Self as Other and the redeemed present Found Self as that durable Self" (Jackson 2012 p. 52). A sinner tells a story of conversion by admitting wrong, asking for forgiveness, and committing to avoid future falls.

Similarly, Ellwanger discusses public apologies as "stag[ed] conversion narratives," a *metanoia*, the Greek term meaning a change of heart, that reconciles the offender with social ethical standards (2012, p. 309). This performance, he argues, is in itself a punishment and form of humiliation – a penance. Through enacting a *metanoia*, the offender reconstitutes her identity to repair her image and relationship with the audience. Further, the public spectacle of the apology can act as a deterrence to other potential offenders.

It is important to note that these qualities of apology discussed thus far are culturally bound. The majority of research on apology has focused on American and Western European practices. However, several studies have argued that apologetic practices differ across cultures. For example, Suzuki and van Eemeren (2004) illustrate that the Japanese have different expectations for apology than do Western Europeans. Japanese accept a simple statement of sorrow and stepping down from leaders while Westerners have a more defensive tradition that does not necessarily require resignation from a position. Also, in Japan a speaker's ascribed ethos, that which derives from seniority, sex, family background, can be more important in an apology than an achieved ethos, which is established in speech. Liebersohn et al. compared American and Jewish apologetic practices through studying apologies by President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Barak. They noted that the public nature of the Protestant confession, and hence US apologetic practices, does not exist in Judaism. Therefore, Barak instead relied on the Zionist historical narrative as a rhetorical resource (2004, p. 937).

Through this analysis, Liebersohn et al. explicitly argued against the "pretentions of universality underlying the study of apology" (2004, p. 941). In addition to the dominance of studying Western apologetic traditions, most studies are also focused on identifying the shared generic qualities of apology. Like Libersohn et al., I would like to highlight differences among apologies, rather than commonalities. The speech events I investigate here share many features that

reflect what we already know about political apologies in the US, relying heavily on the Protestant confessional model. However, despite the similar rhetorical situations, variety still exists among these apologies that influence rhetorical choices made by the speakers.

3. *US political apologies for marital infidelity*

In 2008, Eliot Spitzer, then Democratic governor of New York and formerly Attorney General, was found to have frequently visited high-end prostitutes. The next year, Mark Sanford, then Republican governor of South Carolina, admitted to having an affair with a journalist from Argentina. Prior to his admission, he had been missing for several days and lied to his staff about his whereabouts. In 2010 Mark Souder, a Republican representative from Indiana, resigned after admitting to an affair with a staffer. Finally, in 2011, Anthony Weiner, a Democratic representative from New York, admitted to having sent sexually explicit texts and images of himself to women, what is popularly called "sexting." He initially denied sending the images, saying his Twitter account had been hacked.

The analysis studied six texts: Spitzer's initial speech admitting to his "failings" (Chan, 2008) and his speech several days later stepping down from office ("Full Text of Spitzer Resignation"), Sanford's speech confessing to his affair and resigning as the Chairman of the Republican Governor's Association ("Transcript: Gov. Mark Sanford's Wed. afternoon press conference"), Souder's speech in which he confessed and resigned from his Senate seat ("Verbatim"), and two speeches from Weiner, the first in which he admitted to sending the explicit message ("Full Transcript Of Rep. Anthony Weiner's Resignation Speech") and then, like Spitzer, one a few days later in which he resigns his Senate seat ("Full Transcript Of Rep. Anthony Weiner's Resignation Speech").

These speeches all echo the Protestant testimonial with their central act of public mortification – each speaker admits wrongdoing and explicitly apologizes or asks for forgiveness. They also signal some corrective action by referencing their efforts to repair their relationships with their wives, families, and constituents or acknowledging the need to "heal" themselves. None of them deny wrongdoing or try to evade responsibility which would be contrary to a true confession. They also make some reference to religion or God.

In addition to mortification and corrective action, they employ some other image restoration strategies – most prominently bolstering, a sub-strategy to reduce the

offensiveness of an act. Benoit quotes Linkugel in defining bolstering as "any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship ..." (1997, p. 258). The speakers bolster their images by reaffirming their commitment to public service, indicating that despite their "private" or "personal" failings that their desire to serve was sincere and the work they accomplished significant. In his initial speech, Spitzer opens with

Over the past nine years, eight years as attorney general and one as governor, I've tried to uphold a vision of progressive politics that would rebuild New York and create opportunity for all. We sought to bring real change to New York and that will continue.

Only after this bolstering move does he admit his violation of "obligations to my family" and "any sense of right and wrong." In similar ways, all the speakers expressed their sincere commitment to serve their constituents, presenting themselves as true public servants. Souder, for example states, "It has been a great honor to fight for the needs, the jobs, and the future of this region where my family has lived for over 160 years."

They even characterize their resignations as a way of caring for the office and their constituents. Sanford didn't resign from office, but as chairman of the Republican Governor's Association. He does this, he says, in order to have the time to repair his relationship with his family, friends, and constituents. Sanford, then, in not stepping down as governor, shows he is still committed to public service and that he feels his affair, though wrong, does not indicate that he is unfit as a governor. Spitzer, though he says resigning is part of taking responsibility for his actions, he also says he is doing so as to not "disrupt the people' work." Souder resigns to save his family from media scrutiny. And Weiner states that he is stepping down because he has become a "distraction."

By bolstering in these ways, the speakers re-present themselves almost as they were as candidates running for election: idealistic, passionate, hard working, and self-sacrificing. This public persona is juxtaposed with the fallen individual. The personal vs. public dichotomy is implied or explicitly referenced by each speaker. Their "sin" does not, or should not, diminish the good that they have done and still are capable of. And, they will each be able to "heal" from this fall. In looking at similar types of speeches, Jackson argues that through these redemption narratives speakers "each generalizes his individual acts as typical journey of

anyone" that they are "representative of Everyman's fall from grace" (2012, p. 55), reminding the audience that politicians are only human and that all of us, at some time, fall and have to get up. Thus, the bolstering not only helps restore their image, but also supports the conversion narrative, the metanoia by juxtaposing the ideal self with the fallen self.

4. *Variation: religious presence*
Despite the similarities among these apologies for infidelity, significant differences also exist. The most obvious variation seems to be the amount of religious language used, which can be related to each speaker's political ethos. Although there are exceptions, in US politics, Republicans are considered the more conservatively Christian and the Democratic party more secular. Sanford's political ethos, as well as Souder's, was grounded in a Republican, conservative Christian tradition. Sanford, an Episcopalian, was a Southern Republican and member of the religiously conservative group The Family. Likewise, Souder, a Republican from the Midwest, and evangelical, self-identified and ran as a religious conservative. To break one's marriage vows, then, is a blow to this religious grounding of their public images. Their efforts to restore their images, then, must address this fact. Their metanoia, must be an explicitly religious one.

In his rambling speech, Sanford reflects on "God's laws," which he says are "designed to protect people from themselves." Here he acknowledges he has broken God's laws and affirms their wisdom. He further apologizes to "people of faith across South Carolina" and claims "believe it or not, I've been a person of faith all my life." Souder is even more direct in his religious sentiment when he states, "I have sinned against God" and later, "My comfort is that God is a gracious and forgiving God to those who sincerely seek his forgiveness as I do." This use of religious references and language gives "presence" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p.115ff) to their faith and makes their repentance a religious one.

For Spitzer and Weiner, both Jewish Democrats, religious faith was less a part of their public ethos. Therefore, their apologies, though in a form with religious roots, gave little presence to religion. In his first speech, Spitzer makes no religious allusions. In his resignation speech, he states "From those to whom much is given, much is expected," a phrase from the New Testament, and in closing asks for prayers for his successor, David Patterson. Weiner likewise makes no religious references in his first speech. In his second, his only religious

reference is in his closing thought when he states, "With God's help and with hard work we will all be successful." In comparison to Sanford and Souder, then, Spitzer and Weiner's apologies are not grounded in religious terms. They didn't need to be since religion was not part of their public ethos. In fact, if they had suddenly expressed strong religious sentiment in these apologies, their authenticity may have been questioned. Not surprisingly, then, the presence given to religious sentiment remains consistent with the political ethos of the speaker. This highlights the fact that image restoration strategies depend upon, in part, the prior image being restored.

5. *Variation: representations of transgressions*
A more significant difference exists in how the speakers represent their transgressions. In some cases the transgression was already known publically (Spitzer), in others there was suspicion and speculation (Weiner), and others little was known yet by the public (Souder and Sanford). But in all cases, the speakers, as part of the apology, had to admit to wrongdoing and therefore, had to represent the transgression in some way. Fairclough states that when "representing a social event, one is incorporating it within the context of another social event, recontextualizing it" (2003, p. 139). This recontextualizing filters the elements of the social event: it decides what details to include or exclude or foreground or background, giving presence to some aspects of the situation rather than others. It also represents the event as more or less abstract, arranges them in a certain order, and may or may not make additions to the event, such as explanations or evaluations (Fairclough 2003, p.139).

In the apologies, the representations of transgressions vary in their levels of abstraction. These differences can be related to the legality of the transgression and with the forthrightness with which the speaker initially dealt with the media and the public in relation to the transgression. Despite these differences, the representations still all contribute to image restoration.

First, legality: although prosecution for patronizing a prostitute is rare, Spitzer still faced possible criminal charges in relation to his use of prostitutes. The Justice Department was investigating him for possibly breaking several laws: one law involved transporting someone across state lines for the purpose of prostitution, another involved how he paid for the prostitutes (he may have engaged in "structuring," which means the money was paid in such a way as to "conceal their purpose and source"), and finally, he was also being investigated

for possibly using campaign funds for his prostitution activities. ("The Times Answers Spitzer Scandal Questions").

Not surprisingly, then, although he had to admit guilt, he had to do so in a very generalized way so as to not implicate himself with regards to any of these charges. In his speeches Spitzer represents his transgressions in two ways: "I have acted in a way that violates my obligations to my family and that violates my – or any – sense of right and wrong." And "... I have disappointed and failed to live up to the standard I expected of myself." Note that these representations are highly generalized – he never mentions prostitutes or even marital infidelity. He could be referring to many types of transgression – tax evasion, fraud, sexting, an affair. Thus, he admits to an unspecific wrongdoing, carefully avoiding possibly implicating himself.

Despite being very general, Spitzer's representations still assist him in restoring him image. In the first representation when he says "I have acted in a way that violates my obligations..." he, while being in the agent position, is still able to slightly distance himself from the wrongdoing. Using "acted in a way" instead of simply saying "I have violated my obligations..." is reminiscent of an old adage "hate the sin, not the sinner" which implies that peoples' actions are not necessarily reflective of their persons. Also, in referencing his sense of right and wrong and the "standard" he expected of himself, he bolsters his image, reaffirming the values that he stood for as attorney general and governor. These phrases also allow him to acknowledge his own hypocrisy since in his previous role as attorney general he prosecuted prostitution rings (Eimicke & Shacknai, 2008).

The other three apologists did not have to worry about possible legal prosecution.[i] They were freer to be concrete in representing their transgressions. But, they differed in how forthright they were in the initial handling of their scandals. The less initially forthright, the more concrete the representations. Sanford and Weiner clearly complicated their situations with their lies. Souder's case, on the other hand, was fairly simple and direct: he resigned before the case became widely known by the general public. His representation is concrete, though not detailed:

I sinned against God, my wife and my family by having a mutual relationship with a part-time member of my staff.

He also calls it a "personal failing" and an "error." He makes additions to the representation by stating:

It has been all consuming for me to do this job well, especially in a district with costly, competitive elections every two years I do not have any sort of 'normal' life – for family, for friends, for church, for community.

Although he does not make an explicit connection, through this addition he implies that reason for his transgression, suggesting that the pressure and isolation led him to have an affair, thus minimizing the offensiveness of the event. He later says "For sixteen years, my family and I have given our all for this area. The toll has been high." He does not specify what he means by "toll," but this sentence puts him in a victim position, as suffering a toll with his family. It also implies that the affair itself could be the toll. This again helps minimize the offensiveness of the event.

The lead-up to the apologies by Sanford and Weiner were less forthright. Sanford told his staff he was hiking the Appalachian Trail, but his cell phone was turned off and they were not able to reach him for several days. His wife also could not account for his whereabouts. This situation lead to speculation and concern by members of the state Senate and of course, put his staff in a difficult position ("Sanford back Wednesday"). He was, in fact, in Argentina visiting his mistress. Thus, he had secondary transgressions to address in his speech – his lying to his staff and being unreachable. He represents his affair in concrete terms:

I've been unfaithful to my wife. I have developed a relationship with a dear, dear friend from Argentina. It began innocently as I suspect many of these things do in just a casual email back and forth in advice on one's life there and advice here. But here recently over this last year it developed into something much more than that.

Note that although in the beginning of this representation he takes the agent position, accepting responsibility for the transgression, the narrative that follows provides a causal explanation that helps him minimize the affair. The "relationship," a nominalization, takes the subject position in the sentences, being the agent that "began innocently" but "developed into something much more." This narrative, by detailing the process, helps minimize the offense by making it understandable and relatable, even common. Here we see how he "generalizes his

individual acts as a typical journey of anyone" (Jackson 2012, p. 55). This characterization of the event is supported by calling his mistress a "dear dear friend." Thus, the affair was not some thoughtless fling with a random woman, but rather a "relationship" that developed from friendship. But Sanford also had to address lying to his staff and causing confusion:

I would also apologize to my staff, because as much as I did talk about going to the Appalachian Trail, ... that isn't where I ended up. And so I let them down by creating a fiction with regards to where I was going, which means that I then in turn, given as much as they relied on that information, let down people that I represent across the state.

Although this representation of lying is more abstract than that of his affair, it is still constructed in ways to diminish damage. By saying the Trail "isn't where I ended up" he seems simply someone along for the ride, without agency. And he softens the offense by referring to it as "creating a fiction," rather than "lying" which has a strong negative connotation.

Finally, Weiner had the most sensational transgression and circumstances leading to his speeches. Not only was sexting relatively new and uncommon, he emphatically denied in media interviews that he was the source of the pictures. He and his office claimed that his social media accounts had been hacked. They kept up this ruse for 10 days until he finally admitted he sent the pictures. Thus, in addition to sexting, he had the added transgression of lying about it to the media and the public. Because of this, his apologies not only had to acknowledge his previous self that behaved inappropriately, but also his self who boldly lied about it. Of all the apologists investigated in this paper, he had the most repair work to do.

While Weiner is concrete in his representations of both his transgressions, he does little minimizing. In his first speech he gave a concrete explanation of his sexting by narrativizing his scandalous tweet and the how he came to cover it up:

Last Friday night, I tweeted a photograph of myself that I intended to send as a direct message as part of a joke to a woman in Seattle. Once I realized I had posted it to Twitter, I panicked, I took it down, and said that I had been hacked. I then continued with the story to stick to that story, which was a hugely regrettable mistake.

In this statement he slightly minimizes the sexting by referring to it as "joke," but, unlike Sanford and Souder, there are no other additions or explanations that help his audience understand why he was engaging in such behavior or how it came about. The explanation he does provide only addresses the cover-up and again slightly minimizes by referring to his panic. After this statement he continues, admitting that he engaged "in several inappropriate conversations conducted over Twitter, Facebook, email and occasionally on the phone with women I had met online." Notably, he also specifies what he did NOT do: "To be clear, I have never met any of these women or had physical relationships at any time." He also then refers to his other transgression – that of lying to the media and the public: "I haven't told the truth and I've done things I deeply regret." In his second speech he represents his transgression more generally as "personal mistakes...and the embarrassment I have caused...the distraction I have created" and "the damage I have caused." Weiner, then, having the most repair work to do, is concrete, but does little minimization. This lack of minimization is perhaps due to the nature of the transgression. Unlike having an affair, extra-maritial sexting by politicians is still fairly uncommon and more difficult to make understandable or relatable.

Overall, investigating the representation of transgressions reveals ways in which their levels of concreteness or abstraction are related to the forthrightness with which they initially dealt with the situation. Also, the representations, whether abstract or concrete, are constructed in ways to support image restoration.

6. *Variation: metadiscourse*
The final variation among the speeches I will address is the use of metadiscourse. All the speakers use some metadiscourse, but its use increases with the amount of repair work needed, so that Sanford and Weiner employed the most metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is understood as discourse about discourse, or "the unique reflexive capacity of language, as used by human beings, to have itself as its subject matter" (Martinez Guillem 2009, p. 731).

Metadiscourse takes many forms, from explicit guidance to the reader such as "let me first point out" to more subtle modality markers. Vande Kopple identifies seven functions that metadiscourse serves, noting that any instance of metadiscourse could serve more than one function at a time:

1. text connectives (first, next, etc,),

2. code glosses, which help readers understand specific points,

3. illocutionary markers, which make explicit what speech act is being performed,

4. validity markers, which can be understood as modality markers,

5. narrators,

6. attitude markers, which express the speaker's feeling toward the text (e.g. "surprisingly"), and

7. commentary which directly dialogues with the reader (1985, p 83-85).

Others have pointed out how these metadiscourse functions contribute to ethos through positioning (Martinez Guillem 2009, p. 737), alignment, and evaluation (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989). Sociolinguists refer to this phenomenon as stance-taking. DuBois defines stance as:

a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field. (2007, p. 163)

Thus, when speakers express a judgment through evaluation, they position themselves as holding certain sociocultural values that either align, or don't, with their audiences.

While all the speeches had some metadiscourse that act as illocutionary markers, such as Souder's "It is with great regret I announce that I am resigning," Sanford and Weiner had more than twice the amount of metadiscourse than Spitzer or Souder. The additional metadiscourse in their apologies function as attitude and validity markers. The attitude markers are found in the expressions of desire such as "I want" and "I would" that Sanford and Weiner often use to preface their statements. Sanford is quite repetitive with the phrases "I would" and "I want": "I would secondly say to Jenny..."; "I would apologize to my staff..."'; "And so I want to apologize to my staff...I want to apologize to anybody..."; "I would ask their forgiveness."

In a similar way, Weiner states: "I want to thank my colleagues...."; "I also want to express my gratitude to members of my staff..." These speakers could have said "I apologize" or "I thank," but they add a layer of attitude markers that imply an emotional stance – a desire. Not only is the speaker apologizing or thanking, but

he *wants* to do so.

In addition to these attitude markers, they also employ validity markers. Sanford says he will "lay out the whole story" to provide "the bottom line"; he uses the phrase "bottom line" several times throughout his speech. Most notably, he precedes his admission of an affair with "The bottom line is this," implying that other lines or stories were out there, but his representation is the most accurate and relevant. Weiner uses the phrase "to be clear" several times, as in "To be clear, the picture was of me, and I sent it." These instances of metadiscourse are used to affirm the validity of what they are saying.

I attribute the higher frequency of metadiscourse, specifically attitude and validity markers, in Sanford and Weiner's apologies to the increased repair work required of them. They not only had to repair their images because of their infidelity, but since they mislead people or directly denied the wrongdoing, they also had to repair their relationship with the public and reaffirm themselves as *now* telling the truth. Thus, they strengthen their emotional stance as repentant through attitude markers and use validity markers to portray their current representations as truthful.

7. *Conclusion*

The apologies of these four politicians are typical of public apologies in the US. They follow the features of the Protestant confessional testimonial through mortification and corrective action. These moves contribute to the speakers' image repair as does their bolstering. Despite these similarities, however, variations exist in their use of religious language, how they represent and minimize their transgressions, and their metadiscourse. These variations can be related to their political ethos, the nature of the transgression, and the amount of repair work required. It seems that the nature and severity of the transgression have the most impact on the variations in these speeches. Also, it appears that metadiscourse is an especially important resource for speakers whose images are severely damage. Thus, it is worthwhile not only to look at whether or not a speaker uses a specific strategy, but also the extent to which they do so, relative to features of the rhetorical situation they face.

NOTE

i. Souder might have been investigated by the US House of Representatives for ethics violations, but he avoided this by resigning.

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