

A Corpus-Based Study of Corporate Image Restoration via Public Apology

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Received: June 5, 2020

Accepted: June 15, 2020

Published: July 27, 2020

doi:10.5296/ijl.v12i4.17182

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v12i4.17182>

Abstract

As one of the most effective measures for corporations to manage crises, public apology has received extensive attention from both practitioners and researchers. This paper attempts to conduct a corpus-based and interdisciplinary study on English public apologies issued by foreign corporations, and to explore how the corporations repair their images via public apology under the tentative theoretical framework adapted from Benoit's image restoration discourse theory (IRDT) and Coombs & Holladay's situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Results show that three salient linguistic features are identified in corporate apology corpus: (a) highly frequent use of modal verbs "will" and "can"; (b) highly frequent use of personal pronouns "we" and "you"; (c) highly frequent use of demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that". It is found that five pragmatic strategies (strategy of expressing apology, strategy of intensifying affection, strategy of mitigating responsibility, bolstering strategy, and rebuilding strategy) are most frequently employed to express mortification to the victims, to reduce the offensiveness of acts and to minimize or to evade responsibility. Furthermore, it is also found that corporate image is restored by means of weakening the negative impression and re-building a responsible and benevolent image. These findings would not only shed light on the corporate image restoration studies, but also offer implications for the practitioners in

the business world.

Keywords: Corpus-based study, Image restoration strategies, Corporate public apology

1. Introduction

With the increasingly fierce competition in international trade, corporate crises occur frequently in such a mercurial global trade environment (Robert, 2017). Once exposed, enterprises in crisis will try to repair their images and minimize the losses timely through various public relations means. Different methods are applied to deal with crises, among which public apology is preferable to the majority of corporations, which are believed to be responsible for offensive acts or remarks. Apology has been deemed as one of the most prominent means and the most used strategy for protective impression management to minimize inadequacy or to avoid negative perception about people's or organizations' offensive act (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Schlenker, 1980).

As pointed out by Robert (2006) that “we are living in an age of apologies”, more and more corporations realize the importance of public apology in getting them out of crisis and bringing long-term development all over the world (Hearit, 2006) and consequently numerous enterprises issue public apology to restore image. A well-composed apology with sincere attitude might not only help the corporation get out of crises, but also turn crises into opportunities, contributing to publicizing the positive image for further development (Benoit, 2006). Thus, corporate public apology has become a staple of corporate reports studied by scholars from various fields, including cognitive psychology, management and sociology (Kadar, 2018; Ran et al., 2018; Coombs et al., 2010; Kampf, 2009; Hearit, 2006).

Much attention has been paid to the time enterprises should apologize and situation in which apology should be issued (Aeron, 2017; Olshtain, 1989), the strategies the crisis enterprises apply (Benoit, 2006; Hearit, 1994; Cohen & Olshtain, 1983), the differences of apology in multicultural world (He, 2012; Holmes, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1989) and the functions of public apology (Lakoff, 2001; Hearit, 1994). However, the previous research fails to explore the linguistic features of English public apology, let alone corpus-based and interdisciplinary approach to analyzing it. Although other genres have been largely studied by these research methods (e.g., Hu, 2015; Hu & Tian, 2018), corpus linguistics has nowadays been widely embraced among scholars with the development of information technology. Therefore, this paper will carry out an interdisciplinary and corpus-based study on English corporate public apology, with an aim to find out how the corporations in crisis repair their images via public apology by exploring the salient linguistic features and pragmatic strategies.

This study aims to address the following three questions: (1) What are the most salient linguistic features displayed in corporate public apologies? (2) What pragmatic strategies are employed to restore image through these linguistic devices in corporate public apology? (3) How are these pragmatic strategies employed to restore corporate images?

2. Literature Review

This section will review the previous studies on corporate image restoration, corporate public apology and their relationship respectively so as to understand the status quo in the related studies.

2.1 Studies on Corporate Image Restoration

Due to a number of high-profile crises that brought great challenges to corporations, image repair theories have recently flourished, taking corporate image restoration as the ultimate goal. The well-known theories involved in corporate image restoration mainly include Goffman's (1959) Impression Management Theory (IMT), Ware & Linkugel's (1973) crisis responding strategies, Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Discourse Theory (IRDT), Hearit's (2001) Apology theory and Coombs and Holladay's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), in which various image restoration strategies were proposed respectively. Although the Impression Management theory (Goffman, 1959) and crisis responding strategies (Ware & Linkugel, 1973) initially belonged to the relevant theories of self-defense, Benoit (1997) expanded these theories to the business level, and integrated the self-defense theories and proposed five typical corporate image restoration strategies: *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *corrective action* and *mortification*. And then Coombs & Holladay (2007) developed four strategies: *deny*, *diminish*, *rebuild*, *bolstering* in SCCT based on the categories of corporate crises, which are more comprehensive and targeted. These theories, especially IRDT (Benoit, 1997) and SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2007) served as the theoretical framework for numerous studies. For example, Benoit & Czerwinski (1997) initially applied IRDT to explain how USAir responded to its aircraft crash incident in 1994; Sidharth et al. (2011) explored the overall representative image restoration strategies used by British Petroleum company and the dominant issue and emotion in the audience comments on different media channels based on IRDT.

2.2 Studies on Corporate Public Apology

Over the past few years, corporate apology has been studied by scholars from various perspectives, including public relations (Benoit, 1997; Hearit, 2001), cross-cultural communication (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1998), pragmatics (Afghari, 2007; Ran, 2010). Most of the researches on public apology and the mundane apologies provided distinct definitions on apology (e.g., Goffman, 1971; Searle, 1979; Olshtain, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1989; Trosborg, 1995; et.), among which one of the most cited definitions on apology is the one concerning the face need of both hearer and speaker (Kamf, 2009).

The analysis of public apology strategy is most extensively carried out (Fraser, 1981; Cohen & Olshtain, 1983; Trosborg, 1987; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1989; Holmes, 1990; Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Chen, 2015). Among all the strategies, the five apology strategies, as the core elements of the public apology, proposed by Cohen and Olshtain (1983), were integrated or transformed into the strategies proposed by all other scholars and became the most popular framework of apology strategies applied in academic area, which has been widely discussed in various corporate crises (Xu, 2018; Ruth, 2014; Zhang, 2014).

Quite a number of scholars conducted the contrastive studies on corporate public apologies from different countries (He, 2012; Cui & Li, 2012; Huang, 2010; Zhao, 2010) to explore the differences in apology expressions, apology strategies and apology frequency. Some scholars investigated the functions and effectiveness of corporate apology (Norrick, 1978; Hearit, 1994; Lakoff, 2001; Page, 2013; Samuel et al., 2019). For example, Samuel et al (2019) explored the role of corporate apology in seeking forgiveness and future cooperation, and found that apologies issued by corporations have positive and significant influence on the future trust and cooperation. Furthermore, a genuine apology is found to lead to forgiveness through analysis of specific cases (Bentley, 2012; Hearit, 2006; Benoit, 1997). But many studies have also found that the degree of offense, the cost paid for the offense, and the offender's intention jointly exert great impact on the effect of public apology (Fischbacher & Utikal, 2013; Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009).

Besides, several scholars studied the relationship between nonverbal behavior of the apologists and the effect of public apology, and found that the subtle emotion expressions and body language when apologizing in public significantly affect the forgiveness and trust (Brinke & Adams, 2015; Rose et al., 2006).

Apart from that, some researchers have also targeted pseudo-corporate apology (Gruber, 2011; Kampf, 2009; Lazare, 2004). Organizations or offenders would issue pseudo-apology out of the following reasons: 1) public pressure (e.g., public opinion condemnation, strike); 2) they think they should not be responsible for the situation; 3) they want to evade liability; 4) real apology is too humiliating and 5) they avoid showing weakness to opponents (Bentley, 2012; Gruber, 2011; Kampf, 2009; Tavis & Aronson, 2007; Hearit, 2006). Then, Lazare (2004) suggested that generally pseudo-apology display 8 features: 1) vague and incomplete acknowledgement; 2) the passive voice; 3) creating an offensive conditional; 4) questioning whether the victim was damaged; 5) minimizing the offense; 6) using the empathy "I am sorry"; 7) apologizing the wrong party; 8) apologizing the wrong offense. Although not all 8 strategies must apply at the same time, it is enough to take it as a pseudo-apology when three or more features are present. More surprisingly, the pseudo-apologies are more effective than genuine apologies in some situations, especially in political field (Bentley, 2015; Eisinger, 2011).

From the above literature interview, it can be found that studies on corporate public apology focus on apology strategy, the functions and effect of public apology, the differences of public apologies from various countries, the nonverbal behavior of public apology as well as the pseudo- or non- apology, which are mainly related to pragmatics and crisis management. However, the majority of scholars are more likely to employ the textual analysis or case analysis method, while few studies resort to the corpus-based approach to corporate apologies. Therefore, this paper intends to investigate the public apology in terms of linguistic features, pragmatic strategies and functions combining the pragmatics with crisis management, taking a corpus-based approach to the features of corporate apologies.

2.3 Corporate Public Apology and Corporate Image Restoration

It has been proved by numerous studies on real cases that public apology has been regarded as

one of the primary crisis response strategies among various corporate image restoration strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Benoit, 1997). For corporations, the public apology has become a routine for them in crisis communication and is issued in various forms like written letters serving different functions.

A large number of studies have demonstrated that public apologies exert positive impact in corporate image restoration when the corporation is in the midst of crisis (Bentley, 2012; Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2006; Benoit, 1997). But some scholars argued that public apology did not always work in repairing image but posed threat to the corporate image (Kampf, 2008; Bilder, 2008). Apologizing means that the corporation has failed to play its role appropriately and correctly before, which leads to trust loss, status loss in specific field and even the calamity of imprisonment, especially in political field. Meanwhile, those apologies perceived non-sincere and hypocritical by the audience result in the catastrophic damage to the corporation (Kampf, 2008).

Therefore, corporate public apology is not the only way to corporate image restoration although it has been regarded as a routine for crisis corporations, and over-dependence on public apology is unwise for corporations to repair their images. More importantly, appropriate strategies employed in public apologies appear to be particularly important for corporate image restoration.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Image Restoration Discourse Theory

The theory of Image Restoration Discourse (IRDT), proposed by Benoit in 1997, focused on the message option of the corporations in crisis. In other words, it aims to explain what message strategies the corporations choose in various situations. The corporations need to repair image under the premise that the company is “believed” to be responsible for the act which is “considered” offensive in IRDT. That is, the perceptions of the public are more important than the reality of the event. Thus, once the acts are “considered” offensive in the public, the primary thing for corporations is presenting strategic messages and taking actions to repair its image. Given the above conditions, five message options, also called image restoration strategies, were identified to respond to crises as Table 1 presented (Benoit, 1997).

Table 1. Image Restoration Discourse Theory (IRDT)

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
Image Restoration Discourse Theory (IRDT)	Denial	Simple Denial
		Shift the blame
	Evasion of Responsibility	Provocation
		Defeasibility
		Accident
	Reducing offensiveness of	Good Intentions
		Bolstering

Event	Minimization
	Differentiation
	Transcendence
	Attack Accuser
	Compensation
Corrective Action	
Mortification	

3.1.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication theory (SCCT), initiated in 1996 and improved in 2007 by Coombs and Holladay, has been the hotpot of international crisis management research in recent years. Designed to explore the influence of different crisis situations on organizations based on the famous Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), This theory classifies crisis situations into four dimensions: types of crisis, authenticity of evidence, degree of crisis damage and past performance of organization, based on the public perception of crisis attribution and the different crisis situations through repeated experiments. Furthermore, the crises are divided into three broad categories: victim crisis, accidental crisis and preventable crisis.

Different categories of crises indicate different attributions of crisis responsibility to organizations. Generally speaking, the attribution of crisis responsibility ranging from low to high corresponds to the above order of crisis categories (Coombs, 2007). According to the types and the attributed responsibility of crisis, four crisis responding strategies were proposed as the following table shows.

Table 2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Strategy	Tactic	Tactic Explanation
Deny	Attack the accuser	Claiming something is wrong
	Denial	Asserting that there is no crisis
	Scapegoat	Blaming some person or group outside the crisis organization
Diminish	Excuse	Minimizing responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis
	justification	Minimizing the perceived damage caused by the crisis
Rebuild	Compensation	Offering money or other gifts to victims
	Apology	Accepting responsibility and asking the stakeholders for forgiveness.
Bolstering	Reminder	Telling stakeholders about its past good works
	Ingratiation	Praising stakeholders and/or reminding them of past good works by the organization
	Victimage	Reminding stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis, too.

3.1.3 The Tentative Theoretical Framework

Based on the above elaborated theories, IRDT (Benoit, 1997) and SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2007), the theoretical framework for this research is tentatively constructed as follows.

Table 3. Theoretical framework adapted from IRDT and SCCT

	Pragmatic Functions	Pragmatic Strategies
Corporate Image Restoration via Public Apology	to express mortification	Strategy of expressing apology
	to reduce offensiveness of event	Strategy of intensifying affection
		Strategy of mitigating responsibility
	to minimize or evade responsibility	Bolstering strategy
		Rebuilding strategy
		Denying strategy

The theoretical framework is constructed in the above Table 3 mainly for two reasons. First of all, as IRDT and SCCT were proposed in the field of crisis management, the classification of crisis responding strategies is systematic but macro, whose nature is message option, while pragmatics mainly studies the language in use or in context. That is, the pragmatic strategies studied in this thesis are at lower level compared with the strategies in these two theories while at the same level with their sub-strategies. To some extent, the crisis responding strategies in crisis management are almost equivalent to the pragmatic functions in linguistics in this study.

Secondly, both theories focus on what the organizations respond to the crises, but are not restricted to making apology. Besides, there is no denial of responsibility after the initial analysis on the targeted corpus. Therefore, the deny strategy is excluded from the present study. In view of the above, the authors constructed the interdisciplinary theoretical framework by re-selecting and summarizing the strategies from the theoretical preliminary of IRDT and SCCT, and taking into consideration the research object of this study, public apology, one of the crisis responding strategies.

3.2 Research Methodology

3.2.1 Data Collection

The target corpus consisted of 100 English corporate apologies, about 21,000 words, issued by different companies from various industries abroad, ranging from FMCG companies and airline companies to internet companies, spanning from October 2005 to October 2019, which covers a total of 14 years in order to enhance the authenticity and validity of the data. All these apologies were downloaded from various sources on the Internet, such as companies' official websites, Facebook, and blogs. The corporate apologies are very difficult to be obtained directly from the official websites in many cases as the company usually presents it to the public just for a few days and then deletes it in order to remove "the shame" right away. However, as the apology letters are likely to be reprinted and forwarded to other social websites or captured as pictures by the public, they can be collected through these indirect

sources. Public apology letters and official statements are two forms of the present data, which are presented in written form and in English language so as to guarantee the validity and reliability of the corpus.

As the study involves keyness analysis, the reference corpus is a must to be used for a comparison with the target corpus. Rayson and Garside (2000) came up with two types of corpus comparison in keyword analysis: type one compares the sample corpus with a larger standard corpus, while type two compare two corpora with almost equal size but in different genres or languages. This thesis applied type one to analyze the keywords of corporate apologies. In this study, the AmE06Antconc Corpus (hereinafter AMEC), a larger standard corpus, compiled and published by Paul Baker in 2006, was used as the reference corpus.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

The analysis software used in this study was AntConc 3.5.7, which is designed to carry out corpus linguistics research automatically on a large number of texts. Word frequency, keywords and concordance are three main functions of the tool. Here are the steps for data processing:

Firstly, the target corpus needs to be processed initially, such as removing the publishing date, salutation and signature in each public apology. And then the corpus is combined in a consistent format after the download.

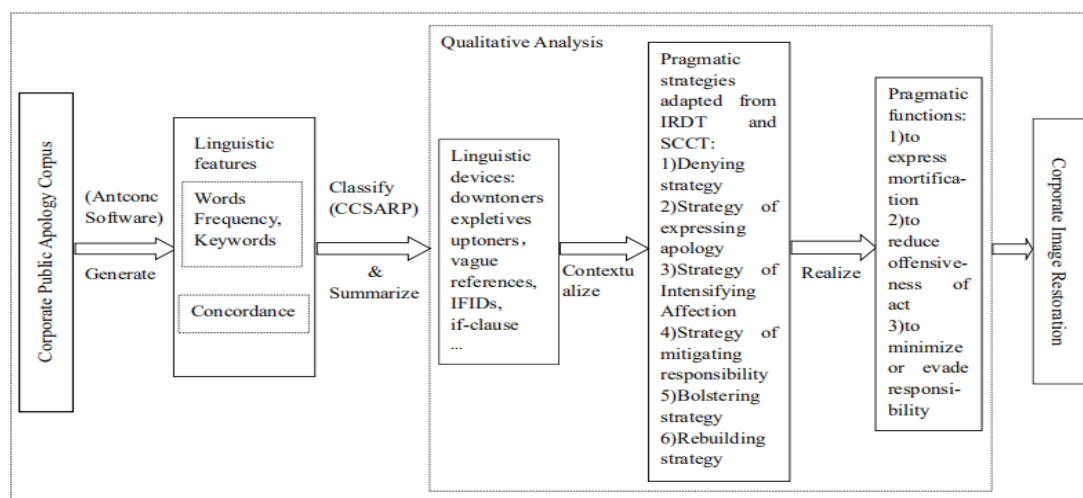
The next step was to import the target corpus and reference corpus into the AntConc 3.5.7. By starting a new project and coding all texts, the word list was generated set in frequency. Then keyword list of the target corpus was obtained by AntConc 3.5.7 compared with the reference text. The words in the keyword list not only appeared in high frequency, but also with high “keyness”, involving the statistical probability as computed by an appropriate procedure compared with the *P value* set by the authors. After that, the concordance function was run, contributing to exploring the syntactic features before or after the target words or phrases. In this way the keywords could be generated, and the syntactic features could be identified as well.

Finally, the linguistic features generated from the software were analyzed further in specific context. The linguistic devices are classified based on the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984), which provides more than 30 linguistic tools to express “apology”. Based on the classified linguistic devices extracted from the linguistic features acquired in corporate apologies, the pragmatic strategies these linguistic devices are employed to substantiate and the pragmatic functions these pragmatic strategies are deployed to realize in specific context, are investigated in qualitative analysis.

3.3 Analytical Framework

This paper first explored the salient linguistic features of corporate apologies using corpus-based approach, and then identified the pragmatic strategies these linguistic features demonstrated, and finally investigates the pragmatic functions realized in specific context based on the theoretical framework adapted from IRDT and SCCT. On that basis the analytical

framework for this study is mapped out in the following figure.



4. Linguistic Features of English Corporate Public Apology

This section will first identify the keywords of corporate public apologies and then make a concordance analysis on them with the assistance of Antconc software.

4.1 Keywords List Generated

Antconc software identifies the keywords on a mechanical basis when the statistical probability calculated between a word’s frequency and keyness of target corpus and that of reference corpus, by an appropriate procedure (commonly Chi-Square or Log-Likelihood), is equal to or smaller than a specified P value, and the lower P value set, the higher keyness the results have (Baker, 2006; Scott, 1996). Thus, in this study, P value is set as $p < 0.0001$ in accordance with the log-likelihood statistics and only the positive keyness is explored. With the keyword function of Antconc, a positive keywords list of 170 keywords is generated in this study, but only the top 25 lexical (included pronouns and modal verbs) keywords are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Top 25 lexical keywords in ECPA (no lemmatization)

	word	frequency	keyness
1	we	741	+1669.76
2	our	431	+961.93
3	that	315	+637.83
4	you	265	+585.86
5	this	258	+572.31
6	have	370	+491.09
7	will	157	+342.56
8	it	146	+317.85
9	your	145	+315.61
10	I	111	+239.4

11	all	86	+183.52
12	customers	85	+181.29
13	more	72	+152.32
14	can	67	+141.19
15	information	66	+138.97
16	us	65	+136.75
17	their	64	+134.52
18	apologize	56	+116.77
19	people	50	+103.48
20	new	46	+94.63
21	sorry	44	+90.22
22	these	43	+88.01
23	privacy	42	+85.8
24	better	39	+79.2
25	never	38	+77

As presented in Table 4, the top 25 lexical keywords are strongly corporation-related and apology-related. Verbs from keywords are only one, *apologize*. As a form of expressing emotion and asking for forgiveness, the modal verbs must be employed frequently in public apology, which is verified with the results in Table 4 that the frequency of modal verbs *will* and *can* is very high. Besides, the nouns of keywords are almost corporation-related, like *customers*, *information*, *people*, and *privacy*. Pronouns of keywords are mainly the first person and the second person pronouns and possessive pronouns (*we*, *our*, *I*, *us*, *you*, *your*). However, what calls for special attention is that whether other lexical keywords, like *that*, *have*, *it*, *all*, are pronouns, conjunctions or tense indicator or not, need to be determined in the whole sentence.

4.2 Concordance Analysis

Several screened representative lexical words, whose similar concordance lines are more than 5, from the top 25 frequent lexical words and lexical keywords, are selected as the search term for the concordance analysis. The following tables are the concordance results in detail.

Table 5. Concordance of *this* and *that* in ECPA

function	examples	freq.
Pronoun& Determiner	that: xxx promise they are never going to do that to you again. we are deeply sorry for that . we will never forget that or take it for granted	32 168
	this: xxx is important for people to think this , and xxx as soon as we learned about this (<i>incident/situation/issue</i>) we are truly sorry if this happened to you	

Conjunction	that: apologize for the inconvenience that you faced. xxx hope that in the future we will xxx xxx confirm/make sure that you/our consumers will	283
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Having specified the search terms, Table 5 shows two common usages of the concordance for keywords *that* and *this* as well as their corresponding examples. The frequency of *that*, serving as the demonstrative pronoun and often referring to the offensive act, is up to 32 times in addition to its common usage as conjunction (283 times). Meanwhile, *this* is used as the demonstrative pronoun as well or a determiner followed by *incident*, *situation*, *issue* and the like, the majority of which indicate the mistake made by the corporations as well, up to 168 times out of a total of 258 times.

 Table 6. Concordance of *customer(s)* in ECPA

	examples	freq.
1	apologize to (our/esteemed/loyal/valued) customers and xxx	14
2	we are working hard to compensate our customers for xxx	6
3	(provide/offer/secure/deliver) xxx service to our customers	8
4	xxx understand our customers	5

Table 6 reveals 4 types of common patterns of *customer(s)*, basically “verb (sth.)+(to) customers”, including *apologize to customers* (13), *compensate customers* (6), *offer service to customers* (8), *understand customers* (5), which reflect the core of CPAs. Besides, nearly all *customers* are qualified by *our* with other modifiers like *valued*, *esteemed*.

 Table 7. Concordance of *will* in ECPA

	examples	freq.
1	xxx will continue to/further do/do better to/make unremitting efforts to	32
2	xxx will ensure/improve/upgrade/increase/maintain/make sure	16
3	xxx will be done(eg. removed/protected/implemented/restored)	14
4	xxx will never (happen again/repeat/not allow/not include)	13

The concordance for *will* shows great similarities, among which four language patterns presented in Table 7 are the most frequent. The results show that they all belong to “promise of forbearance” or “offer of repair” as Cohen and Olshtain (1989) proposed.

 Table 8. Concordance of *apologize/apology(ies)/sorry* in ECPA

	examples	freq.
1	we (deeply/sincerely) apologize for xxx/to xxx	40
2	we are (deeply/ exceedingly/ extremely/ sincerely/ truly/ very) sorry	37
3	xxx (express/offer/issue) our (sincere/deepest/most heartfelt) apologies	15
4	xxx would like to (take this opportunity/time)/want to apologize for	13
5	hope that you accept/please accept our (sincere) apologies	7

The concordance of *apologize/apology(ies)/sorry* is rather unitary as the above table shows.

The language pattern *we apologize for* appears up to 40 times while the total number of *apologize* is 56 times. A dominant feature is that nearly all expressions of apology are issued by “we” or qualified by “our company”, while “I” is only 6 times in total. Besides, the majority of expressions of apology are modified by the adverbs, such as *sincerely, truly, deeply*, to express strong affection.

5. Pragmatic Strategies for Image Restoration via Public Apologies

This section will explore the pragmatic strategies for corporate image restoration, extracting linguistic devices from linguistic features identified in section 4 based on the CCSARP and formulaic expressions devices generated from concordance analysis under the theoretical framework as the third section demonstrated.

5.1 Strategy of Expressing Apology

The first strategy for corporations to repair image via public apology is the strategy of expressing apology, which means how the crisis corporations show strong feelings of regret, embarrassment or humiliation to the victims. This strategy is linguistically realized as follows:

5.1.1 IFIDs

The IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices) are used to apologize directly to the audience. As the result showed in section 4, the frequency of word “apology” and its lemmatization is up to 117 times, and “sorry” is 44 times, which all are among top 25 lexical keywords. Besides, the apology expression, “regret”, also appears 14 times. Furthermore, as the concordance result showed, some formulaic expressions of making apology are extremely frequent. Look at the following examples.

(1) We sincerely apologize for the problems this may have caused...

(2) We are extremely sorry for the frustration this has caused our customers...

5.1.2 Self-Referring Terms and Other-Referring Terms

Terms of address play an important role in affirming the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer (Malcolm, 2003). In corporate apologies, another type of the strategy of expressing apology is the crafty employment of self-referring terms and other-referring terms. The self-referring terms mainly consist of the first person pronoun “we” and the phrases like “our+company/stores/restaurants”. Look at the tables in the last section, the linguistic devices, “we” (freq: 741; keyness: +1669.76) and “our” (freq: 431; keyness: +961.93), are both among top 25 frequent words and keywords.

The other-referring terms are made up of the second person pronoun and honorifics. “You” (freq: 265; keyness: +585.86) is used most when corporation issues public apologies. And in some cases, “you” is often replaced by “customers”. Moreover, it turned out that “our valued/ loyal/ respected/ esteemed customers” are the most used honorifics when conducting concordance analysis on “customers”. These honorifics are used to “lift” the status of the hearer and express respect between strangers but with economic interest connections.

(3) We know that some of you feel Apple has let you down.

(4) We are extremely sorry, and express our sincerest apologies to our valued customers.

Personal pronoun indicates the identity of the communicators in the communication context, and proper choice of personal pronouns in different situation would get twice the effect with half the effort (Fillmore, 1997). As confirmed in the quantitative analysis in section four, the first lexical feature is the extensive use of the first and second person pronouns and possessive pronouns. For the first person pronouns, Callow (1998) holds that they would reduce the text authenticity because they are used to express the speakers' opinion or attitude rather than reality, but they would be beneficial to build a close relationship between communicators. Among them, the first plural personal pronoun "we" and possessive pronoun "our" followed by "company/corporation/store" and the like occur about 1000 times in total in ECPA, showing that the public apologies are always issued from the standpoint of the whole company rather than an individual, and the usage of "we" seems to be many people here to apologize to the victims so as to express stronger sincerity. The second person pronoun "you" comes second. The personal pronouns "we", phrases of possessive pronoun like "our company/stores/restaurants" and the second person pronoun "you" together create a context for face-to-face conversation, shortening the relationship with the audience and making the audience take the initiative to establish the connection with the corporations in crisis.

5.2 Strategy of Intensifying Affection

The second strategy, intensifying affection, is realized by using a number of devices. The strategy analyzed on this dimension relates to various modifiers available to the speaker for increasing compelling force. Upgraders are the most used linguistic devices to strengthen emotions in corporate apologies, which can be divided into two types: intensifiers and expletives.

5.2.1 Intensifiers

Intensifiers are adverbial and adjectival modifiers by means of which the speaker aggravate or over-represent the state of affairs denoted in the proposition (Blum-Kulka, 1989). In corporate apologies, the typical intensifiers are several adverbs like "sincerely/deeply/truly/extremely/exceedingly/incredibly" and the adjectives "very/sincere/sincerest", which all are employed to modify the apology expression. These intensifiers, especially "sincerely/sincere/sincerest" and "deeply", appear rather frequently, up to 52 times and 35 times respectively, which are used to strengthen the authenticity and sincerity of apology so as to make the offended believe in the apologists.

(5) We wish to sincerely apologize to our fans, friends, customers, partners...

(6) We deeply regret any embarrassment or displeasure caused by the post, and again offer our sincerest apologies.

5.2.2 Expletives

Expletives are the impolite expressions or the words conveying no independent meaning but added to strengthen the feeling of speaker (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006). This study focuses on the latter one meaning and found that the expletives are usually applied to intensify the regret for the misconduct. Examples are listed as follows:

- (7) We recognize that we badly mishandled this situation and our team's response was inexcusable.
- (8) We made a bloody mess.

The most frequently used expletives in corporate apologies are “bad(ly)” and “bloody”. Just as the examples show, they are both used to modify wrongdoings, emphasizing the speaker's attitudes, especially the repentance or abhorrence, towards the misconduct. Reinforcing sincerity of apology using intensifiers and the repentance by expletives both work for the strategy of intensifying affection in corporate apologies.

5.3 Strategy of Mitigating Responsibility

5.3.1 Vague References

The corporations in crisis often apply vague references to avoid specification and explicitness in making public apologies. The typical vague references in corporate apologies are the demonstrative pronouns “that” and “this” and phrases “this+situation/incident/issue”, which appear frequently as indicated in section 4. As demonstrative pronouns, these two words play a role of reference and substitution to avoid verbal repetition, which is determined by the economic principle of language as Levinson (2004) observed. More importantly, such a usage as vague references in corporate apologies provides a proper way to avoid reiteration of the offense, contributing to obscuring the incident and consumers' bad memories of the corporations in crisis. Similarly, the determiner usage of “this” with the abstract words like *event, situation, and mistake* can also serve the same function as those vague references do.

- (9) We will never forget that or take it for granted.
- (10) Please accept our apologies for any inconvenience this has caused you.
- (11) We would like to express our deepest regrets to those who have suffered in any way or if this incident has caused you any anxiety.

5.3.2 Downtoners

The speaker can weaken the effect of his utterance on the hearer by the downtoners, which are the modifiers signaling the possibility of non-compliance (Blum-Kulka, 1989), including reduplication of verbs, modal verbs, and the adverbs expressing uncertainty or possibility, . The most used downtoners in corporate apologies are the modal verbs expressing likelihood. Here are several formulaic expressions containing downtoners:

- (12) I can certainly understand the disappointment this delay might have caused to you.

(13) It has now come to our attention that we may in fact be part of the problem.

The downtoner, especially modal verbs expressing likelihood like *may* and *might*, is used when one makes a statement or opinion less definite and less assertive. Here the corporations in crisis issue public apology for the damage to customers, but the usage of downtoners in the sentence *bad results/effects this (misdoing) may/might have caused* ... shows either that they are not sure whether the damages indeed exist, that is, they would not apologize if there is no problem and they are only sorry for the one who has suffered in the crisis, or that they are not ready to directly admit the harm to others that has been done.

5.3.3 If-Clause

In addition to the above lexical mitigation, syntactic devices can be used to mitigate the speech act. The embedded “if-clause” is the representative syntactic device to the strategy of mitigating responsibility. The syntactic device is frequently ritualized as follows:

(14) We are truly sorry if this happened to you.

(15) Not everyone has been affected, but if you have experienced any of those problems, I’m genuinely sorry.

Different attitudes are indicated by means of “if-clause”, including being pessimistic about the outcome and less assertive to the incident (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Here the usage of “if-clause” in corporate apologies indicates that the corporation hesitates to make apology or avoids explicit expression in describing the harm to others that the misconduct brought and undermining the existence of the victims, which is similar to the usage of downtoners “may/might” as discussed above.

5.3.4 Formulaic Expressions for “Out of Good Intention”

The corporation in crisis often suggests that the offensive misconduct is performed out of good intention. The examples extracted from ECPA corpus are:

(16) We would like to assure the public that this was never our intention.

(17) It was our intention to convey concepts of inner and outer beauty; unfortunately the video instead offended many.

In corporate apologies, sentence patterns like “assure/ensure that... was not our intention”, “our/my intention was not...” and “It was our intention to..., but/unfortunately...” occur frequently. All these formulaic expressions indicate that the corporation does intend to do something beneficial for customers instead of the offensive one although the outcome is not consistent with the expectation, creating an illusion of “good intention gone awry” so as to obtain customers’ sympathy and understanding.

5.3.5 Formulaic Expressions for the Offensive Action Occurred by Accident

In addition, the corporations in crisis are likely to employ certain means to convince the audience that this offensive incident happened by accident rather than normally. The formulaic expressions, “never intend to/never intentionally do something” and “something offensive has

never happened in service history/over the past years”, are frequently employed, just as the following examples:

(18) We have never and would never - - do anything to intentionally shorten the life of any Apple product, or degrade the user experience to drive customer upgrades..

(19) This phenomenon has never happened to us in our 5 years of service.

The use of “never” is the punch-line in these formulaic expressions. The corporations in crisis make best use of human psychology, quite aware of the fact that “no one would do something harmful to himself”, attempting to make the audience empathize with them. With the expression of concrete time period like “in our 5 years of service”, example (19) further strengthens the impression that this incident is truly an accident so that the corporation should be held less accountable, which adapts to the famous saying “to error is human, to forgive divine”.

5.4 Rebuilding Strategy

Rebuilding strategy refers to the means by which the corporations in crisis positively put forward solutions and remedial measures to repair their images.

5.4.1 Formulaic Expressions for Compensation

Offering compensation is one of the most used tactics to make up for the damage already brought to the customers with money and better service or in other forms. The corporation attempts to compensate the victims to rebuild a responsible image. The common language patterns are as following examples.

(20) All those affected have been emailed and advised they can re-book for travel on an alternative flight or apply for a full refund.

(21) I've extended your Amazon Prime membership by one month.

5.4.2 Formulaic Expressions for Correcting Actions and Making Promises

The formulaic expressions for corrective actions and promises are used to correct previous misconducts and promise no re-occurrence and improvement in future, and give the customers a renewed hope for the corporations in crisis. The analysis on corporate apologies shows that these expressions occur almost in all these 100 public apologies. Consider the following examples:

(22) We have led the internet in building tools to give people the ability to see and control what they share. But we can also always do better. I'm committed to making Facebook the leader in transparency and control around privacy.

(23) Rest assured that we have looked at each of these ingredients, where they come from, and how they can be made even safer. I believe our restaurants are safer today than they have ever been.

(24) They promise they're never going to do that to you again.

In examples (22)-(24), all corporations have taken actions to attempt to restore the current state of affairs to the state before crisis or to be better, which are marked by the language structure *we have done something*. Meanwhile, they all promise to take measures to prevent the occurrence of similar offensive incidents in the future. The promise is indicated by two structures: one is making promises directly just as the example (24) *somebody promise never going to do that again* or *we are committed to doing* in example (22), the other is expressing the vision for the future as example (23) *observed (I believe) something will be better*.

5.5 Bolstering Strategy

In addition to those strategies analyzed above, the bolstering strategy is frequently employed in the corpus. Generally speaking, this strategy is widely used in corporate advertising texts rather than in public apologies. However, the concordance analysis found that formulaic expressions for mention of the past excellent behavior or acquired achievements (positive evaluation from customers or market share gained), and emphasis on the corporate philosophy are two most employed linguistic tools to “bolster” the corporations in crisis to repair images.

5.5.1 Formulaic Expressions for Mention of Previous Excellent Performance

By observing the corporate apologies, more than half of them contain the expressions about past corporate achievements, including widespread positive evaluation from customers and the vast market. The present-perfect structure “... have done something” is the typical pattern, for example:

(25) We has always focused strongly on the needs of our customers. As result, the efficacy and convenience of our products have increased confidence markedly amongst consumers.

(26) We have published thousands of books and stories for more than 50 years...

Public attitudes towards corporate crises are, to a large extent, influenced by their past images (Coombs, 1997). On the surface, it seems to be a slight mention of the good jobs the corporations have done before, but actually it serves as a distraction from their misconducts. In fact, the corporate positive image presented in front of the customers is conducive to the public attitudes towards the incident so as to support image restoration.

5.5.2 Formulaic Expressions for Emphasis on the Corporate Philosophy

Reiterating corporate philosophy is the most applied linguistic device to achieve the bolstering strategy in corporate apologies, which is mainly manifested by the language patterns, including *we strive to/are dedicated to, something are our (highest/utmost) priority* and *our beliefs are something* as shown in the following examples:

(27) Walmart operates under Four Basic Beliefs: "Respect for the Individual," "Service to our Customers," "Strive for Excellence," and "Act with Integrity."

(28) We strive to make world-class products that deliver the best experience possible to our customers.

(29) Providing quality and secure entertainment services to our customers is our utmost

priority.

Corporate philosophy is the value standard of the whole corporation, which guides the formulation of strategic goals and policies (Xu, 2004). The emphasis on corporate philosophy in corporate apologies contributes to informing customers that the corporations still hold a clear goal and stay true to the original mission so as to rebuild a positive image. The bolstering strategy achieved by these two formulaic linguistic devices is also regarded as a marketing tool which not only benefits the promotion of corporate core value, but also helps the corporation to better position itself in public.

6. Corporate Image Restoration via Pragmatic Strategies

Section 6 will explore how the corporations in crisis employed these pragmatic strategies in corporate apologies to repair their images in specific cases.

6.1 To Express Mortification

Mortification function can be realized mainly through the strategy of expressing apology and the strategy of intensifying affection, each of which has several linguistic realization devices. Cases about them can be found in dozens from the corpus. One case is the Apple's response to the laptops' battery problem in June 2019. In response to complaints from customers about the faulty battery components, Apple issued apology letter to the public in the name of Apple's executive and staff. In the apology statement, Apple expressed:

- (30) We [self-referring term] deeply [intensifier] apologize [IFID] for our regrettable actions. We are extremely [intensifier] sorry [IFID], and express our sincerest [intensifier] apologies [IFID] to our valued customers [honorific]. From the bottom of our heart, we would like to express our deepest [intensifier] regrets [IFID] to those who have suffered in any way or if this incident has caused you any anxiety.

As observed in example (30), Apple applied the IFIDs directly for many times, such as *apologize for*, *sorry*, *express apologies*, *express regrets*, to confess and beg forgiveness. Further, the self-referring term *we* and the other-referring terms *you* and honorific *valued customers* together build a face-to-face context, the sincere attitude in which is intensified by the intensifiers like *deeply*, *extremely*, *sincerest* and *deepest* and so forth. Formulating the expressions with the IFIDs, combined with the first and second personal referring terms, honorifics, and intensifiers that strengthen the sincere affection, the corporation realized the function to express mortification to the victims.

6.2 To Reduce Offensiveness of Act

In order to blur the offense, the strategy of mitigating responsibility and the rebuilding strategy are two most widely used tactics for crisis corporations, which can be analyzed further in specific case respectively. A representative case of using lexical and syntactic mitigation in the strategy of mitigating responsibility and the rebuilding strategy is the incident of crashed *48-hour print website* in 2015. When it noticed the website hiccups, the corporation replied:

- (31) Please accept our apologies for any inconvenience this [vague reference] might

[downtoner] has caused you... We are truly sorry if this happened to you [if-clause]. The issue is now corrected [corrective action] thanks to additional equipment that we installed... We've added additional staff to [corrective action] take care of you as we catch up on your orders. In the meantime, we are extending the 15% off plus free shipping promotion through April 9 [compensation], so that everyone can take advantage of the final days of the sale.

The corporation (48Hourprint) attempted to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the misconduct. It used *this*, the vague reference, to replace the offensive incident instead of direct and clear indication of the incident, and incorporated the downtoner *might* and the *if-clause* in apology statement so as to undermine the existence of victims who were offended by its misdeeds. Furthermore, the corporation declared that it had taken timely actions indicated by the structure *have done*, to correct its previous misconduct, and *offered compensation* to the customers in order to strengthen the public's positive attitudes towards it. The combination of blurring the offensive incident and highlighting the positive attitudes and measures jointly contribute to reducing the offensiveness of act.

6.3 To Minimize or Evade the Responsibility

All strategies analyzed in section 5 are conducive to minimizing the corporate responsibility, especially the mitigating strategy and the rebuilding strategy, which are also often applied to blur the offensiveness as the above section investigated. Besides, another ubiquitous and symbolic device in mitigating strategy to minimize or evade corporate responsibility is to indicate the offense to be an accident.

In the incident of iPhone slowdowns from August 2016 to November 2017, as other corporations, the strategy of expressing apology and the rebuilding strategy both are applied in Apple's apology statement issued on 28 December 2017. Besides, Apple was making the most of the formulaic expression of accident to turn the public opinion around, as the following excerpt illustrated.

(32) We have never [present perfect tense] — and would [modal verb] never — do anything to intentionally [accident] shorten the life of any Apple product, or degrade the user experience to drive customer upgrades.

Apple tried to define the incident to be an accident in an apology letter. As the example (32) excerpted from the letter, two coordinated clauses were employed: firstly, the structure *have never do anything intentionally*, which derived from the present perfect tense “have done”, indicates that Apple never did anything harmful to customers intentionally over the past years; the second structure *would never do anything intentionally*, especially the usage of modal verb “would”, shows that doing offensive acts are never the willingness or intention of Apple, as a globally well-known corporation with high reputation. In short, Apple attempted to persuade the audience that the iPhone slowdowns happened by accident so that it should be less blame. In this way can the corporation minimize or evade the responsibility.

In addition, claiming that the misconducts result out of good intention is also a tactic to mitigate corporate responsibility. Calvin Klein (hereinafter CK) just applied it in the

“Queer-baiting” incident in 2019. “Queer-baiting” carried certain homosexual connotations deliberately arranged or implied to hype up or cater to the customers. In 2019, in order to save the declining market performance, CK resorted to lesbian marketing concept to gain more market share in advertisement. However, it received lots of criticism from the audience who thought it the objectification of women. In the face of these criticisms, CK issued a public apology in Twitter in time. Here example (33) is excerpted from the second paragraph in its public apology.

(33) As a company with a longstanding tradition of advocating for LGBTQ+ rights [corporate convention], it was certainly not our intention to misrepresent the LGBTQ+community [good intention]. We sincerely [intensifier] regret [IFID] any offense we caused.

Example (33) first emphasized the CK’s convention, respecting and supporting LGBTQ group, and then stated that offending them was not CK’s intention while promoting freedom for expression of gender and sexual identity was. It advertised the lesbian image with kind intention, but being misunderstood by the audience, which created an image of grievance so as to gain the sympathy and understanding of the audience. The expression of “do evil with good intentions” in corporate apology, as the CK did, can help the corporations in crisis minimize or evade responsibility.

6.4 Brief Discussion

This chapter examined how the corporations employ pragmatic strategies to repair their images. In order to restore corporate image, the corporations in crisis apply comprehensive strategies to blur the offensiveness and minimize the responsibility to mitigate the negative impression on them; on the other hand, they try to build a positive image by expressing apology directly, correcting mistakes and making promises, offering compensation and even mentioning the past excellent performance, . Only in this way can the corporations in crisis impress the audience with a responsible, benevolent and considerate image. Specifically, directly making apology in public reveals that the corporations in crisis are able to put themselves in consumers’ shoes and express regret and sympathy to them; correcting mistakes and offering compensation reflect the corporate responsible attitude towards crises, . Although the corporations adopt a series of pragmatic strategies to blur the offensiveness and to minimize the responsibility out of corporate interests as this section demonstrated, the whole public apology is an attempt to portray them as responsible, benevolent and considerate. It is the positive image rebuilt and the negative impression resulted from the crisis weakened by these pragmatic strategies that are ultimately conducive to corporate image restoration.

The results indicated that pragmatic strategies applied in public apology play an essential and profound role in the communication process between corporations and customers, and in repairing corporate image during crisis. In order to repair corporate image, various pragmatic strategies are applied in each public apology rather than only one based on the specific situation of crisis, and the realization of pragmatic function usually requires the combination of multiple strategies. After exploring the pragmatic strategies, the reasons why the corporations in crisis employ them need to be discussed briefly.

Firstly, the collected corpus is mostly from European and American countries which belong to low-context culture (Hall, 1988). Therefore, the corporations in these countries always express apology directly whether they did the wrongdoing or not so that the IFID is applied frequently (Yang, 2015). At the same time, quite a number of studies have proved that face-to-face apology and more apologists present seem to be more sincere, so the corporations employ self-referring like *we* and other-referring terms, typically *you* and *honorifics*, to create a face-to-face context in written apology.

Secondly, the frequent employment of mitigating strategy is to reduce loss and repair image. As profit is the goal of business corporations, if the corporation bears all the responsibilities directly, it would inevitably suffer heavy losses and certainly reduce profits greatly (Boyd, 2011; Benoit, 1997). Therefore, such devices as vague references, downtoners, if-clause can help corporations take less responsibility. Specifically, the use of formulaic expression device for emphasizing the incident happened by accident is conducive to obtaining the sympathy and understanding of the public; and the reason why to announce the incident is out of good intention originally is that the corporations in crisis strive to make the public view the incident from the positive and lenient perspective. However, what calls for special attention is that the mitigating strategy should be applied appropriately, otherwise it would make an insincere and untrustworthy impression on the audience, which is contrary to corporate intention.

Thirdly, the employment of rebuilding strategy is just to cater to the psychological expectations of the public (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). For customers, they are not only concerned about who should be responsible, but also care about whether and what they can be compensated during crisis. The corporations in crisis take positive actions to compensate consumers' losses and make promises to correct their wrongdoings now and in the future, contributing to rebuilding a responsible and considerate image.

Lastly, in order to distract consumers from the incident, the corporations frequently emphasize corporate philosophy and mention the previous excellent performance, collectively called bolstering strategy. In this way can the corporation not only be perceived in a positive way, but also advertise it to those potential customers.

7. Conclusion

With the assistance of Antconc software, this study conducted an interdisciplinary corpus-based study on corporate apologies in terms of linguistic features, pragmatic strategies and pragmatic functions under the tentative theoretical framework adapted from Benoit's IRDT and Coombs and Holladay's SCCT. Based on the analysis of 100 corporate apologies collected from Western corporations, the linguistic features of corporate apologies tend to be apology-related and business-related and conventionalized. Five pragmatic strategies are most frequently employed, to express mortification to the victims, to reduce the offensiveness of acts and to minimize or to evade responsibility, so as to weaken the negative impression caused by the crisis and re-build a responsible and benevolent image to repair corporate images.

However, as with all empirical research, this study has several limitations. The first limitation rests on the corpus size. This paper conducted a study based on a self-built corpus of only 100 pieces of English corporate apologies, a total of over 20,000 words. The target corpus is not big enough to generate more extensive results, which may affect the representativeness of the results. In the future, more data should be collected to enlarge the corpus so as to eradicate the influence on the results caused by corpus size. The second limitation is related to the pragmatic function analysis. This study has practical guidance to the crisis responding management for corporations in crisis though it only explored the theoretical functions achieved by these strategies rather than pragmatic effects in reality. But in the future research, it would be of more significance to explore the actual effect of pragmatic strategies in reality by evaluating the customers' response, the sales performance and other indexes.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the research grant (17SS03) delivered by Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and the support provided by the Centre for Business Culture and Philosophy of Culture and the center for Foreign Literature and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

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