

How companies apologize: A genre analysis of corporate apologies on Sina Weibo

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Abstract: In recent years, it has become common practice in China for enterprises to issue a public apology on Sina Weibo, a prominent social media platform, when corporations face criticism for alleged wrongdoings. A successful corporate apology can not only extricate corporations from public crisis but also restore trust with customers and investors. The study aims to investigate how the corporate apologies on Sina Weibo are structured. Using Swales' CARS model, the author identifies seven move types in a self-built corpus of twenty-two apology statements issued on Sina Weibo.

Keywords: Corporate Apologies; Genre Analysis; Moves

1. Introduction

Corporations face intense public scrutiny due to increased information accessibility and consumer awareness. When misdeeds like defective products, offensive advertisements, or unethical behavior are exposed, online consumer complaints can surge. Immediate action is crucial, as silence may be seen as unethical (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). Poor handling can escalate minor incidents into severe crises, threatening a company's reputation. Apologies, which are victim-centered and accommodative, are more effective in crisis management than denial or no response (Li, 2017). A public apology demonstrates accountability and honesty, helping to reshape public perception, soothe consumer anger, and protect the company's reputation.

The term "genre" originates from the Latin word "genus", meaning "type" or "category". Introduced to linguistics by ethnographers, it has become a key concept. According to Swales (1990), a genre is defined by its shared communicative purposes, recognized by experts within the discourse community, shaping its structure, content, and style. These purposes heavily influence the genre's internal organization. Corporate apologies qualify as a genre due to their shared communicative purposes: acknowledging fault, expressing regret, and seeking forgiveness. Recognized by public relations experts, executives, and stakeholders, these apologies follow a distinct pattern and use specific linguistic resources to end crises and rebuild trust.

Genre analysis reveals the rationale behind a genre by identifying moves, strategies, and linguistic features, explaining experts' choices. This study analyzes corporate apologies on Sina Weibo, aiming to uncover the genre's structure and features, enhancing public understanding and helping corporations construct effective apologies to restore reputation and public relations. Taking corporate apologies issued on Sina Weibo as a genre, the study explores the following question: What are the typical move types of corporate apologies issued on Sina Weibo?

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), genre analysis involves examining the consistent structural and linguistic features of particular genres or text types and understanding the functions these features serve within a discourse community. In the past several decades, there has been a trend to conduct genre analysis in the field of applied linguistics, especially within the three research areas as categorized by Hyon (1996): English for Specific Purposes (ESP), North American New Rhetoric studies, and Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics. Each school provides unique perspectives for the analysis of different genres.

John Swales, one of the most influential figures of the school of ESP, contends that the general value of genre analysis lies in that it works as a means for studying spoken and written discourse for applied ends (Swales, 1990). J.R. Martin, as a prominent contributor to genre analysis in Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics, regards genre as "a staged, goal-oriented, social process" (Martin, 1992), which in-

dicates that this school stresses the integration of form, function and social context in the analysis of genre. Genre analysis in New Rhetoric Studies focuses on the situational context in which genre comes into being and on the social actions or social purposes that the genre aims to achieve.

Despite the divergence in their viewpoints, all of the three approaches share the belief that communicative purposes and contextual factors play an important role in understanding genres. Of the three approaches mentioned above, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach is probably the most influential one, with Swales' move-step analysis being widely applied in the exploration of various academic and professional genres. The move analysis in this study is based on Swales' CARS model.

2.2 Research Methodology

2.2.1 Data Collection

The data used in this study consist of twenty-two corporate apologies written in Chinese and issued on Sina Weibo from 2021 to 2023. These statements were mostly made by well-known companies from various industries such as transportation, manufacturing industry and food industry. Sina Weibo is chosen as the source of corporate apology statements based on the following considerations: (1) Sina Weibo is among the most influential social media platforms in China, having 599 million monthly active users by the end of the second quarter of 2023. (2) Many companies have an official account on Sina Weibo, including BVLGARI, Tesla, and MINISO, to name just a few. (3) Sina Weibo is a platform on which companies prefer to issue a public apology when a public crisis occurs.

2.2.2 Data Analysis

The specific procedures used in this study are as follows:

First, as some of the statements are presented in pictures, the author needs to convert all the materials into text formats and check for any errors. The texts are then put into the same file, constituting the corpus for this analysis.

The next step is to find out the moves in these corporate apologies. Each apology is treated as an independent text, read and reflected on for multiple times. Following Swales' criterion for identifying a move, each apology is segmented into different units, which are later identified as specific move types.

3. Findings and analysis

Based on Swales' CARS model, the author identifies seven move types after a close examination of the samples in the corpus, which includes reviewing the incident, making apologies, accounting for the event, acknowledging responsibilities, offering repair, repairing images, and showing the resolution.

Move type 1: reviewing the incident

In public apologies, companies tend to provide a holistic account of what happened to help readers better understand the situation. The length of the move varies greatly, as the writer can either briefly introduce the previous incident with merely several words or offer an extremely detailed account of the time, place, people involved, causes, and consequences. Reviewing the incident can be realized in different ways, depending on the intention of the company. Some prefer to give a detailed account of the time, place, causes and consequences of the whole event, presenting themselves as honest and righteous corporations to the public, while others, as in example 1, avoid revealing too many details, hoping that general and vague expressions can mitigate the offensiveness of their act.

Example 1:

We have noted the reports regarding Snickers-related activities in certain regions of Asia.....

(S7 Snickers China)

Move type 2: making apologies

A sincere apology is crucial in addressing mistakes, as it helps reduce public outrage and protect a company's reputation. MINI China issued a second apology for the "ice cream incident" after the first one faced backlash. As in example 2, the company used explicit phrases like "extend our sincere apologies" to show sincerity and willingness to admit errors, conveying remorse and empathy for any negative impact caused.

Example 2:

First, we would like to extend our sincere apologies.....We deeply regret any inconvenience this may have caused.

(S2 MINI China)

Move type 3: accounting for the event

The “accounting for the event” move provides the public with a reasonable explanation of an incident, addressing their right to know the truth. Companies must explain how and why the incident occurred. Logical explanations can significantly alleviate public concerns about alleged wrongdoings. Example 3 shows how Maiquer, a modern food processing enterprise, explains its problematic products. There are cases in which companies do not think the accusations that they are involved in are true. Under such circumstances, they can refuse to acknowledge any wrongdoings and reject the allegations that they believe to be untrue.

Example 3:

Based on our preliminary investigation, the defective products resulted from our company’s failure to effectively clean the product tank lines of residual formulated milk during the transition between pure milk and formulated milk production processes, leading to the inadvertent mixing of legal food additives (including propylene glycol components) from formulated milk into pure milk.

(S12 Maiquer Group Co., Ltd.)

Move type 4: acknowledging responsibilities

Companies may criticize themselves for causing any unpleasant experiences for consumers as a way of acknowledging responsibilities. By reflecting on their incompetence and shortcomings that lead to an offensive event, corporations are confessing that they may be held responsible for the negative comments about themselves, their products or their services, as is shown in Example 4. Companies openly criticize themselves, for some problematic acts could have been prevented with greater diligence or responsibility. Besides self-criticism, companies also acknowledge responsibility by admitting mistakes. As example 5 shows, MINISO, once presenting itself as a Japanese brand, faced backlash for its marketing strategies. As Chinese product quality and cultural confidence grew, MINISO admitted its brand positioning errors to appease offended consumers and manage the crisis.

Example 4:

This also exposes significant loopholes within our company’s internal management system!

(S13 Zi Hai Guo)

Example 5:

From late 2015 to 2018, MINISO was in its early stages of global expansion and had hired Japanese designer Miyake Junya as its Chief Designer, promoting itself as a “Japanese designer brand”. During the initial stages of the company’s development, it experienced erroneous brand positioning and marketing strategies, leading it down the wrong path.

(S16 MINISO)

Move type 5: offering repair

Accused companies often outline measures in their apologies to address damage from inappropriate behavior, poor products, or services. This practice aims to minimize negative impacts by informing customers of the company’s plans to resolve the issue. Given the offense, prioritizing problem-solving and pacifying affected parties is crucial. Cha Yan Yue Se, a milk tea brand, was accused of objectifying women through its product slogans. The company responded by reflecting on the issue and promising corrective actions, including recalling the controversial items. This proactive apology helps restore its image and supports future brand development.

Example 6:

When we make a mistake, we must genuinely commit to making improvements. We will immediately recall this batch of Changsha-themed mugs. Furthermore, we will carefully reflect on the underlying reasons behind this incident, and work towards enhancements in various aspects, including creative standards, creative management, and product management.

(S3 Cha Yan Yue Se)

Move type 6: repairing images

A positive reputation is a valuable asset for companies, bringing many indirect benefits. When scandals damage corporate images, companies strive to restore them by emphasizing aspects like corporate culture, attributes, or achievements. Apologies often highlight values such as “purpose”, “tenet”, “belief” and “value” or stress the company’s national brand attributes to revive the public’s favorable memories. Example 7 shows LI-NING, a Chinese sportswear brand, defending its controversial designs by emphasizing its Chinese heritage and commitment to popular products. However, reiterating corporate culture can backfire, highlighting inconsistencies between the company’s statements and actions, potentially aggravating public sentiment.

Example 7:

The vigorous development of the Chinese economy and sports industry has been the cornerstone of LI-NING’s brand growth, and the 32-year brand journey has also relied on the support of every consumer. As a professional sports goods company in China, creating products that are loved by the public, more professional, and more design-oriented is a belief we have always adhered to.

(S6 LI-NING)

Move type 7: showing the resolution

An apology alone may not appease the public, as customers fear repeat offenses. To address this, companies often end apologies with promises. They demonstrate commitment either by pledging to improve goods or services (example 8), or by vowing to prevent future incidents (example 9). These commitments aim to dispel doubts and restore consumer confidence and trust.

Example 8:

Mars Wrigley respects China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity, strictly abides by local laws and regulations in China, and will continue to provide high-quality products and services to Chinese consumers.

(S7 Snickers China)

Example 9:

We will definitely engage in deep reflection and take measures to prevent a similar situation from happening again.

(S11 P&G China)

4. Conclusions

After conducting a detailed analysis of twenty-two corporate apologies sourced from Sina Weibo, the author identifies seven distinct move types, namely, reviewing the incident, making apologies, accounting for the event, acknowledging responsibilities, offering repair, repairing images, and showing the resolution. The move type “reviewing the incident” can range from detailed descriptions of events to concise introductions. “Making apologies” signifies companies’ willingness to admit errors, while “accounting for the event” involves explaining the incident for transparency. Companies may acknowledge responsibility through self-critique or admissions of mistakes. The “offering repair” move includes proposing solutions and self-reflection. “Repairing images” involves highlighting corporate culture, attributes, and achievements. Lastly, companies may demonstrate their resolution by pledging product or service improvements and preventing similar future incidents.

The identification of move types in corporate apologies on Sina Weibo enhances understanding of this genre. It offers insights into how companies structure apologies, handle public crises, and repair reputations. Consumers can assess the sincerity and responsibility of companies, while enterprises learn how to craft effective apologies and restore their image. However, the study has limitations: the small corpus of 22 apologies may affect generalizability, and the identification of move types and strategies may be subjective. Future research should collect more samples and establish clear criteria or involve multiple annotators to reduce subjectivity.

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