

## When an apology is not an apology

"The linguistic field of discourse analysis offers up an extensive body of research on what makes an apology an apology, and the first and most frequently cited work in that area is John Searle's 1969 book *Speech Acts*. Way back in the year of this idealistic pragmatist's birth, Searle laid out the criteria a statement has to fulfill in order to qualify as an apology, and in layman's terms, we can say that it requires two parts: 1) **regret** (the "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" part), and 2) **responsibility** (some explicit statement that you were the one who did the thing that's being apologized for). The statement "I'm sorry that I borrowed your jacket without asking," for example, meets both of those criteria. There are several other conditions which will disqualify a statement as an apology if they're not also met (for example, if you don't actually regret the thing you're apologizing for, and are only saying you do in order to curry favour with the apology's recipient), but I won't even get into that here. The basic form is pretty darn basic: regret, and responsibility. They've both gotta be there, or else it's not an apology.

Often, people will use a rhetorical trick in which they make a statement that has a lot of the superficial trappings of an apology, but without one or both of those basic criteria of form. I call these statements "**fauxpologies**." One classic type of fauxpology is to say something like: "I'm sorry that you're upset about me borrowing your jacket without asking." This fulfills the regret criterion, but not the responsibility criterion, since the speaker is expressing regret not for an action, but for someone else's emotion. Another classic type of fauxpology is to say something like: "I'm sorry if I borrowed your jacket without asking." The responsibility criterion is similarly missing here, since the speaker is expressing regret only if a condition is true, but weaseling out of any admission that it is true. The effect of statements like these, if used skillfully, is to make recipients feel as if they should feel apologized to, despite the fact that no actual apology ever took place. They're not apologies, but rhetorical tricks for weaseling out of taking actual responsibility.

A truly excellent example of a **fauxpology** can be found in a recent post by Laurie Hawn (the Conservative candidate currently attempting to unseat Anne McLellan in Edmonton-Centre) called *Jumping to Conclusions*. When several bloggers and a bunch of people over on [rabble.ca](http://rabble.ca) asked him to apologize for referring to Jack Layton as a "National Socialist", he responded by saying, and I quote: "I'm sorry if capital letters confused some people." Ingeniously, this statement actually manages to function as both of the aforementioned types of **fauxpology** at once, since it a) doesn't take a stance on whether (his) capital letters did confuse people, and b) expresses regret for something that someone else felt. It isn't an apology, but it is a rather clever little rhetorical trick, one that does seem to have succeeded in confusing some folks out there into thinking it was an apology.

As for this particular idealistic pragmatist, I never took a stance on the whole "apologize" issue--waiting, instead, to hear what Hawn had to say about his reasons for phrasing things that way. And if, as he now says, he actually meant "federal socialist leader" (the head of the socialist party nationally) rather than "National Socialist Leader" (Führer Jack), then I still think what Hawn wrote was pretty darn imprudent, but it wasn't necessary for him to apologize to anyone. But Hawn would certainly paint himself as a far more sympathetic character if instead of blaming everyone but himself and issuing grudging fauxpologies, he were to write something like: "Whoops. I didn't mean to call Jack Layton a Nazi, though looking at it now I can see why people might read it that way. I'm rewording the original post so that it will look less ambiguous." I'd have thought someone who wants to represent one of Canada's most hotly contested ridings might take a little more care with that sort of thing, but I suppose sometimes it's more important to evade responsibility than it is to come off as a nice guy."