



## Sorry if! On Conditional Apologies

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### Abstract

Usually, apologies are made by using non-conditional utterances: “I apologize for ruining your evening!” Very little, if any, attention has been given so far to conditional apologies which typically use utterances such as “If I have ruined your evening, I apologize!” This paper argues that such conditional utterances can constitute genuine apologies and play important moral roles in situations of uncertainty. It also proposes a closer analysis of such conditional apologies (rejecting some alternative accounts) and contrasts them with unconditional apologies.

**Keywords** Apologies · Conditional apologies · Speech acts · Commitment

I just stepped on your toe. You say “Ouch!” and look at me in anger. I notice what happened. I respond and apologize by saying “Oh, I’m sorry!” I apologize to you for stepping on your toe.<sup>1</sup> What is going on here? Contrast this with the following case. I am uncertain whether I did or did not step on your toe. I feel somewhat uneasy and say to you “If I should have stepped on your toe, I apologize!” I will argue here that such an utterance constitutes

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<sup>1</sup> For some representative work on apologies, see Bovens 2008, Cohen 2017, Davis 2002, Gill 2000, Goffman 1971, 113–114, Govier and Verwoerd 2002, Kort 1975, Lazare 2004, Miller 2014, Smith 2008. For more specific aspects see Barnum-Roberts 2011, Hallich 2016, Pettigrove and Collins 2011, Thompson 2000. For an overview see Mihai 2013. —I will almost exclusively talk about apologies from individuals to individuals and put collective apologies aside. —There are situations when we say “sorry” even though we did not do anything wrong: Someone’s friend dies and we say “I’m so sorry”. This is not a case of an apology but of an expression of sympathy or empathy. The word “sorry” has more than one possible meaning. Thanks to Tony Milligan here. — Finally, apologies also need to be distinguished from excuses. I can apologize for being late without having an excuse (“I am so sorry for not taking the appointment seriously!”), and I can give an excuse for being late without offering an apology (“I am sorry but there was an emergency which caused my delay!”). That one can use the word “sorry” in both cases can, again, be misleading.

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a peculiar form of an apology, an apology under uncertainty but an apology all the same. While a lot has been written about the former, “unconditional” case of an apology (which typically uses a non-conditional utterance), very little has been written on the latter, “conditional” case of an apology (which uses a conditional utterance). Since conditional apologies play an important role in our moral lives, they deserve much more attention than they have received so far. Conditional apologies are sometimes met with suspicion but this is unfair in many cases where, as we will see, a conditional apology is appropriate and an unconditional one wouldn’t be. This paper argues in some detail that sincere conditional utterances like the one above constitute genuine apologies. It also proposes a closer analysis of such conditional apologies (rejecting some alternative accounts) and contrasts them with unconditional apologies.

## 1 Unconditional Apologies

What kinds of responses are apologies? Let us start with the standard, basic form of apologies which are not conditional in the way discussed below; this will help with the analysis of conditional apologies. Apologies in general are speech acts.<sup>2</sup> One can say “Hereby I apologize for stepping on your toe!” and thus apologize for stepping on that toe. But what kind of speech act are such unconditional apologies? What am I doing when I apologize to you for stepping on your toe? Several things.<sup>3</sup>

First, I acknowledge that I stepped on your toe and that this constitutes some harm. This amounts to a speech act of assertion. The apology needs to identify a specific act and characterize the act with some specificity; to say “I apologize for all my misdeeds!” when it is not clear which deeds are meant, does either not constitute an apology at all or only an incomplete one which might only be acceptable in very special circumstances (like, e.g., memory loss).

Second, I express some remorse and the wish that I would have done otherwise. I am not just describing a psychological state of mine (which would amount to an assertion). I am also not just expressing it (which would not amount to a speech act at all). The crucial point here is that I am also proposing a certain public view of myself to others. This constitutes what one can call an “expressive” speech act.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Some authors, like, e.g., Smith 2008, might disagree and take “apology” in a broader sense.

<sup>3</sup>For different functions of apologies, see Bovens 2008, Cohen 2017, Davis 2002, Gill 2000, Govier and Verwoerd 2002, Kort 1975, Lazare 2004, 14, Smith 2008, ch.2. For different types of speech acts, see Austin 1962/1975, 151–164 and Searle 1969 as well as Searle 1975. I am not interested here in a classification of speech acts, in particular not in one that claims to present a complete list of non-overlapping basic speech acts. I doubt that this can be done: Speech acts seem to constitute a pretty heterogenous bunch. I am also not aiming at giving a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for conditional or unconditional apologies here. The history of speech act theory gives us reason to be very skeptical not just about our ability to ever find a finite “checklist” of apologies but also about there being such a finite set of conditions all apologies do check. Neither our social practices nor our conceptual systems are “compositional” in that sense, in contrast to formal languages employing stipulative reductive definitions.

<sup>4</sup>But see Barnum-Roberts 2011 who argues that neither regret nor any sincere expression of it is required for an apology. I disagree but cannot go into a discussion of this view here. – Searle’s notion of the speech act of an expressive (see Searle 1975, 356–358) is somewhat different: He identifies the illocutionary role as one of expressing a psychological state. He categorizes apologies as expressives (see Searle 1975, 357) which is, according to the analysis proposed here, too narrow.

Third, I perform the speech act of a promise to behave better in the future. There might be cases where I can predict that I won't be better in the future (due to predictable akrasia, for instance) but in typical cases, an apology does have this aspect of a promise (for doubts in the case of apologies for failures of character see Pettigrove and Collins 2011, 146). One might also suspect that included in this is a promise of compensation for the damage done but this is not necessary (but see Bovens 2008, 225–228, Lazare 2004, 14; Smith 2008, 80–91; for a cross-species scientific account of making amends see, e.g., Silk 1998). Instead, the apology itself can constitute a “symbolic” compensation insofar as I take a humble attitude and take on a lower status, at least for the time being.

Fourth, I accept normative responsibility. This is different from merely asserting that I am causally responsible for the toe-stepping and that that constitutes an offense. Rather, I accept a certain change of status within the relevant group (for instance, now that I stepped on your toe, I cannot just walk away from the scene and mind my own business; I have acquired some new obligations).<sup>5</sup> This amounts to a different kind of speech act which one could call “status acceptance”.

Finally, one might suspect that an apology also includes a request for forgiveness (see, e.g., Bovens 2009, Cohen 2017, 362, Hallich 2016, Lazare 2004, ch.11, Smith 2008, ch.6). However, one can appreciate that an apology has been made and accept it for that reason but still not forgive the offender (though it is hard to imagine forgiving the offender but not accepting their apology). Accepting an apology and forgiving are different stages of reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> It is not plausible to assume that an apology also includes the request for forgiveness.

So, overall, an apology has the character of an assertion, an acceptance of status, an expressive and a promise. We can thus see an apology as a hybrid or combination of four more basic speech acts. Alternatively, we could see it as an irreducible albeit quite complex speech act of its own. It doesn't matter here which way we go.<sup>7</sup>

So, by saying “Sorry!” or “I apologize” I do apologize. The illocutionary role of the act can be less or more explicit (like in the latter case); it typically is not implicit. The propositional content is either explicit (“Sorry that I splashed you!”) or not (“Sorry!”) but can, in the latter case, be reconstructed from the context. There is always some content. One cannot apologize without apologizing for something. Let “A” stand for the illocutionary role of an apology and “p” stand for its propositional object (but see Searle 1975, 364). We can then say:

(Form) Apologies are speech acts; their form is *Ap*.

<sup>5</sup>This part is self-reflexive: The status involves the obligation to do all the things listed here, including status acceptance. There is no troublesome infinite regress lurking here.

<sup>6</sup>Speaking of stages of reconciliation: One can succeed in making an apology but not succeed in having it accepted. As Cohen 2017, 363 aptly remarks: “*success at fulfilling an apologetic function(s)* is not equivalent to a *successful apology*.”

<sup>7</sup>I am leaving the question open here whether there are some deeds so monstrous or so trivial that they don't allow for an apology and also not for acceptance of an apology. “I'm sorry I killed all your friends and relatives!” would be candidate for the first; “I'm sorry I stood between you and the sun for a second!” would be a candidate for the second. A similar question arises for requests for forgiveness and acceptances of such requests. —One can have special reasons not to apologize for some misdeed: when the addressee won't understand or will misunderstand the apology, or when the addresses will exploit the apology for worse ends (an apology for bumping into a violent person could also invite them to commit much worse acts against the apologizer rather than appease them). —I am also leaving open the question here whether one can apologize in advance, for some expected future act.



## 2 Conditional Apologies

So far, I have only talked about the paradigm case of unconditional apologies. However, there is a different use of the apologetic vocabulary which doesn't quite fit the *Ap*-scheme. Suppose you come to me and complain about my hostile behaviour yesterday. I am not aware of anything like that but respond by saying "I apologize if I have behaved in a hostile way!" (or, equivalently: "If I have behaved in a hostile way, I apologize!"). Let us call this a "conditional apology". It is conditional in its surface grammar but is it also conditional in a deeper way? More importantly, are conditional apologies genuine apologies at all or rather merely apparent apologies?<sup>8</sup> I will argue for a positive answer to the last question: Conditional apologies are an important type of apologies which serve a function that unconditional apologies cannot serve.<sup>9</sup> It is, by the way, very astonishing that this type of apology has been mostly ignored in the literature; the only more detailed treatment of it I know is by Miller 2014. I will start by describing what conditional apologies are not before I go in more detail into what they are.

### 2.1 Indicative Conditionals?

The form of "I apologize if I have Xed" is certainly not the form of an indicative conditional. First, a conditional apology can easily include a modal term on one side of the conditional ("Should I have Xed, I apologize!") – interestingly without taking subjunctive form on the other side. With or without the modal, it is still a conditional apology. Obviously, an indicative conditional ceases to be one if one substitutes modal expressions into it. Second, there is another difference between conditional apologies and indicative conditionals if we can assume (as I will argue below) that conditional apologies are genuine apologies. The utterance of "If I have Xed, then I apologize" taken as an indicative conditional does not constitute the speech act of an apology at all. I but not you can apologize for my behaviour (assuming you're neither my proxy nor my representative) but both I and you can utter the above indicative conditional and it doesn't matter who does it (substituting pronouns, or course). Apart from that, the indicative conditional leaves open whether the speaker will indeed apologize. It only states that I will apologize if I Xed; it leaves open what will happen if I didn't X. Even if one takes the statement to be a bi-conditional, it still leaves open whether the speaker will apologize. Finally, the consequent of the indicative conditional "If

<sup>8</sup>That an apology is genuine does not entail that it is a good apology (the apologizer might be inept at apologizing). It also does not entail that the apology will or should be accepted by the addressee. An apology might misfire, be infelicitous or deficient in some way (see Austin 1962/1975) while still remaining to be a proper, "genuine" apology. Thanks to a referee here.

<sup>9</sup>Some apologies, including conditional apologies, are insincere. For instance, I might be under the impression that Chuck is in a very bad mood, ready to explode. I don't think I did anything wrong but I also have a strong interest in calming Chuck down. So, I say to him "I'm sorry if I should have annoyed you!". Or I might think that B is massively oversensitive and self-centered. In order to tease B a bit I remark, with a bit of sarcasm: "Oh, I'm so, so sorry if I should have hurt your feelings!". In a situation like that, a remark like the latter might even amount to conversationally implicating that B is oversensitive and self-centered. I will put such cases aside here and focus on sincere and authentic apologies. Barring special circumstances, people typically assume that an apology given is authentic. It is, however, hard to estimate how often people are apologizing in an inauthentic way (whether conditionally or unconditionally). Finally, there are what I take to be openly inauthentic apologies, like "You think that I offended you but I disagree. However, I don't want you to resent me. Hence, I apologize!" This strikes me as an insincere unconditional apology, not as a sincere conditional apology. Thanks to a referee for remarks on all this.

I have Xed, then I apologize” is a descriptive statement about some act, not the performance of that act (how could it be?). There is nothing apologetic about the indicative conditional. However, there is something apologetic about “I apologize if I have Xed” taken as a conditional apology (see below).

It would be somewhat desperate to analyse “If I Xed, I apologize” as a conditional with a truth-apt antecedent and the speech-act of an unconditional apology in the consequent. This would be just ungrammatical. It also doesn’t help to assimilate conditional apologies to biscuit conditionals or junk conditionals. Uttering a biscuit conditional (see Austin 1979, 210–212) like “There are cookies on the table if you like some” still involves the unconditional assertion that there are cookies on the table. The antecedent only specifies conditions of relevance of the information given in the consequent; the latter is detachable from the antecedent. In contrast, a conditional apology does not include an unconditional apology, and the antecedent “If I Xed” is not detachable from the consequent without changing the latter drastically. A junk conditional (see Sorensen 1988) like “If you can run the mile in 2 minutes, then I am Billie Holiday” is an indicative conditional a subject is warranted to believe only if and as long as they believe that the antecedent is false. The main point of uttering it is to communicate that the antecedent is false. Nothing like that is the case in conditional apologies.

A conditional apology is also not an apology for something conditional (an unconditional apology, then). What would the conditional be? Certainly not “If I have Xed, then I apologize”. This would give us nonsense: “I apologize for apologizing if I have Xed!”. It also does not help to analyse it along the lines of “I apologize for having Xed if I should have Xed!”. How could one apologize for a logical truth? The expression “I apologize!” in the consequent of a conditional apology can also not be used as a sentential operator and put in front of a whole sentence. Commands differ in this respect: “If the sink starts to overflow, call me!” can be understood as the speech act of a command with the conditional content “if the sink starts to overflow, you call me”. The conditional character of the content is not essential as the equivalence with the command to avoid sinks starting to overflow without a call to me shows.

## 2.2 Suppositions, Presuppositions?

Could the antecedent of “If I Xed, then I apologize!” express a supposition? Does the conditional invite us to work with the hypothesis that I did X and then find out whether I would apologize?<sup>10</sup> This would collapse the conditional apology into an indicative conditional again. Or am I then apologizing unconditionally but within the “scope” or in the “context” of a supposition? It is hard to understand what this could even mean. Perhaps something like this works in other cases (see Barnett 2006) but there seems little hope in the case of apologies.

It also doesn’t help much to take the antecedent “If I Xed” as expressing a presupposition of the act of (unconditionally) apologizing. One aspect of an unconditional apology (see above) is the speaker’s belief that they have Xed. An explicit apology (“I apologize for

<sup>10</sup> See Ramsey 1931, 247 for a related idea about indicative conditionals: “If two people are arguing ‘If  $p$  will  $q$ ?’ and are both in doubt as to  $p$ , they are adding  $p$  hypothetically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about  $q$ ; ... they are fixing their degrees of belief in  $q$  given  $p$ .”

Xing!”) makes this clear. We do not have a presupposition at work here but rather an implicit or explicit part of the content of the apology.

### 2.3 Promises?

Could a conditional apology be a kind of promise of an apology, that is, a speech act but one of a promise? According to this idea, to utter “If I should have stepped on your toe, I apologize!” would be the promise that I will apologize under certain conditions, namely if it turns out that I have indeed stepped on your toe. It would be like the promise that I will buy you cake if you stop stomping your feet. However, first, it seems (and I will argue more for this below) that the conditional apology is, to some degree, at least, a genuine apology; the analysis of them as promises would have to explain this as a mere appearance. Second, a promise to make a conditional like the one just mentioned true is deficient in some serious way if the promiser believes that it is unknowable whether the antecedent is true. Suppose I believe that we cannot find out whether Goldbach’s conjecture is true. Suppose further that I say to you “If Goldbach’s conjecture is true, I’ll buy you a Maserati!”, I’m not making a real promise. Conditional apologies, taken as speech acts, do not require such knowability in order to succeed (and if they are indeed apologies, then they work even given unknowability; see below).

### 2.4 Conjunctions?

Here is still another idea. Even if the surface grammatical structure of “I apologize if I have Xed” is conditional, the deeper semantic structure of it could be conjunctive rather than conditional:

I apologize for having Xed. But I am not sure I have Xed,  
or  
 $Ap$  & I am not sure whether  $p$ .

The speaker apologizes unconditionally but weakens the apology somehow by raising a doubt or even suspends judgment about whether they Xed.

This analysis faces a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is that the apology stands unaffected by the element of doubt. But then the addition of an expression of uncertainty is simply irrelevant to the apology. One might as well add to any ordinary unconditional apology of the form “I apologize for Xing” the irrelevant supplement “And I believe that I Xed”. The other horn of the dilemma is that the expression of doubt is destructive of the apology. Imagine someone saying something like “Look, I apologize for throwing your favourite t-shirt into the garbage! I’m sorry! Btw, I’m not quite sure I really did that. But, again: I’m sorry!” It is not clear, to say the least, that such a person would be doing anything in the way of apologizing. Conditional apologies are not like that.

### 2.5 What Are They Then?

The basic idea here is that one is doing something by saying something of the form “Should I have Xed, I apologize!”. One can perform a speech act with an utterance of this type of sentence (provided one is not using it as an indicative conditional). This seems to me to be



a very plausible starting point for any analysis of this speech act, and hard to dispute. Is it also a form of apology?

I listed four crucial features (not necessarily completely defining features) of an unconditional apology above: the acknowledgement of the relevant facts, the expression of remorse and agreement to a certain view of oneself, the promise of better future behavior, and status acceptance. Whatever happens when one is giving a conditional apology, none of these features are present: one isn't stating that one has Xed; therefore, one is also neither expressing remorse nor promising improvement nor taking over responsibility and accepting a new status (or at least not the status involved with unconditional apologies). So, how could a conditional apology still be a genuine apology?

Miller 2014, 405 presents a list of four crucial features of (unconditional) apologies. Her list slightly differs from mine and is not a list of speech acts. It includes the following conditions: believing that one has done something wrong, feeling remorse, wishing that one had done something different, and being committed to better behaviour in the future. Miller argues that conditional apologies can be genuine apologies (see against this the passing and very brief remarks in Gill 2000, 13, Lazare 2004, 13, 55–56, 57–58, or Smith 2008, 60), namely in cases where the speaker is uncertain whether they did the relevant deed (see Miller 2014, 411–413). Miller, of course, admits that the first two of the above conditions of unconditional apologies are absent in conditional apologies while the latter two might be present though she also concedes that in many cases none of the four conditions are present in conditional apologies (see Miller 2014, 407–408 and 411–413). I think it is doubtful that even the last two features can be present in a conditional apology; I would therefore embrace only the stronger claim that all four features are missing in a conditional apology.

Miller, however, argues that conditional apologies can still be genuine apologies even when they don't meet any of the four conditions above. There are four similar conditions which can be met by conditional apologies, —conditional equivalents of the features of unconditional apologies. A speaker can have certain “conditional dispositions” such as that they would acknowledge wrongdoing if they found out the relevant facts, that they would then feel remorse, that they would wish they had acted differently and that they would be committed to better behaviour in the future (see Miller 2014, 413–414).

I agree with Miller that conditional apologies can be genuine, *sui generis* apologies – but not for her reasons. I think her explanation is too counterfactual. Lots of things might be true of a speaker if circumstances were different. What does all this tell us about the actual world in which the speaker utters a conditional apology? That the speaker would do what's required for an (unconditional) apology is certainly not sufficient for an actual apology. Having certain latent character dispositions does not turn the utterance of words of the form “If I have Xed, then I apologize!” into a genuine apology. Having the unmanifested disposition to make an unconditional apology is not sufficient for actually making a conditional apology.

I think it is more plausible to assume that the conditional apologizer really (actually) apologizes. What speaks in favour of this? In order to answer this question, one needs to take the epistemic situation of the agent, potential speaker and apologizer into account.<sup>11</sup> The Agent either knows or doesn't know<sup>12</sup> whether they have committed the relevant act, —

<sup>11</sup> We can leave addressee and hearer aside here.

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, the agent either believes with justification or doesn't believe with justification that they have committed the relevant act, and so on for other types of epistemic states. I will not discuss here which epis-

an act that would call for an apology. If the agent knows that they committed the deed, then an unconditional apology would be appropriate; a conditional apology would be too weak under such circumstances. Much of the bad reputation of and suspicion about conditional apologies might be due to their inappropriateness in cases where the agent has knowledge of the act. In such cases, the agent becomes suspicious of trying to save their face. If the agent knows that they didn't do the deed, then no apology would be appropriate; they would concede something where there is nothing to concede and also mislead the addressee (who might have a harder time now identifying the real offender, if there is one). The crucial question here is the following one: What can the agent do if they don't know whether they have committed the relevant act and hold that, as far as they know, they might have committed it but also might not have committed it? In other words, what if the agent is uncertain whether they did the deed or not?<sup>13</sup>

In this case, it would be insincere to offer an unconditional apology: The agent meets none of the four conditions mentioned above (acknowledgement that they did they did the deed, expression of remorse, promise to get better, acceptance of responsibility and relevant status). The agent would not only do the addressee injustice due to their insincerity. They would also risk, in case they didn't do the deed, to concede too much and lose "moral face" unnecessarily. In such a situation, it is fairer to all involved and more appropriate to offer a conditional apology: "If I have Xed, then I apologize!"

Does this count as an apology? Yes! I propose the following view:

If S did do X but is uncertain whether they did it or not, then "If I Xed, I apologize!" constitutes an apology;

If S did not do X but is uncertain whether they did it or not, then "If I Xed, I apologize!" also constitutes an apology but a void one.

In both cases, we have the speech act of an apology. What exactly is going on here?

Let us take a closer look at the claim that if S really did X (and is uncertain whether they did or did not do X), then "If I Xed, I apologize!" is an apology. This might seem puzzling because it meets none of the above 4 conditions of an unconditional apology (acknowledgement that they did they did the deed, expression of remorse, promise to get better, acceptance of responsibility and relevant status). In what sense then can it still be an apology?

We can get a clue about this by asking what the hearer H gets out of an unconditional apology in such a situation of uncertainty. Assume that the hearer is also uncertain about whether S Xed and knows that S is genuinely uncertain about this, too. Then H gets something in the way of an apology (something similar enough to an unconditional apology) if S offers a conditional apology to H while H gets nothing if S remains silent. The first is satisfying in the circumstances (what more could H expect, given the shared uncertainty?) while the second is disappointing because S fails to do anything in the way of an apology. The situation is not much different if H knows that S Xed and also knows that S is uncertain about this. If H knows that S did not X, then they know that S is making an apology albeit a void one (on this latter case, see below).

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temic state is relevant in this context and just take knowledge as a placeholder for the relevant state.

<sup>13</sup>I can leave open here how certain the agent would have to be in order to be in a position to know.



So, what is it, more precisely, that H is receiving from S here? Taking the phenomenology of receiving a conditional apology in a situation of uncertainty seriously, the following is plausible. In place of meeting any of the four conditions of an unconditional apology the speaker rather commits himself to being a certain kind of person,—to taking the moral position of someone who

- accepts the relevant facts whatever they might turn out to be and rejects Xing, treating it as an offense,<sup>14</sup>
- is aware of and critical of whatever their own failings turn out to be,
- is willing to improve whenever this is called for,
- and is ready to accept the relevant status corresponding to their behaviour.

This commitment or these particular commitments are not identical with the conditions of an unconditional apology but they are closely parallel to them, as one can easily see. The speaker of a conditional apology (under uncertainty) performs the speech act of a binding commitment to a certain moral position and to being a certain kind of person. Such a position consists not just of certain beliefs but also of certain behavioural dispositions. The speaker gives the hearer assurance that they are a certain kind of moral person. The commitment can be seen in analogy to the agreement to play a game according to the rules. The commitment established by a conditional apology is itself unconditional.<sup>15</sup> One might object that there is no difference in commitment between unconditional and the conditional apologies. However, I don't think this is plausible. Unconditional apologies lack the four features of conditional apologies (see above). For instance, in the latter case there is no promise to behave better in the relevant respect. But there is a different kind of commitment: one could say, a promise to play by the moral rules of the game.

How can this commitment suffice for an apology (in some sense of the word “apology”)? Here it is interesting to notice that a person who is committed in the way of a conditional apology is thereby also committed to apologizing unconditionally if cognisant of the relevant facts. This is plausible because it is hard to see how someone could have the first commitment without having the second. So, even if the hearer doesn't get an unconditional apology, they get something close enough in the way of apologies, namely the above complex commitment. Conditional apologies are quite different from unconditional apologies but still close enough to deserve the title “apology”. Apologies are a heterogenous bunch but still a bunch on their own.

It fits with all this that a hearer who receives a conditional apology in a situation of uncertainty is typically satisfied with that. Even if it later becomes clear to both parties that the speaker did indeed X, the hearer need not and typically does not insist on an unconditional apology in addition. They got what they wanted, given the circumstances. Speaker and hearer might, however, agree to revisit the issue and confirm to each other that S really

<sup>14</sup>Whether it really constitutes a harm or offense and, if yes, what kind of harm, might be controversial. It is, however, only necessary for the apology that the speaker thinks their act was harmful in a certain way; the addressee (or third parties) might disagree. If the addressee disagrees that harm has been done, they will think that there was no need nor occasion for an apology. But it will then still remain an apology. I won't go further into this here.

<sup>15</sup>This is confirmed by the fact that acceptance of a conditional apology does not take conditional form: We don't say things like “If you apologized for Xing, then I accept this!” or “If you Xed, then I accept your apology!”, etc. Acceptance of an apology is unconditional, whether it is a conditional or an unconditional one.

did X after all. This is a retrospective emphasis and reconfirmation of the apology already given; to add an unconditional apology now would be redundant.

All this is confirmed by the following case. K is the victim of Xing. It is known to all participants in the situation that someone Xed but it is uncertain for everyone who Xed. It is also shared and common knowledge that exactly three persons might have Xed. Each of them, A, B, and C, then offers a conditional apology for Xing to K. In this case, K is getting all they could hope for, even if the apology is socially “distributed” and in some sense “anonymous”. However, if C, for instance, were not to offer a conditional apology, K would have reason to be unsatisfied.

All this is not to deny that a conditional apology is in a sense weaker than an unconditional apology: The hearer would not be satisfied if they assumed that the speaker knows that they Xed. In such a situation, a conditional apology is better than nothing but not as good as an unconditional apology. However, this does not mean that a conditional apology isn't the best one can expect under conditions of uncertainty; furthermore, under such conditions it is sufficient as an apology. Whether a conditional utterance of the form “If I did X, then I apologize!” counts as a fully satisfying apology depends on the epistemic circumstances: whether it is known to the speaker that they Xed or whether they are uncertain about it.

What if the speaker did not X after all but still apologized conditionally? In that case their apology is fully present but “void”. It is void, however, in a different sense from the one in which an unconditional apology is void if the speaker falsely believes that they Xed. In the latter case, the fact that the speaker did not X gives them a reason to take their apology back. In the case of a conditional apology, in contrast, the fact that one did not X does not give the speaker a reason to take their apology back.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in the case of a void unconditional apology, the speaker has lost “moral face” and has reason to want to repair his lost moral status; this is absent in the case of a void conditional apology.

Two peculiarities of conditional apologies are worth mentioning at the end. First, in the case of unconditional apologies, sometimes gestures play the role of apologies but typically only if there is no chance of verbal communication and only as an “ersatz” of or stand-in for a speech act. I am driving in my car through the rain, go through a lot of water and inadvertently splash a lot of water on you on the sidewalk. I wave my arms in an apologetic way to you because you wouldn't hear me saying “Sorry!” and you take it as an indication of what I would have said could you have heard me. This is a derivative form of an apology which presupposes the existence of the basic form where the latter is a linguistic act, a speech act. Nothing like that exists in the case of conditional apologies: They don't have the kind of non-linguistic derivatives that unconditional apologies have. I can make apologetic gestures towards a person who cannot hear my unconditional linguistic apology. But I cannot perform a somewhat “conditional” non-linguistic act to stand in for a conditional linguistic apology. This is an interesting difference between conditional and unconditional apologies

<sup>16</sup>They might, however, have different kinds of reasons to take the conditional apology back. For instance, they might have changed their mind about the badness of Xing. —It is worth mentioning that taking back an apology is also a speech act; in a sense, it is a second-order or more indirect one. One could say, in a formal way: “I hereby cancel my former speech act of apologizing for Xing!”. Its form (see (Form) above) is (with “C” for cancelling or taking back): C(Ap). This is a second-order act only insofar as the apology is part of the content of the cancelling act; one doesn't perform a hierarchy of acts when cancelling an apology. One can take an apology back if the act of apologizing was based on a false assumption. The practical reasoning which led to the act of apologizing was based on a false premise (that one Xed) but that does not mean that the conclusion (that I should apologize) or the act to which it led didn't happen or was somehow deficient. Curiously, the speech act of taking an apology back has not received much attention at all in the literature.

which also illustrates in a non-trivial way that we can do some things with language that we cannot do without it.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, it seems that conditional apologies are quite special insofar as other kinds of speech acts with similar conditional variants are hard to find. An appropriate person in the right circumstances can make it the case that two persons are getting married by saying “I hereby declare you married!”. But it makes no sense to say something like “If your papers are in good order, then I declare you married!”. There is no such way of getting married. Similarly, the right person in the right circumstances can christen a ship by smashing the right kind of bottle against the right kind of ship and saying “I hereby christen you the *Andrea Doria!*”. Saying something like “If the official permissions are in good order and sufficient, then I christen you the *Andrea Doria!*” makes no sense and accomplishes nothing except confusion. Perhaps this difference is due to the fact that in the case of christening a ship or getting people married, the relevant facts are typically established beyond reasonable doubt while that is not the case with apologies. However, this is not more than a first hunch. I have to leave the question open here why the speech act of an apology is special in allowing for a conditional variant.

### 3 Conclusion

I argued here that utterances of the form “If I have Xed, then I apologize” constitute genuine apologies. After rejecting several alternative attempts to analyse such statements, I proposed a speech-act analysis of conditional apologies as acts of commitments to being a certain kind of moral person. I put this in relation to and contrast with the analysis of unconditional apologies given at the beginning<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup>There are symbolic acts which are both very similar in some ways to apologies but also clearly different. When (in Warsaw in 1970) the former German chancellor Willy Brandt spontaneously knelt at a monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, he performed an act but not an act of apology. It would be worth analysing what kind of act this was.

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