

Book review: Dramas of Reconciliation. A performance approach to the analysis of political apologies in international relations, written by Michel-André Horelt. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019

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Book Review



Michel-André Horelt, *Dramas of Reconciliation. A performance approach to the analysis of political apologies in international relations*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019. 262 pp., ISBN: 978-3-8487-2098-9.

According to Searle (1976), performances of apologies belong to the class of expressive speech acts. Their psychological state is characterised such that “a man who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A” (Searle, 1976: 4; italics in original). Crucially, such speech acts constitute verbal performances. This monograph takes a more holistic approach; it studies the verbal, non-verbal and material resources, the participation framework, as well as the timing and physical setting required to ensure that state apologies on the international stage are successful. The book consists of nine chapters: an introduction (Chapter I), a review of previous research (Chapter II), five analytic chapters (III–VII), the conclusion (Chapter VIII) and the literature used in the study (Chapter IX).

Chapter I, which provides an introduction to the study, presents the research questions and definitions of the key terms and concepts deployed in the study. It contains a summary of the subsequent chapters.

The literature review in Chapter II establishes the analytic frame of the study. This chapter considers public, state apologies to be rituals and discusses such apologies as genres which have evolved over time and have been shaped by a “globalized memory” (p. 64). Rituals are defined “as a macro-concept denoting public events of symbolic communication” (p. 65), with apologies in particular being characterised by liminality. Successful apologies create integration; unsuccessful apologies disintegration. Finally, the elements that constitute apology rituals are identified: the background symbols (space, time, objects), the foreground script (verbal and gestural performances), and the actors (the apologising protagonist, participating representatives and the audience). These elements represent the analytic dimensions addressed by the study.

Chapters III–VII form the centrepiece of Horelt's work; they offer empirical case studies of public apologies in the political arena.

Chapter III begins the analysis with a case study of the now iconic *Kniefall* of German Chancellor Willy Brandt at the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970. Horelt provides a detailed account of the background and situational context in which Brandt dropped to his knees at the Ghetto memorial and describes the reactions of individual observers and the response of the international media. The nonverbal *Kniefall* is discussed as a ritual of purification; the apology does not receive its symbolic, cathartic value from the official response of members of the audience but from the subsequent media framing of the *Kniefall*, which defines the corporal gesture as an act of collective atonement by post-war Germany.

Chapter IV is concerned with two case studies of verbal apologies: the child removal apologies given by the Australian and Canadian Prime Ministers in their respective national parliaments in 2008. The author details the parallel historical background and situational setting of the two parliamentary ceremonies in Ottawa and Canberra, where the apologies were performed in the presence of representatives of the Indigenous peoples, and how these apologies were staged as public, collective rituals through live screenings. In the Australian context, the symbolic, emotional value of the apology is demonstrated by the quotations of individual responses. With respect to Canada, the subsequent creation of a commemorative National Day of Reconciliation is treated as evidence of the success of the apology.

Chapter V deals with two case studies: the 2012 Polish-Russian remembrance ceremony of the Katyn massacre and the joint visit of Polish and Russian state representatives to the scene of an airplane crash which occurred only a few days later. In this crash, labelled Katyn no. 2 by the Polish media, the Polish president, other high-ranking officials and some of the relatives of the victims of the Katyn massacre were killed. Following a detailed report of the historical background, the order of events at the remembrance ceremony and the visit to the crash site, Horelt argues that although no verbal apology was given by the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, at the remembrance ceremony, the recognition that Russia had been responsible for the massacre was interpreted as an improvement in relations between the two countries. However, it was only the displayed solidarity and Putin's embrace of the Polish Prime Minister at the crash site that lent authenticity and truthfulness to the earlier ritualistic remembrance ceremony.

Chapter VI analyses three apology episodes following the war in the former Yugoslavia and, in particular, the war crimes committed by Croats and Bosnians in Ahmići (1992/93), by the Serbs in Vukovar (1991) and by the Bosnian

Serb army in Srebrenica (1995). It is shown that these episodes represent different levels of success: the first (Ahmići) is described as a “‘ground-breaking’ gesture” (p. 198) for relations between the sides involved, and the second (Vukovar) as a reconciliation rite attended and accepted by the political elite, but criticised by societal organisations. With regard to the third (Srebrenica), it is argued that it was rejected on the grounds that it lacked form and content as well as symbolic actions which would have demonstrated the sincerity of the apology.

Chapter VII illustrates an apology given by the Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi at the Seodaemun Prison Hall memorial in 2001, which was performed in the absence of his South Korean counterpart and was received with reservation and even protest. This case study demonstrates those factors which contribute to a failed apology: While it contained the relevant verbal, corporal and locational features that should ensure such an apology is successful, the symbolic absence of an official public reception embodied the unwillingness of the South Korean side to participate in a transformative ritual that was intended to improve relations between both countries.

Chapter VIII discusses the implications of the study against the backdrop of the constitutive elements of an apology performance that were introduced in Chapter II.

Chapter IX includes a list of references.

The study provides an impressive account of how successful apologies are performed as powerful, transformative rites within which an interplay between a carefully orchestrated commemorative ceremony and spontaneous ‘authentic’ displays of emotion are enacted at symbolic sites. One of the book’s strengths is that most case studies contain a detailed multimodal analysis of images taken from authentic video footage. The images substantiate the argument and visualise the events from the perspective of the viewing audience, which underscores the status of state apologies as public media events. Unfortunately, there is room for improvement in the presentation of the results. Some gentle editing would have improved the readability and clarity of the argument.

From a linguistic perspective, it would have been expected that the success of an apology is heavily dependent on its wording. However, Horelt finds such a logocentric view “puzzling” (p. 202). By contrast, he argues that the success of an apology not only depends on a verbal act, but also on relevant “contextual factors” (p. 202). This position echoes recent research in the multimodal analysis of social interaction which challenges the primacy of verbal resources (e.g., Mondada, 2016).

Overall, this is a refreshing volume which exposes the relevance of a multimodal analysis of political communication.

References

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