

Comment

Inconvenient truths

Gregory A Petsko

Address: Rosenstiel Basic Medical Sciences Research Center, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454-9110, USA.
Email: petsko@brandeis.edu

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"Persuade thyself that imperfection and inconvenience are the natural lot of mortals, and there will be no room for discontent, neither for despair."

Ieyasu Tokugawa, Shogun

The email seemed harmless enough. It didn't contain any hidden viruses or malware; it wasn't phishing for personal or financial information so it could steal my identity; it didn't even come from yet another student grubbing for yet another point or two on some quiz or exam. Yet, it was enough to send me into a paroxysm of rage.

The message was from a multi-user scientific facility I had last heard from 9 months ago, when I wrote a letter of recommendation for the promotion of one of their staff. It informed me that they had erred in their description of the job I had recommended him for, and asked me to please rewrite the letter with the correct job title and the current date.

Now, what made me furious was not the extra work - it was extra work, to be sure, but in these days of word processors and files of old letters, not that much. Nor was it their having, mysteriously, waited 9 months to do this, without explanation for the delay. Those things were annoying but not enough to light my admittedly short fuse. No, what set me off was the way their message ended: "We apologize for the inconvenience."

My response, I fear, was not the most courteous. I sent back the edited letter with a curt note saying that, if they were going to ask me for something like this after so long a silence, they owed me an explanation. And I ended by saying that they needed to get their facts straight: "This is not an inconvenience - it's an imposition."

I didn't feel much better afterwards. For one thing, I suppose I shouldn't have berated some poor administrative assistant who probably was embarrassed about having to send the

message in the first place - although, to be fair to me, it didn't seem like they were embarrassed at all. But the real reason why I didn't cool down until much later (actually, since I'm using the incident as the basis for this column, I guess I still haven't cooled down) was because I suddenly realized how much I hate that expression: "We apologize for the inconvenience."

Has there ever been a phrase in the English language more blatantly insincere? It goes way beyond 'clichéd', making it all the way to 'hypocritical'. I have never yet seen it used as anything but an attempt to weasel out of the consequences of screwing up. Where it came from I don't know, but wherever that was I wish it would go back. I think I first encountered it between ten and twenty years ago, when it started appearing on signs warning drivers approaching road construction projects. It had a sarcastic tone even then. "Bridge closed for repaving", it would say. "Twenty mile detour. We're doing this in the middle of rush hour just because we feel like it. We apologize for the inconvenience".

Like a lot of meaningless expressions ("Have a nice day"; "Fine, thanks; how are you?"; or "That chartreuse outfit looks great with your purple hair."), this one probably arose out of a desperate need to find something to say. I mean, if you're trying to inform some hapless motorist that their day is about to become a living hell because of something you've done, and you don't want them to get out of their car and hurl their travel mugs at you, you can't say what you really feel, which is "We don't care what happens to you, so go rot." You need to find a way of seeming to be sorry without actually being sorry. "We apologize for the inconvenience" must have seemed to some public relations hack like a master stroke: it contains the magic word 'apologize' but at the same time trivializes the consequences of what was done by calling it an inconvenience. Who would sue anyone over that?

There are so many things wrong with this that I don't know where to begin, but I guess the biggest problem I have with

Box 1**When a scientist says:**

This is a well-written paper
 This proposal addresses an important topic
 I enjoyed your talk
 Your conclusions are interesting
 The PI has been productive
 Our project uses genome-enabled tools
 Overly ambitious
 Insufficient experimental details
 Genomics
 Functional genomics
 Expression profiles
 Protein profiles
 Proteomics
 Advanced proteomics
 Translational research
 Systems biology
 Genome-wide
 Structural genomics
 Bioinformatics
 Rational drug design
 Oh, you write those *Genome Biology* columns

What he/she probably really means:

The author should stick to literature
 Too bad it doesn't address it well
 The parts I was awake for sounded pretty good
 I don't believe a word of it
 If only he had produced anything worthwhile
 Maybe this buzzword will get this piece of crud funded
 If she does all this, it'll make slobs like me look bad
 I can nit-pick anything to death, no matter how good it is
 Who cares what any of these genes actually do?
 Misannotation on a genome-wide scale
 A very large number of very small changes
 Two-dimensional gels
 Bigger two-dimensional gels
 Really big two-dimensional gels
 Maybe a new buzzword will get this piece of crud funded
 Physiology, but if I called it that, no one would come
 I don't know how to study anything in depth
 It sure beats thinking
 Garbage in, garbage out
 Yeah, right
 Don't give up the day job

it, besides its patent insincerity, is its presumption. Isn't it my place to decide what to call the effects of someone else's actions on me? If it's an inconvenience, I'm the one who should say so. And if it's actually a colossal pain in the rear end, justifying any sort of verbal - and perhaps non-verbal - assault as a response, well, I'm the one who should decide that, too. Having the person who has just imposed on you or wrecked your schedule or caused you to waste an hour of your life making up for their mistake calling it an inconvenience is like having the person who has just held you up at gunpoint apologize for making you hold your hands in the air.

The art - and it is an art, really - of apologizing seems to have gone the way of cars that look distinctive, or novels with plot, or songs with lyrics you can actually understand. I can't count the number of times that someone has said "I'm sorry, but...". Every time that happens, I can still hear my mother telling me "There is no 'but' in an apology. If you say, 'I'm

sorry, but...', you're not really sorry." Just listen the next time a politician or a celebrity apologizes for some serious misdeed. I practically guarantee that there will be a 'but' in there somewhere, actual or implied.

Science is not immune to these meaningless locutions. Genomics is rapidly acquiring its own set as well. They aren't just used for convenience, or economy of words. They're used for the same reason as 'We apologize for the inconvenience' is used, as a way of camouflaging the truth. In the interest of public service, and in the hope of making all of you Sancho Panzas in my quixotic efforts to tilt at the windmill of scientific discourse, here are some of them, together with their translations (see Box 1).