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The construction of Congolese-Belgian relations in apologies. A discourse analysis of letters over colonial past

La construcción de las relaciones congoleño-belgas en apología. Un análisis del discurso sobre el pasado colonial

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Abstract

Apologies have attracted the attention of various social sciences' disciplines, suggesting the need for political figures to apologize for ingroup's historical injustices. Despite these expectations, Belgium has not yet offered public apologies for its colonial past in Congo. In 2019, a Belgian company launched a competition offering the possibility for Belgian citizens to write an apology for the country's colonial past. In this paper, we analyze five letters selected by the company and examine how authors describe the ingroup and the outgroup in order to understand Belgian and Congolese present relationships. Drawing on discursive psychology, we looked at how the two social groups are constructed by means of regularity and variability in the authors' use of discursive devices. Results show that the majority of the discursive devices are used to maintain a distinction between the two. Similarities and differences among letter in terms of intergroup relations are discussed.

Keywords: **Public apologies; Social group; Discursive analysis; Social sciences**

Resumen

Las disculpas han atraído la atención de las ciencias sociales, sugiriendo la necesidad de que las figuras políticas se disculpen por las injusticias históricas del endogrupo. Sin embargo, Bélgica aún no se ha disculpado públicamente por su pasado colonial en el Congo. En 2019, una empresa belga lanzó un concurso que ofrecía a los ciudadanos belgas la posibilidad de escribir una carta de disculpa por el pasado colonial. En este artículo, analizamos cartas seleccionadas por la empresa y examinamos cómo los autores describen el endogrupo y el exogrupo. Basándonos en la psicología discursiva, analizamos cómo se construyen los dos grupos sociales mediante la regularidad y variabilidad en el uso de dispositivos discursivos por parte de los autores. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de los recursos discursivos se utilizan para mantener una distinción entre los dos grupos. Se discuten las similitudes y diferencias entre las cartas en términos de relaciones intergrupales.

Palabras clave: **Disculpas públicas; Grupo social; Análisis discursivo; Ciencias sociales**

Introduction

During the last decades, there have been heated social and political debates over how colonialism should be represented (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Bobowik et al., 2017; Bosma et al., 2012). While for centuries Europeans have represented colonizers as national heroes making sacrifices to civilize distant and neglected populations, testimonies of appalling behaviors of colonizers recently (re-)surfaced (Bentley, 2015; Licata et al., 2018). This is also the case in Belgium. Over time, Belgians have witnessed growing protests challenging the morality of their colonial heritage (statues were vandalized, marches organized and the government lobbied by militant associations). Whereas most former colonial powers have reacted to these revelations and protests by offering public apologies, Belgium has not yet done so. As already suggested by Simona Lastrego and Laurent Licata (2010), public apologies have an impact on intergroup relations, drawing the feeling of certain collective emotions essential to the coming together of two groups. It is thus in a particularly tense political climate that in April 2019 an advertising company launched a competition inviting ordinary citizens to write a letter to the Congolese in order to apologize for the atrocities committed during the colonial period. Five letters were selected by a jury set up by the company. Drawing on discursive psychology, we analyzed the five letters and specifically looked at how social categories were constructed. By looking at how the ingroup and the outgroup are referred to, we identify how Congolese-Belgian intergroup

relations are constructed in the letters. Next, we outline the context within which the competition took place and the letters selected.

THE CASE OF BELGIUM'S COLONIAL PAST

Belgium's colonization of the Congo officially started in 1908 and ended in 1960. However, King Leopold II already obtained sovereignty over Congo in 1885 at the Berlin Conference. Congo remained the sole property of the King until 1908 when, in response to reports of atrocities perpetrated on the locals and the ensuing international campaign requesting an end to the King's rule, it became a Belgian colony. Narratives over the Belgian colonization vary greatly (Licata & Klein, 2005, 2010; Licata et al., 2018), but one cannot deny that the Congolese population suffered tremendously. Adam Hochschild's (1998) book describes horrific massacres carried out to force the population to submit to colonial power. During the colonial period, Congolese resisted (Burroughs, 2018) and were supported by an international campaign reporting the abuses, but resistance was violently repressed by the colonial power. When it became obvious that there were no other alternatives, Belgium decided to end the colonization and Congo declared its independence on June 30, 1960.

Recently, during the 60th anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Congo's independence (and in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement sparked by the killing of George Floyd), King Philippe of Belgium presented his "deep regrets" for the atrocities perpetrated by colonials (Clevers, 2020). However, although Belgian officials acknowledged Belgium's violent past on a few occasions and mostly for specific events or practices, to date, no public apology has been offered to the people of Congo for Belgium's colonial past in a more general perspective. Furthermore, paternalistic views over the colonial past still persist, exacerbating the relations with Congo and the Congolese community living in Belgium (Figueiredo et al., 2018; Licata & Klein, 2005, 2010; Lastrego & Licata, 2010). It is thus not surprising that Belgium was recently called on by a U.N. working group to present a public apology to the Congolese for its colonial past (Crisp, 2019). Public apologies have created a lot of interest among social psychologists and, as suggested by Borja Martinovic et al. (2021), studies on public apologies have mainly focused, until now, on the victim's need for an excuse, but little research has looked into how the perpetrator group feels about public apologies. Public apologies, although having been studied for a long time by social psychologists can still surprise us (Gkinopoulos et al., 2022). We may add that the lack of public apologies can also have surprising impacts on individuals' perception of intergroup relations.

In reaction to the lack of public apology for Belgium's colonial past, ordinary Belgians and militant associations have started to protest. It is in this general tense context that an advertising company launched a national competition, giving Belgian citizens the opportunity to write an apology for their country's colonial past to the Congolese people. Drawing on a discourse analytical perspective, we next present the criteria that we have selected to analyze how the authors referred to the two groups.

Discursive psychology and the construction of intergroup relations

From a discursive point of view, language not only represents reality, but also socially constructs it (Wiggins, 2017). Social reality is constantly described, (re) interpreted and negotiated by speakers through linguistic practices (Wiggins, 2017). In other words, linguistic practices act on the world and consequently have performative effects (Wiggins, 2017). Therefore, discursive practices can "maintain and promote certain social relations" (Íñiguez-Rueda & Antaki, 1994, p. 63).

The letters analyzed in this paper, written by ordinary citizens who situate themselves as members of the colonizer group, are public apologies, which imply "a willingness to acknowledge and express regret for illegitimate harm committed in the name of their group" (Wohl et al., 2011, p. 73). Most if not all research on the production or expression of public apologies focuses on representatives (Wohl et al., 2011), here instead we focus on apologies written by ordinary people. An apology is, in general terms, a speech act whose goal is to bring reconciliation between two sides (Tavuchis, 1991). However, past research has shown the ambivalent aspect of apologies, where the apologizer, through the use of particular rhetorical devices, manages to reject responsibility rather than express real remorse (Wohl, et al., 2011).

This situation shows that apologies can actually be an opportunity to reinforce the status quo. The way people construct the two sides may maintain and promote certain social relations among them. For this reason, the objective of this paper is to analyze how the two groups involved in colonization, Belgians and Congolese, are constructed by ordinary people in the apologetic letters in order to reveal the ideological effects of discourse, that is, if their discourse challenges or maintains colonial relations between the two sides. It is important to note that the letters only express how Belgian citizens construct the intergroup relation; the position of Congolese citizens is not explored here.

The analysis we propose is crucial to better understand present intergroup relations between Congolese and Belgians, which is still a rather silenced topic. However, the need for such questioning is palpable as suggested by Ana Figueiredo

et al. (2018) who have shown that how the colonial past is perceived has a strong impact on acculturation dynamics among Congolese immigrants living in Belgium.

METHODOLOGY

The corpus of apologetic letters: "Sorry is a start"

Our corpus includes the five best letters selected by the jury of the competition, named "Sorry is a start". The event's promotion figured on a website (Creative Belgium, 2020) created for this occasion, as well as in newspapers, cinema spots and social media. Everyone could participate (although the participants needed to be Belgian citizens). The instruction was to write the most appropriate apology to the Congolese for Belgium's colonial past, on behalf of the Belgian population. A total of 177 letters from Belgian citizens were initially received. From this set of letters, the company first selected about 15 letters based on the following criteria: the right tone of voice, empathy for the subject, in-depth knowledge of the subject, writing style, and grammatical correctness. The authors were then invited to present their letters to a jury[1]. Based on the letters and the presentations, the jury selected five letters that were considered the best and, from those letters, chose the winning letter. Letters could be written in either Dutch or French, two of the country's three official languages[2], representing the two largest language communities. The article's bilingual co-author translated into French the only selected letter (letter 2) written in Dutch so that the whole analytical corpus was in French.

Analytical approach and procedure

Discursive psychology is a discourse analysis perspective that has been used to study intergroup relations and racism (see, for instance, Wetherell & Potter, 1992). It allows us not only to examine how people themselves define, describe, explain and argue about social categories, including the terms they employ to refer to those categories, but also to understand the connection between the individual and the social. Because of its focus on discursive practices, this methodological approach allows us to see how social categories are produced and re-negotiated at the micro-level. According to discursive psychology, the ideological effects or functions of discourse cannot be directly observed in the raw data. As Margaret Wetherell & Jonathan Potter (1988) explain, "discourse analysis cannot be, in a straightforward way, an analysis of function because functions

1 Members of the jury were mainly copywriters, journalists and historians. There were also some activists and students of African languages.
2 The third being German.

are not in general directly available for study" (1988, p. 170). For example, one can be racist without even mentioning race (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The ideological effects or functions of discourse are elucidated through the identification of regularity and variability in the use of discursive devices.

Since language is action-oriented, people use different discursive devices, defined as "techniques for the construction of facts" (Edwards & Potter, 1992), to construct different versions of reality. Variability is the result of particular choices of discursive or rhetorical devices. It must be mentioned, however, that the "choice" in the use of discursive devices is not necessarily intentional or deliberate as people "may be just doing what comes naturally" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 34). Therefore, the analysis of the variability and regularity of discursive devices allows us to reveal the particular constructions people do, in this case, regarding the two sides involved in the Belgian colonial past. For instance, people may use some particular discursive devices when talking about their ingroup and some other when talking about the outgroup (variability). However, as Potter & Wetherell (1987) explain, there is also regularity in variability. It is by choosing the same similar devices, for instance, in our study, when talking about a group, that people ensure regularity. This means that when people talk about groups, they do it differently according to their relation to this particular group (variability), and each group is regularly presented in the same way (regularity). This implies that people are regular in their switch of rhetorical devices according to their attitude[3] towards the object of their discourse.

Our aim is thus to analyze how discourse is articulated and what is obtained (consciously or unconsciously) through these specific constructions (Sisto Campos, 2012). On this basis, we first identified which particular discursive devices (including terminology and rhetorical figures) are used to describe the two groups, and then we identified the regularity and variability in the use of the discursive devices in order to reveal the effects of discourse. To perform the discourse analysis, we analyzed each letter individually and then discussed them together. We analyzed each letter by looking at all discursive devices referring to the ingroup, the outgroup and a superordinate group including both Congolese and Belgians. Following this step, we analyzed their regularity and variability.

The decision to look at how people describe the ingroup, thus make references to their social identity, is nourished by the fact that past research has shown that: (1) reference of self and social identity, and more particularly the distinctive

3 From a discursive psychology's perspective, attitudes are "stances taken in matters of controversy: they are positions in arguments" (Billig, 1991, p. 143).

use of the two in an apologetic context, allows to dissociate the self from the guilty ingroup and thus from the misdeed's responsibility (Goffman, 1971; Petrucci, 2002); and (2) that Belgians do not consider colonial past as being still relevant in the country's collective memory, thus do not consider it as part of their national identity (Rosoux & van Ypersele, 2012) and hence tend to dissociate themselves from it. Therefore, looking at how Belgians refer to themselves and their national group when apologizing for the colonial past is critical to better understand how past and present intergroup tensions are created, maintained or appeased. Indeed, Andrew McNeill et al. (2014) have already pointed out how references to self and identity are action oriented in the apology process. However, this has not been done yet in the Belgian colonial context. For this reason, in the apologetic letters, we focused on the discursive devices used to categorize the apologizer's and victims' groups. This enabled us to identify the individuals' attitude towards their colonial past.

Results

In this section, we present the analysis for each letter individually. We present a selection of the excerpts[4] that illustrate best the use of discursive devices, their regularity and variability. The original full texts in French with line numbering can be found in the appendix of the paper (see Lastrego et al. 2025). In the discussion section, we highlight some common patterns identified throughout the letters.

Letter1 (written by Anne-Lise)

The author addresses the letter to a person, identified as a sister ("letter to my sister", line 1). The sisterly image is attributed simultaneously to the Congolese people and the country in itself. This can be illustrated by the fact that the author apologizes for past misdeeds endured by the Congolese ("I ask forgiveness to your ears for the racist and disparaging remarks that you must have listened to" lines 8-9), but also for taking advantage of Congo's natural resources ("I ask forgiveness to your belly, which I opened to extract your wealth" lines 19-20). Congo in French is a masculine name, the author could have chosen the image of a brother, but instead chose a woman: she refers to woman's breasts in "I ask forgiveness to your breast that I forced to feed strangers while your own children were only entitled to the last drops of your breast milk" (lines 16-20). Moreover, in French, verbs are conjugated to the gender of the person, and the author conjugates the verbs that are attributed to Congo in the female form. An example

4 These excerpts are translated into English in order to facilitate the reading.

can be found at line 45 "I ask forgiveness for having considered you" and considered is conjugated to the feminine form. The writer writes in the name of Congo's sister (the letter is signed by "Your Belgium" at line 68 where "your" is feminized). Although the two, Congo and Belgium, belong to the same family, they share a love-hatred relationship: "I ask forgiveness to your heart; which I dragged without its consent into a toxic and destructive love-hate relationship", (lines 14-15). A relation that Congo has not chosen, but has been forced to be part of. Congo appears here not to have resisted it but endured it passively.

Congo is a woman who has been tortured and who has not been able to defend herself (even her milk is stolen from her, forcing her to breastfeed foreigners). This sense of incapacity to protect herself is strengthened by the author's use of synecdoche, a figure of speech where a part of something is used to refer to its whole (Oxford University Press, n.d.) to describe parts of Congo's body. As research has shown, women's abuse has often been reported by an overdetailed description of the victim rather than the abuser (Berns, 2004). Congo is thus a set of body parts (lines 6-42, e.g. "head", "ears", "mouth", "eyes", etc.), a passive character (passive voice[5]), suffering the actions done by an agentic character: the use of "I" confers to Belgium control and power over its actions (in addition to the active forms of verbs). Even when describing Congo's independence ("The day I cowardly abandoned you, washing my hands of the bad decisions you might have made like a crazy dog[6], drunk on freedom and autonomy", line 55-57), Congolese are not conferred an active role in the achieved independence since the author describes it as Belgium's abandonment. As a matter of fact, the author does not refer to the act of independence as a victory for Congolese, but as a result of Belgium's departure. Furthermore, Congolese are never mentioned in the letter but are referred to as "children" (lines 17 and 22) or a "crazy dog" (line 57). Belgians, on the other hand, are never referred to as children, even when the author writes "I ask forgiveness to your breast that I forced to feed strangers while your own children were only entitled to the last drops of your breast milk": Congolese are referred to as children, meanwhile Belgians are simply referred to as foreigners.

As previously mentioned, Belgium and Congo are referred to as persons and sisters. The author reinforces this link by using informal linguistic devices such as first and second personal pronouns. The use of "I" refers to Belgium and not the

5 A passive voice is a type of a sentence in which an action (through verb), or an object of a sentence, is emphasized rather than its subject. The emphasis or focus is on the action, while the subject is not known or is less important.

6 Dog is feminized as the author uses its feminine form *chienne*.

author directly (as the letter is signed by "Your Belgium") and by the fact that the author apologizes for past misdeeds which she did not perform directly but were carried out by Belgium during the colonial time. For example, the author describes severed hands ("I ask forgiveness for your severed hands for not having worked enough", line 25) which has become a symbol of colonial times as well as the use of physical punishment such as whipping (lines 35-36). The letter heavily relies on the anaphora[7] "I ask forgiveness" (lines 2, 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 25, 27, 29, 32, 35, 38, 40, 43, 45, 48, 51) used throughout the majority of the letter to apologize for colonial misdeeds. By using an active form (I ask forgiveness), Belgium is given an active role in the letter, while Congo is a country described as a list of body parts, a passive entity that suffers the action of others. Belgium, on the other hand, is a person who is never referred to as a body. Congo's children are sent to a "capital" (line 23) or "sent to me" (lines 43-44) and not a body part. The use of discursive devices in order to describe Congo as a set of body parts is extremely regular throughout the letter, thus not letting Congo to be perceived as an active actor, but only a passive victim in the intergroup relation. Meanwhile, variability of discursive devices can be observed when referring to Belgium, which is never described as a body. Belgium has an active voice (the apology is expressed by a person, by using the first personal pronoun), whereas Congo has no voice at all in this relationship.

Finally, at the end of the letter (lines 63-64), the author writes: "I was your cancer for too long". Once again Congo is referred to as a body, here a sick body, but the sentence is written in the past tense, as if to suggest that the illness is over. Belgium should not be considered anymore as a cancer, thus Congo is not sick anymore, or at least is cancer free. Using the past tense allows the author to detach herself from what has been done and suggests that now there are no more obstacles to a healthy intergroup relationship.

Letter 2 (written by Dagmar)

The letter is addressed to "To the Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian populations, as well in Congo, in Rwanda, in Burundi and Belgium" (lines 1-3) thus referring to various parties: not only Congolese, but all those who might have endured the consequences of colonialism, even including the diaspora. The intention to include a large number of entities is reinforced at lines 16-18 "When in the past attempts have been made to apologize, they have been hesitant. Only a few victims were commemorated, not the entire population" where the

7 An anaphora is, according to Bonhomme (2005, cited by Véronique Magri-Mourgues, 2015), the fact of using exactly the same group of words in different parts of a text to strengthen the value of the information.

author seems to suggest that victims are not only those who directly experienced the Belgian colonization, but all the people who have been directly or indirectly affected by it. The author's intention of inclusivity is once again present at lines 54-55: "the suffering that we made your populations endure". By using a plural pronoun ("your" in French is conjugated in the plural form[8]) and referring to population in its plural form, the author suggests that victims can belong to different social groups. Moreover, the fact that the author addresses herself also to present civilizations, suggests that the consequences for the colonial past are not over and thus creates continuity between the past and present times. This regularity in addressing herself to a larger entity (past and present populations) allows her to indicate that the consequences of the past are still present, thus acknowledging the enduring consequences of colonialism. In terms of intergroup relations, it allows to recognize that there are still tensions and unequal statuses among Congolese and Belgians that can be interpreted as a legacy of the colonial past.

The author apologizes in the name of the Belgian population (by signing the letter in its name: "In the name of the Belgian population") and throughout the letter she uses the pronouns "we" or "our", including herself and consequently expressing responsibility for what has been done in the past. However, there are some exceptions and thus variability where, instead of using the plural pronoun "our", the author refers to "this colonial past" (line 15), enabling self-distance from the horrific past (Peetz & Wilson, 2008). As a matter of fact, "this" has no strings attached to her group and could be designed to describe another group's past. This need for self-distancing could also be attributed to the author's use of passive forms: "When in the past attempts have been made to apologize, they have been hesitant" (lines 16-17), where the subject is omitted from the sentence. Michael Wohl et al. (2011) mentioned this contradictory aspect of apologies, where even if past horrors are described, speakers/authors self-distance from it rather than taking responsibility for them. This variability in referring to the past allows reducing the present responsibility, thus reducing the previous acknowledgment that Belgium is still harming Congolese. However, the author of this letter regularly recognizes the past and present intergroup tensions and frequently highlights Belgium's responsibility. The regularity of discursive devices' use also allows the author to recognize the offended party as a complex entity, while the perpetrator is simply her ingroup: the Belgians.

8 The letter was originally written in Dutch and even in the Dutch version it is conjugated in the plural form.

Letter 3 (written by Bregtje)

Bregtje's letter was proclaimed by the jury as the winning one. The letter is addressed to different entities: "Dear citizen of Congo. Dear citizen humiliated by Belgium. Dear citizen of the world" (lines 1-2) and uses the second person plural pronoun (you) when addressing herself throughout the letter. The way the author addresses her letter to the reader, allows to annul intergroup boundaries: "citizens of Congo" are also "humiliated citizens" and "citizens of the World". Barriers are removed and Congolese are considered as human beings, belonging to the world and having been humiliated by another country.

Throughout the letter, the author uses the first-person singular pronoun ("I") and the first-person plural pronoun ("our") when apologizing. By using those pronouns, the author takes responsibility for her group's misdeeds. The use of anaphora "I am sorry" (repeated in lines 3, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 22, 24, 32, 33, 38, 43, 45, 50, 52, 56, 64) also allows the author to denounce not only Belgians' behavior but also her own by using the first-person singular pronoun. The anaphora is used to ask forgiveness for: not knowing enough about the colonial past, for having exposed people in human zoos, for dilapidating their cultural patrimony, for rape and kidnapping, for ignoring the consequences and for the present consequences of colonial past (such as enduring racism). The author clearly includes herself in the Belgian group by saying "us, Belgians" (line 32). However, when signing she uses only the first-person singular pronoun ("I").

Although she repeatedly recognizes her belonging to the perpetrator group by the use of "us, our", the author manages in some cases to save a part of the Belgian population (e.g. "I am sorry that Belgians don't all have knowledge", line 6-8) thus creating two subgroups (those who know and those who don't) and thus blaming those who still do not know. While Belgians are clearly identified as the perpetrator group, the author's membership is less clear, as sometimes she writes about Belgians without including pronouns such as "we" or "our". In addition, despite the fact that Belgians are clearly the guilty group, the victim one is less clear as most of us can define themselves as citizens of the world. However, the author greatly denounces Belgians' behaviors and does not focus on victims' absence of reaction. She assumes responsibility for what her group has done by criticizing what has been done.

Letter 4 written by Jean-Pierre

The letter is addressed to "To the people of Congo" and throughout the letter the author uses pronouns such as "you, yours" when talking about "the people of Congo". Meanwhile, pronouns such as "we, us, our" are used to describe the

author's ingroup, although it is never explicitly stated who "us" clearly is. The ambiguity concerning the membership of the ingroup is even stronger when the author (who is a man, as indicated by the name) apologies simultaneously to African and women for men's past behavior: "We have treated our women as we have treated Africa, with submission, disregard for their rights" (lines 63-65). Here it is unclear who "us" is. Is he talking in the name of the people of Belgium or Belgian men? According to the author, both women and Africa have been mistreated and, although the intention is assumingly to recognize the wrong acts, the result is the author's essentialization of both women and Africa. Firstly, he implies that all women and all African countries are the same (thus simplifying the complexity of both women and African countries). Secondly, he categorizes women and Africa as passive victims, consequently representing them as entities without any control over their destiny (Gray & Wegner, 2009). This also implies that women could not be colonizers, and African countries could not defend themselves. By doing so, Belgian men are also lumped together, as they all are considered women abusers and colonizers. Thirdly, the author apologizes only to "our women" and not Congolese women, thus omitting all the atrocities that women in Congo have endured.

Although, the author uses "us" most of the time, there are two exceptions where the author describes the perpetrator as a distinct entity:

(1) "But the former colonizer is manipulating your policies to take better advantage of your talents and your wealth. He leaves you the inheritance of corruption." (lines 35-37), where "the former colonizer" and "he" replace the previous use of "us". This is a discursive device already analyzed in letter 2, where avoiding to include oneself in the misdeed allows the author to self-distance from the past wrongs.

(2) "After the 'SORRY' that you've waited too long, our love story can finally begin" (lines 76-77) where "our" is not used to describe the ingroup but is attributed to a superordinate group including both Belgians and Congolese.

Throughout the first part of the letter, the author uses anaphora to make a list of things Belgians should have done ("In your respect, we should have", lines 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, 19, 21, 24), where instead of highlighting the wrongful acts, the author makes a list of the good actions that Belgians should have done, thus not focusing on past misdeeds.

Throughout the letter, the author regularly creates two distinct groups by the use of pronouns "you" vs. "us". Although it is clear that "you" is addressed to the people of Congo, the ingroup is much more ambiguous. Discursive devices

are regularly used in order to describe women or Congolese as passive victims, while Belgians and men are given a stronger and more active role in the relationship. However, the identity of the perpetrator is not always clear when the author uses forms such as "the former colonizer" or "he" to describe those who have carried out the misdeeds. By doing so, he does not always include himself in the guilty group. As a consequence, by not stating clearly who is the perpetrator, it is not clear what the abuses the author is referring to are. By creating ambiguity, the author creates even more intergroup ambiguity.

Letter 5 written by Anne-Charlotte

The author of the fifth letter uses a particularly familiar rhetoric, by addressing her letter to members of a family rather than a nation: "Moms, Dads, Daughters and Sons" (line1). Congolese are thus categorized as members of a family, and it will be stated later on that Belgium has the role of a child in this family. However, the author could have addressed the letter only to "Moms and Dads" as Congo is never referred to as a child or a sibling, thus it is puzzling that the author addresses it to "Daughters and Sons".

The author relies heavily on the family analogy[9], especially when she compares the colonial past with a "fight" between a kid (Belgium) and a parent (Congo):

> No one can decide for you when trust can be restored but like you would do for a cherished child for whom you have unconditional love[…], free your children, your grandchildren and the generations to come from the clutches of hatred and of poisonous memory. (lines 52-57)

In this particular quote, she urges Congolese to forgive Belgians in order to free future Congolese from hatred. Here, not only the author gives Congo full responsibility for the future nature of the relations between Congo and Belgium, but she also compares Belgium to a child, which essentially annuls its responsibility for what has been during its colonial past. The use of a child analogy is also used previously when the author writes: "As a child who would love to repair the irreparable" (line 16), where again Belgians are given the role of the misbehaving children and Congo the role of the understanding parent. The author does not write in the name of Belgians, but rather in her own name as she uses single pronouns such as "I" and "my" throughout the letter. It is not clear if she belongs to this family or if she is an outsider analyzing it.

9 An analogy consists of linking two relations —the target and the source— allowing transferring the relative value of the terms of the source to those of the target.

In the last part of the letter, the author uses the pronoun "we" in order to include the two groups into a superordinate:

> We can choose between two paths, two totally different worlds. Choose the path of hatred, resentment and revenge, harshness, memories and sorrows that haunt minds, day and night, and bruise bodies endlessly. Or choose the path of forgiveness, absolute elegance, incredible greatness, indisputable nobility, choose this path which leads to freedom and serenity of soul. (lines 40-48).

However, despite the use of "we", the message is actually addressed to the abused part. Indeed, the author is lecturing the Congolese, who should forgive Belgians in order for all parties to get closure. She adds: "free your children, your grandchildren and the generations to come from the clutches of hatred and poisonous memory" (lines 55-57), once again suggesting that if victims do not choose forgiveness, then they are responsible for future tensions. It is not a choice that she is giving but a sermon. The tone is particularly paternalistic and sounds as a parent scolding a child.

The repetition of the family analogy allows to suggest that the two countries belong to one family, a dysfunctional family but still a family that can resolve its tensions. What the author suggests by repeatedly using the family analogy is that a family must resolve its problems and that solutions can always be found. Pressure is thus put on the adult, to behave as an adult: forgive the misbehaved child. However, in the last part of the letter, the tone changes and it is the author who assumes the parental role and scolds the child (here Congo) to forgive and not perpetrate hate.

Discussion

In a general context characterized by a lack of official apologies by Belgian authorities for the country's colonial past, an advertising company launched a competition calling on ordinary citizens to write the most appropriate apology to the people of Congo for Belgium's colonial past, on behalf of the Belgian population. In this article, we carried out a discourse analysis of the five letters considered to be the best by the jury set up by the advertising company. Results show that although there are some attempts to include Belgians and Congolese into the same group, most of the discursive devices are actually used to maintain a distinction between the two.

Letter 1's author refers to Congo as if it was a woman, a sister. By describing different parts of the abused body, Congo appears as a passive woman, one that has

endured all kinds of mistreatments. At some point, Congo is even referred to as a child and a crazy dog unable to cope with her own freedom. Contrarily, Belgium is described as a highly agentic person (never a body). Although the intention of an apology is to improve present relations, this letter does not seem to recognize Congo as an equal. Furthermore, the author indicates that Belgium's misbehavior is over, implying that Congolese have nothing to fear anymore. In contrast, the author of letter 2 continuously links the colonial past to the present (racist) system as she includes colonial victims to present times and represents the other as more complex than a simple entity (by introducing the mistreated party in the plural form). However, the author also self-distances herself from the guilty group, thus rejecting in some way responsibility. Thus, even though the original author's goal was to question Belgium's behavior, by self-distancing she does not allow Belgium to fully recognize its role. The author of letter 3 includes herself in the guilty group and apologizes to a larger set of victims. This is the only letter that strongly highlights the responsibility of Belgians in the past misdeeds, by not focusing on the victims, compared to the other letters that overfocused on the victims. Letter 4 compares Congo to a battered woman and writes that "we" should apologize to both Congo and women. Thus, who is "us" is not clear. By not clearly defining who is the abuser, it is difficult to question the relationship. However, the author manages to attribute a passive role to Congo, thus again painting Congo as defenseless. Finally, the author of letter 5, similarly to the one of letter 1, uses the analogy of a family, implying that Belgium and Congo belong to the same family. However, here Congo is the parent of a child (Belgium) that has misbehaved. By doing so, Belgium's responsibility is highly reduced. As demonstrated by Marta Augoustinos et al. (2002), the use of rhetorically self-sufficient arguments allows to maintain discrimination. These authors also highlighted how apologies can allow the guilty group to put pressure over victims to forgive (see also Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). This is clearly done by this letter's author when she writes that if Congolese do not forgive, then they choose hatred. This is also implied by the fourth author when he writes that after this apology, now the Congolese-Belgian love story can begin.

Common patterns exist among most letters. Indeed, the analysis shows that most of the time all letters construct both groups as mutually exclusive and unequal (Belgium being described as the dominant one), thus not really challenging past constructs. It is important to note that the two groups had been already defined by the competition's call itself; however, this definition could have been challenged by citizens' letters. Congo is often given the role of a passive entity, unable to defend itself from others (it is regularly described as a child, a battered woman, a piece of a woman's body), while Belgium is given a more agentic role.

Self-distance devices have the effect of protecting the author from having to accept responsibility over the ingroup's misbehavior. When self-distancing is not used, Belgium is given a naïve role, a child's role (letter 5), thus reducing its responsibility. Most letters also compared the relationship between Belgium and the Congo to an intimate relationship, either a family or a love relationship. Such analogies have a series of advantages when trying to improve intergroup relations: They (re)humanize the Other; they signal good intent on the part of the speaker and his or her ingroup; and they question the uneven structure of the past and present relations between Belgium and Congo by treating the different groups on an equal footing[10]. Concerning the latter advantage, an author went as far as reversing the power structure by giving the Congolese the authoritative role of the parent who ought to show mercy to Belgium which was put in the role of the bad behaving child. These metaphors have unintended drawbacks, however. They imply that the harm endured by Congolese during the colonization can be compared to the harm endured by battered women or to the pain caused by a child to his or her mother. One could rightfully claim that the above harms differ in scope, nature, and degree. Such analogies thus tend, at the very least, to trivialize, minimize, or else deny the harms caused by the colonial power. Moreover, the above metaphors have often been used to demand forgiveness from the Congolese, thereby adding to the burden of victimhood.

Contributions of the study

Our findings add to the existing literature in three ways. First, unlike most if not all research on the production or expression of public apologies which focuses on representatives (Wohl et al., 2011), we analyzed apologies written by lay people. For an apology to be effective, it is generally recommended that it be issued by a group's representative, preferably one that is considered prototypical (Schumann & Ross, 2010). However, there are good reasons to study apologies issued by lay people. Research indeed suggests that movements towards official apologies are often (and should preferably be) initiated in a bottom-up fashion, from citizens and grass-roots organizations to the government (Wohl et al., 2011). Studying citizens' apologies for historical injustices will consequently improve our understanding of the context and antecedents of official apologies. Next, as recent research suggests (Reinders Folmer et al., 2012.), the role of representative carries with it a more competitive mindset than the role of group

10 Despite these benefits, it must be acknowledged that families can also be abusive and justify the abuse in the name of love (Fraser, 2008). Thus, these kinds of analogies also allow the authors to justify past misdeeds, by implying that the two parties have always loved each other despite it all.

member. This could affect both the content and the form of apologies. This possibility could not be examined in our study but constitutes an interesting avenue for future research.

Second, research on public apologies has predominantly adopted a content-coding paradigm whereby instances of apologies are first segmented before elements considered essential for the effectiveness of an apology are looked up for (see e.g., Blatz et al., 2009). This paradigm fails to capture the full meanings of apologies (Cels, 2015). In our study, we analyzed the apologetic letters from a discursive perspective, identifying regularity and variability in the use of particular discursive devices. This allowed us to go beyond the identification of the presence or absence of specific content by showing how discourse is articulated and the effects that such articulation has in terms of intergroup relations.

Also, of particular importance in the analysis of an apology is the inclusion of the set-up in the analysis (Wohl et al., 2011). The apologies we analyzed were written in the context of a competition. It can be safely assumed that their authors aimed at gaining the favor of the jury, which may have led them to try to make their apologies more conducive to forgiveness. Paradoxically however, trying to win the votes of the jury may have undermined the apologies' effectiveness. This observation raises another research question worthy of investigation: How do communication goals affect apologies? There are at least three ways to address this question. One could analyze the non-selected letters and compare them with the selected ones. One could interview the authors of the selected letters with e.g., the reconstruction interview method (Reich & Barnoy, 2016), which would allow us to study the genealogy of the letters and to examine how communication goals contribute to the creative process of writing an apology. Lastly, one could ask participants to write an apology and provide different groups of participants with different communication goals (for example: creating new social constructs to challenge colonial ones).

Third, our study answers the call for more research on how language is and can be used to improve intergroup relations (Rakić & Maas, 2018) as it sheds light on the rhetorical devices considered by the letters' authors or the jury as most appropriate for writing a public apology. For example, the letters' authors made ample use of figures of speech like analogies. Little is yet known about the functions of these devices (Rakić & Maas, 2018), but they are powerful: They allow to make the abstract concrete and familiar, to draw inferences, and to guide action (Ghilani et al., 2020). Finally, as previously mentioned, public apologies have an impact on intergroup relations, drawing the feeling of certain collective emotions essential (Lastrego & Licata, 2010) to the coming together of two

groups. It might be argued that this article illustrates how the lack of public apologies might lead to individuals' clumsiness when addressing their country's colonial past.

Conclusion

While research on government apologies is extensive, less attention has been paid to how lay people reproduce unequal intergroup relations when apologizing for historical injustices perpetrated by their ingroup. To fill this void, we discourse analyzed the five letters selected by the jury of the "Sorry is a start" competition. As suggested by the name of the competition, the letters were meant only as a first step towards reconciliation. Our analysis suggests that this first step was to a certain extent clumsy, as some of the discursive tools used by the letters' authors reproduced colonial constructs instead of challenging them. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that this step may prove useful as it is part and parcel of the context within which official apologies may one day be issued.

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