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A Genre Analysis of Chinese Celebrities' Apologies on Sina Weibo

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays many celebrities from different circles join in Sina Weibo, the most popular self-media platform in China. Based on genre theories of Bhatia and Swales and considering the unique social context, the study has analyzed 3 pieces of apologies from Sina Weibo. This research is a new attempt to apply genre theory to apologies posted by celebrities on self-media platform. Besides, it helps celebrities deepen their understanding of apologies posted on self-media platform, impair images, decrease negative social impact, and more importantly shoulder social responsibilities. Meanwhile, fan groups and other netizens can further their knowledge of apologies posted by celebrities online and evaluate celebrities and their social influence in a more reasonable and objective manner.

Keywords: Component, Apologies, Genre analysis, Sina Weibo.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Chinese government appeals the whole society to cultivate and practice socialist core values and then all Chinese citizens hold higher expectations for celebrities to set good examples for their high name recognition and great influence. Consequently, posting an apology on Sina Weibo has become a significant way for Chinese celebrities to mend relationship with the public, and take on social responsibilities.

These apologies serving for diversified communicative purposes are valuable resources for genre analysis. Linguists have paid great attention to the study on genre and genre analysis; however, most of Chinese scholars in this field mainly limit their scope within academic genre or traditional business genre. The genre analysis targeted at apologies posted on Sina Weibo by Chinese celebrities is rare. The genre analysis targeted at apologies posted on Sina Weibo by Chinese celebrities is rare. Under the instruction of Swales' and Bhatia's theories, taking unique social context into consideration, this study intends to analyze 3 pieces of apologies on Sina Weibo platform with the qualitative method.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Relevant Concepts and Theories

2.1.1 Apology

Apology has been largely explored in the research literature and linguists who are interested in it have already given clear definitions. Germany linguist, Holger Limberg [6] defined "apology" as a speech act that "highly conventionalized in everyday speech". In this study, apology is a conventionalized speech act that exists when addressers find themselves in a situation where their behavior, or language causes an offense, violates a social norm or simply does not meet others' expectations and then exerts depressing impact on large groups of people. This speech act plays a vital role in shouldering social responsibilities, saving one's image and repairing relationship with others.

2.1.2 Swales' CARS Model

Swales [11] proposed and specified his Create a Research Space (CARS) model with its three principal moves: "establishing a territory", "establishing a niche" and "occupying the niche".

"Establishing a territory" refers to introducing the topic, discussing its importance or describing the current situation and features of that area of study on introduction writing. "Establishing a niche" is to show that previous research is not complete or there are still some aspects of research fields that require further investigation. This move contains 2 steps. Step 1 is to indicate a knowledge gap (obligatory) or add to what is known, and step 2 is to present positive justification. Indicating a knowledge gap can help build a demand for current contribution. Move 3 is attached by announcing the present research descriptively (obligatory) and presenting research questions or hypotheses. In this move, the writer explains how he or she plans to fill the gap or describes what he or she considers to be the main features of the research.

In Swales' CARS theory, he proposed concepts of "move" and "step" in a genre. And the concept of "move" is applied to the move structure analysis in this study.

2.1.3   Bhatia's Seven-step Model

Based on the idea that moves serve as discriminative elements of generic structure and strategies as non-discriminative options within the allowable contributions available to an author for creative or innovative genre construction, Bhatia [2] contended that scholars who are investigating a genre-text in a comprehensive way need to take some or all of the seven steps he proposed into consideration, "depending upon the purpose of the analysis, the aspect of the genre that one intends to focus on, and the background knowledge one already has of the nature of the genre in question". The seven-step model includes following steps: l) Placing the given genre-text in a situational context; 2) Surveying existing literature; 3) Refining the contextual analysis; 4) Selecting corpus; 5) Studying the institutional context; 6) Undertaking three levels of linguistic context; 7) Specialist information in genre analysis.

2.1.4   Bhatia's Multi-perspective Model

Bhatia [3] claimed that the various frameworks used for discourse analysis can be summarized as discourse as text, discourse as genre, discourse as professional practice and discourse as social practice. The above views can be combined into a multi-perspective and four space model of discourse analysis.

Discourse as text refers to the analysis of language use which is constrained within the domain of the surface-level properties of discourse. Discourse as genre extends the analysis further to account for not only the way in which text is constructed, but also the way the text is interpreted, used and exploited. Discourse as professional practice extends the study of genre to relate it to professional practice. Discourse as social practice places the study of genre in the social context, where the research center shifts significantly from the surface-level properties to the features of context.

2.2   *Previous Research on Genre Analysis and Apologies*

Studies on genre analysis at home and abroad show different features. NR school, ESP school and SFL school, as the three most influential schools in this field, lay solid theoretical foundation for the follow-up researchers on genre studies. Western linguists studied on genre in a wide range from those in academic settings, professional settings to those in daily-life practice, such as wedding invitation letter [9]. Besides, they are innovative in combing genre analysis with other theories such as modality and social context such as marketization. In comparison with the genre studies made by foreign scholars, studies on genre analysis in China are much later [5]. Chinese scholars were dedicated to introducing genre theory to China. Owing to their painstaking work, more and more scholars have been trying to specify the concept of genre and have applied genre theories proposed by foreign pioneers to their own researches under Chinese context. Reviewing the development of genre studies in China, it can be found that lots of achievements have been made and the future of genre analysis in China is rather promising.

Apology is still a hot topic both at home and abroad. Studies abroad on apology have a long history; however, most studies focus on linguistic features on surface level instructed by the face theory, the speech act theory or the politeness principle (eg, [1], [10], [8]). Researches on apology (especially the apology posted by celebrities online) from the perspective of genre analysis can be hardly found. In China, under the social context of promoting and practicing socialist core values, Chinese scholars have higher awareness of celebrities' social responsibilities (eg, [4], [7]). However, most of them mainly study celebrities' apologies from the perspective of public crisis

management or only explore polite strategies based on the speech act theory and the politeness principle. Researches on various genres based on genre theory have been conducted such as, corporate annual reports, introduction of attraction sites, prospectuses and etc., which have broadened the scope of genre studies in some way. It is worth conducting further researches on apology based on genre analysis.

Therefore, the present study will be a new attempt in genre analysis filed by researching on apologies of Chinese celebrities posted on the internet.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS

3.1 Research Question

This study will address the following question: What are the generic features of apologies on Sina Weibo?

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The author has collected 3 pieces of apologies. The following criteria will be observed. Firstly, it is authenticity. These 3 samples of apologies are all from Sina Weibo official accounts of Chinese celebrities. Besides, the related incidents were all once trending topics on Sina Weibo, which means they are quite influential in China. Thirdly, these apologies are posted on Sina Weibo as the exclusive platform to respond to their personal affairs instantly.

This study attempts to make a genre analysis of apologies posted by Chinese celebrities on Sina Weibo. In this research, qualitative approach is adopted. 3 samples are selected to find out the generic features based on the theoretical framework. The detailed analysis includes following stages: (1) features from textual space; (2) features from socio-cognitive space; (3) features from social space.

3.3 Materials and Analyses

3.3.1 Zhai Tianlin's Apology

Example 1 is about a talented Chinese actor Zhai Tianlin. He is famous for his education background that he is a doctoral student of Beijing Film Academy, one of the best universities in performing. However, he was found that as a doctoral student, he knew nothing about China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), a

widely known and used platform providing academic literature, degree paper, conference reports and so on, which you cannot miss if you are involved in academic researches. In his apology, he admitted that he had been so complacent and conceited that he plagiarized in his paper writing. After Zhai posted the apology on his account, more than 436,000 netizens gave him a thumb-up on Sina Weibo platform. Although some netizens pointed out in their comments that he brought shame to his Alma Mater and disrupted the academia. Over 100,000 people gave a like to a comment that you are still a good actor. Another Sina Weibo user appreciated his decision to make an apology and said that although his outstanding acting skills are not deniable, he made a mistake. And this comment received more than 70,000 likes. According to a review of netizens, responses, it can be safely concluded that common people are provided a platform to openly discuss about the misbehaviors of a celebrity and its forthcoming consequences. The public confessions of their mistakes give young people a chance to know that no matter how rich or famous you are, you have to accept punishments once you undertake wrongdoings. And as public figures who used to be regarded as decent and kind at least among their fans, they probably receive harsher criticism and punishment. This is also a way for celebrities to take on their social responsibilities.

Meanwhile, making a public confession frankly on a platform which millions of people can reach, celebrities may leave an impression that they are well prepared for the punishment because they heartfully regret for what they have done. And then young fans may think their idols are so upright to admit mistakes in a very frank manner that they can tolerate it this time.

3.3.2 Wu Xin's Apology

Example 2 is Wu Xin's apology to Zhong Hanliang. Expressions such as "I apologize for" and "sorry" frequently show up in the apologies. This finding is consistent with previous research results that the most common IFIDs for apologies are explicit apologies such as "sorry", "excuse me", "I apologize for…", "I regret that…" In the Example 2, famous Chinese hostess Wu Xin was reported to sell a toy given by actor Zhong Hanliang on a show through an online second-hand goods trading platform. Fans of Zhong pointed that she killed a friendly relationship cruelly. To address this problem, Wu posted an apology in which she

directly and bitterly regretted what she did to Zhong. It is safe to conclude that making a clear and direct apology is a widely preferred method among celebrities who are facing a public crisis and an easily accepted way for fans who are concerned.

3.3.3 Fan Bingbing's Apology

Example 3 is an apology posted by Fan Bingbing who was one of highest paid actors in China. Fan has been fined around 883 billion yuan for tax evasion and other offenses and she escaped criminal charges because the fines were paid on time. She clearly told the audience the consequence of her wrong doings that after being convicted of tax evasion, there were many fines and penalties in punishment decisions and she would do as it asked. "I completely accept the penalties given by the taxation authorities after their thorough investigation. I will follow the final order given by the taxation authorities and will do my best to raise funds to pay back the taxes and fines." This move is mainly for providing more new and authentic information about the process of the incident to people who are concerned. After giving information about what has happened and the consequence or the ending of an incident, the writer of an apology always directly admits that he or she made wrong decisions or exerted negative impacts on specific groups of people. In most cases, celebrities frankly admit their mistakes, in which way their fans are more likely to believe their idols are still respectable because they are courageous to face their mistakes. In other words, this move is to not only provide information, but also convince their fans that it is worthwhile to continuously support them. "Today I'm facing enormous fears and worries over the mistakes I made! I have failed the country, society's support and trust, and the love of my devoted fans! I offer my sincere apology here once again! I beg for everyone's forgiveness!" She expressed her feelings and admitted that she let her country, the society and all her fans down.

"While I will continue to produce great work for everyone, I will keep a close eye on my company's management to ensure that my company abides by the law, building it into a great company that is cultured and has high integrity, in order to spread positive energy to society!" In Example 3, positive adjectives are applied in making promise. Introducing a bright blueprint by using nice words can help to leave a good impression and then get more support from the public.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The seven main goals of genre-based analysis of written discourse identified here can be realized in terms of the three concepts of space (textual, socio-cognitive, which incorporates tactical and professional, and social).

4.1 Genre Features of Chinese Celebrities' Apologies on Sina Weibo

Investigation of textual space invariably focuses on the surface of the text, which may include analyses of statistical significance of lexico-grammar based on a corpus of texts, textualization of lexico-grammatical resources used in the corpus, patterns of discoursal, rhetorical or cognitive structuring, and intertextuality as well as interdiscursivity, all analysed within the context of generic conventions and practices.

4.1.1 The Structural Level

In order to explore features of apologies on Sina Weibo, the study is going to analyze the move structure of the genre. Bhatia [2] pointed out, "it is useful to think of moves as discriminative elements of generic structure and strategies as non-discriminative options within the allowable contributions available to an author for creative or innovative genre construction". In other words, the moves help express the real communicative intentions to serve for the genre-text as a whole. The structural interpretation assigned to Chinese celebrities' apologies below indicates that writers of apologies have used the following moves. ("Table 1")

Table 1. Move structure of Weibo apology

No.	Move
1	Reviewing the incident
2	Describing present situation and personal statement
3	Acknowledging a fault/ negative influence
4	Expressing apology/regret
5	Explaining reasons about the incidents
6	Making a promise
7	Calling for forgiving

The results have indicated that 7 moves are included among the apologies, namely, reviewing the incident, describing present situation and

personal statement, acknowledging a fault/ negative influence, expressing apology/regret, explaining reasons about the incidents, making a promise, calling for forgiving, with Move 2-6, being obligatory moves, and Move 1, Move 7 being optional moves.

4.1.2 The Lexical Level

From the perspective of the vocabulary selection, the analysis is made based on the frequency of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns. The verbs can be grouped into several types: making explicit apology, accepting consequence, making promise and modal verbs. The nouns can be grouped into addressee, self-identity, self-reflection and incident. The adjectives include negative words to acknowledge one's faults and positive words to leave favorable impressions on the readers of the apology. Besides, the casual form of first personal pronouns "I", and "we" are frequently used in the apologies posted on Sina Weibo.

4.1.3 The Grammatical Level

On the grammatical level, the study finds that apologies posted on Sina Weibo rarely omit subjects for better affirming responsibilities and expressing regrets. Besides, "shi" construction frequently appears in the apologies, in which most of them serve as assertive verbs for explaining details of the incidents.

4.2 Features from Socio-Cognitive Space

4.2.1 The Perspective of Language Style

In Chinese celebrities' apologies, large paragraphs are used to describe the actions they performed and will perform. This is consistent with the high frequency of obligatory moves such as "acknowledging a fault/ negative influence", "explaining reasons about the incidents", "making a promise", etc. This is mainly because genres such as corporate annual reports and university prospectus have stronger promotional and profit-earning functions to attract potential clients or talents. However, apologies rely on a basic prerequisite that someone is involved with indecent affairs and the public has already lost some faith. Consequently, the addressers are not likely to use rhetorical flourishes to describe their mistakes or promise. Besides, presented in a self-media

platform and written by individuals, the language is sure to be simpler and briefer.

The verbs are appearing at the most occurrences to present what real actions or activities have been undertaken. These frequent words can be divided into several categories according to the intended function, such as, making explicit apology, accepting consequence, making promise and some modal verbs.

Adjectives or adverbs are adopted to indicate the properties or qualities of people or the actions. Though the adjectives and adverbs are not the dominant items, these words reveal the inner feelings or attitudes of celebrities. The research finds that almost all the adjectives are used to describe personal characters including good ones and bad ones when celebrities illustrate their own problems in their apologies. As for adverbs, most of them are neutral, and some frequency adverbs are used to describe their guilt and sincerity.

4.2.2 The Perspective of Generic Values

The first main communicative purpose that Chinese celebrities' apologies serve is to inform the public, especially their fans, of the incidents. In an apology, the addresser must clearly tell what has happened, how he or she is involved and very importantly why. Many mistakes or misbehaviors would be regarded as a joke or something caused by occasional carelessness if they happen to ordinary people; however, celebrities are groups of people who are expected to be models or pioneers for all members of the society, and their behavior and speech can easily lead to wide discussions in society and exert deep impacts on common people, especially on teenager fans. The public needs to know whether this famous figure who has greatly influenced their children and themselves in the way of life is actually respectable or not, and whether one's fault can be blindly tolerated or even covered because of one's reputation and popularity. With high expectations and bounden social responsibilities, celebrities in China must stand out and give a public speech about the incident in which they are involved.

Chinese celebrities' apologies on Sina Weibo also serve promotional function. Celebrities are elites in different fields whose reputation is one of the driving forces for his or her further career development. Apart from clarifying details of the incidents and taking on responsibilities, they try hard to repair and rebuild their images with the

hope that the public can trust and support them as usual. In the apologies, most writers tend to use long paragraphs to show their frankness and boldness to embrace mistakes made by them and take criticisms levelled at them as well as their determination to change themselves. In such a way, they are more likely to be capable of mitigating negative impacts and reestablishing a positive image in front of the crowds.

Apart from what have been mentioned above, the apology can be very emotional in the sense that its writer is very eager to solicit sympathy from the public. A perfect closure of making a public apology is that the apology is accepted. Celebrities who once enjoyed nationwide reputation thrive for continuous support and trust from the public. In other words, if they lose their credibility after the incident, their career is doomed to be ruined. The development of the whole apology including direct expressions about one's regrets and promises to the public must be sincere and natural enough to show the celebrity's regrets and consequently win fans' pity. To make the apology more emotionally appealing, writers tend to establish an approachable, personal and "bow-down" relationship with fans by showing gratitude for peopled supervision sincerely and crave for forgiving humbly.

According to the above discussion, Chinese celebrities' apology on Sina Weibo is a genre applied to serve three communicative purposes: informational, promotional and emotional.

4.3 Features from Social Space

Under the perspective of social space, the analysis focus shifts from textual characteristics to the features of context, such as social structures or professional relationship that genres are likely to maintain or change.

Nouns in the apologies can be categorized in terms of addressee, self-identity, self-reflection and incident. According to the analysis, the noun with the highest frequency is "we" in addressee type. It is safe to conclude that celebrities hope to convey their apologies to as large as possible amount of people. All the addressees not only reflect this character, but also show the degree of gravity of their mistakes. Many celebrities addressed to "the society", "the country", "fellow citizens" and "the masses" because of the national impacts they made. The fact that celebrities can make such a deep influence to the whole Chinese society is owing to their identity. Celebrities are always thought to be

and known to be charming, outstanding and kind pioneers in a particular field, especially those superstars or idols in entertainment circle who own large groups of fanatic fans. Thus, when their long-standing and delicately-built images break down, they often make an unexpected splash in the whole society and consequently receive more harsh critics. Celebrities often acknowledge their faults in their apologies from the standpoint of a public figure or other positive identity. While some celebrities make good use of their identity as a member of the vulnerable to arouse sympathy and understanding in order to mitigate the conflict and impair the relationship with the public.

According to the analysis of pronouns, first personal pronouns frequently appear in the samples. The usage of first personal pronouns can shorten the distance between the addresser and the addressee, improve the familiarity between two parties and leave a favorable impression on the addressees. Unconsciously, in such a way, common people tend to give a sympathetic response and regard the apology-addresser as a friend on his or her side. The casual form of first personal pronoun is used more frequently in the apologies for the following reason. The style of this genre is greatly influenced by internet language. All cyber citizens tend to use oral language to express their opinions online just like what they usually do in daily life since it is easier for them to communicate on real-time. And when celebrities are typing their apologies, they naturally speak casually.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, it is found that Chinese celebrities use apologies to deal with public relationship crisis. If it is not well handed, fans may leave because they lose faith in their idols. Apologies, in some cases, thus need to be emotional to appeal for common people's sympathy and their support. An apology which includes clear description of the new progress of the incident, frank admittance to one's fault, detailed explanation of reasons, and direct apology can be seen as a good apology. Since celebrities can exert deep social impacts, their attitudes towards the mistakes illustrated through apologies mean a lot. Their apologies can avoid unhealthy social atmosphere; meantime apologies may determine their future advancement in the market in the forthcoming years. To sum up, apologies posted by Chinese celebrities on Sina Weibo serve for three communicative

purposes: to inform, to promote, and to solicit emotion.

This study is an application of genre theory to analyze the apologies posted by Chinese celebrities on Sina Weibo, and hopefully it has theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, it is of significance for genre studies in China. In recent years, studies on genre analysis in China mainly focus on abstracts or introductions in academic paper. This study selects a novel subject: apologies posted by Chinese celebrities on Sina Weibo. Analyzing academic language often neglects social factors, while this study combines the context of information age and China's own unique social background where celebrities are highly expected to be moral pioneers for all the citizens.

Practically, this study keeps abreast of the present social requirements to celebrities. The government appeals public figures to set good examples in front of all the citizens, especially youngsters who have not yet established sophisticated and positive life outlook. Once famous people make mistakes, negative influence can instantly and deeply spread over the whole country because of their wide exposure to the public. In order to avoid or mitigate harmful impacts on the society, celebrities need to confess and guide citizens to behave in a correct way. The research results in the study offer a detailed description of moves included in an apology and explain the functions of each move. Hopefully, celebrities can get some inspirations and apply them effectively in real-life practice. Then celebrities taking on their social responsibilities by writing well-accepted apologies are likely to be forgiven and mitigate the impacts on their future career. Meanwhile, after reading this study, the common people, especially young fans know that no guilt can escape from justice, and that everyone should obey the laws and perform kindly. Besides, youngster can better evaluate celebrities according to their apologies based on this study.

Due to limited time, technology and other irresistible factors, a few problems still remain in the present study. Firstly, the data collected is relatively narrow. Much larger corpus to analyze the genre features may be scientific and unbiased for future studies. Secondly, analysis on unique grammatical features of samples in Chinese is not comprehensive. The theoretical basis for this study was proposed for and has always been applied to English genre by scholars. However, the collected data is in Chinese, which had great difference from English in lexis, grammar, and other aspects. Many aspects of Chinese grammatical features thus need to be further explored in future studies.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yibei Wang.

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