



A Genre-based Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and Australian Corporate Apologies

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Abstract. Employing genre-analytic technique, the paper intends to make a contrastive study, in order to figure out the similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese corporate apologies as well as explore the underlying cultural factors. Six moves have been found, in the order of “Expressing Explicit Apologies”, “Restoring Events”, “Assuming Responsibilities”, “Compensating for the Losses,” “Repairing Reputation/Relationship”, and “Demonstrating Resolution”. Among them, move 1, move2, and move 4 can be identified as obligatory moves while the others are optional ones. Differences in frequencies and varieties of strategy utilization can be explained by Hall’s High-context and Low-context cross-cultural theories. It’s hoped that this paper can help the general public better understand the genre of corporate apologies and further equip Chinese firms with cross-cultural competitiveness in the global market.

Keywords: corporate apologies; genre analysis; move; strategy

1 Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed a number of high-profile crises that have challenged either domestic or international corporations, and the increase in cross-border business activities also brought cultural factors under the spotlight. However, given that crisis responses can be a double-edged sword, companies have attached great importance to the construction of corporate apologies in order to repair the tarnished image as well as regain public trust. Meanwhile, considering a large room for revision, written apologies thus have more discourse value than their oral counterparts.

Under the genre analysis framework, both qualitative and quantitative analytic methods are adopted in the present study to make a contrastive analysis of Chinese corporate apology (hereafter, CCA) and Australian corporate apology (hereafter, ACA). This study attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences in generic structure and specific realizations between CCA and ACA?

RQ2: What are the possible factors behind these differences?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Studies on Apologies

Apologies have been extensively studied by scholars from multidimensional perspectives. Among them, speech act theory and politeness theory are frequently cited to explore the nature of apology, and the research on apology strategies provides a manageable theoretical framework for analyzing the realization of apology.

Apologies are pervasive speech acts in daily communication. In the field of pragmatics, apologizing falls into the category of “expressive”, which is defined by Searle (1979) as, “the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content” (Searle, 1979: 275) [1]. Goffman (1971) [2] stated that apologies are “remedial interactions”, which aim at reestablishing social harmony after an offense has been committed. Fraser (1981) [3] further explained that the realization of apology is based on the premise that the wrongdoer acknowledges his/her responsibility. Taken together, the foregoing studies took both parties of the dialogues into account but failed to incorporate non-linguistic factors, such as social background and cultural background.

After Leech’s (1983) Politeness Theories and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory were put forward, most studies have since used them as the framework to study individual interpersonal apologies in informal situations, in which apologies are regarded as threats to the speaker’s negative face (Harris et al., 2006) [4].

Research on the use of apology strategies has produced a wealth of classifications. Cohen and Olshtain (1981:119) [5] updated Fraser’s (1980) findings by classifying apology strategies into direct and indirect ones and came up with the following semantic formulae: (i) An expression of apology; (ii) An acknowledgment of responsibility; (iii) An offer of repair; (iv) A promise of forbearance. The above classification framework provides a theoretical basis for the subsequent research on apologetic speech acts. For different research subjects, Kampf (2009) [6] explored how public figures use apology speech to realize creative forms of apologetic speech, including compromising the apology’s performative verb, blurring the nature of the offense, questioning the identity of the offended, and questioning the identity of the offender. Taking cultural pragmatics theory as the framework, Liu et al. (2016) [7] explored the similarities and differences between Chinese and American political apology speech acts in terms of the extra-verbal explicit means of political apologies and further revealed the social motives for the differences from a cultural perspective.

2.2 Studies on Corporate Apologies

Foreign research on corporate apologies is mainly carried out in the category of “crisis communications”. As a representative of this branch, Benoit (1997) [8] proposed the theory of image repair discourse to interpret the actions taken by companies in response to image crises. The typology he proposed later became an authoritative framework for analyzing corporate apologies. In his typology (1997:179), Benoit introduces five main strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, and corrective

action. Each strategy can be further subdivided and has its discourse markers. Follow-up studies further explore the foregoing topic by contextualizing the parties involved: from the perspective of identity negotiation, Gergin (2018) [9] explored the absence and presence of organizational identity in corporate apology; by adjusting the experimental parameters, Lee and Atkinson (2019) [10] explored how the interaction among crisis participation, brand image, and message appeal affects the effectiveness of corporate apology in crisis.

The research on corporate apologies in China has mainly been conducted twofold: critical discourse analysis and crisis management discourse. Tian & Zhang (2015) [11] explored the relationship between the social effect and discourse strategies of institutions when they implement apologetic behavior as the apologizing party. Yang (2019) [12] analyzed the concept, motivation, and mechanism of apology from the perspective of crisis management and makes a comparative study of apology in two crisis cases by using the 4R model (repentance, responsibility, determination, remediation) proposed by Kleefeld. Based on Benoit's image restoration theory, Yang (2021) [13] used a mixed research approach to explore the similarities and differences in apology discourse between Chinese and Korean corporate apologies in crises.

2.3 Pitfalls of Primary Research

Despite a wealth of existing literature on apology as a speech act and crisis management discourse, the contrastive study between countries has been relatively neglected as a research topic. Particularly, there is no precedent for genre analysis using CCA and ACA as research subjects. Hence, the present study is related to and will enrich the available studies.

3 Research Design

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Since its introduction into the field of linguistics in the 1970s, "genre" has been extensively investigated by scholars from different perspectives. Hyon's (1996) [14] classification is widely cited, namely, Genre Analysis in ESP (English for Specific Purpose), Systemic Functional Linguistics, and New Rhetoric Studies. Different schools have provided various definitions and research methods for genre and genre analysis. Based on the research subjects selected in this paper, the following analysis will focus on Genre Analysis in ESP.

Undoubtedly, studies by Swale (1990) [15] and Bhatia (1993) [16] laid the solid foundation for genre analysis and, subsequently, led to a series of highly cited papers, such as Connor (1996), Hyland (2000), Samraj (2002), Yang and Allison (2003), Kwan (2006), Ozturk (2007), etc. (Zhao & Liu, 2021:9) [17]. Swales (1990) regarded genre as a class of communicative events with a set of communicative purposes (Swales, 1990:58), emphasizing the importance of communicative purpose as the principal criterion feature for forming discourse types and determining their styles. Bhatia (2012:17) [18] further pointed out that genre analysis in ESP schools focuses on examining text-

internal language resources, especially the formal and functional features of language use, but text-external language factors are also attention-worthy.

In ESP school, “move” is an important term that reveals the internal structure and linguistic features of the genre (Zhao & Liu, 2021:7), i.e., to interpret the move is to identify the rationale of the genre. Swales (1990) believed that move is a series of relatively independent functional units that connect content and communicative purposes. On the basis of Swales’ research, Bhatia (1993) has made a further improvement by mentioning that although each move has a unique communicative purpose, they are always subordinate to the overall communicative goal of the genre. Depending on the frequency of use, moves, in a general sense, can be further divided into obligatory moves and optional moves. Furthermore, research on the tactical aspects of genre construction has led to another discovery, “strategies”. According to Bhatia (1993:19), a strategy is “how a writer chooses to do a move”. Hence, “strategy” can be regarded as a lower-level text unit than the move that is adopted to realize the move, and different strategies can be used simultaneously.

This research adopts the genre analysis method constructed by Bhatia (1993), whose key notions when analyzing genre are “move” and “strategy”, in order to investigate the similarities and differences in generic structure and specific realizations between CCA and ACA.

3.2 Data Collection

20 corporate apologies, 10 issued by CCA and 10 by ACA, have been directly downloaded from the internet and placed into two corpora. While CCA covers Haidilao, FRESHIPPO, China United Airlines, etc., ACA includes Woolworths, Virgin Australia Airlines Commonwealth Bank of Australia, and so on. The selection of samples follows the principles below: (i) all the samples should be written ones, including open letters and official statements; (ii) in order to ensure authenticity, the selected texts should be written by native speakers; (iii) the sources span catering industry, transportation, retailing, etc., to guarantee the diversity.

4 Analysis of Chinese and Australian Corporate Apologies

The move structure in both CCA and ACA are sorted out as shown in Table 1. According to the user preference, move 1, move 2, and move 4 respectively ranks the top three. Given their advantages in the overall data, they can be regarded as obligatory moves while the rest are optional ones.

Table 1. Distribution of Six Moves in ACA and CCA (drawn by the author)

Move	CCA	ACA
	N=10/ PCT	N=10/ PCT
Move1: Expressing Explicit Apologies	9 / 90	10 / 100
Move2: Restoring Events	10 / 100	8 / 80

Move3: Assuming Responsibilities	9 / 90	2 / 20
Move4: Compensating for the Losses	10 / 100	6 / 60
Move5: Repairing Reputation / Relationship	5 / 50	2 / 20
Move6: Demonstrating Resolution	7 / 70	3 / 30

According to Halliday and Hasan, obligatory moves regulate the genre to which the text belongs (Halliday & Hasan, 1989: 62)[19]. Thus, “Expressing Explicit Apologies”, “Restoring Events”, and “Compensating for the Losses” draw the textual genre of corporate apology and convey the core information.

In terms of optional moves, although they appear with relatively low frequency, they still play important roles in delivering the overall communicative purpose of corporate apologies. Overall, CCA adopts more optional moves than ACA, which can be attributed to the difference between low-context culture and high-context culture proposed by Hall (1989). In the foregoing optional moves, interpersonal factors and “face” concerns have been emphasized. According to Hall (1989) [20], people in high-context societies underline interpersonal relationships, nonverbal expression, and social context more than people in low-context ones, showcasing the importance of maintaining connection. Since China is characterized by high-context culture, CCA’s focus on relationship maintenance thus is reasonable.

4.1 Move1: Expressing Explicit Apologies

In terms of linguistic features that identify this move, expressions containing the verb “apologize” and the noun “apology” can be regarded as explicit apologies (Ogiermann, 2009:95) [21]. In terms of communicative purpose, this move usually straightforwardly extends an apologetic stance. If the writing stems from sincere guilt, this move can facilitate the remaining reasoning.

4.1.1 Strategy1: Providing apologies.

EX1. We have sincerely apologized to Shannon personally and we would like to offer our heartfelt apologies to our customers who expect more from us.

Tracing the semantic chain, this strategy takes the performative form of “apology/apologize+ intensifier(s)”: verbs (e.g., “apologize”) and nouns (e.g., “sorry”, “apology”) dominate the apologetic mood; intensifiers comprising adverbs (e.g., “sincerely”) and adjectives (e.g., “heartfelt”) as well as the discourse strategy of overwording (e.g., the coexistence of “apologize” and “apology” in a single sample) have been exercised to further intensify the sense of guilt, bearing the expectation of being forgiven.

Besides, by alternately using personal pronouns such as “our”, “we”, “you”, and “my”, companies aim to seek membership with their audience, thereby narrowing the psychological distance and increasing their credibility.

4.1.2 Strategy2: Extending regret.

EX2. Southwest offers our sincerest regret regarding disrupted travel plans...

EX3. We’re sorry to hear that you have had a negative experience with us...

Table 2. Distribution of Move 1 in CCA and ACA and Its Strategies (drawn by the author)

Move1 and Its Strategies	CCA	ACA
	N=10/ PCT	N=10/ PCT
Move1: Expressing Explicit Apologies	9 / 90	10 / 100
Strategy1: Providing apologies	9 / 90	8 / 80
Strategy2: Extending regret	2 / 20	2 / 20

As can be seen from Table 2, move 1 enjoys the highest frequency in both CCA and ACA compared with other moves; within the category of move1, strategy1 is of the highest popularity. Hence, it can be inferred that move1 is the most commonly used move in corporate apologies whereas strategy 1 is the most recognized strategy because they explicitly convey the apologetic mood.

4.2 Move2: Restoring Events

The move aims to provide relevant information about the offensive event in order to satisfy the general public. However, as Benoit (1997) pointed out, perception is usually more important than reality, i.e., it is what the audience “believes to be true” that matters. Hence, companies are likely to tactically manipulate their narratives so as to portray the offensive event from the most favorable perspective.

4.2.1 Strategy1: 5W2H Description.

EX4. On 4-5 May 2021, The Australian newspaper published an article... suggesting that the ACCR engages in dishonest or dodgy shareholder tactics to unjustifiably stop oil and gas projects.

Not all samples contain all of the elements as 5W2H description is not a mandatory model of discourse construction.

4.2.2 Strategy2: Providing reasons / Seeking pretexts.

EX5. This lapse in process is being addressed internally.

EX6. ...because some larger payments require additional steps to process due to financial crime monitoring obligations...

According to the companies' description, factors that caused the offensive events can be categorized into three categories: i) some uncontrollable or unpredictable external variables: by emphasizing some force majeure (e.g., “crew limitations”) or referring to the third party (e.g., “because employees responsible for packaging did not follow the SOP”), companies attempt to shift the blame; ii) some internal factors which haven't been controlled appropriately; iii) efforts have been made but further improvement is needed.

4.2.3 Strategy3: Justifying Motivation.

EX7. In doing so, we merely sought to illustrate that Mr. Lewin was a particularly well-connected corporate adviser and not a skerrick of malice towards the Jewish community was intended by the observation.

This move intends to justify the offense by clarifying that the wrongdoing was unintentional or of nobler purpose.

4.2.4 Strategy4: Minimizing Consequences.

By emphasizing that there is only a small proportion of articles have been involved, companies aim to minimize the seriousness to the largest extent.

EX8. What the CCTV has reported was only part of the 19680 Baojun 560 DCT 1.5T vehicles produced from June 29, 2017, to Nov 30, 2017.

Table 3. Distribution of Move 2 in CCA and ACA and Its Strategies (drawn by the author)

Move2 and Its Strategies	CCA	ACA
	N=10/ PCT	N=10/ PCT
Move2: Restoring Events	10 / 100	8 / 80
Strategy1: 5W2H Description	9 / 90	6 / 60
Strategy2: Extending regret	5 / 50	3 / 30
Strategy3: Justifying Motivation	1 / 10	2 / 20
Strategy4: Minimizing Consequences	2 / 20	0 / 0

As 5W2H Description is the most commonly used strategy in both corpora, it can be inferred that companies are willing to provide necessary details of backtracking offensive events so as to further restore public trust.

4.3 Move3: Assuming Responsibilities

EX9. ...which we acknowledge and take responsibility for.

Move3 usually bothers companies. On the one hand, companies are supposed to bear as much responsibility as possible in order to satisfy the offended party; on the other hand, higher acceptance of blame also indicates an equally higher chance of “losing face” (disgrace). Therefore, well-crafted corporate apologies are needed to achieve a win-win situation.

4.4 Strategy4: Compensating for the Losses

Timely and appropriate remedial measures can help the companies regain support and trust. According to statistics, companies can choose to either verbalize their commitments in a general manner or concretely actualize their plans. It's shown that both CCA and ACA are more inclined to provide concrete remedies, catering to the expectation of customers.

4.4.1 Strategy1: Making General Commitments.

EX10. We can't undo the mistake, but what we can do is apologize for it, fix it, and do everything we can to make sure it doesn't happen again.

This strategy aims to show that companies have recognized their obligations, although detailed solutions remain to be carried out.

4.4.2 Strategy2: Providing Specific Remedial Measures.

EX11. Should you need help, please call our Guest Contac Centre on 13 67 89...we are working 24 hours a day to ensure that all guests arrive at their final destination on time.

This strategy shows the detailed remedies that companies “have provided” or “are providing”.

4.5 Move5: Repairing Reputation/Relationship

4.5.1 Strategy1: Underlining Social Prestige/Social Relations.

EX12. We know Android users have enjoyed Westpac Pay...

The defects cannot obscure the virtues. This strategy, by shifting the attention, encourages people to focus more on the past achievements of companies, which can ease the present tensions to some extent.

4.5.2 Strategy2: Underlining Corporate Culture.

EX13.not in line with our values and goes against the very clear policy and creative guidelines we have in place for our design process.

Table 4. Distribution of Move 5 in CCA and ACA and Its Strategies (drawn by the author)

Move5 and Its Strategies	CCA	ACA
	N=10/ PCT	N=10/ PCT
Move5: Repairing Reputation/Relationship	5 / 50	2 / 20
Strategy1: Underlining Social Prestige/Social Relations	2 / 20	1 / 10
Strategy2: Underlining Corporate Culture	3 / 30	1 / 10

As it is illustrated in Table 4, move 5 appears with higher frequency in CCA. According to Hall (1989), people in high-context cultures attach great importance to interpersonal relationships (especially long-term ones). In China, business is often conducted among close members, because the preference for *guanxi* encourages trust between business partners with long-term cooperative relationships. Therefore, it is reasonable for CCA to use this move more frequently with the hope of maintaining the relationship with regular customers.

4.6 Move6: Demonstrating Resolution

EX14. We remain deeply committed to the development of small businesses in South Africa.

This move aims to demonstrate the determination of companies: to learn from the past and make progress in the future. Expressions are marked with words expressing “prospect”.

5 Conclusion

Employing genre analysis, this paper compares and contrasts CCA and ACA and explores the underlying cultural factors. In terms of similarities, both corpora contain six moves, and three obligatory moves are both present. However, frequencies and varieties of optional moves differ in CCA and ACA. In general, more moves are identified in CCA, and the mechanism behind them can be explained by Hall (1989)'s High-context and Low-context cross-cultural theories. This study aims to help the general public better understand the textual genre of corporate apologies, as well as provide practical insights for Chinese companies to establish a good corporate image overseas and improve Sino-Australian relations.

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