

THE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF APOLOGIES WITH INDICATIVE REFERENCES TO THE LETTERS OF KEATS AND BYRON

NADA AZEEZ YOUSUF AL-MUTTALABI

AL kindly College of Medicine, University of Baghdad, Iraq

ABSTRACT

An apology may be defined as “the act of declaring one’s regret, remorse or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured, harmed or wronged another (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy IEP). A definition quite interested in the function suggests that “an apology is a speech act addressed to B’s face – needs and intended to remedy an offence for which A. takes responsibility.” (Holmes, 1990:159).

Apologies are also "speech acts" that are hard to identify, define or categorize, a difficulty that arises directly out of the functions they perform (Lakoff, 2001:201) and the forms they take. In function, they range from self-abasement for wrongdoing to the formal display of appropriate feeling. In form, they range from explicit apologies to the most ambiguous ones.

Apologies matter theoretically because they are rich in forms and functions. They also involve intricate presuppositions and / or assertions. Their attraction is that they either blur things or explicitly state them. Moreover, their theoretical richness as unique human activities shows in the categories they take i.e. register, genre and key etc. Practically, apologies matter because, as speech acts, they are felicitous from the speaker's perspective and soothing for the addressee.

Apologies are needed on both individual and social levels. On an individual level, they appease the listener. On a social level, they smooth things and bring harmony to the parties involved. Talking about apologies ushers us to an operative linguistic discipline nowadays, namely Pragmatics. Stalnker’s definition of this discipline is quite helpful:

*Pragmatics is the study of the purpose for which sentences
are used, of the real world conditions under which a sentence
may be appropriately used as an utterance (1972:380).*

In a relevant sense, apologies are thematically enticing and practically significant as pragmatic ‘speech acts’, they postulate a daunting task by virtue of their fluidity and of the intricate relations between their forms and functions, and, in a deeper linguistic sense, the relations between language and its context of utterance.

KEYWORDS: Apologies, Pragmatics, Forms, Functions, Keats, Byron

Original Article

Received: Dec 14, 2015; **Accepted:** Dec 18, 2015; **Published:** Dec 29, 2015; **Paper Id.:** IJELFEB20163

INTRODUCTION

Introductory Remarks

The denotative meanings as shown in the entries of various dictionaries recognize apology as a ‘statement’ expressing sorrow for some kind of ‘wrongdoing’. (see MacMillan Dictionary For Advanced Learner’s

Dictionary (1997:59) and Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1985:95)⁽¹⁾.

The dictionary definitions seem to show that apologies are *pragmatic devices* that can easily be pinned down. However, the range of forms these apologies take, the complex functions they perform and the intricate relation between these two discursive poles require an established discipline that is apt to analyse and understand them for what they are.

Forms of Apologies

In form, apologies range from those which are quite *explicit* to those which are quite *ambiguous* and / or oblique (= indirect). Lakoff suggests (2003:203) that "by making use of an ambiguous form", an apologizer "looks virtuous while saving face", a thing which is often "seen in legally mandated 'apologies'".

In **structure**, an *explicit* form of an apology has to include four basic components (Deutschman, 2003:44-45). These are the 'offender', 'the offended', 'the offence' and 'the remedy'. The offender is the transgressor, 'the offended' is the victim of 'the offence', 'the offence' is the incident which triggers the apology. Holmes suggest (1990:163) that the offender may not have played an active part in the offence. 'The remedy' is a component that involves, on the part of the offender, among other things, a recognition of the offence and acceptance of responsibility.

The final component (i.e. remedy) is semantically rendered in terms of words that are meant to appease the hearer-words like 'forgive', 'pardon', 'sorry' etc. These words usher apologies which, according to Edmondson (1981:282) are meant to disarm anticipation of potentially aggressive acts.

The terms that are used to name the basic components of an apology, in my opinion need to be tempered. Instead, I prefer that more indicative mild words to be used – words like *apologizer*, (or *wrongdoer*), *the hurt*, *the wrongdoing* and *redress*.

Austin's analysis ⁽²⁾ (1962 quoted in Hatim and Mason, p.57) serves, at this point, to show some specific forms of apologies. He gives the following examples (numbered by me) I xed has the semantic value of "I did wrong".

- I'm very sorry I xed.
- I guess I xed.
- I shouldn't have xed.
- You must be pretty mad that I xed.
- I was a real jerk to x.
- ... and I'll never x again.

It is suggested that each of these forms underlies what is termed as a *felicity condition* that results in a successful performance of an apology. The examples respectfully have the semantic value of expressing the speaker's regret, of assuming, though hedging on, the speaker's responsibility for the act, of confessing that the act is wrong, of suggesting that the addressee is hurt, of clearly putting the speaker one- down and, finally of promising that such a thing will never happen again.

Syntactically: Speaking, Lakoff suggests (2003:206-207) that the wrongdoer in an apology may occur in a *subject position*, *in other than a subject position*, *out of the sentence* or *backgrounded* in a subordinate clause (My

italics).The following examples which are numbered by me are given to illustrate these structuring points : [x is equivalent to *wrongdoing*]

- I want to apologize.
- I'd like to apologize.
- I guess I owe you an apology.
- It's too bad that X happened.
- Sorry you got Xed.
- I feel I owe you an apology.
- It looks to me like an apology might be in order.

It is quite obvious that the first three sentences (i.e. (a),(b),(c)) show that the apologizer is in a subject position.In (d) the speaker (i.e. the apologizer) is not mentioned in the sentence and in (e) he is totally out of it. In (f) and (g), the apology is *downplayed*.

Functions of Apologies

One of the most significant functions of an apology is to bring social harmony and what is metaphorically stated by Lakoff (2003:201) as "greasing ... the social wheels".He likes to look at this "primarily and essentially a social act" in terms of politeness : "To apologize is to act politely ... paying attention to the addressee's face needs." Olshtain almost says (1989:156) the same thing : "In the decision to carry out the verbal apology, the S (speaker) is willing to humiliate himself or herself to some extent...".He goes further to indicate that the speaker goes one-down (i.e. further humiliates himself).

Goffman (1971:140) talks about apology as restoring social 'equilibrium',that with the act of apologizing "the participants feel that matters are closed and that [social] equilibrium has been restored."

The *remedial* function of apologies is also being harped on by Leech (1983:125) “ **The goal of some speech acts, such as thanks and apologies, can then be seen as the restoration of equilibrium, or, at least, the reduction of disequilibrium,between s [= speaker] and h [hearer]”.**

It is obvious that an apology involves, in certain cases, self-abasement. Lakoff (2003:201-202) gives some operative examples that illustrate the various functions of apology.

The Example

- I apologize for eating your hamster.

clearly establishes the speaker unambiguously as being responsible for the action. Lakoff now provides us with the following examples that serve to establish different functions. [The examples are numbered by me].

- I'm sorry about your hamster.
- Well, someone left the hamster in the refrigerator.
- Well that's what hamsters are for, right ?

- I admit I ate the hamster.
- It was wrong of me to eat the hamster.

I shouldn't have eaten the hamster.

- Can you find it in your heart to forgive me for eating the hamster?
- I 'll never eat a hamster as long as I live.

Lakoff tells us that the act in (b) has been 'downplayed' to convey *regret*, in (c) to assign *responsibility* elsewhere, in (d) to *deny* the occurrence of the wrongdoing, in (e) to *minimize* the utterer's responsibility, in (f) to admit having done wrong, in (g) to indicate a wish for forgiveness and finally, in (h) to abjure bad behavior and to promise never to do the act. The examples shown above in (e), (f), (g), (h) remind us of Olshtain's "verbal apology" in which he shows (1989 : 157) that "the S (speaker) is willing to humiliate himself or herself " for the benefit of the addressee.

It is suggested that socialization processes influence pattern of behavior. Tannen (1991:18) rightly argues that "talk between women and men is cross – cultural communication"

Deutschmann likes to talk of the remedial act of apology. He suggests (2003: 36) that an apology "involves redressive action that 'gives face' to the addressee. He also likes to speak of the factors affecting apology : "Deciding whether to apologize or not is likely to be affected by such factors as power relationships and social distance."

Lakoff notices (2003 : 204) that suprasegmental and non-verbal expressions in apology determine for the addressee the acceptability of an apology in the sense that they serve to determine, for the hearer, " the apologizer's sincerity and sufficiency of remorse". Lakoff materializes things by giving examples: "so for instance an apology made too quickly, or in a monotone, will strike a hearer as scripted, nonspontaneous, and so not deeply felt. A breaking voice, on the other hand, bespeaks sincerity, as do certain nonverbal cues".

Leech also speaks (1983:83-84) of relative politeness as opposed to absolute politeness. "I am aware that people typically use 'polite' in a relative sense : that is, relative to some norm of behavior which for a particular setting, they regard as typical".

The association of apology with politeness, on a linguistic level, has to be emphasized. Held (1999:20) looks at politeness as minimizing conflict and maximizing profit. This idea of personal profit is unequivocally emphasized by Leech (1983:82): "**unless you are polite to your neighbour, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower**".

Brown and Levinson (1987:) suggest that politeness "seeks to disarm [aggression]". Leech (1983:84) minimizes "the impoliteness of impolite illocutions" and of 'positive politeness' which maximizes "the politeness of polite illocutions". He also speaks (p.170) of "a connection between politeness and obliquity (i.e. indirectness)".

In an absolute sense, [1] *Just be quiet* is less polite than [2] *Would you please be quiet for a moment ?*

It is only in a relative sense that we can talk of overpoliteness and underpoliteness (Leech, 1983:102)

Developing a theory of pragmatic interpretation, he talks of *polite principles* (PP) and of *implicatures* of politeness. He designates (p.132) six maxims of the PP. which are "observed 'up to a certain point' " :

- TACT MAXIM (in impositives and commissives) ⁽³⁾
 - (a) Minimize cost to *other* [(b) Maximize benefit to *other*]
- GENEROSITY MAXIM (in impositives and commissives)
 - (a) Minimize benefit to *self*, (b) Maximize cost to *self*
- APPROBATION MAXIM (in expressives and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]
- MODESTY MAXIM (in expressives and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize praise of *self* [(b) Maximize dispraise of *self*]
- AGREEMENT MAXIM (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*
[(b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*]
- SYMPATHY MAXIM (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*
[(b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*]

Leech proposes (1983:108) that direct illocutions which increase the degree of optionality tend to be more polite.

All these details show that the connection between politeness and apology is quite organic. Thus, in the same way as apology manifests a social act, politeness does so. To Werkhöfer (1992:156) "The act ... of being polite ... is social ... in the dual sense of being socially constituted and of feeding back into the process of structuring social interaction." Moreover, both speech acts are operative in appeasing the hearer. Watts (1992:47) sees in politeness a mask "that serves to tone down potential aggression, and to ensure that the interaction will be accomplished smoothly."

Keats's and Byron's Apologies ⁽⁴⁾

I have selected a corpus of 15 chronologically ordered letters for each poet as representing the relevant *genre* impressively materialized by Keats and Byron. One can easily notice that the poets' apologies often occur at the initiating part of the letter under inspection. The analysis will, accordingly, discard the thematic contents of the discussed letters. The illocutionary acts as speech – act verbs that inform the letters are *commissives* in a Searle's sense and in that of Leech (1983:214) ⁽⁵⁾.

Specimens of Keats's Apologies

- From a letter to Taylor and Hessey dated April 1817.

1. "I am very unfortunate for I am just going out and have not a sheet of paper handy- so I can only beg pardon for this scrap".

- From a letter to Taylor and Hessey, [Publishers] dated Friday 16 May 1817.

2." I am extremely indebted to you for your liberality in the shape of manufactured rag ..."

- From a letter to George and Thomas Keats, dated Sunday 21 Dec. 1817

3." I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this ..."

- From a letter to Benjam Robert Haydox Wednesday 31 Dec.1817

4." I thoughtlessly gave you a promise for Sunday..."

- From a letter to to his brothers George and Thomas Keats, dated Monday 5 Jan. 1818.

5."I ought to have written before, and you should have had a long letter last week but I ..."

- From a letter to John Taylor,dated Saturday Morning 10 Jan. 1818.

6."Several things have kept me from you lately ..."

- From a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon dated Saturday 10 Jan. 1818.

7." I should have seen you ere this "

- From a letter to John Taylor, dated Saturday 21 June 1818

8." I am sorry I have not had time to call and wish you health till my return..."

- From a letter to Mrs. Wylie, dated Thursady 6 August 1818.

9. " It was with a great regret to me that I should leave all my friends, just at the moment when I might have helped to soften away the time for them..."

- From a letter to Fanny Keats, dated Tuesday 18 August 1818.

10. I am afraid you will (think) me very negligent in not having answered your letter...

- From a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, dated Jan. 1819

11. "We are very unlucky – I should have stopped to dine with you, but I knew I should not have been able to leave you in time..."

- From a letter to John Taylor, dated Monday 23 Aug 1819

12. "You will perceive that I do not write you till I am forced by necessity: that I am sorry for..."

- From a letter to Fanny Brawne, dated Feb. 1820

13. "My dearest Girl, how could it ever have been my wish to forget you? how could I have said such a thing ?..."

- From a letter to Mr. Wylie, dated Friday, March, 1820

14. "I have been very negligent in not letting you hear from me for so long a time considering the anxiety I know you feel for me".

- From a letter to Fanny Keats, dated Wednesday 12 April 1820

15. "Excuse these shabby scraps of paper I send you and also from endeavouring to give you any consolation just

at present...".

Analysis

It is obvious that in **form**, Keats's apologies sometimes depart from the conventionalized forms of "I am sorry + infinitive, "I am sorry + a that clause" and the impersonal constructions beginning with "it is with + regret / sorrow that".

Keats's apologies, to analyse the specimens, are clearly realized by embedded forms. Often they start with a first person pronoun (I) and sometimes with the second – person (you) or with an indefinite construction. Clearly they are mostly from "one to one" and rarely to two (as suggested by the two letters that address his two brothers and a third one addressed to his friends. These apologies often herald literary enunciations or some creative poetic realizations. In **function**, as the examples show, they try to soften some inconveniences or some moments of inattention and / or lapses.

It is obvious that the apologizing parts of Keats's letters are traditionally rendered. The formality of the words used is quite explicit as shown by the italicized words or phrases : "I must most *crave* your *pardon* ...", I am sorry to *have not* ..." "I am *afraid* you will (think) me (very) *negligent* ..." " *extremely indebted*", etc.

It is also quite noticeable that in the third, the fourth, the ninth and the twelve initiating parts of the relevant letters, the apologizer is *backgrounded* and *downplayed*. The *elevated style* of these parts reveals itself in the intricate choice of certain lexical and phrases such as 'thoughtlessly' and 'forced by necessity'...etc. In most of the initiating portions of these letters, the apologizer occurs in a subject position (examples: " I am extremely indebted...", " I am sorry", "I am afraid...", "I have been... negligent", " We are very unlucky ..." etc.).

In most of these letters, Keats employs constructions that are set to show the apologizer's sincerity in the same way as suprasegmental and nonverbal expressions do, constructions like " I ought to have written before...", " I should have seen you ", "excuse these shabby scraps...". We have also repetitive interrogative constructions that do the same job: "how could it ever have been ?", how could I have said such a thing?"

Demonstrably, the main function of Keats's apologies seem to amend some irritating deflections, disinformation and / or inconveniences that have, in his opinion, disheartened his addressees.

Specimens of Byronic Apologies

- From a letter to Augusta Byron, dated March 21nd, 1804

1. "Although, My ever Dear Augusta, I have hitherto appeared remiss in replying to your kind and affectionate letters ; yet I hope you will not attribute my neglect to a want of affection ...".

- From a letter to William Harness, dated February 16th, 1808.

2. "Again I trouble you, but I would not do so, did I not hope your Sentiments nearly coincided with mine, on the subject, I am about to mention...".

- From a letter to John Cam Hobhoue, dated February 17th, 1808.

3. "I write to you to explain a foolish circumstance, which has arisen from some words uttered by me before Pearce and Brown, when I was devoured with Chagrin, and almost insane with the fumes of, not 'last night's Punch but that evening's wine'..."

- From a letter to Mrs. Catherine Gordon Byron [= Byron's mother] dated Mch.6th, 1809.

4. "My last letter was written under great depression of spirits from poor Falkland's death, who has left without a shilling four [sic] and his wife..."

- From a letter to Lord Holland, dated June 25th, 1812.

5. "I must appear very ungrateful and have indeed been very negligent, but till last night I was not apprized of Lady Holland's situation..."

- From a letter to Lord Holland, dated March 25th, 1813.

6. "I regret very much the cause of my yesterday's loss ... and trust that it exists no longer..."

- From a letter to Harriette Wilson, dated April ? ⁽⁶⁾ 1814.

7. "If my silence has hurt 'your pride or your feelings', to use your own expressions, I am very sorry for it..."

- From a letter to John Hanson, dated Oct.24th, 1814.

8. "I am truly sorry to write to you in any terms but the most friendly – but circumstances compel me..."

- From a letter to Lady Byron, dated March 25th, 1816.

9. "I am truly sorry to hear that you have been informed.. I have spoken of you harshly or lightly..."

- From a letter to R.B. Hoppner, dated November 28th, 1817.

10. "I seem fated to give you trouble. Certain persons (or person) unknown this day walked into the hall and during the sleep or neglect of the Servants carried off a blue great coat..."

- From a letter to Augusta Leigh, dated May 17th, 1819.

11. "I have been negligent in not writing, but what can I say [.] Three years absence ____ and the total change of scene and habit make such a difference..."

- From a letter to Countess Teresa Guiccioli, dated November 25th, 1819.

12. "You are and will always be my first thought – but at this moment I am in a terrible state of not knowing what to decide..."

- From a letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, dated April 26th, 1821.

13. "I am very sorry to hear what you say of Keats – is it actually true ? I did not think criticism had been so killing..."

- From a letter to Thomas Moore, dated August 27th, 1822.

14. "It is boring to trouble you with 'such small gear', but it must be owned that I should be glad if you would enquire whether my Irish subscription ever reached the committee..."

- From a letter to Sir Timothy Shelley, dated June 7th, 1823.

15. "I trust that the only motive of this letter will be sufficient apology even from a stranger – I had the honour of

being the friend of the late Percy B. Shelley...".

Analysis

It is clear that the letters do reflect and/or represent certain periods of Byron's life: his boyhood, his Grand Tour (to Europe), his marriage and separation, his stay at Venice, Rome, Genoa and Greece.

Looking at these Byronic letters, one can easily notice, even in their initiating parts of them which realize apologies, that Byron is inconsistent and eccentric in his own use of capital letters. Moreover, the *question* mark adjacent to the date of writing the letter serves to show that the date is conjectural. Obviously, Byron's *punctuation*, even in the apology part seems to follow no rules.

Syntactically speaking, the apologizing parts of the letters are realized by complex and compound sentences embracing intriguingly embedded constructions. As the representative specimens show, the apologizer, in most cases, occurs in a subject position : "I have...", "I trouble ...", "I write...", "My last letter...", "I must appear...", "I regret ...", "If my silence has ...", "I am ((very)(truly)) sorry...", "I seem fated ...", "I have been (very) negligent ...", "I am very sorry...", "I trust that ...". Only two of the specimens reveal the addressee in a subject position. One of them begins with the dummy expletive *it* : "It is boring to trouble you with ...". The other is : "You are and will always be my first thought".

It is quite noticeable that the first person pronoun with which usually the apologizing part starts: 'I regret ...' 'I am ...' 'I write...' etc normally enacts a traditional way of apologizing. Moreover, one can easily notice that the lexical forms of the speech acts in the apologizing portions are quite **elevated**. Apparently, they are meant to address close people of high calibre. The corollary expressions demonstrate both sensational linguistic alertness and literariness.

In terms of *function*, obviously Byron's apologies try to set right some inconvenient mishaps and / or misconceptions. He seems to be keen enough to appease his addressees.

CONCLUSIONS

To recapture things, the paper has answered the main research questions concerning the *felicity* of apologies as discursal speech acts. We have seen that these pragmatic devices are socially required to effect harmony between the speaker and the addressee.

The importance of the theme tackled by this paper shows in the fact that it has the specific objective of activating studying areas that have remained, up to now, to my knowledge, unearthed.

The paper has also shown that apologies as pragmatic speech acts are significant in the sense of the *psychological impact* they exercise on their markers (speakers) and recipients (hearers / addressees) as well.

It has clearly been shown that the analytic approach to these discursal devices would certainly advance our understanding of the pragmatic nature of these apologies. It would equally isolate them for our inspection as harmonizing devices that their writers (in our case the two Romantic poets) strive to effect with their receivers.

The detailed examination of the corpus of the literary letters of Keats and Byron articulates an exploratory study that has looked critically at these unconventional forms and functions of apologies occurring in highly elevated literary texts. Having properly scrutinized these discursal realities often occurring at the initiating parts of these letters, we have come to the conclusion that these elevated acts realize quite operative devices that are designed, on the poets' part, to

redress mild lapses or some awkwardness and /or inconveniences. Judging from the replies to these letters, the status of their senders is shown to be elevated in the eyes of their recipients.

Notes

- *MacMillan Dictionary* defines apology as “a statement that tells someone that you are sorry for doing something wrong or causing a problem” (p.54).
- *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines apology as “a word or statement saying sorry for something that has been done wrong or that causes a problem” (p.59)
- *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines an apology as “an admission of error or discourtesy accompanied by an expression of regret”(p.95).
- Austin’s five categories of illocutionary force (1962:151) are *verdictives*, *exercitives*, *commissives*, *behabitives* and *expositives*.
- Most of the illocutionary acts mentioned within the brackets are those of Searle (1979:1-29). They may be summarized as follows:
 - Assertives e.g. stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, reporting.
 - Directives such as ordering, commanding, requesting, advising and recommending.
 - Commissives e.g. promising, vowing, offering.
 - Expressives e.g. thanking, congratulating, pardoning, blaming, condoling etc.
 - Declarations e.g. resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, excommunication, appointing, sentencing etc.
- The following pieces on Keats and Byron are based on material from *Wilson’s English Literature* and *Safier’s Adventures in English Literature*.

John Keats (1795-1821)

Keats died when he was twenty five years. Had he lived longer, he would have been the greatest poet of his time. His mature letters attest to his unique talent. His poetic themes revolve round love, the wish to die and beauty in nature. He became an orphan when he was eight years old. In London, he befriended Leigh Hunt, who encouraged him to take himself seriously as a writer. The year 1819 witnessed Keats’s “astonishing sequence of masterpieces”. Keats is painfully aware that beauty dies. This heart-ache shows in his magnificent odes : *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and *Ode to Grecian Urn*. (Wilson, pp. 223-224; Safier, pp. 556-557).

George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1924)

Born with a clubfoot, he suffered both from the physical and psychological effects of his deformity. As a poet, he embodied the romantic spirit. Descending from two aristocratic families, he was sent to Harrods and then to Cambridge University. It was at Cambridge that Byron began to write poetry. He travelled to different places in Europe. He went to Spain, Portugal, Albania, Greece and Switzerland. His satirical epic *Don Juan* is one of his masterpieces. However, Byron remained all his life the young spoilt child who sulks and sneers if he cannot have his own way. He ended his life fighting

for Greece. (Wilson, pp. 220-221; Safier, pp. 526-527).

5. Classification of speech –act verbs in Leech

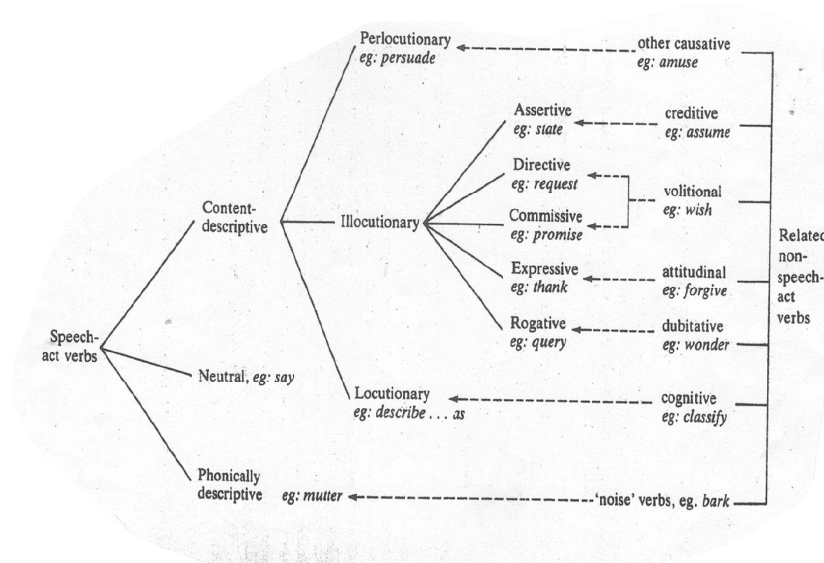


Figure 1

6. It seems that the author is not sure of the date of the letter, hence the presence of the indicative question mark (?) along with the suggested date.

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