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“He offered an apologetic smile.” The politeness of apologetic gestures

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Speech acts are one of the most basic analytical categories in pragmatics and – as their name suggests – they are normally conceptualised as actions that are carried out through speaking. However, this contribution focuses on the non-verbal and multimodal aspects of apologies. In terms of politeness and face management, apologies are ambivalent. They are redressive and indicate a concern for the hearer, but they also include a certain amount of self-blame and thus threaten the speaker’s own positive face. Narrative descriptions of apologetic gestures were retrieved from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) through the collocation profiles of apology expressions. Such gestures may occur in isolation without a spoken apology, or they may occur together with a more or less explicit apology. In many cases, the apologetic gesture helps to discursively negotiate the severity of an event that may have been perceived as an offence and the speaker’s responsibility for it.

Keywords: Speech acts, apologies, gestures, facial expressions, *Corpus of Contemporary English* (COCA), face work

1. Introduction

The title quote of this paper appears in identical form in two different texts that are included in the Fiction Section of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). They are given here with some context as examples (1) and (2).

- (1) She took one look at his smudged hands and dirty clothes, sighed. “David. Did you forget?” They had reservations for dinner at the little Italian place downtown. “Uh, no,” he began, but since he wasn’t any damn good at lying, tried to explain himself instead. “I just lost track of the time, that’s all.” He offered an apologetic smile. “Give me ten minutes to get cleaned up and we can go.” (Stephen L. Burns, “Going, Going, Gone”, COCA, FIC, 2001)
- (2) Kemi’s mother suddenly emerged from the hostel gates, rolling one of Kemi’s wheeled boxes on the ground. Behind her, the driver carried Kemi’s mattress in a bundle on his head. He offered an apologetic smile when he saw me. (Uche Okonkwo, *The Girl Who Lied*, COCA, FIC, 2018)

In both examples, the narrator describes one of the characters as giving an apologetic smile. In example (1), the apologiser also produces a verbal apology. He implicitly acknowledges an offence, i.e. having forgotten the plans for dinner, and provides an excuse, “I just lost track of the time, that’s all.” In example (2), the apologetic smile appears to be silent. The driver does not say anything. As readers we may have only a vague idea of what an

apologetic smile looks like, but in these examples, the narrators assign an explicit illocutionary intention to a facial expression. Such descriptions have interesting implications for our understanding of the notion of speech acts. It raises important questions about the role of facial expressions in the recognition of speech act illocutions (see Domaneschi et al. 2017) and more generally about the possibility of performing a “speech act” with facial expressions or gestures alone, without words.

The term speech act goes back to the language philosophers John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969) and their seminal work which turned into one of the corner stones and foundations of pragmatics as we know it today. But the origin of the term, for a long time, focused research in very specific ways. Even the title of Austin’s seminal book, published posthumously, focuses on verbal actions; “How to do things with words?” At the time it was new to consider utterances not just as true or false or meaningless but as achieving interactional goals, as changing the world, as it were. Austin’s (1962), and later Searle’s (1969), work also focused the attention on single utterances, on their felicity conditions and on the underlying illocutions. Perlocutions were marginalised. And the inventory of speech acts largely depended on the existence of appropriate speech act labels. More than half a century has passed since this early work on speech acts and many of the constraints just pointed out have been critically discussed and the investigations have been extended in various directions, but the multimodal aspects of communicative actions have received very little attention from a pragmatic perspective. It appears that the term “speech act” has prevented researchers from extending their investigations beyond verbal communication.

In this contribution, I want to extend the investigation of speech acts to nonverbal instantiations, and as an illustrative example, I shall take apologies and investigate the various ways in which they can be performed as co-speech or silent gestures and facial expressions. On a descriptive level, I describe the range of gestures and facial expressions that are used to perform apologies. Or to be more precise, I describe the range of gestures and facial expressions that narrators in fictional texts use to describe the apologetic behaviour of specific characters, and how the use of apologetic gestures is related to the face work of speakers or characters.

Apologies have received a lot of scholarly attention not only from speech act theorists but also from scholars interested in issues of politeness and impoliteness (for some early work see, for instance, Owen 1983; Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989; Olshtain 1989; Trosborg 1995). Apologies have been described as speech acts that threaten the speaker’s own positive face because he or she acknowledges some fault and accepts at least partial responsibility for it, and many researchers have focused on the different components that speakers use to perform an apology and to minimise the face threat. In the case of a silent gesture that is described as apologetic, however, the analyst has no more than the narrator’s ascription of an illocutionary intent to work with, which poses a challenge to an analysis that wants to determine its politeness potential.

On a methodological and theoretical level, this paper argues for a specific way of investigating such gestures or non-verbal communicative actions. The investigation is based on the fiction section of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), and it uses an approach that has variously been called metapragmatics (Hübler 2011; Haugh 2018) or metacommunicative expression analysis (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013, 2014) to locate gestures and facial expressions that are described as “apologetic”.

Section 2 of this paper will provide the necessary background of previous research literature. It first sketches the different approaches that have been used to investigate apologies and the way in which these have favoured verbal apologies with an almost complete disregard for all non-verbal aspects of apologies. It also introduces some of the background of gesture research and how this relates to pragmatic theorising. Section 3 introduces the data and method that have been used for this paper, i.e. the relevant aspects of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* and the specific version of metapragmatic expression approach that has been developed for this paper. The results are presented in Section 4 together with a discussion of what this means in terms of the politeness potential of apologies. The final section briefly concludes this paper.

2. Previous literature

Apology research has a long history. In the 1980s apologies attracted the attention of researchers because of their inherent face threats. People who apologise acknowledge that they have done something wrong, something that requires redressive action. In the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987: 68) this constitutes a threat to the positive face of the speaker. His or her positive self-image is threatened through the admission of having transgressed. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Trosborg (1995) used this as a starting point for their investigations of apologies in contrastive settings. Blum-Kulka et al. used discourse completion tasks to find out how people from different cultural backgrounds perform such face-threatening acts while Trosborg asked participants to perform role plays for the same purpose.

Corpus-based research on apologies started with Deutschmann's (2003) influential study of apologies in the *British National Corpus*. He retrieved apologies from the roughly five-million-word part of the BNC that consists of demographically coded dialogues, and for the retrieval of apologies from the data he relied on a small set of lexemes that typically occur in apologies, such as *sorry*, *pardon*, *excuse* or *afraid*. Such a procedure retrieves a large number of apologies, but the precision is limited. The researcher needs to manually discard instances in which the search terms do not serve as part of an apology. And more seriously the re-call is also limited because the searches for these lexemes do not capture the more indirect ways of apologising without these terms. Deutschmann (2003: 36) claims that it is rare for people to apologise without using one of the lexemes in his list.¹ But this method has the advantage of retrieving actual apologies with their precise wordings. They can be analysed according to the speaker demographics and the chosen formulations. Often the immediate context of the apology reveals what the speaker apologised for and so on. In more recent corpus-based work, Lutzky and Kehoe (2017a, 2017b) set out to refine the corpus methodologies in order to retrieve large numbers of apologies more reliably from

¹ The claim is difficult to trace because he only provides a reference to Meier (1998) as evidence. In his list of references the intended title is erroneously listed with 1994 as publication year, and Meier (1998) refers to Holmes (1990) and Olshtain (1989). Their claims are somewhat more qualified, and they are based on apologies collected or elicited with the diary method and discourse completion tasks respectively (see also Jucker 2018: 377).

corpus data (for other recent corpus-based approaches see, for instance, Arizavi and Choubsaz 2019, and Aijmer 2019).

While these corpus-based approaches are interested in the distribution patterns of apologies across large corpora, a different strand of research focuses on the details of the local contexts in which apologies occur. Robinson (2004), for instance, examines the sequential organization of what he calls “explicit apologies”, i.e. apologies including *sorry* or *apologize*, and how their positioning within a turn-constructional unit influences the preference organization. Rieger (2017) also focuses on the local context in which apologies occur in her discursive perspective. She looks in great detail at a few selected apologies taken from a situation comedy and studies the way in which these apologies are developed and negotiated over several turns. Heritage, Raymond and Drew (2019) focus on individual instances of apologies to investigate the way in which particular apologies are designed to respond to the type and severity of the offense that was the cause of the apology.

Several researchers have focused on the larger impact of public apologies in which apologizers have to calculate the costs and benefits of an apology and the ways in which they can minimize the impact of a perceived misdeed. Kampf (2009), for instance, investigated a large number of apologies in the Israeli public discourse between 1997 and 2004. Mok and Tokunaga (2009) and Efe and Forchtner (2015) looked at specific public apologies issued by the Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, respectively with a focus on the chosen strategies and their effectiveness in the public discourse. And Okano and Brown (2018) looked in detail at the cultural implications of a public apology by Becky, an Anglo-Japanese singer and television celebrity, for her involvement in an affair with a married man.

Other strands of apology studies have explored the macrosocial variation of apologies and the perception of apologies. Barron (2019), for instance, uses an updated and refined version of the early production questionnaires to elicit apologies from informants from Virginia and Tennessee in a study of intralingual macrosocial pragmatic variation in the U.S.A., while Haugh and Chang (2019) as well as Murphy (2019) provide studies that shift the focus from the apology itself to the way in which an apology is perceived by recipients or onlookers.

In this paper, I propose a metapragmatic expression analysis, which uses corpus tools to search not for the specific speech acts itself but for explicit mentions of the speech act. This kind of approach has been successfully used in the context of historical investigations for which experimental methods cannot be used (see, for instance, Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014; Jucker 2018). Here, the researcher searches for a lexeme that is commonly used to talk about a specific speech act, e.g. the term *apology* and its morphological variants and uses the retrieved hits to analyse how people talk about this speech act, how they negotiate a possible need for it in a particular situation, the adequacy of a specific formulation or whether an utterance was really intended as an apology and so on. This method retrieves instances in which a nearby utterance is described as an apology as in (3). But it also retrieves instances in which a form of the lexeme is used to perform the speech act in question as in (4) and apologetic gestures that are used silently (5) or together with speech (6).

- (3) “Forgive me,” he said quickly. “I should have phrased dut better.” “Yes. You should have.” But Gioioso seemed inclined to accept the apology. (COCA, FIC, 2009)

- (4) Kneeling, Britt began to collect bits of glass. “I apologize for my outburst.” “It’s all right.” But it wasn’t. (COCA, FIC, 2003)
- (5) He was pond scum. She grimaced, then gave him an apologetic look. (COCA, FIC, 1998)
- (6) “My parents speak Wenzhou dialect,” said Meizi with an apologetic shrug. “I’ll translate.” (COCA, FIC, 2012)

Jucker (2018) used this method to trace the development of apologies in the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) containing data from 1810 until 2009 (for a longer diachrony of apologies see Jucker 2019). Through a manual analysis of all retrieved hits, he finds that a small but noticeable percentage of all the apologies retrieved in this way is performed silently, as in example (5) above. In the most recent half-century (1960-2010) roughly 15 per cent of all hits fall into this category (Jucker 2018: 391). He provides the following example (Jucker 2018: 394).

- (7) Morley nodded apologetically, but before he could answer Sorenson pushed him away. (COHA, FIC, 1934)

Here, the character’s nodding is described as apologetic, and the narrator makes it explicit that no words were added. Morely was pushed away before he had a chance to say anything. The apology is performed nonverbally. It is difficult to say whether the other characters recognised the gesture as apologetic. As a communicative gesture it was presumably maximally fuzzy and open to interpretation. But what counts for the analysis in this case is the fact that the narrator describes it as apologetic. Through the description, a clear illocutionary intention is assigned to the gesture.

These examples in COHA suggested that it might be worthwhile to investigate the description of apologetic gestures in some more detail in order to open up a new dimension of apology research. Apart Okano and Brown (2018) mentioned above, who provide a painstaking multimodal analysis of Becky’s public apology, apology research so far has focused almost entirely on the verbal aspects of apologies while the multimodal aspects have been largely ignored in spite of the growing literature on the pragmatics of gestures (see Hübler 2007; Wharton 2009; Payrató and Teßendorf 2014; Pereira 2018; and Brown and Prieto 2017, 2021 for relevant overviews).

Kendon (2004: Chapter 1), in his seminal book entitled *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*, reserves the term gesture for visible actions that are intentionally communicative and the result of at least a degree of voluntary control by the actor, and in that sense have the status of utterances. They go beyond unwittingly communicated meanings that humans in co-presence continuously derive from one another’s visible bodily actions.

“Gesture” we suggest, then, is a label for actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness. They are those actions or those aspects of another’s actions that, having these features, tend to be directly perceived as being under the guidance of the observed person’s voluntary control and being done for the purposes of expression rather than in the service of some practical aim. (Kendon 2004: 15)

Gestures can have a referential function or a pragmatic function. In their referential function (called representational by McNeill 1992), gestures illustrate concepts by drawing their outlines, by indicating their shape or by enacting or representing them (Lopez-Ozieblo 2020: 1). They are seen as part of the propositional content of what a speaker communicates

(Kendon 2017: 157) and they are usually analysed as accompanying verbal communication (Müller 1998), i.e. co-speech gesturing. This is what Kendon (1995: 247) calls substantive co-speech gesturing which contributes in various ways to the content of an utterance. This contrasts with pragmatic gesturing which relates to the pragmatic aspects of an utterance, such as its discourse status or illocutionary potential. Kendon (2004: 159) distinguishes three types of pragmatic functions of gestures. In their modal function, they change the interpretation of an utterance or comment on it. In their performative function, they add interaction with the interlocutor, and in their parsing function (which might perhaps better be termed emphasising function), they stress specific parts of an utterance.

In this contribution, I am concerned with the first and second type of gestures, i.e. gestures that add an illocutionary point to a verbal utterance or gestures that convey an illocutionary point on their own. In everyday conversations, where there are no narrative voices to help with the interpretation, interactants may find it difficult to assign a clear illocutionary point to a specific gesture. But utterance interpretation in general is not a decoding process that leads to an identity of what the speaker wants to say and what the addressee derives from the utterance. Utterance interpretation is an inferential process that leads to a resemblance of the thought that the speaker wishes to communicate and the thought that the addressee derives from the utterance (see Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wharton 2009; Clark 2013). Information may be strongly communicated. The speaker who says, “I apologize for my outburst” in (4) above explicitly (and performatively) states the illocutionary point of the utterance. Other formulations are less clear and leave room for interpretation. On this scale, gestures are at the opposite end of the scale and leave as much room for interpretation as possible, if it weren’t for the narrative voice in the fictional context which disambiguates or clarifies the situation for the reader.

3 Data and method

The data for this investigation comes from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, which in the version released in March 2020 contains one billion words of American English from 1990 to 2019 in eight different registers. Table 1 gives an overview of the genres that are contained in this corpus.

Table 1: The *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (based on the PDF overview available at https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/coca2020_overview.pdf)

Genre	Number of texts	Number of words (in mio)	Explanation
Spoken	44,803	127.4	Transcripts of unscripted conversation (TV and radio programs)
Fiction	25,992	119.5	Short stories and plays, fan fiction
Magazines	86,292	127.4	Magazines including domains like news, health, home and gardening, religion, sports, etc.
Newspapers	90,243	123.0	Newspapers from across the US
Academic	26,137	121.0	Peer reviewed journals covering the full range of academic disciplines

Web (Genl)	88,989	129.9	Broad range of web genres (taken from the US portion of the GloWbE corpus)
Web (Blog)	98,748	125.5	Texts classified as blogs by Google (taken from the US portion of the GloWbE corpus)
TV/Movies	23,975	129.3	Subtitles of TV shows and movies (taken from the TV and Movies corpora)
	485,179	1,002.9	

For the purposes of this paper, the fiction section is particularly important because of the narrative descriptions of interactions between fictitious characters. It is in such contexts that gestures are described together with their communicative significance. The analysis in Section 4.1 will show that the relevant vocabulary and the relevant collocations are particularly frequent in this section. For this reason and wherever possible the investigation will be restricted to this section. However, in the most recent version of COCA, it no longer seems to be possible to restrict collocation searches to individual registers because COCA now provides so-called Word Profiles for the 60,000 most frequent words. These profiles include genre frequencies, synonyms, frequent collocates, related words, clusters and samples of concordance lines. Additional links call up more detailed list of collocates and clusters. The collocates page linked to each word profile provides lists of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs that collocate with the word in question. They are listed according to their frequency. The collocational strength is also given, i.e. the value that measures the extent to which the observed frequency of the co-occurrence of the word with its collocate is bigger than it would have been expected on the basis of the individual frequencies of the word and the collocate. These word profiles are a very useful research tool because they restrict the collocates to content words and because all the collocates are sorted according to their word class. Moreover, they also include all relevant morphological variants, that is to say the information on the noun *apology* also includes co-occurrence patterns with the plural form *apologies*, and the verb also includes the forms *apologizes*, *apologized* and *apologizing* as well as the British English spellings *apologise*, *apologised*, *apologises* and *apologising*. But it must be remembered that the accuracy of the results obtained from these lists obviously depends crucially on the accuracy of the parts-of-speech tagger that was used in the preparation of COCA.

On a methodological level, corpus searches for pragmatic entities are faced with the difficulty that the searches must specify specific surface strings to identify recurring patterns in the data, but pragmatic entities are generally defined on a functional level which rarely translates directly into such surface patterns. An apology, for instance, can be realised in many different ways, and it is no straightforward task to list all the possible surface manifestations that can be searched for. Jucker and Taavitsainen (2013: 95) have described the dilemma in their three-circle model of corpus pragmatics. One circle stands for those approaches that search for specific illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), i.e. elements such as *sorry*, *pardon* or *excuse* that regularly occur as part of an apology and generally even flag it as such. This was the method used by Deutschmann (2003) in his investigation of apologies in the *British National Corpus* (see Section 2 above). The second circle comprises approaches that search for typical patterns of specific speech acts. Jucker et al. (2008), for instance, traced compliments in the *British National Corpus* on the basis

of typical patterns that had been proposed by Manes and Wolfson (1981). And the last circle comprises approaches that search for metapragmatic expressions, such as speech act labels that people use to talk about specific speech acts. These searches do not retrieve the speech acts directly but passages in which the speech acts are discussed or discursively negotiated (“Is this a compliment?”) and thus provide an ethnographic view of how people view specific speech acts. The three circles overlap in different ways. A search for a metapragmatic expression may also retrieve passages in which the expression is used to actually perform the speech act (“May I compliment you on a wonderful performance?”). All these approaches have their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of recall and precision (see Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013: 95 for a discussion).

In this paper, I am using a method that focuses on a subset of the metapragmatic expressions and their co-occurrence patterns. The search for apology-gesture collocations starts with the relevant word profiles, i.e. the word profiles for the noun *apology*, the verb *apologize*, the adjective *apologetic* and the adverb *apologetically*. COCA’s lists for noun, adjective, verb and adverb collocates were then manually searched for gesture terms starting with the most frequently attested collocation and down to a threshold of three collocations. Thus, the procedure searches for collocations of metapragmatic expressions, one naming a specific speech act and the other naming a communicative gesture, such as a smile, a shrug or a shaking of the head. The same procedure was used to retrieve collocations of apology descriptions with politeness terms. The final investigation that searched for apology components in utterances occurring in close vicinity of a gesture was carried out on a sample of specific co-occurrence patterns of an apology expression with a gesture expression. The utterances were coded by two coders according to a modified catalogue of apology components based on the list developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 289-294) and Jucker (2018: 16) (see Section 4.3 for details).

4 Analysis

4.1 Register profiles of apologies

As pointed out above, it is no longer possible to restrict collocation searches in COCA to individual registers. It is, therefore, necessary to first establish the register profiles of the relevant metapragmatic expressions in order to get a clear picture about the distribution of the collocations that are of interest for this paper. Figure 1 displays these profiles in the form of radar charts.

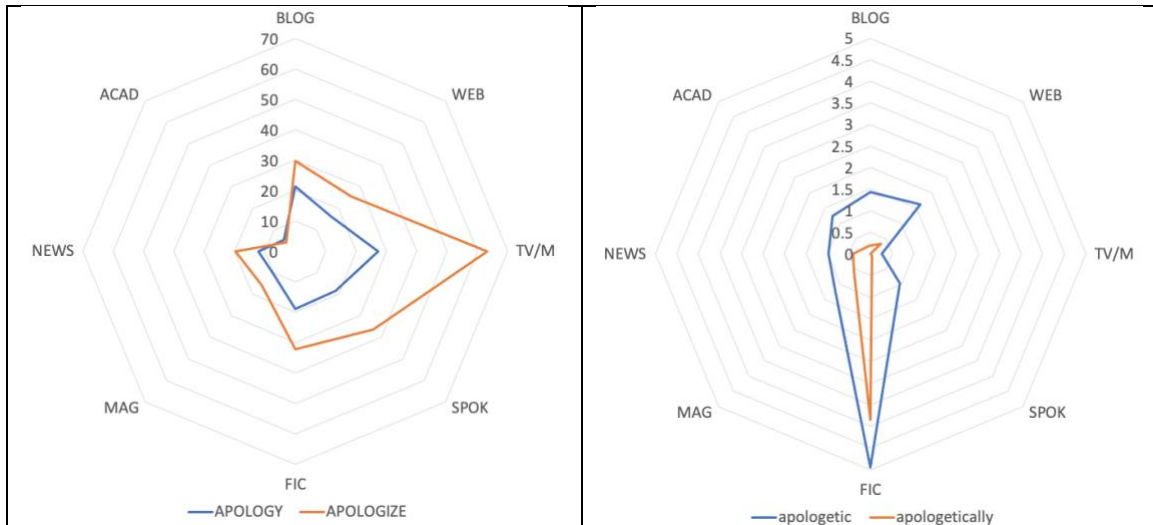


Figure 1: Register profiles of relevant metapragmatic expressions (capitalised expressions include relevant case forms and, where relevant, British spellings; BLOG: Web (Blog); WEB: Web (General); TV/M: TV/Movies; SPOK: Spoken; FIC: Fiction; MAG: Magazines; NEWS: Newspapers; ACAD: Academic)

The left-hand side of Figure 1 displays the register profiles for the noun and the verb. Both forms include relevant case forms and alternative spellings according to the search algorithms provided by COCA. They indicate that the verb is clearly more frequent than the noun, but both of them are particularly frequent in TV/Movies followed by Spoken, Fiction and Blogs. They are rare in Magazines and News and almost non-existent in Academic. For the adjective and the adverb, displayed on the right-hand side of Figure 1, a different picture obtains. Their frequency is much smaller altogether than that of the nouns and verbs as can be seen by the very different scales of the two charts. Moreover, the adjective and the adverb are clearly much more frequent in Fiction than in any other register. The adjective *apologetic* is about three times as frequent in Fiction as it is in Web, which ranks second. And the adverb *apologetically* is more than seven times as frequent in Fiction as it is in Magazines, the runner up in that category. It seems reasonable to assume that *apologetic* and *apologetically* are used mainly to characterise communicative acts and this appears to be particularly relevant in fictional writing.

4.2 Collocational patterns of apologies and gestures

In a next step, I explore the different expressions with which the adjective and the adverb collocate. For this purpose, the collocates feature of the relevant word profiles of COCA was used. As pointed out in Section 3 above, this feature lists all nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs that collocate with the search term in the order of their frequency of occurrence. For Figures 2 and 3, those collocates were manually extracted from the four lists that appear to indicate some sort of gesture and which list a frequency of occurrence in COCA of three or more. As might have been expected most of the relevant gestures for the adjective were found in the list of nouns, but some verbs occur as well. For the adverb all the relevant gestures appeared in the list of verb collocates. Some of the collocates have homonyms with different meanings, e.g. the noun *wave*, but an inspection of the actual

collocations confirms the reasonable assumption that in the context of *apologetic* it refers to the gesture rather than to moving water.

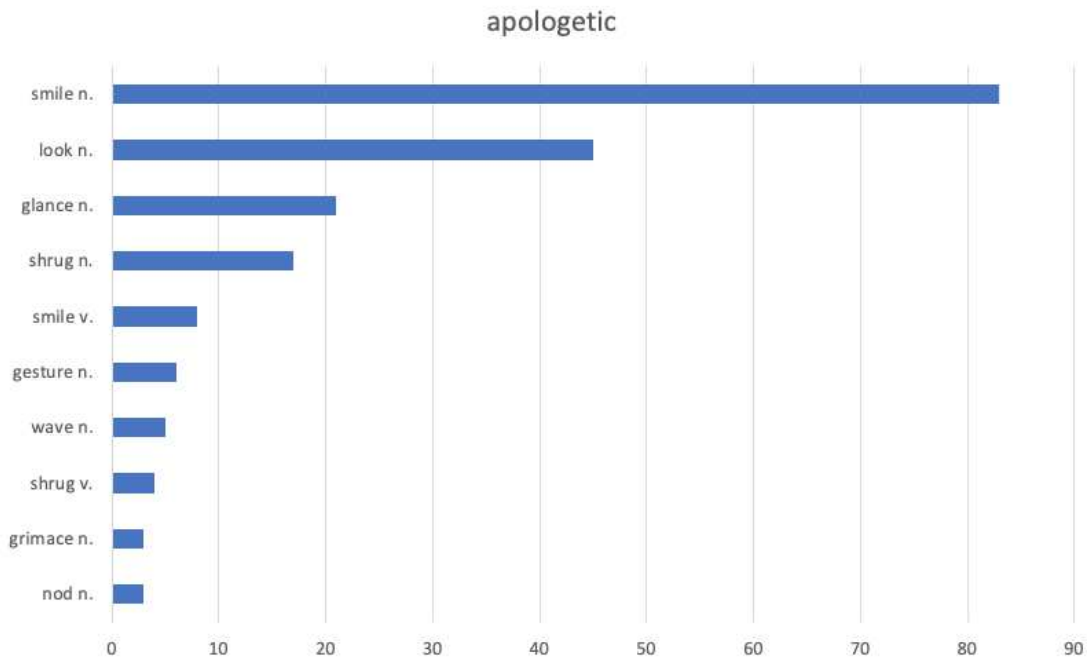


Figure 2: Gesture collocates of *apologetic* in COCA (retrieved manually from the list of collocates in COCA's relevant word profiles)

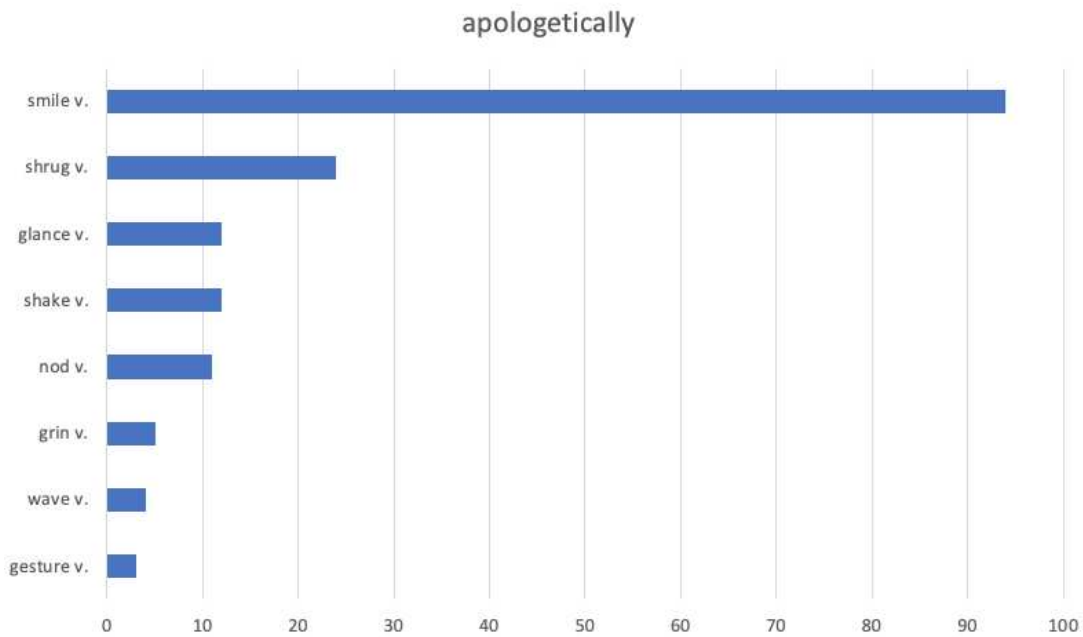


Figure 3: Gesture collocates of *apologetically* in COCA (retrieved manually from the list of collocates in COCA's relevant word profiles)

Figures 2 and 3 reveal that both *apologetic* and *apologetically* co-occur most frequently with a smile or the act of smiling. If we ignore the distinction between nouns and verbs, we can see that six expressions occur in both lists (*smile, glance, shrug, gesture, wave* and *nod*). Two of the gestures collocate only with *apologetic* (*look*, and *grimace*) and two of them collocate only with *apologetically* (*shake* and *grin*). This can be explained, at least to some extent, by the fact that most of the expressions in the two lists can be used either as a noun or as a verb. *Shake* is a special case, since in this case it is always some combination of *shake* and *head* which collocates with *apologetically*. COCA’s word-profile feature lumps together the relevant case forms for noun and verb collocates (depending again, of course, on the accuracy of the parts-of-speech tagger used in the composition of the corpus).

The different types of gestures that are ascribed an apologetic illocution fall into four categories. The most frequent of these are facial expressions comprising the terms *smile, grimace* and *grin*. These three terms together, both as nouns and as verbs, account for 193 collocations of the total of 360 collocations depicted in Figures 2 and 3. Descriptions of a gaze (*look, glance*) account for 78, and movements of shoulders and arms (*shrug, gesture, wave*) for 63 of the collocations. A head movement (*nod, shake*) is less frequent and accounts for the remaining 26 collocations. Table 2 provides relevant examples for each category, split into co-speech gestures and silent gestures. All examples are drawn from the fiction section of COCA.

Table 2: Illustrative examples of apologetic gestures (all examples from the fiction section of COCA with the publication year of their sources given in brackets)

Co-speech gestures	Silent gestures
Facial expression	
She looked back at him, and this time, her smile was apologetic . “Sorry, I got ta go. But it was incredible to meet you, Owen.” (2019)	He watched her for a while, but then with an apologetic smile , turned and walked away. (2016)
Dr. McBride looked up at him and smiled again, apologetically this time. “I’m sorry, Mr. Skilling,” she said. (2004)	He smiled at her, apologetically , and put his hand in his lap. (2013)
Gaze	
“I have to go,” she said with an apologetic look . (2016)	Tom glanced apologetically at the waiter, who was new and had never run into Edwin before. (2004)
“Sure,” I said, with an apologetic glance at Lulu. (2019)	Eleanor shot Nancy a quick, apologetic look , and then she too was gone (2017)
Shoulders/arms	
“Sorry guys.” Liz shrugged apologetically . “I always tell you that I don’t do sports.” (2019)	Her husband looked up long enough to give me a quick apologetic shrug before following her out. (2015)
“My French,” she says, gesturing apologetically . “It is very, very bad.” (2019)	Bandar made an apologetic gesture and the old man sniffed and turned to look down the road. (2006)
Head movement	

<p>The stranger shook her head apologetically: no, she could not. (2019) As Victor’s mother spoke, he nodded apologetically. “Madam,” the captain said when she was finished. “My sincerest apologies. I will instruct my soldiers to avoid speaking with your boys.” (2007)</p>	<p>The teacher nodded apologetically, (2013) Having no idea what she had meant, I shook my head apologetically. But Hardy replied without missing a beat (2008)</p>
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

In the descriptions provided by the narrators, it is not always clear whether a gesture is meant to be synchronous with a spoken verbal apology or whether the gesture and the apology occur in sequence. In the example “‘I have to go,’ she said with an apologetic look,” it is clear that the apologetic look occurred together with the verbal apology, but in the example “‘Sorry guys.’ Liz shrugged apologetically. ‘I always tell you that I don’t do sports,’” we do not know whether Liz shrugged apologetically during a brief pause between her two utterances or whether the two utterances were spoken without a pause and in combination with the shrugging gesture. It is clear that such details would be interesting and relevant for a pragmatic analysis but in the fictional context, they appear to be of little relevance for the narration itself. For the categorisation, the description of a relevant gesture in close vicinity to a verbal apology by the same character was taken as a sufficient indication of categorising it as a co-speech gesture. On this basis, almost two thirds (63%) of all the attestations can be classified as silent gestures. The remaining cases (37%) are cases of co-speech gestures. A breakdown of co-speech versus silent apology gestures according to the different gesture types did not reveal any major differences, except that gaze gestures tend to be silent with about 70% silent gestures, whereas head movements only have a little more than 50% silent gestures.

4.3 *The politeness of apology gestures*

As pointed out above, the politeness potential of apologetic gestures is not easy to gauge. In the past, apologies have been analysed as redressive actions with an inherent face threat to the speaker’s own positive face. The speaker acknowledges to have committed some offence that has in some way affected the addressee and is serious enough to require an acknowledgment by the offender. The methodology of investigating collocational patterns of metapragmatic expressions offers a first approach to the data. Figure 4 provides an overview of collocation frequencies derived from the COCA word profiles for *apology*, *apologize* and *apologetic*. It displays all the collocates that belong to the wider semantic field of courtesy or politeness. The word profiles for the noun and the verb include all relevant morphological variations. The word profile for the adverb did not produce any relevant collocates.

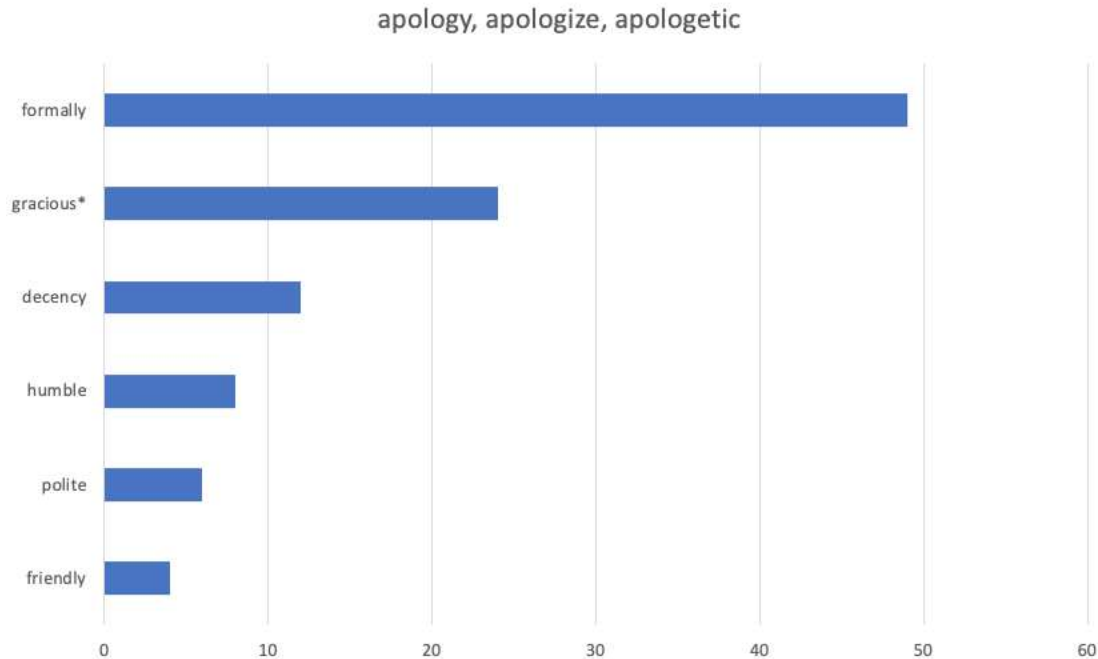


Figure 4: Politeness collocates of *apology*, *apologize* and *apologetic* in COCA (retrieved manually from the list of collocates in COCA's relevant word profiles)

Figure 4 reveals that politeness related terms are not particularly frequent collocates of the metapragmatic expressions *apology*, *apologize* and *apologetic*. The term *formally* is the most frequent one, but it is attested only 49 times in the context of an explicit mention of an apology. The terms *gracious* (including *graciously*) and *decency* occur 24 times and 12 times respectively. The remaining three (*humble*, *polite* and *friendly*) have frequencies of less than ten. Given the fact that *apology*, *apologize* and *apologetic* together with their morphological variants and spelling variants are attested 47,372 times in the one billion words of COCA, the politeness collocates appear to be negligible. It appears that the discourse on apologies does not overlap to any great extent with the discourse on politeness. A few examples of the actually attested collocations reinforce this picture.

- (8) In 1997 President Clinton formally apologized on behalf of the government. (COCA, WEB, 2012)
- (9) The government will also formally apologize for the seizure. (COCA, NEWS, 1995)
- (10) He is gracious and apologetic about not calling back sooner to respond to an interview request. (COCA, MAG, 1998)
- (11) Jeanette will smile and graciously accept his apology but think to herself that Nathan is just a bit odd. (COCA, FIC, 2009)
- (12) In reality, Sir Giles's tone was perfectly polite, nearly apologetic to even suggest such an idea. (COCA, FIC, 2012)

All these apologies appear to be very formal and in some cases clearly public apologies (see Kampf 2009; Mok and Tokunaga 2009; Page 2014; Efe and Forchtner 2015 and Okano and Brown 2018). They have more serious, and perhaps even legal, consequences. They are not necessarily more polite than apologies which are not described as formal. The terms

gracious and *graciously* describe an act as courteous, kind and pleasant, but when they collocate with a term of *apology*, they can either describe the act of apologizing or the way in which the apology is received, as the example (11) indicates. This leaves only a handful of cases in which the chosen methodology reveals passages in which the act of apologising is described as polite or gracious. Thus, there is very little evidence to suggest that narrators in fiction make an explicit connection between an apologetic gesture and politeness. The connection, if there is one, appears to be more indirect, and it has to do with the level of responsibility that the speaker takes for the offence that has been committed.

In an earlier study (Jucker 2018), I investigated the development of apologies in American English throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century. As part of the analysis, I retrieved apologies that occurred close to the metapragmatic expression *apolog** (including the adjective, adverb and the different forms for nouns and verbs) from the *Corpus of Historical American English* and – on the basis of Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989: 289-294) scheme that I modified slightly for my purposes – categorised the retrieved utterances according to the apology strategies that were used. It turned out that for the most recent half century, i.e. 1960 to 2010, three strategies were responsible for more than three quarters of all analysed hits. 37 per cent of them contained an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), such as *sorry*, *pardon* or *excuse*. 26 per cent contained a clear indication that the speaker takes responsibility for the offence, and 13 per cent contained the speaker’s explanation for why the offence had occurred without taking personal responsibility for it. The other categories included the offer of a repair, i.e. the speaker suggests a remedy for the offence; the promise of forbearance, i.e. a promise that the offence will not happen again in the future; a denial of intent or an indication that the speaker is concerned about the hearer’s feelings. About ten per cent of the retrieved hits were classified as silent. They were performed by gestures that were described as apologetic by the narrator or one of the characters. The diachronic perspective revealed that the percentage of IFIDs had increased over the two centuries under investigation while both the category of taking responsibility and the category of providing an explanation had gradually decreased (Jucker 2018: 391).

For the current project, the relevant passages were retrieved in a slightly different way, i.e. through collocation searches, and they focused on apologies that were performed by gestures. The results, therefore, are not directly comparable.² But an analysis of a sample of 163 apology-gesture-expression combinations revealed the following breakdown. 103 of these combinations were silent gestures without an indication of a verbal apology while 60 combinations were co-speech gestures. Table 3 lists the frequency of the silent and the co-speech gestures with a breakdown of the individual apology components in the utterances that occur together with the co-speech gestures.

Table 3: Distribution of apology gestures (Co-speech gesture categories adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 289-294 and Jucker 2018: 16)

Strategy	Frequency
Silent gestures	103 63.2%
Co-speech gestures	Explanation or Account 23 14.1%
	Illocutionary Force Indicating Device 17 10.4%

² All examples were independently coded by two coders. Among the 163 cases, there were only seven disagreements, which amounts to an interrater agreement of almost 96 per cent.

Offer of Repair	10	6.1%
Taking on Responsibility	6	3.7%
Denial of Intent	2	1.2%
Concern for hearer	2	1.2%
Total	163	100.0%

The figures are low, especially for the co-speech gestures and their accompanying utterances. They need to be interpreted with caution. The most frequent category of apology component in the utterances is the explanation or account. The illocutionary force indicating device comes second, but they comprise only ten per cent of all analysed cases of apologetic gestures. It appears that narratives which describe apologetic gestures have little need to add an explicit utterance, and if there is an utterance, there is little need to flag it explicitly as an apology. Speakers give an explanation for what has happened, but it is left to the gesture to characterise this account as apologetic. Or in other words, the speakers tend to prefer not to damage their own positive face by producing an explicit apology. The following examples provide some qualitative support for these conjectures. In these cases, it is necessary to provide more content in order to be able to guess more reliably what kind of scene is described in these narrations.

- (13) “Thanks for the cookies. I really wasn’t expecting.” Suddenly, a woman’s voice shouted from inside. “Kara! Who are you talking to?” Kara’s smile faded, and she quickly turned back to the inside of her house. “Don’t worry, it’s no one!” She looked back at him, and this time, her smile was apologetic. “Sorry, I got ta go. But it was incredible to meet you, Owen.” She grinned again. “I’m totally eating all of these cookies tonight. No doubt about it.” (COCA, 2019, FIC) ifid

In example (13), the character called Kara gives an apologetic smile, and at the same time she uses an utterance that is clearly marked as an apology, “Sorry, I got ta go.” She cannot linger to talk to Owen, who has given her some cookies. From a narrative point of view, it appears that the description of the smile as apologetic is not needed to clarify her illocutionary intent, but in order to describe a shift in the quality of the smile that she affords Owen.

In example (14), the verbal apology is less explicit. Here the speaker takes responsibility for the offence for which he has just been blamed.

- (14) She took one look at his smudged hands and dirty clothes, sighed. “David. Did you forget?” They had reservations for dinner at the little Italian place downtown. “Uh, no,” he began, but since he wasn’t any damn good at lying, tried to explain himself instead. “I just lost track of the time, that’s all.” He offered an apologetic smile. “Give me ten minutes to get cleaned up and we can go.” (COCA, 2001, FIC) resp

The woman in this example appears to be cross with David because he seems to have forgotten a dinner reservation and failed to get ready in time. With the utterance, “I just lost track of the time, that’s all,” he takes responsibility for not being ready, and with the next utterance he follows up with an offer of repair. He suggests a remedy for the offence. According to Blum-Kulka et al.’s categorisation of apology components, individual components are often sufficient to perform an apology. But it is clearly less explicit than the use of an illocutionary force indicating device.

- (15) My hair was damp and I sneezed several times. Miss Carmel Ann sighed. We waited awhile in silence. No one came. Not a one of the seven girls she had invited besides me, not Suellen or Gina or Wendy Marie, not Lynette and Lynelle, the twins, not even DeeDee Ducrosse, who always showed up because she worshiped the ground that Miss Carmel Ann walked on. “I guess it’s the rain,” I said finally, shrugging apologetically. (COCA, 2004, FIC) expl

In example (15), the speaker and I-narrator produces an utterance together with an apologetic shrug. The format of the utterance, in this case, looks even less like an apology. It is the context and the narrator’s combination of the utterance with an act of apologetically shrugging that turns it into an apology. The force of the apology is maximally vague. The speaker provides an explanation or account of why they are waiting in vain for some invited guests. But without the apologetic gesture, it might not even have been clear that the situation could be seen as some sort of offence requiring an apology.

In the next example, the utterance seems to have lost even more of its identity as an apology. The speaker provides what appears to be an explanation for an offence.

- (16) The cemetery bus was not the best place for Chen to mull over possibilities. Abruptly, the pungent smell of salty fish surged up, derailing his thoughts. He glanced around, noticing a covered bamboo basket at the foot of an old woman across the aisle. Probably in her late sixties or early seventies, she had a sallow, deeply lined face and a prominent mole on her shrunken chin. “My late husband likes salted fish,” she said with an apologetic grin, aware of Chen’s gaze. (COCA, 2015, FIC) spec

The old woman in the narrative must have realised Chen’s irritation at the pungent smell in the bus, and she offers what looks like an explanation for the offensive smell, “My late husband likes salted fish.” The apologetic intent does not really become clear from the utterance itself. It is only the accompanying apologetic grin which turns it into an apology.

- (17) That was when he felt a touch at his elbow, five cool fingers on his skin, and here was another girl giving him an apologetic smile and trying to ease past him – cut in line – because she was a sorority girl too and the three sorority girls ahead of him were already cooing her name. (COCA, 2019, FIC) silent

Example (17), finally, is an example of a silent apology gesture. The girl in this narration avoids a verbal apology, but merely offers an apologetic smile. She avoids any kind of explicit utterance that could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of an offence that might need an apology, and instead offers what we may assume to be a friendly smile. The narrator assigns a clear illocutionary intent to the gesture. From a narrative point of view, we may assume that it is actually the focaliser of the narrative, the male character, who interprets the smile as apologetic. From a pragmatic point of view, it is the combination of the situational co-occurrence of an offence – another girl jumping the queue – and a friendly gesture, which turns the gesture into an apology. It is the sequential positioning after an offence that helps to make an apology expectable in this case.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In terms of politeness, apologies are ambivalent. On the one hand, they recognise the need for redressive action, they express the speaker’s concern for the hearer and regret for what

has happened. To this extent, they are – by default – polite and considerate. But on the other hand, they acknowledge the speaker's perceived involvement in the offence. They include a certain amount of self-blame, or, in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness approach, they constitute a face-threatening act that threatens the speaker's own positive face, i.e. his or her wish to be appreciated and liked by others. The apology is a means to negotiate the face needs of both the speaker and the addressee, and at the same time it discursively negotiates the existence of an offence. Without an offence, there would be no need to apologise, and, on the flip side, an explicit apology acknowledges that an offence has occurred, or it even discursively creates one by suggesting that a certain event is, in fact, an apologiseable offence. Both the apology and the offence are fuzzy notions that need to be negotiated carefully, especially in cases that are less than unequivocal. It is in these situations that gestures appear to be particularly helpful in the performance of apologies.

The above analysis of patterns of metapragmatic expressions denoting apologies collocating with metapragmatic expressions denoting gestures has shown that it is in particular smiles, looks, glances and shrugs that are regularly described as having an apologetic intent. In the majority of cases, such gestures are performed silently. They are the only indication both for the addressee, usually a fictional character, and for the reader who reads the description of the situation that an apology was performed. However, the character has only the gesture to go by, and it is uncertain to what extent the apologetic intent of the gesture is recognisable to him or her. For the reader the situation is different because the narrative voice explicitly assigns an apologetic intention to the nonverbal gesture. In the case of a co-speech gesture, it is the combination of the gesture with an utterance that decides on the actual force and explicitness of the apology. The analysis above has shown that only few utterances include an explicit illocutionary force indicating device. In most cases, the utterances themselves are relatively vague and again leave room for interpretation for the character, but not for the reader who is told by the narrative voice that an apologetic intention was involved in the gesture that accompanied the utterance. Thus, the gestures help the characters to reduce their explicit apologetic commitment and, at the same time, this reduction of explicit apologetic commitment helps to discursively reduce the weight of what has happened and the speaker's involvement in it. If the event does not require an (explicit) apology it can perhaps be turned into something slightly unfortunate and insignificant which only requires a friendly gesture without the need to acknowledge any responsibility.

It is a matter of speculation how these observations apply to everyday interactions where there is no narrative voice which can interpret the illocutionary intent of a gesture for the observers. But it appears to be clear that speakers use gestures pragmatically, either with a modal function, to use Kendon's (2004: 159) terms, when they modify the illocution of an utterance, or with a performative function when the gesture carries its own illocutionary force. In the case of apologies, they use them to carry out face work by discursively balancing the severity of the offence (or its mere existence) with the need for an explicit acknowledgment of responsibility. The extent to which the addressees of pragmatic gestures are able to interpret their correct illocutionary intentions remains an open question. In actual conversations, they have a much richer ensemble of multimodal cues, which may include not only a verbal apology and a smile but gaze, hand gestures, tone of voice and more. In a written text, the narrator has to be more selective and highlight

an apologetic smile or an apologetic shrug. The narrative version, thus, is both more restricted and more explicit in assigning a specific intention.

On a scale of communicative explicitness, gestures occupy a position that is very close to the maximally vague end, but presumably this is not the full story. The examples quoted above have shown that it may well be the sequential positioning of the gestures that adds to their interpretations as tentative apologies. They are performed after events that turned out to be small ruptures in the course of events, a husband or partner who turns up unprepared for an evening out, the non-appearance of expected guests, a basket emitting a pungent smell, and so on. In such situations a friendly gesture in itself may come across as a concern for the hearer's feelings, as an expression of regret and, ultimately, as an apology.

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Corpora

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

Corpus of Historical American English (COHA): <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>

British National Corpus (BNC): <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>

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