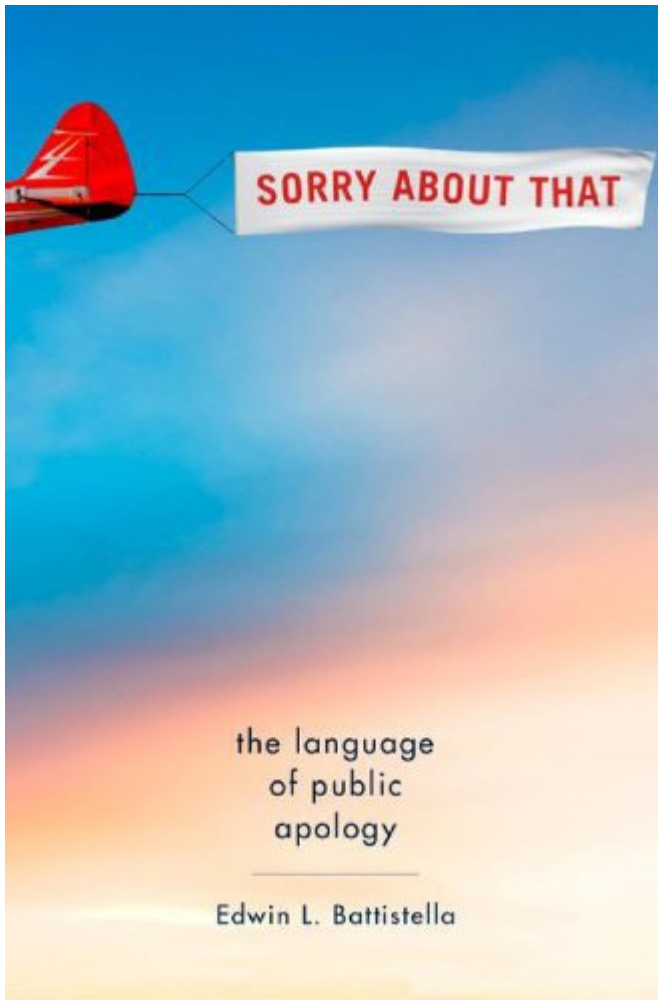


Sorry About That, by Edwin L. Battistella

reviewed by [Gerald J. Mast](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Sorry About That

By Edwin L. Battistella
Oxford University Press

When the popular televangelist Jimmy Swaggart was blackmailed into confessing his sexual liaison with a prostitute, he cried many tears during the televised address to his church and said, “I have sinned.” However, he did not discuss the liaison. Despite

his silence about the details of his sin, Swaggart's 1988 public confession was regarded at the time as an effective response that saved his ministry, even though critics noted the absence of substance.

The divided public reception of Swaggart's confession is a prime illustration of the confusion in American culture about the meaning and purpose of public confession—confusion that rhetorical scholar Dave Tell has described as “confessional anxiety.” According to Tell, in his book *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America*, we experience confessional anxiety because we swim in a sea of personal stories—memoirs, interviews, and testimonies—that claim to disclose the real truth about a controversy or a disputed event. Yet, such disclosures are also typically partisan speeches designed to deflect criticism and, frequently, to take sides in cultural battles over such issues as sex, race, religion, and violence. The emotional authenticity that we value in confessional speech betrays the truth that we seek from the confessor. Behind Swaggart's tears was a calculated silence about his misdeeds designed to protect his moral image and maintain the financial standing of his ministry.

The story of Swaggart's empty confession is only one of numerous accounts of historic apologies presented by linguistics scholar Edwin Battistella in this anecdotal study of public apology.

By examining the grammatical and rhetorical structure of such apologies, Battistella shows that our anxieties and confusions about confession are rooted in a deeper ambiguity that defines the genre of apology more broadly: the tension between the culpable self and the apologetic self. Battistella, who teaches in the writing program at Southern Oregon University, draws on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman to explain that a successful apology must distinguish the guilty self from the apologizing self. The latter must disavow the former and become identified with those whom the former has offended.

Such dissociation of selves is difficult, and in the apology process there are many opportunities for failure—or at least inadequacy. For example, when professional golfer Frank “Fuzzy” Zoeller made a racially tinged remark in 1997 about his competitor Tiger Woods, he apologized with the commonly repeated refrain: “I’m sorry if I offended anyone.” Such a statement fails to fully identify the apologetic self with the offended party. Zoeller also said, “I didn’t mean anything by it”—denying guilt by invoking purity of intention.

When Dan Rather apologized during the 2004 presidential election for questioning President George W. Bush's National Guard service on the basis of faulty documentation, he said, "We made a mistake in judgment." Such language refuses to fully identify the self with the offense by shifting responsibility to the collective *we* for what is presented as a regrettable blunder rather than a morally flawed decision.

Apologies also run into trouble when they are offered on behalf of a group or a nation. As a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan sided with veterans groups and other political leaders who opposed a national apology to Japanese Americans for their internment in relocation camps during World War II. However, after Reagan became president, he changed his mind and signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which included both an apology and reparations. National leaders presume to speak on behalf of an entire nation when they support or refuse to support such collective apologies. Inevitably, not everyone prefers to be spoken for when an apology is issued on their behalf.

Collective apologies are also complicated by the fact that they are often offered long after the death of both the offenders and the victims, as was the case when the Massachusetts legislature decided in 1957 to pardon Ann Greenslade Pudeator, who had been convicted and executed for being a witch during the Salem witch trials in 1692. Some who opposed the pardon argued that it might require reparations to Ann's living descendants. Others were concerned that the pardon was an effort to change history and to avoid its lessons.

Running through most of Battistella's accounts of flawed or imperfect apologies is reluctance to completely repudiate the actions of the previous self, even if one has regrets or is sorry about what happened. This reluctance seems most prominent in apologies by men. Accused of plagiarism in the production of his book *The Wild Blue*, historian Stephen Ambrose at first responded with an apology: "I made a mistake for which I am sorry." Faced with evidence of more extensive plagiarism in other works, Ambrose turned defensive and attacked his accusers. "Screw it," he said in an interview not long before he died, "If they decide I'm a fraud, I'm a fraud."

Ambrose came from the post-World War II generation of American men who had been trained to see apology as a sign of weakness, a lesson gathered from the strong, silent male hero figures of John Wayne films. Such a gender code, perhaps overlearned, according to Battistella, was visible in then vice president George H. W. Bush's famous campaign statement in 1988, after a U.S. missile shot down an

Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 people: “I’ll never apologize for the United States of America, ever. I don’t care what the facts are.” Richard Nixon also followed this postwar gender code and refused to apologize for his role in the Watergate affair, although he did express regret.

It is instructive to compare Stephen Ambrose’s defensive response to plagiarism charges with the more complex response by another American historian—Doris Kearns Goodwin—to charges that she had plagiarized a significant portion of her book *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*. Like Ambrose, she described her plagiarism as a “mistake.” Unlike Ambrose, she followed up with actions that displayed penitence: resigning from the Pulitzer Prize Board and the Harvard University Board of Overseers, as well as taking a leave from her role with PBS. Her actions and her subsequent high-quality work helped to reestablish her credibility and authority.

Still, even Goodwin insisted that her past actions were just a mistake, thereby denying full moral culpability. Like most of the apologists described in Battistella’s book, she was caught in the bind of needing to distance herself from her past actions, but not so much as to undermine the integrity of her present self—rooted as it is in her past self.

Battistella is more descriptive than analytical, but he draws on Tell’s work to show how modern people are deeply shaped by unreflective patterns of confession exemplified by the writings of the modern philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his autobiographical *Confessions*, Rousseau described the successes and failures of both his private and public life with minimal inquiry into his motivations and without apology for his “depravity.” Even a religious confession like Swaggart’s is shaped more by the instinctive and emotional reporting of Rousseau’s confessional legacy than by the introspection and self-disclosure encouraged by the deeper Christian confessional tradition. In Rousseau’s model, sin and failure are an inevitable part of the human condition; it is best to acknowledge that and get on with your life. In other words, if we accept Goffman’s definition of apology as a matter of dividing the self, modern people are very reluctant to completely renounce the former guilty self and thus typically fail to actually apologize.

For an example of complete self-renunciation, Battistella turns to the ancient *Confessions* of Augustine. Unlike Rousseau, Augustine had no trouble probing the depths of sin that lay behind his youthful misdeeds, providing a public accounting of his personal motivations and delusions. Augustine succeeded where modern apologists fail, in part because he had no trouble blaming his former self completely;

that unconverted self, as Battistella points out, was for Augustine “a person who no longer exists.”