

# Sorry

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## *Apology to Aborigines*

*"The wrongs were done not through words but through deeds. The rights need to be done in exactly the same way. Much breath is wasted in polemic while people's lives are twisted and broken out of sight of those who speak it."*

The article by John Parkins, published in Asian Times, Monday Feb 18, 2008 caught my eye. I had turned the pages of the newspaper, but his words brought back memories of my school years. The infinite number of times I had said 'sorry' to my mother only to be faced by sheer incredulity on her part. 'Sorry bollei hoe gelo?' (So you say you are sorry and that's it?). It would be over little things. Everyday things. I had forgotten to put the milk back into the fridge. I had not locked the front door properly. While crossing her, my foot had accidentally touched hers. 'Sorry.' I could not help but utter this little word that the Canadian brothers had taught me. This was the late-sixties. I was studying at a convent in Dhaka called St Joseph's high school. The brothers were patient. They would repeatedly instruct us, 'If you make a mistake, if the fault is yours, you must say, "I am sorry."' When I used the word at school, they would smile at me. Their smiles were kind and encouraging.

But things were different at home. My mother would immediately retort, Sorry bollei hoe gelo? (So you say you are sorry and that's it?) I was always at a loss. I never knew what to say. What could I say? What should I say? Should I say, 'But ma, this is what I am taught at school.' Or, 'You are supposed to say this ma.' Or, much later, devouring Barbara Cartland and Mills & Boons romances, should I have tried to explain, 'Ma, this is English etiquette, you have to say it. It doesn't mean anything.' But I was sure all hell would break loose. I was sure she would pounce on my words and say, 'Why say it then?' And of course I would be at a total loss.

Think before you commit a wrong, that is what she would say. 'But ma, what if something happens accidentally? I didn't want to, but it happened, still... what then?' She was quick to remind me, if you had been really mindful you would have been more careful with things and events. Then she would go on, 'If it does, be ashamed, behave ashamed. Don't go around, still strutting... And make sure it never happens again.'

The years had passed. I was on my own. I kept making mistakes. I kept mumbling sorry. But I was not able to forget my mother's words. I felt there was something more to it. But what was it? Manners? Or rather, lack of? That was often implied, that

they had more, we had less. I was quite unconvinced. There must be something else. Maybe it has to do with language. I was not sure. Philosophy, ethics? I was not sure. I used to read a lot, but I could not find any answers. I couldn't forget her words either.

Many more years later, I came across John Austin's work. In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin, a philosopher of language, says, language does not only convey information. It is a mode of action. Speaking involves acts: labouring, writing, cooking, cleaning, marrying, and marching. And therefore, a theory of language is part of a theory of action. There are two kinds of utterances, connotative, and performative (he revised much of this later, but that's a separate issue). Connotative ones are descriptive; they report. They are either true or false. For instance, the jug is made of glass. East Pakistan was part of Pakistan. The history of Aboriginal Australians is one of genocide.

Performative ones are different. What is important here is the attitude of the person speaking – her feelings, perceptions, intentions. Following Austin I could see that when I said 'I am sorry', whether I meant it genuinely or not was more important than uttering the word. My thoughts returned to what ma had said. Was that what she was driving at? At the meaning? Or did her words belong to, let's say, a different moral universe? Hmm, I thought, it's both yes and no. If something happened accidentally, against my will, then yes. I would have to be remorseful. Sincerely so. What were her exact words? Behave ashamed. But the other half of her lesson, that had been different. Think before you commit a wrong. Think. So that the need to say I'm sorry does not arise. I found Austin very interesting. I hadn't thought a theorist or a philosopher of language would give importance to the speaker's intentions, to his/her feelings. I hadn't thought what a speaker, or writer, meant by "accepted" was part of the meaning of accepted. Linguistics no longer seemed boring.

I return to the present. I look at younger mothers who instruct their children to utter the word 'sorry.' I remember a young friend who had come with her three-year old. He had spilt food, and she insisted, 'Tell you are sorry; tell them you are sorry for spilling the food. I feel slightly bemused when I read an article reporting a survey on the use of the word sorry by Britons ('Sorry to say,' BBC News 24). The article tells us that the word originated from the Old English word 'Sarig,' which meant 'distressed, full of sorrow.' What had earlier been a hard to use word is now an "over-used figure of speech." It is 'common.' It is a 'cheap and convenient way' of excusing inappropriate, anti-social behaviour. According to the survey's findings, the average person in Britain says sorry often. Two-thirds of the time, they don't mean it. I am more convinced than ever. My mother must have meant something very fundamental when she had objected to the word....."sorry "

### **Getting it wrong?**

Prime minister Indira Gandhi of India will be remembered. For her unforgettable statements. One of these was to waiting journalists. Something to this effect, 'If you exercised self-censorship yourself, we would not have to censor you, would we?'

It's funny. It's also very telling. We not only need to censor ourselves. We also need to pitch it right. Who does that benefit and how? What does apology do for those who apologise? That's the question Eva Mackey, a Canadian anthropologist asks of 'Sorry Day' ceremonies. These are enacted by local communities in Australia, and seen as part of a 'people's movement.' ('As good as it gets? Apology, Colonialism and White Innocence,' 1999). Her answer is, it accomplishes two things. It foregrounds 200 years of colonial violence, but the acknowledgement is made in order to erase genocidal actions. Simultaneously. Through a few simple words. Like magic. As such, it does a lot for the apologise. They are able to construct themselves as innocent. The actions themselves are rendered 'forgivable.' Before even being spoken, the acts are made forgivable. Not acts that can be punished, or avenged. Not acts that 'fall outside the bounds of forgiveness altogether.' She asks why do Canada and Australia's attempts at cultural genocide not mean that they be ejected from the United Nations. How can a few simple words do so much? To understand that, says Mackey, we must see apology as a 'speech act.'

Paraphrasing Eva, my question is: what does our self-censorship do for those who rule? It constructs them as innocent. As uninterested in power. Until the playing field has been levelled. Made empty for them. The only players.

### **Getting it right**

Is the observance of Language Day a speech act? Mouthing words, saying niceties. Only for one day, each year. Thank you Salam, Rafiq, Barkat, Jabbar, Sofiur Rahman, nine year-old child... Thank you for giving us the Language Day. We are sorry you had to die though...

Or is it about re-creating meanings of love, sacrifice and struggle? For languages and their peoples. For the mother-tongues of other peoples of the world, Fighting not only for the survival of languages, but the peoples these languages belong to. Fighting for their physical and cultural existence. Fighting for their freedom from encroaching urbanisation. Fighting against open-pit mines and eco-parks. One foisted on the name of national security, the other in the name of development. Is it about getting self-censorship right? Or getting it wrong.