A Pragmatic Study of Corporate Apologies for Impression Management: A Case of Chinese Food Industry

Kexin Zhou

School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Guangzhou, China

E-mail: 1219611351@qq.com

Zhanghong Xu (Corresponding author)

School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Guangzhou, China

E-mail: 1458975262@qq.com

Abstract

Some of Chinese corporations in food industry have recently faced sharp criticism for their illegal operation or unethical behavior. To deal with such crisis, these corporations are inclined to manage their public impressions by issuing apology statements. Serious as these problems are, yet scarce research has focused on the impression management of Chinese corporations through apologies. This paper aims to make a pragmatic analysis of apology strategies employed by Chinese food companies for impression management, drawing upon the framework of Jones and Pittman's (1982) impression management strategies and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) theory of CCSARP. Based on a self-built corpus of 50 apology statements issued by Chinese food companies, the paper identified different apology strategies and their accompanying linguistic features through discourse analysis. The results show that IFIDs and *offer of repair* are two of the most common strategies in Chinese corporate apologies, whereas *taking on responsibility* is less frequently used. The apology strategies are often accompanied with such linguistic features as *person deixis*, *honorifics*, *intensification* and *repetition*. Chinese companies adopt these diverse apology strategies and

linguistic features for the sake of impression management, which is realized by using such strategies as *ingratiation*, *self-promotion*, *exemplification* and *supplication*. Finally, the paper provides insights into the understanding of crisis management and corporate communication practice online.

Keywords: Corporate apologies, Impression management, Pragmatic strategies

1. Introduction

The increasing exposure of illegal operations and unethical behavior in Chinese food industry on March 15th causes a sensation every year. Big brands including Haidilao, Master Kong, Shuanghui, Xicha all once faced serious criticism and their reported misdeeds were under high public scrutiny due to the negative impact on consumers. When under intense scrutiny, the involved party has to think about the impression others are forming (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In response, those reported organizations often resort to issuing apology statements in the first place, as apologies are generally regarded as an effective strategy to manage crisis (Raju & Rajagopal, 2008). Apology statements offer companies an opportunity to speak to their customers, thus corporate actors must carefully consider how their messages will be perceived by the general public. In this sense, language choice and discourse organization become far more critical.

A number of linguists have regarded apologies as a speech act (Ancarno, 2015; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 2008), which is a significant resource to be studied from pragmatics (Page, 2014). Within pragmatics, most researches have focused on public apologies (Ancarno, 2015; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kampf, 2009; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018) and political apologies (Bentley, 2014; Compton, 2016; Harris et al., 2006), while pragmatic researches on corporate apologies have just gained momentum in recent years. These pragmatic studies have provided new links between corporate apologies and image repair (Page, 2014; Xu & Yan, 2020) or rapport management (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020), yet other management theories that can be used to analyze corporate apologies still remain unexplored in the field of pragmatics. As any corporate communication may reflect impression management in some way and for multiple reasons (Perkiss et al., 2021), the apology statements issued by companies in crisis can be thought as a way of managing others' impressions of them. In the extant impression management literature, the majority of researches has centered on CSR reports (Cho et al., 2012; Cho & Roberts, 2010; Perkiss et al., 2021), annual reports (Moreno & Jones, 2022), and accounts (Tata, 2000a, 2000b; Woldt & Prasad, 2022). Nonetheless, little is known about how corporations facing scrutiny use apology statements to manage impressions.

As such, a missing element can be identified in past research, that is, a lack of attention to the relationship between corporate apologies and impression management, especially from pragmatics. To fill this research gap, this paper is designed to make a pragmatic study of corporate apologies in Chinese food industry, with an aim to find out what apology strategies and their accompanying linguistic features are employed in these apology statements and how they can be related to impression management.

Based on a self-built corpus of 50 corporate apologies issued by Chinese companies in food industry from 2008 to 2022, this paper aims to address three questions: (1) What apology strategies are employed in corporate apologies delivered by Chinese companies in food industry? (2) What linguistic features can be identified in these Chinese corporate apologies? (3) How can companies realize impression management through apologies?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses relevant literature on corporate apologies and impression management. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework of the paper. Section 4 presents the paper's research method and Section 5 provides a contextual analysis of the data followed by an exploration of how corporations adopt apologies to manage their impression. The final section concludes the paper's findings, implications and limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section will review related studies on corporate apologies and organizational impression management, followed by an objective evaluation of these researches. After a systematic review of previous literature, the research gap of this paper will then be identified.

2.1 Corporate Apologies

As the best crisis response strategy for companies to take on responsibility (Raju & Rajagopal, 2008), corporate apologies have been studied from a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, communication and intercultural studies.

In the field of linguistics, pragmatic researches on apologies have been prevailing, with particular emphasis on public apologies (Ancarno, 2015; Kampf, 2009; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018) and political apologies (Bentley, 2014; Compton, 2016; Harris et al., 2006). The context of corporate apologies, however, has only recently begun to receive attention from pragmatics (Lutzky, 2021; Page, 2014). In particular, Page (2014) analyzed the components of corporate apologies in response to customer complaints on Twitter and their relations to image repair. She found that these corporate apologies used more "offers of repair" and less "explanations", which were generally combined with imperatives and questions.

A second stream of research has taken communicative approaches to analyze corporate apologies, including crisis communication (Benoit, 2014; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Lee & Chung, 2012; Raju & Rajagopal, 2008), public relations (Compton, 2016; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Lee & Chung, 2012; Ran et al., 2017), and the effectiveness of corporate apologies (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009; Kim et al., 2015; Lee & Atkinson, 2019; Lutzky, 2021). For instance, Lee and Atkinson (2019) examined the interactive impact of crisis involvement, brand image, and message appeal on the effectiveness of apologies made by corporations in crisis, finding that the three-way interaction is especially influential in low-crisis involvement condition.

Finally, both Western and Chinese scholars have devoted considerable attention to studying corporate apologies from intercultural perspectives (Grieve, 2010; Li, 2017; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020). Most of them aim to uncover the similarities and differences between

domestic and foreign corporate apologies using a cross-cultural and contrastive approach. Take Morrow and Yamanouchi's (2020) study as an example, they made a comparative analysis of hotels' apologies in English and Japanese Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), discovering much similarity in the frequency of apologies and differences in the use of Explanation, Repair and other moves.

To sum up, western scholars have focused more on the communicative aspects of corporate apologies, particularly measuring whether apologies were successful or not. The linguistic form of corporate apologies, however, has been relatively neglected. Among the three pragmatic researches on corporate apologies (Lutzky, 2021; Page, 2014; Xu & Yan, 2020), they have provided guiding significance in relating corporate apologies to image repair in different domains. Nonetheless, Chinese pragmatic studies on corporate apologies are still inadequate, and current studies have yet explored the relationship between corporate apologies and other management theories. Another popular management theory, impression management, is an attempt to align the values and norms of an organization with those of society (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2013), which is in line with the intent of corporations facing food safety crisis. Hence, this paper aims to make a pragmatic analysis of apologies made by Chinese food companies and relate them to impression management.

2.2 Impression Management

The term impression management (IM), has been defined as a construct used to explain how individuals or organizations create, maintain, protect or alter their image or reputation held by a target audience (Bolino et al., 2008; Perkiss et al., 2021). In the field of management, two major areas are identified in the literature on IM: individual-level IM and organizational-level IM.

The majority of research on IM has focused on its application at the individual level within organization, particularly in the context of job interviews (Higgins & Judge, 2004; Wang & Feng, 2006), performance appraisal (Bolino et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2007), and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Bolino et al., 2006; Bowler & Brass, 2006). Specifically, Bolino et al. (2014) examined the relationship between subordinates' repeated use of IM tactics and supervisors' ratings of likability and performance. They found that defensive IM tactics (i.e., apologies and justifications) lost their efficacy over time, whereas the efficacy of assertive IM tactics (i.e., ingratiation and self-promotion) over time was less evident.

In recent years, the concept of IM has been generalized to the organizational level (Tata & Prasad, 2015; Woldt & Prasad, 2022). Organizational-level IM researches are generally scattered in discussing how organizations in crisis use IM tactics to repair damaged legitimacy (Cho & Roberts, 2010; Perkiss et al., 2021) and create a specific image in front of the audience including customers (Abramova et al., 2016) and shareholders (Woldt & Prasad, 2022). To be specific, Woldt and Prasad (2022) used IM theory to examine the way firms facing supply chain crisis communicate with their shareholders, finding that in the short term, firms could mitigate negative shareholder returns by assuming less responsibility for the crisis.

In addition, a number of scholars have also devoted to investigating IM from pragmatics (Chovanec, 2021; File, 2018; Lee, 2020). However, most of these researches are centered on media interviews (Chovanec, 2021) and personal interaction (File, 2018) instead of the organizational context. To my knowledge, only one study (Lee, 2020) has examined the use of IM in organizational context from pragmatics. Lee (2020) made a cross-cultural study and analyzed hedges and boosters as both metadiscourse markers and IM strategies in the CEO's letters to shareholders of Chinese and U.S. corporations. He found that more hedges and boosters were used in the U.S. CEO's discourse, demonstrating more conviction and certainty in comparison to the Chinese discourse which imparted more caution and tentativeness.

On the whole, previous IM researches have provided invaluable inspirations for follow-up studies. Individual-level IM researches have enriched the application of IM in various contexts with regard to its usefulness and effectiveness. IM researches at organizational level have further confirmed its applicability in the organizational context, and its impact on some organizational operations. Pragmatics researchers have taken a more micro perspective to analyze IM, with particular attention to the linguistic choices. The vast majority of organizational-level IM researches has focused on contexts like CSR reports, annual reports and accounts, yet few of them have analyzed corporate apology statements and limited research exists to analyze organizational IM from pragmatics.

2.3 Corporate Apologies and Impression Management

Corporate apology is generally regarded as a statement made by organizations in crisis to acknowledge responsibility and ask for forgiveness (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Kim et al., 2004). In IM literature, scholars often view apologies as an IM tactic (Bolino et al., 2008; Weiner, 2000).

From this perspective, several researchers have analyzed the use of IM tactics including apologies in organizational contexts (Abramova et al., 2016; Bolino et al., 2014). For instance, Abramova et al. (2016) explored the impact of different response strategies to negative reviews on the impression of the host and guests' willingness to rent. Their findings showed the "confession/apology" strategy positively influenced the impression of guests regarding the host and enhanced their willingness to rent. Other IM researches are more concerned about the use of apologies in improving the relationship between managers and employees (Bolino et al., 2014) and its effectiveness in repairing trust (Kim et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2004) and image (Gundlach et al., 2003). As such, past research has not considered the use of IM tactics in the context of corporate apology statements, and it can also be found that IM research on corporations' external discourse needs further exploration.

Overall, even though researches on corporate apologies and IM have been extensive, several issues warrant further investigation. First, IM researches at organizational level have focused more on the contexts of CSR reports, annual reports and CEO's letters, yet IM studies investigating corporate apology statements remain unexplored. Second, pragmatics research on corporate apologies in relation to IM is very much neglected, as pragmatics researches on corporate apologies are often related to image repair and pragmatics researches on IM discuss more about media interviews and interpersonal communications. Third, organizational IM

researches have been Western-centric and Chinese studies on IM used by organizations in crisis are insufficient. Likewise, domestic researches on corporate apologies from pragmatics are limited. Hence, this paper is designed to analyze Chinese corporate apologies from pragmatics and examine how Chinese food enterprises in crisis manage to improve the public's impression of them.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of corporate apologies will be underpinned by two theories. First, the content of apology statements will be identified by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework. Second, given that corporate apologies reflect certain traits of organizational impression management, Jones and Pittman's (1982) taxonomy will be adopted to investigate how corporations in crisis use apologies to manipulate the impression that they give.

3.1 CCSARP

As apologies are often regarded as a kind of speech act (Ancarno, 2015; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Harris et al., 2006; Kampf, 2009), researchers studying corporate apologies take them as a speech act as well (Lutzky, 2021; Page, 2014). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) carry out a research project named Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) to explore the similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers' realization patterns in two speech acts, requests and apologies. They regard apologies as a post-event speech act, and that the speaker who apologizes commits his or her violations of social norms and involvement of the cause (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The framework of CCSARP has proved robust and been applied in many previous researches (e.g., House & Kádár, 2021; Page, 2014; Wouk, 2006), and its applicability in corporate apologies has been examined as well (Page, 2014). Hence, this paper adopts CCSARP as theoretical framework to identify and code the components of Chinese corporate apologies.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) provide some apology strategies in the framework of CCSARP, which include:

1)   Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID): *sorry, excuse, apologize, forgive, regret, pardon* and *(be) afraid*.

2)   Taking on responsibility: It's my fault.

3)   An explanation or account: The bus was late.

4)   An offer of repair: I'll pay for the damage

5)   A promise of forbearance: This won't happen again.

3.2 Impression Management Strategies

Researchers have put forward a number of different strategies and tactics for impression management (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This paper adopts Jones and Pittman's (1982) model to examine the use of impression management strategies in corporate apologies. Their taxonomy is suited

to this paper for three reasons. First, among a variety of IM theoretical frameworks, Jones and Pittman's (1982) model is the only IM framework empirically validated (Bolino & Turnley, 1999). Second, this taxonomy includes five different IM strategies encompassing a wide range of behaviors that may be related to corporations in crisis. Third, this framework continues to be examined by many former researchers in political contexts (Jackson & Lilleker, 2020) and organizational contexts (Bolino et al., 2014; Gwal, 2015; Harris et al., 2007), which validates its applicability to corporations as well. The five impression management strategies proposed by Jones and Pittman (1982) and their key characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Jones and Pittman's (1982) Impression Management Strategies

Impression management strategies	Key Characteristics
Ingratiation	To show warmth, humor, reliability and charm
Intimidation	To cause fear, danger, pain and discomfort
Self-promotion	To seek competence
Exemplification	To be honest, disciplined, charitable and self-abnegating
Supplication	To solicit help

4. Research Design

This section illustrates this paper's research design aimed at examining the research questions in the introduction. The process of data collection will be presented at first, followed by an overview of the methods used for data analysis.

4.1 Data Collection

The corpus of this paper includes 50 apologies issued by Chinese companies in food industry from 2008 to 2022. The corporations selected are mostly well-known enterprises in China's food industry, such as Haidilao, Yangguofu, Xicha, Yidiandian, and Three Squirrels. Some of these corporate apologies were selected from their official websites to ensure their originality. However, the first-hand data were quite difficult to find, since most companies refused to put the apology statements on their official websites for a long time. Hence, the second-hand data from other social media platforms were then taken into consideration, such as Weibo (the largest China-based microblogging site) and Chinese news reports. All these corporate apologies were searched online based on such keywords as "道歉" (apologize), "歉意" (apology), "声明" (statement) and "致歉信" (apology letter). It should also be noted that the

corporate apologies selected in this paper were either issued by their official corporate accounts or the personal accounts of their top managers like CEOs to ensure the authority and validity of the data.

Further, the process of selecting data have several standards. First, all the corporate apologies selected were from the same industry, food industry, so that they can have some commonalities in the use of apology strategies. In this way, public apologies made by celebrities or companies in other industries were excluded. Second, these Chinese corporations were all home-grown firms, which excluded foreign-owned enterprises and joint ventures with foreign equity. Third, the length of each apology statement should be at least over 100 Chinese characters so that shorter apology messages were screened out as invalid data. At the very beginning, 55 Chinese apologies issued by companies in food industry were collected, but they were eventually narrowed to 50 because three of them were issued by foreign-owned enterprises like Starbucks and Burger King and two of them were too short to be considered appropriate. The 50 Chinese apologies included 26,864 characters with an average length of 537 characters. The shortest text was 108 characters in length, and the longest, 1,555.

4.2 Data Analysis

The analysis software used in this paper was AntConc 3.4.3, a concordancing tool which was used to quantify the use frequency of apology strategies within the dataset. Given that AntConc cannot process Chinese corpus without word segmentation, this paper adopts the ROST CM6 software to segment Chinese corpus automatically and manually correct some unreasonable word segmentation, such as 致 歉→致歉, 我 司→我司, 线 上线 下→线上线下.

The specific data analysis procedures were carried out as follows. First, the Chinese corpus was uploaded into the AntConc 3.4.3, and the word list was automatically generated by frequency. This step provided an overview of the most frequently used characters in the corpus, including pronouns like 我们(we) and performative words like 道歉/歉意(apology/regret). The second step was to search for apologetic expressions in the concordance search volume and quantify their frequency of occurrence, based on the seven types of IFIDs proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). A total number of 130 concordance lines was found and their linguistic features were further identified before the next step. Although IFIDs proved to be dominating in composing a successful apology (Harris et al., 2006), other indirect forms of apology should be taken into consideration as well to ensure the integrity of the study (Page, 2014). The third step was then to code the data manually based on the other four apology strategies outlined in the framework of CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), followed by a calculation of their frequencies. In the process of the manual coding of apologies, distinct linguistic features indicating corporate impression management were coded as well. At last, these linguistic features were interpreted in the light of impression management proposed by Jones and Pittman (1982).

5. Results and Discussions

This section makes further analysis and discussions of the collected data, including the apology strategies and linguistic features employed in Chinese corporate apologies, followed by a discussion of how these features can reveal impression management.

5.1 Apology Strategies Analysis

Based on the five apology strategies proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), this part elaborately illustrates the use frequency and distribution of each strategy in the data with specific examples.

5.1.1 IFIDs

Numerous Chinese characters were identified for apologizing in this corpus, such as 道歉 (apologize), 歉意 (apology/regret), 抱歉 (apologize), 致歉 (apology/apologize), 对不起 (sorry), 遗憾 (regret), 谅解 (forgive), and 担忧 (worry). Table 1 summarizes the use frequency of each IFID in the corpus of Chinese corporate apologies. It is worth mentioning that no direct translation of *(be) afraid* was found in this corpus, however, the Chinese characters 担忧 (be worried/worries) were identified and regarded to have similar meaning of the former.

As the figures in Table 2 attest, the Chinese characters 歉意 and 致歉 were the most frequently occurring IFIDs, and the less used IFIDs were 遗憾 and 担忧. The formal expressions in Chinese containing the character 歉, including 歉意, 致歉, 道歉, and 抱歉, comprise 85% of the IFIDs in total. Whereas the spoken apologetic expression 对不起 only comprises 0.08% in the corpus. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that Chinese corporations often use formal expressions of apologies in their public apology statements, in order to show their sincerity and create a good impression on the audience. A specific example is presented as follows.

Table 2. Frequency of IFIDs Identified in Chinese Corporate Apologies

IFIDs	Frequency
歉意	42
致歉	38
道歉	18
抱歉	12
对不起	11
谅解	5

遗憾	2
担忧	2
Total	130

(1) 由于我们的问题，对消费者带来了困扰，我想再次道歉：对不起。(I would like to apologize again for the trouble caused to consumers due to our problem: SORRY.) (cf. Tian Yuan Zhu Yi's apology statement)

As the above examples and Table 2 show, direct apologies like IFIDs were used frequently in Chinese corporate apologies, and they were usually modified by intensifiers such as *sincerely* and *deeply*, which will be further discussed in section 5.2.2. Besides, Chinese enterprises are also skilled at using repetition to add force to their apologies, as the above examples show that some statements contained multiple apologies in one sentence.

5.1.2 Taking on Responsibility

Taking on responsibility is generally regarded as an essential component of a corporate apology (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Pace et al., 2010), but the manual coding of this corpus showed that only 29 out of 50 (58%) Chinese corporate apologies contained explicit expressions of acknowledging responsibility. These corporations usually take the responsibility for specific problems on their own initiative, using such expressions as 承担...的责任 (taking the responsibility of ...) and 负有...的责任 (bear the responsibility of ...):

(2) 对于此事件若造成顾客的利益受损，我们愿意承担相应的经济责任和法律责任。(We are willing to take the corresponding economic and legal responsibilities if the interests of customers are damaged by this incident.) (cf. Qian Dama's apology statement)

Apart from the above explicit way of taking on responsibility, we also find other implicit ways of acknowledging responsibility by expressing self-deficiency or apologizing for having brought inconvenience to consumers, as in (3).

(3) 给您带来不便，深感抱歉！(We are deeply sorry for the inconvenience!) (cf. Luckin Coffee's apology statement)

Such strategy as shifting the focus of apology from directly accepting responsibility to the concern of customers' feelings was used frequently in Chinese corporate apologies. This strategy is considered to save face for both sides (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020), but in the context of Chinese corporations apologizing to the public, it also reduces the possibility of taking risks. In addition, it is noteworthy that there was no denial of responsibility in the corpus.

5.1.3 An Explanation or Account

Explanations were used with 64% (32 out of 50) of the Chinese corporate apologies. In this data sample, using the strategy of explanations was also found to be varied greatly. The majority of companies attribute their mistakes to management loopholes, as in (4).

(4) 这些问题，都是因为我们自身管理疏漏造成的。(These problems were all caused by our own management oversight.) (cf. Chabaidao's apology statement)

In addition to indicating management failures, some apologies contained more specific reasons, such as technical errors, staff maloperations, and superior decision-making mistakes. Examples are shown as follows:

(5) 本次苯并（a）芘超标，非主观人为因素导致，属于生产工艺技术上的问题。(That benzo (a) pyrene exceeded the standard this time was not caused by subjective human factors, but belonged to the problem of production technology.) (cf. An apology statement of Hunan Jinhao Tea Oil Co., Ltd.)

(6) 此次涨价是公司管理层的错误决策,伤害了海底捞顾客的利益，对此我们深感抱歉。(This price increase was a wrong decision of the company's management, which hurt the interests of haidilao customers, and we are deeply sorry for that.) (Haidilao's apology statement)

A number of Chinese corporations would also restate their beliefs and principles in the apology statements as supplementary explanations. They use this strategy to create a positive impression on the public, and reduce customers' negative evaluations of themselves, as in (7) below.

(7) 本宫的茶一直视食品安全为品牌的根基，这也是我们坚守的底线与命脉。(Ben Gong's Tea always regards food safety as the foundation of our brand, which is also the bottom line and lifeblood we stick to.) (cf. An apology statement of Ben Gong's Tea)

Overall, in the apology statements, except some instances of specific explanations for the incidents, most Chinese corporations would attribute their mistakes to management problems, and restate the company's belief to create a positive impression on the public.

5.1.4 An Offer of Repair

Repairs occurred in almost every apology statement, with a high percentage of 98% (only one apology statement without an offer of repair). Nevertheless, among them only 11 out of 50 (22%) Chinese corporate apologies contained specific offers of repair to customers, and the rest (76%) were about corrective actions that companies took to deal with the crisis. Examples of each case follow.

(8) 我们将无条件为您退款并重新制茶。(We will give you a refund and remake the tea without any conditions.) (cf. Nayuki's apology statement)

(9) 针对媒体报道中的涉事门店，<u>我们现已责令其停业整顿</u>。(We have now ordered the stores involved in the media reports <u>to close for rectification</u>.) (cf. Mixue Ice Cream & Tea's apology statement)

In addition to financial compensation, offers of repair oriented towards the need of customers usually contained such characters as 退货 (return the product), 换货 (exchange the product), 重做 (remake), and 折扣 (discount). However, corrective actions illustrated by companies in the apology statements were often about recalling faulty products, closing stores, and strengthening management, staff training and awareness education. Both ways of offering repairs function as face-saving strategies and contribute to corporate impression management, as these strategies help companies improve the unfavorable impression on the public when they actively provide remedies for the crisis.

5.1.5 A Promise of Forbearance

Promises of forbearance appeared in 39 out of 50 (78%) apology statements. Companies making promises of forbearance attempt to ensure their customers that the same problems will not happen again. An example of this strategy used in the data sample can be seen in (10) below.

(10) 我们承诺，问题解决前，不会再上架该产品。(We promise that the product will not be put on the shelf again before the problem is solved.) (cf. BESTORE's apology statement)

By promising to avoid reoccurring problems and make positive improvements, companies are committed to win back the audience's trust. At the same time, they are reconstructing a convincing image to the public and isolating themselves from the negative impact of the crisis.

The analysis of the five apology strategies employed in Chinese corporate apologies also found that there were some distinct linguistic features accompanied in the apology statements, such as person deixis, honorifics, intensification and repetition. The use of these linguistic features is described in the following section.

5.2 Linguistic Features Analysis

Apology strategies in corporate statements are accompanied with linguistic features which are investigated in this part with demonstrations of word frequency and specific examples.

5.2.1 Person Deixis and Honorifics

With the help of the concordance software AntConc 3.4.3, the word list ranked the use frequency of all words and lexical bundles in the corpus of Chinese corporate apologies. Person deixis were thus found to occupy a relatively high proportion, as Table 3 shows the frequency of different person deixis in the data and their ranking in the word list.

Table 3. Frequency of Person Deixis and Their Ranking in the Word List

Ranking	Person Deixis	Frequency

2	我们	247
10	消费者	119
35	大家	48
37	顾客	46
38	我公司	45
58	我司	36
82	我们的	27
97	我	24

As Table 2 shows, first person plural pronoun form "我们" (we) was used frequently in Chinese corporate apologies. In addition to using other forms of first person pronouns like "我" (I) and "我们的" (our), Chinese companies were also adept at using self-referring terms like "我公司/我司" (our company), omitting the use of first person singular possessive form "我的" (my) in the apology statements. Using corporate voice in this way reflects the authority of the apology statement as well as the importance the company attaches to the issue, as can be seen in (11) below. As for the recipient of the apology statements, Chinese companies use more expressions like "消费者" (consumers) and "顾客" (customers) to refer to the audience. Another Chinese expression "大家" is also frequently used by Chinese corporations to refer to the broad audience, which could be translated into the second person plural form *you* in English according to the context, as can be seen in (12).

(11) 在此，向所有消费者郑重致歉，感谢媒体的监督，我公司将实事求是，绝不隐瞒，如有进一步的调查结果，会及时向公众通报。(Hereby, we solemnly apologize to all consumers and thank the media for their supervision. Our company will seek truth from facts and never hide anything. If there are further investigation results, we will inform the public in a timely manner.) (cf. An apology statement of Beijing TRT Apiculture Co., Ltd)

(12) 也希望大家给我们一些时间，我们争取在 9 月 30 日前完成全部售后，在此对广大消费者诚挚道歉，对不起。(We also hope that you can give us some time, we will try to complete the after-sales service before September 30, we sincerely apologize to the majority of consumers, SORRY.) (cf. An apology statement of Tian Yuan Zhu Yi)

Furthermore, honorifics like "您" (the honorific form of second person pronoun) were also used in some Chinese corporate apologies to show full respect to the recipient, as in (13) below. Other honorifics appeared in the form of adjectives such as "尊贵的" (distinguished) and "尊敬的" (honorable). They were usually used to modify the nouns *customers* or *consumers*, and positioned at the greetings of apology statements. Another form of honorific

expression occurred in the Chinese idiom "敬畏之心" (with reverence), as can be seen in (14). The use frequency of different kinds of honorifics are presented in Table 4.

(13) 我们会有专门的工作人员及时联系到<u>您</u>，并可以应<u>您</u>的要求上门解决<u>您</u>的诉求。 (We will have a dedicated staff to contact <u>you</u> in time, and at <u>your</u> request to solve <u>your</u> demands.) (cf. Kalado's apology statement)

(14) 三只松鼠将以更加<u>敬畏之心</u>, 不断努力为消费者提供更安全更优质的产品和服务，以高品质回馈广大消费者的厚爱。 (The Three Squirrels will continue to strive to provide consumers with safer and better products and services <u>with more reverence</u>, and to repay the love of consumers with high quality.) (cf. An apology statement of Three Squirrels)

Table 4. Frequency of Honorifics in Chinese Corporate Apologies

Honorifics	Frequency
您	18
尊敬的	8
敬畏之心	2
尊贵的	1
Total	29

5.2.2 Intensification and Repetition

Examination of the IFIDs in Chinese corporate apologies showed a tendency for them to be used with intensifying words including adjectives like "诚挚的" (sincere) and adverbs like "郑重地" (solemnly). More specific words can be seen in Table 5 and examples are followed.

Table 5. Frequency of Intensifiers in Chinese Corporate Apologies

Intensifiers	Frequency
诚挚的(sincere)	20
郑重地(solemnly)	16
诚恳地(sincerely)	15
深感(deeply)	12
真诚地(honestly)	9

深深的(deep)	8
非常(very)	3
真挚(earnestly)	2
Total	85

(15) 在此，江西卡拉多食品有限公司郑重地、诚恳地向广大消费者表达致歉！(Here, Jiangxi Karado Food Co., Ltd. solemnly and sincerely apologize to the vast number of consumers!) (cf. Karado's apology statement)

(16) 对于顾客反映的情况，我们再次深表歉意。(We deeply apologize again for the customer's feedback.) (cf. Nayuki's apology statement)

Calculations show that intensifiers were used 65% of the time with IFIDs, which is a common practice for Chinese enterprises to add force to their apologies. Besides, these intensifiers also directly expressed the company's sincerity in apologizing and served to leave a good impression on the audience.

Further, as the above examples show, repetition was used commonly as well in apologies. The word "再次" (again) is a symbol of repetition, and it appeared 23 times in IFIDs. The other kind of repetition occurred in the situation when an apology statement contained multiple apologies, and even one sentence included multiple IFIDs, as can be seen in example (1). The function of repetition is similar to intensification, that is, reinforcing the tone of the apology and highlighting the sincerity of the apologizer.

5.3 Discussion

The above data analysis showed that Chinese corporations in crisis used various apology strategies which were realized by different linguistic features for the sake of impression management. Based on the framework of Jones and Pittman's (1982) impression management strategies, a further discussion of how these companies realize impression management through apologies is conducted as follows.

First, as ingratiation is an attraction-seeking strategy, it can be realized by companies using honorifics in apologies to show their warmth to the target audience. It is also a form of ingratiation for companies to actively compensate customers for their losses, as they intend to regain the favor of customers. Second, self-promotion is a skillful strategy for companies to display their competence in key areas to gain credibility and subtly claim their incompetence in secondary areas, which is reflected in the use of explanation and offering remedial measures in apologies. Companies first acknowledge their ineptitude in certain problem areas through explanations, and then highlight their prompt remedial actions as a way of self-promotion. This strategy can also be identified in the use of corporate voice in apologies, such as the self-referring term *our company*. Third, exemplification aims to project integrity and honesty, and the exemplary actions should be sincere and self-consistent, which can be

seen in a company's detailed remedial actions in apologies as well. Lastly, as supplication is a strategy to solicit help, it often occurs in IFIDs when companies seeking forgiveness from their customers, especially accompanied by using intensifiers to add force to apologies. It is worth mentioning that the strategy of intimidation, which leads to threats and danger to the audience, is not present in Chinese corporate apologies.

6. Conclusion

This section begins with the findings of the research, centering on the answers to the three questions proposed at the introduction, followed by the implications and limitations of this paper, and then some suggestions for further research will be given.

The primary objective of the paper was to investigate the apology strategies and linguistic features employed by Chinese food companies for impression management in apologizing. With the help of the concordance software AntConc 3.4.3, this paper identified different apologies and their accompanying linguistic features in the corpus of 50 apologies issued by Chinese food companies. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework of CCSARP and Jones and Pittman's (1982) theory of impression management strategies were respectively used to identify the apology strategies and impression management strategies in the data.

The findings of this current research suggest that, among the five apology strategies, IFIDs and *offer of repair* are two of the most common strategies used by companies in crisis, which is consistent with prior studies on corporate apologies (Pace et al., 2010; Page, 2014). Even though more than half of the data sample provided *explanations*, *promises of forbearance* and the strategy of *taking on responsibility*, *taking on responsibility* was the least frequently used strategy in Chinese corporate apologies. The linguistic features identified in these apology strategies include the use of *person deixis*, *honorifics*, *intensification* and *repetition*. In order to leave a favorable impression on the audience, companies often used *ingratiation* to satisfy their customers through *honorifics* and *offer of repair*. *Intimidation* was avoided in apologies and *supplication* was also rarely used in IFIDs. The other two impression management strategies, *self-promotion* and *exemplification*, were commonly used in the company's remedial actions. These findings imply that, companies in crisis need to pay more attention to taking on responsibility and offering repair to their customers in the apology statements to reflect their sincerity.

This paper has made certain contributions to studies on pragmatics and corporate apologies. Nevertheless, there are still some limitations. First, the data collected were not comprehensive enough. As corporations are inclined to leave a good impression on the public, they will delete their apology statements once the crisis has passed. Thus, it is hard for researchers to collect more data. Second, crisis was not classified according to its severity. Some companies apologize for unethical behaviors while others apologize for illegal operations. The difference of crisis types or the reasons for apologizing may lead to differences in the use of apology strategies and impression strategies. Third, some social factors, such as the impact of apology strategies employed in corporate apologies on impression management, are not discusses in this paper. This will include a wide range of public participation in research and a specific investigation of their perceptions and opinions.

As a result, considering the research limitations stated above, some suggestions are presented for future researches on corporate apologies. First, a broader range of data should be collected to make a more thorough and convincing study on corporate apologies. Second, specific classifications of crisis should be taken into account in future researches. Lastly, future researches are suggested to consider the effects of apology strategies used in corporate statements on impression management by evaluating the public's perceptions and other factors.

Acknowledgements

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