

The Speech Act of Apology by Lenovo on Facebook

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Abstract: New media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have allowed brands to connect with the public. However, negative comments can damage their image, so brands should use clear apology strategies. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of the electronics market is closely related to the connection between brands and customers. This article examined the apology strategies used by Lenovo, a company with international brand influence, in response to negative messages or complaints on its official Facebook account from April 30, 2023 to June 9, 2023. The study used a mixed research method to identify responses containing common apology words on Lenovo's public account through IFIDs and obtained all posts using the two most frequently used apology words in the text. Under the guidance of Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Page (2014)'s apology strategies, the study examined the apology strategies and combinations used by Lenovo in its posts. The results showed that Lenovo often used the following six apology strategies: "expression of apology", "explanation or account of the situation", "acknowledgment of responsibility", "an offer of repair", "follow-up moves: questions and imperatives", and "greetings, closings, and terms of address". Furthermore, "greetings", "expression of apology", and "follow-up moves: questions and imperatives" were the most frequently used semantic combinations.

Keywords: New media, Speech act, Speech act of apology, Apology strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The emergence of new media has led to brands and companies actively opening official accounts on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to connect with users. These platforms are open to the public, allowing them to comment or reply below the post. However, some of these comments or replies may make a threat to the company. Therefore, it is critical for brands or companies to handle complaints from dissatisfied or angry customers to repair their reputation and maintain customer relationships. One effective way to remedy this threat is through replies containing apologies.

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the electronic digital market is experiencing steady growth. According to Statista (n.d.), the market is projected to reach USD 102.8 billion in revenue by the end of 2023, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.32% during 2023-2028. This growth is closely linked to a brand's social media presence and ability to maintain positive customer relationships. Brands and companies must consistently work to build and maintain strong relationships with customers on social media to retain their market position and attract new consumers.

This study examined Lenovo's use of apology strategies in their Facebook replies to negative information or complaints. By identifying the effective semantic formula of apology, the study aimed to reveal Lenovo's efforts to maintain their reputation and establish strong relationships with customers.

1.2. Problem Statement

According to Porteous (2020), customer service was the whole and ultimate goal of good business. In public services, complaints and apologies were necessary for customer service, and employees must understand the impact of customer perceptions (Belfas, 2014). Facebook, as an interactive platform with immediacy and spreadability, must

consider its huge narrative power and its impact on our lives when considering its power (Hall, 2020). If a customer posts a negative post (such as containing a complaint) under a brand or company account, it might pose a risk to the company's reputation and need to be remedied in time (Page, 2014). However, so far, many brands or company have known little about the form of companies apologizing to individual customers on Facebook.

Although electronic digital brands or companies used the power of new media platforms to maintain their brand image among the public to establish a stable growth of brand reputation, such as actively responding to customer complaints and needs on social media. Nevertheless, in the face of crisis communication, there was no clear strategy for using apologies to respond to maintain face and reputation and establish harmonious relationships with customers.

1.3. Research Objectives

(1) To examine the apology strategies by using the responses to public posts including negative messages or complaints on Lenovo's official Facebook account.

(2) To examine the prevailing patterns of semantic formulas of these apology strategies used.

1.4. Research Question

(1) What apology strategies are used in responses to public posts including negative messages or complaints on Lenovo's official Facebook account?

(2) What are the prevailing patterns of semantic formulas observed after classifying the apology strategies used?

1.5. Significance of Study

The results of this study can benefit brands and companies, particularly those in the electronic digital products industry, by emphasizing the importance of negative user feedback or comments. Responding promptly can minimize face threats, repair the company's image, and restore relationships with users. Furthermore, the apology strategies outlined in this

study can serve as a useful reference for future brands and companies looking to improve customer service satisfaction and resolve communication crises on social media.

Additionally, the study is expected to significantly contribute to the literature on pragmatic studies, specifically in apology speech acts. By delving deeper into how apologies are utilized in social media interactions, this research can aid companies in formulating more efficient strategies for managing their online reputation and fostering stronger relationships with their customers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, developed by John L. Austin, is a significant theory in language use. Austin recognized that individuals used language not only to convey literal meaning but also to express deeper thoughts or achieve certain intentions through their words. In other words, people often intended to perform a certain action through their speech, which was known as a “speech act”. Austin categorized speech acts into three types: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act refers to the surface meaning of the speaker’s utterance. An illocutionary act refers to the underlying intention or meaning conveyed by a speaker through their speech, which can extend beyond the literal meaning to communicate other hidden intentions. On the other hand, a perlocutionary act refers to the impact or effect that the speech has on the listener (Austin, 1975).

Searle’s classification of illocutionary acts includes five categories. The first is the representatives (or assertives), in which the speaker makes a judgment about the truth or falsehood of what is said or makes a prediction about the future. The second is the directives, where the speaker’s words prompt the listener to act according to their instructions including commands, requests, suggestions, and invitations. The third is the expressives, where the speaker expresses their

psychological state through their words. Examples of this category include apologies, thanks, and congratulations. The fourth is commissives, which involves the speaker making a commitment to future behavior through their words. This can include promises, pledges, and guarantees. The fifth is the declarations, where the speaker’s words make the content of the proposition consistent with the world. This contains appointments, announcements, dismissals, and other similar statements (Searle, 1979).

2.2. Speech Act of Apology

Apology is basically a social act with the purpose of maintaining people’s favorable relationships. To apologize is a kind of polite act, which is to value the need of the hearer’s face. It’s a measure of remedy and is a necessary component of remedial conversation. The basic function of apology is to provide a remedy for an offensive act and to regain social balance and harmony. John Searl (1969) proposed IFIDs (The illocutionary force-indicator devices) as “discourse power indicating devices” to describe words or expressions that indicate the discourse power of a discourse. In the context of apologies, IFIDs are specific words or phrases that indicate that the speaker is making an apology. Common IFIDs for apology words in English include “regret,” “pardon,” “afraid,” “excuse,” “forgive,” “sorry,” “apology/apologies”, and “apologize/apologise” (Deutschmann, 2003). These expressions constitute conventionalised and lexicalised expressions of apology, indicating to the listener that the speaker is attempting to take remedial action through their words.

Each speech act has the largest set of potential semantic formulae, whether they are apologies, requests, complaints, etc. This can be achieved by formulating and describing the speech act set for each speech act. The model proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) is used to categorize and classify the various apology strategies used by the participants in their study. These strategies are listed below:

Table 1. Strategies for apology(Olshtain and Cohen,1983)

Strategy	Examples
1 Expression of apology	Expression of regret I'm sorry
	Offer of apology Excuse me
	Request for forgiveness Excuse me
2 Explanation or account of the situation	The bus was late
	Accepting the blame It's my fault
	Expressing self-deficiency I wasn't thinking
3 Acknowledgment of responsibility	Recognizing the other person as deserving apology You are right
	Expressing lack of intent I didn't mean to
	4 An offer of repair I'll pay for the broken vase
5 Promise of forbearance It won't happen again	

In a study conducted by Page (2014), he examined the apologies made by companies via Twitter in response to customer complaints. The following four apology strategies were proposed:

2.3. Previous Studies on Speech Act of Apology

Research on the speech act of apology has focused, as it did initially, mostly on everyday language and interpersonal. For example, drawing on the coding framework of previous

studies, Chen et al. (2022) used a dataset of 30 authentic institutional emails written by Chinese university students to their native English teachers to investigate the frequency and combination of apology strategies used by English learners in natural contexts. Sienes and Catan (2022) discovered that the Philippine ninety call center personnels delivered the “perfect apology” on most complaint calls by employing all five strategies proposed by Cohen et al. (1986) to alleviate and reduce liability and guilt to customers. Ngo & Luu (2022)

collected dialogue data extracted from romance and family movie scripts to investigate the lexico-grammatical

realization of direct apology strategies and discourse, including apologies in English conversation.

Table 2. Strategies for apology(Page,2014)

Strategy	Examples
1 Explanations	Weather is causing many delays tonight
2 Offer of repair	will get that emailed to you this week!
3 Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	Can you advise what the rowdy passengers are doing so I can advise control team?
4 Greetings, closings and terms of address	@username Hi [name deleted]...Thanks ^AF

However, the emphasis has been on interactions that take place in the private sphere, while language research investigating apologies made in public contexts is still in its early stages (Page, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that the method of analyzing apologies as speech acts in everyday conversation can also be utilized in studying public apologies (Murphy, 2015). Therefore, this study took Lenovo's response to a customer's comment containing a complaint as an example in Facebook, exploring how a company or brand used apology strategies in the public context of social media to fill this research gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study used strategies of apology from Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Page (2014) to examine how Lenovo responded to negative messages and comments from customers on Facebook, with the goal of identifying the apology strategies employed by Lenovo and how they were utilized. The study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method was utilized to analyze Lenovo's replies using IFIDs to identify frequently used apology words. Qualitative analysis was based on Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) and Page (2014)'s strategies of apology and entailed an in-depth investigation and interpretation of Lenovo's responses including high-frequency apology words.

3.2. Data Source and Collection

The data was located on Lenovo's official account by using the Facebook web version (<https://www.facebook.com/lenovo><https://www.facebook.com/lenovo>), by reviewing and viewing the posts from April 30, 2023 to June 9, 2023 through the software named Python for Windows, as well as exporting them in all Lenovo official replies in the comment area, which contained multiple languages and emoticons, were manually screened to eliminate non-English replies and clear non-text formatting.

The collected text was determined by IFIDs to contain replies involving commonly used apology words from Lenovo's official account, and the data obtained by frequency calculation was utilized to find all posts including the first two apology words used frequently in the text, in order to facilitate further research.

3.2.1 Why Lenovo

Lenovo Group Limited (for short: Lenovo) is a Chinese multinational technology company that specializes in designing, manufacturing, and selling consumer electronics, personal computers, software, business solutions, and related

services.

In 2014, PwC (Pricewaterhouse Coopers) published a report on the website (<https://www.strategy-business.com/article/00274>) about Lenovo: "Lenovo has emerged as China's first true multinational, surpassing Hewlett-Packard Company and Dell to become the world's largest maker of PCs." Also on Canalys's website (<https://www.canalys.com/newsroom/global-pc-market-Q4-2021>) described Lenovo as: "As of 2021, Lenovo is the world's largest maker of PCs Largest personal computer supplier". At present, Lenovo has operations in over 60 countries and sells its products in around 180+ countries. Therefore, this brand has a profound international influence in the field of electronics and digital.

Furthermore, on February 17, 2023, Lenovo Group (HKSE: 992) (ADR: LNVGY) released its most recent report on third-quarter results, revealing that the Group generated US\$15.3 billion in revenue and US\$437 million in net income, with each major business group contributing operating profit for the fifth consecutive quarter. Lenovo's ongoing revenue growth indicated the company's solid relationship with its customers.

3.3. Data Analysis and Coding

Following data collection, the data were classified into apology approach classes using the frameworks proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Page (2014). The frameworks were chosen since they had already been utilized extensively in apologetic techniques and consisted of seven major strategies: "expression of apology", "explanation or account of the situation", "acknowledgement of responsibility", "an offer of repair", "promise of forbearance", "follow up moves: questions and imperatives", "greetings, closings and terms of address".

Furthermore, the expression of apology category included three subcategories: "expression of regret", "offer of apology", "and request for forgiveness". On the other hand, acknowledgement of responsibility had four subcategories: "accepting the blame", "expressing self-deficiency", "recognizing the other person as deserving of apology", and "expressing lack of intent". In the coding process, if the same strategy appeared multiple times in a reply post, it was counted as one. The study was conducted by two researchers who worked independently following the same coding guidelines to maintain reliability. Any discrepancies were reviewed and discussed until full agreement was reached on the coding of the data.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

Lenovo's Facebook posts are public, as were user

comments and Lenovo’s responses. When collecting and exploiting social media content as research data, considerations of research ethics and privacy are highly relevant.

4. Result and Conclusion

4.1. The frequency of apologies within the dataset

The complete dataset was searched for the lexemes

conventionally recognized as IFIDs: “regret”, “pardon”, “afraid”, “excuse”, “forgive”, “sorry”, “apology/apologies” and “apologise/apologize” following the practice of Deutschmann (2003). Any instances where the lexemes were not being used as an apology were discarded. This resulted in 25 replies.

Table 3. Apology Words Used by Lenovo

Apology Words(IFIDs)	Frequency	Percent
Regret	1	4%
Pardon	0	0
Afraid	0	0
Excuse	0	0
Forgive	0	0
Sorry	18	72%
Apology/apologies	2	8%
Apologize/apologise	4	16%
All Words Combined	25	100%

The table displayed that out of the eight apology words, only four were present in the data, which were “sorry”, “apologize/apologise”, “apology/apologies”, and “regret”. The word “sorry” was the most frequently used, appearing 18 times, while “apology/apologies” and “apologize/apologise” appeared 6 times, and “regret” was scarcely used by Lenovo,

only once. Therefore, the remainder of the study concentrated on the distribution of “sorry” and “apology/apologise”.

4.2. Apologies and their accompanying strategies

Table 4. Apology Strategies Used by Lenovo

Apology Strategies	Frequency	Percent
Expression of apology	24	27%
Explanation or account of the situation	2	2.2%
Acknowledgment of responsibility	4	4.4%
An Offer of repair	11	12.4%
Promise of forbearance	0	0%
Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	24	27%
Greetings, closings and terms of address	24	27%
All Strategies Combined	89	100%

According to the table, Lenovo employed six apology strategies, including “expression of apology”, “explanation or account of the situation”, “acknowledgement of responsibility”, “an offer of repair”, “follow up moves: questions and imperatives”, “greetings, closings and terms of address”. However, the company did not use the “promise of forbearance” strategy, possibly due to its reluctance to directly admit its mistakes. Instead, Lenovo euphemistically admits its responsibility by using terms such as “trouble”, “inconvenience”, “experience”, “issue”, and “this” when

expressing apologies. This approach helps the company avoid repeating unresolved problems in the customer’s reply, which may pose a face threat to the company. For example:

Hi @Disha Chatterjee! We’re sorry for the late response and for the trouble. Certainly not the kind of experience we want you to have.

Sorry for the experience and totally not the kind of experience we want you to have.

Sorry for the inconvenience this may have caused you.

We’re sorry to hear that you are having issues with the

charger of your Lenovo unit.

We are very sorry for what this has caused you.

Thus, without acknowledging the error, promise of forbearance did not exist.

In analyzing Lenovo’s apology on Facebook, it was found that the frequency of greetings, closings and terms of address accounted for 27%. The apology began with a greeting and directly @ing the name of the person being addressed and ended with an expression of gratitude. Commonly used greetings such as “Hi” and “Hello” were used at the beginning of the apology, while an expression of gratitude such as “Thank you” was used to close it. Expressions of gratitude may be followed by the name of the speaker. However, when responding to negative comments from other companies, the style of the opening may change, and the company’s full name may be used after a statement expressing regret. Lenovo’s reply to posts always included the employee’s nickname and Lenovo at the end of the conversation to indicate the authenticity and authority of the reply and to reduce customer doubts. Examples are as follows,

Hi Andy Malek! Thanks for reaching out... Rai_Lenovo

Hey there, @Liv Sim!...Thank you for reaching our support! -Chris_Lenovo

Sorry to know that, Infoline Capital ...Chx_Lenovo

In Lenovo’s customer service interactions, their responses typically started with an expression of regret or apology for the customer’s experience, which demonstrated their sincerity and encourage further conversation. For instance,

Hi Saly. Sorry to hear that you feel this way.

Hi, Charlotte. We apologize for the inconvenience.

According to the chart presented above, the percentage of “follow up moves: questions and imperatives” was found to be 27%, which accounted for a significant proportion. The analysis revealed that in Lenovo’s apology reply to posts, questions and imperatives were frequently used for the next step. These two types of language were used either in combination or independently. Both questions and imperatives were used to prompt customers to engage in

further interaction, which can be perceived as a threat to the company’s reputation. This was because Lenovo shifted the responsibility of seeking compensation onto the customer rather than the company (Page, 2014). As shown in the example below.

Hi Brianna. ...Do you have any case or reference number that we can check? Could you send us a private message with a case number of the serial number of your device, so we can check the warranty status? ...

Hi, Fred. ...Can you tell us more about the issue via DM? Please try the steps from here: ...

Hi there, @Loh Yeow Keat! ...Please send us a PM with a clear photo of your job sheet and the serial number of your laptop for us to check...

Providing a way to repair the relationship was usually placed before the closing remarks in Lenovo’s replies to show the company’s attitude of continuing to pay attention to the events that customers have encountered and to reflect the company’s attitude of after-sales maintenance and responsibility towards customers, which assisted to mitigate any potential face threats. However, posts that directly explain the reasons for faults and complaints were difficult to find in replies to avoid further questioning and potential face threats. As illustrated in the following example.

Hi, Melanie... If you haven’t received your order by 6/6, Please message us so that we can follow up. Thanks! Kate_Lenovo

...We use UPS in the United States and Canada for most deliveries. Standard delivery generally arrives in 4-9 days. An “Estimated Ship date” or “Estimated Delivery date” will show in your details once your order is placed. This date may differ from what was shown at purchase due to a change in manufacturing or logistics conditions since the order was placed...

4.3. Patterns of Semantic Formulas Used by Lenovo

Table 5. Patterns of Semantic Formulas Used by Lenovo

Apology Strategies		Frequency
	Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	9
	Follow up moves: questions and imperatives+ An Offer of repair	5
	Acknowledgment of responsibility+ Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	3
Greetings, closings and terms of address +	An Offer of repair+Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	3
Expression of apology	Explanation or account of the situation +An Offer of repair+Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	1
	Acknowledgment of responsibility+Follow up moves: questions and imperatives+An Offer of repair	1
	Follow up moves: questions and imperatives+ Explanation or account of the situation+	1
Expression of apology +	Follow up moves: questions and imperatives	
Greetings, closings and terms of address	Follow up moves: questions and imperatives +An Offer of repair	1
All Strategies Combined		24

As noticed by the analysis, “greetings”, “expression of apology”, and “follow up moves: questions and imperatives”

were the most often used semantic combinations. Initiating further instructions or requests to customers and seeking the

next step of interaction is actually threatening customers' face and maintaining the company's authority. It was then followed by "an offer of repair". The company promised to assist clients in solving their problems or suggest them to stay in touch. This action was regarded as a remedy rather than the origin of the cause. Providing "An offer of repair" was to save face threats, the purpose was to reshape the company's reputation, regain the company's face, and rebuild trust between the company and customers. The frequent use of the apology strategy followed by "follow up moves: questions and imperatives" from Lenovo's replies have been observed in semantic formulas. This excessive use of the strategy was considered to be a result of Lenovo's over-protection of its own company's reputation. This behavior may lead to a deterioration of the relationship between customers and the company.

5. Discussion

This study examined Lenovo's response to negative feedback and complaints on Facebook within the past 40 days. The aim was to analyze how Lenovo, a brand with significant influence in the electronic and digital industry, restored its image and built strong customer relationships in the face of potential threats. The data revealed that Lenovo often employed polite language, using expressions like "sorry" or "apology" to express regret and sympathy towards customers. Additionally, the company frequently used interrogative sentences to further investigate the cause of the problem. However, the overuse of this approach may ignore the importance of creating a personal emotional connection with the customer, focusing solely on technical solutions to the problem.

According to Jones (2012), a "good apology" required one or two apology strategies. However, Cohen et al (1986) argued that a perfect apology must include "expression of apology", "explanation or account of the situation", "acknowledgment of responsibility", "an offer of repair", and "a promise of forbearance". Lenovo's apology strategies included "follow-up moves: questions and imperatives", "an offer of repair", and "an acknowledgment of responsibility", indicating a positive response to users' confusion and complaints. This reflected Lenovo's efforts to maintain or consolidate its brand image.

The apologies from Lenovo employees appeared insincere and mechanical, likely due to the script and training provided by their superiors. This led to a limited apology that was not emotionally connected to the customers. As a result, the employees' focus on problem-solving was more of a job task rather than a genuine effort to assist customers.

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