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Genre Analysis of Business Letters– Taking Corporate Apology Letters as an Example

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Abstract:
Nowadays business letters are a common form of communication on business occasions. Since we need to be effective and accurate in business communication, the study of the language format of business letters is essential for the communicative purpose of this genre. Since the 1900s, genre theory has been receiving a lot of attention, both in academic and pedagogical circles. The place of genre analysis is becoming increasingly important in international communication. The study of genre analysis not only makes us get a better understanding of the linguistic characteristics of the texts, but also be aware of their structure which appeared to be organized according to genre expectations and conventions. In this essay, I will analyze four different corporate apology letters from four major international corporations for their crisis in different situations. The structure and language use of the four corporate apology letters demonstrates similarities and consistency to some extent. The results illustrate that it is necessary to have a method for describing the appropriate structure and language convention to help communication in business which is one of the goals of genre analysis.

Keywords:
Genre analysis, Business letters, Corporate apology letters

1.Introduction

Business letters are commonly used in business activities for various commercial purposes. In business writing, clarity, conciseness, correctness, completeness and courteousness are the five fundamental elements of writing skills. However, the method to describe the five principles in writing the text needs to be delicately handled. Therefore, genre analysis of the text is an essential method to help in business writing.

According to Bhatia, genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Although there are a number of other factors, like content, form, intended audience, medium or channel, that influence the nature and construction of a genre, it is primarily characterized by the communicative purposes that it is intended to fulfil. It also most often is a highly structured and conventionalized communicative event. Moreover, various genres display constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. This means that although the writer has a lot of freedom to use linguistic resources in any way s/he likes, s/he must conform to certain standard practices within

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the boundaries of a particular genre.[1]

Therefore, it is important to analyze the structure and language convention of business letters so that to appropriately express the purpose of the business communication. In this essay, I will analyze four corporate apology letters from four different international companies for their business crisis in different situation. To better understand the function of corporate apology letters, I will analyze the four texts from the structure and linguistic aspects.

2.Genre Analysis of the Corporate Apology letters

Bhatia believed that genre analysis is an examination of linguistic performance in academic and professional settings. According to Bhatia, in analysing a genre, there are seven steps to take:

1)putting the text in the situational context which is related to it;

2)Identification of the genre;

3)comprehending the discourse community precisely by clarifying and determining the goal of the genre;

4)collecting a corpus for analysis;

5)having information about the members of that discourse community; and

6)analyzing the linguistic aspects of the corpus by focusing on (a) lexicogrammatical features (or the study of tenses), (b) text patterns, and (c) structural interpretations (or move analysis)[1].

As a result, the first step is to identify a type of genre which used in a similar situation in business communication. To analyze its structure and language features, there need some corpus of this genre to start with. This type of genre need to be usually used in business communication.

Li argues that “Corporate apologies made after an alleged wrongdoing or transgression could well be considered as an independent genre given that they are one of the most frequent and central crisis-related activity types.” [2] In this essay, I chose four company apology letters as the analysis corpus. They are from United Airlines, Uber, JetBlue Airline and Real Estate Industry. They are all published for apologizing to their customers for some crisis events for different reasons. And they all share some similarities to each other.

The first one is from United Airline. The event happened this year, and because of its sever influence. It caused the global eyesight. One of their customer was rudely forced to get off for the company’s own system problem. And a video was spread on-line, everyone saw the terrible treatment for the innocent customer. As a result, the company sent an email to every customer of the company to offer an apology and wish to reconstruct credibility in this way.

The second one is from Uber. The event also happened lately in September this year. Uber’s business license is denied renewal by London government because of the public security responsibility problem. It influenced 3.5 million Uber users and 40 thousand Uber drivers. For this reason, the company CEO Dara Khosrowshahi posted an apology letter on his twitter to apologize to the influencers and remind their contribution

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to society.

The third one is from JetBlue Airline. This apology letter is called the most epic apology letter and one of the best examples of an apology letter to customers by several case studies. It was Valentine's day at New York's JFK airport. The icy winter storm that was brewing outside was forecasted to change to rain – a prediction which led JetBlue to continue to load flights and allow them to wait for takeoff on the runway. What was supposed to be a short delay grew exponentially, and passengers on 9 grounded planes found themselves in limbo for 6 hours or more. That day, only 17 of JetBlue's 156 scheduled flights left JFK. Over the next five days about 1,000 flights were cancelled as the company scrambled to recover. Pilots, crew, and aircraft had been displaced by the storm, and thousands of customers had been left frustrated and flightless. Founder and CEO of JetBlue David Neeleman was "humiliated and mortified" by the breakdown in operations, and promised that change and reparations were in the works. The country was waiting for a solution, and he knew he'd have to deliver. "I can flap my lips all I want," Neeleman said. "Talk is cheap. Watch us."

The last one is a little bit different. It's from a real estate broker from the real estate agency Bryan Robertson. He apologized for the bad service and professional degree of all the agencies in the industry for all the customers after the trend of their choice of on-line websites. He mostly did self-criticism for the whole business and wanted to regain the customers trust.

All of the four apology letters share the similarity of the purpose of offering apologies to the customers and wanting to rebuild their trust from them. According to Bhatia, "Genres are recognizable communicative events, characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which they regularly occur"[3]. The four examples share the same communicative purpose followed to the same genre – corporate apology letters. They shared the same register in the context. All of them are related to some business crisis situation and the tenors are all company representatives and the customers. And it is often appeared as a public letter posted on the website of the company, TV broadcast, newspapers and some social contact media such as twitter or sent by emails. They are constructed and written in a formal and polite way posted publicly to solve the company crisis problem. Eventually their purpose is to make promotion for the company. So they belong to the same promotional genre colony.

Structure Analysis of The Four Corporate Apology Letters

Genre analysis is one of the most well-established frameworks for the study of professional discourse. Defined by John Swales, genre is "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes... In addition to purposes, exemplars of a genre exhibits various patterns of similarities in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience." "The clear implication is that, although several aspects can be studied in the analysis of a genre, the essence of a genre lies within its communicative goal, as it points us toward its ideological functions" . "Every text of the same genre has a similar communicative goal, which is fulfilled by different rhetorical functions and lower-level functions, the so-called 'moves' and 'strategies'"[4]. A move is an element of a text used for a certain function, for instance, of acknowledging receipt of a message. Based on Li's structure of corporate apology letter, we summarized our own moves analysis when we do the group genre analysis project. The structure is summarized as follow:

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Move 1: Salutation

Move 2: Apologizing

Move 3: Establishing crisis event

Move 4: Offering Explanation

Move 5: Claiming responsibility

Move 6: Promising rectifications

Move 7: Reminding contribution

Move 8: Re-establishing credibility

Move 9: Ending[2]

Moves 1 and 9 work as a frame for the other moves which are responsible for the context of the letters, most of the letters would include this move, to clarify the addressees and have a polite opening, and all of the four letters' addressees are their customers. And the central moves 2,3,4,5,6,7 and 8 are for the information which of the communicative purpose. The structure distribution of the four apology letters is as the table presents:

Move	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Sample1		√	√	√	√	√		√	√
Sample2	√	√				√	√√	√	√
Sample3	√	√√	√	√	√	√√		√√√	√
Sample4	√	√√	√√	√				√√	√

As it showed in the table, for Move 1 only the first sample didn't cover. The reason for it is that the event caused global attention and the company wanted to address for everyone who paid attention to this event.

For apology letter, Move 2 is necessary and we can see from the table that two samples appeared twice in the context. Because we can find that Sample 3 and 4 both showed deep empathy for the customers and tried very hard to rebuild the credibility. In this way, we can see that both of their apologies are very sincere and human.

Three of the samples covered Move 3 except sample 2. And this move in Sample 1 is quite simple as we can find in the text "We can never say we are sorry enough for the shameful way one of our customers was treated aboard United States' flight 3411." However, this move is largely covered in Sample 3 and 4. The reason for it is that both of the two company's wrongdoing is from the system and management problem within the company and it influenced a large number of their customers severely and lost the trust of customers. They wanted to be fully responsible for the event and established the crisis event without any excuse. But for Sample 1 and 2, they are not so self-criticized. Especially for Uber, they didn't even mention the problem maybe because they didn't think its their fully responsibility and problem to cause the influence. For this reason, they even didn't cover Move 4 to offer any explanation or Move 5 to claim any responsibility. Also, there was no Move 5 in Sample 4, because as a representative of the whole industry, it's not his own responsibility

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to make the apology. As a result, we can conclude that Move 3,4 and 5 are optional.

The same thing happened to Move 6 and 7, in Sample 4, the author as a representative is not responsible for the industry's crisis so there won't be any promise of rectifications from him. And for Move 7, in Sample 2, Uber didn't want take the responsibility by themselves, they think it's the governments' problem caused the event. For this reason, they mentioned their contribution to the society a lot in the letter to show their customers and the government their social responsibility and wanted to renew the license. So Move 7 is typical for Sample 2. Also, to conclude, Move 6 and 7 are optional.

For Move 8, every sample covered this move. That's because the final purpose of the apology letter is to rebuild the company's credibility and regain the trust of customers. As mention before, Sample 3 and 4 are very sincere and human and conveyed deep empathy for the customers who had been affected. In Sample 3, The letter reminded the customer of the company's mission statement, and discussed a plan to make reparations and avoid a repeat scenario. The final paragraphs reestablished JetBlue as an industry leader, and stated the airline's ultimate attention: to win back its customers' trust. As a result, Move 8 appeared three times in this Sample. Also for Sample 4, the author tried very hard for reestablishing the credibility to win back the customers' trust and wish they could choose them again.

Linguistic Analysis of The Four Corporate Apology Letters

All of the four samples shared not only the structure similarity but also the linguistic similarities. For Move 2 apologizing, the language is direct and explicit and most of them used the adjective "deeply" and "truly" in front of "sorry" to express the sincere apology. Two of them used negative sentence "We can never say we are sorry enough for the shameful way one of our customers was treated aboard United's flight 3411." and "Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the anxiety, frustration and inconvenience that you experienced" to emphasize the apology.

In Move 4, most of the samples used past tense or present perfect tense to make the explanation. For example, "That day, corporate policies were placed ahead of our shared values.", "Last week was the worst operational week in JetBlue's seven-year history." and "The overwhelming poor service you've experienced comes from decades of some agents being "commission chasers".

In Move 6 promising rectifications, all of the samples covered this move used future tense in the sentence to make the promises. For example, "We will increase incentives for voluntary rebooking up to $10, 000." in Sample 1, "We won't be perfect, but we listen to you; we will look to be long-term partners with the cities we serve; and we will run our business with humility, integrity and passion" in Sample 2 and "JetBlue will emerge as a more reliable and even more customer responsive airline than ever before" in Sample 3.

In Move 8, all of the four samples used future tense to regain the customers' trust. for example, "And I know we will be a stronger, better and more customer-focused airline as a result." in Sample 1, "You have my commitment that we will work with London to make things right and keep this great global city moving safely" in Sample 2, "JetBlue will emerge as a more reliable and even more customer responsive airline than ever before" in Sample 3 and "everyone one of you will finally get the wonderful real estate experience you so richly deserve." in Sample 4. Other linguistic feature for this move is that all of them used strong words,

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mostly comparative adjective like “stronger”, “more reliable” and “better” to make the promise of the future and to rebuild the credibility.

Another interesting linguistic feature in this move is that mostly the language implies some promotional features like “Learn more about these commitments and many other changes at hub.united.com” in Sample 1, “. This is especially saddening because JetBlue was founded on the promise of bringing humanity back to air travel and making the experience of flying happier and easier for everyone who chooses to fly with us.” in Sample 3 and “When we do, everyone one of you will finally get the wonderful real estate experience you so richly deserve.” in Sample 4. It showed the permanent purpose of corporate apology letter is to make promotions for the company. As discussed before, it belonged to the promotional genre colony.

3.Conclusion

Through the genre analysis of the four corporate apology letters, I find that though they are from different companies of distinct industry and used in various emergent crisis. The structure and linguistic convention of the four letters demonstrate similarities from many points which all serve as making apology and rebuilding company credit to their customers. It is essential to write the business letters in a certain organization and convention which can better enhance the business communication. Atai and Falah noted, there is enough evidence to suggest that people’s knowledge of both linguistic competence and of the appropriate structure of genres and forms are an essential requirement for successful and effective communication not only in verbal form but also in written form.[5] Nodoushan also argued that one path to successful communication is through the implementation of genre analysis in communicative events.[6] Therefore, the genre analysis of the business letters help communication between companies and customers.

As Li said in his study, “This study into the genre of intercultural corporate apologies---a field that has thus far been little explored as compared to other professional genres---has examined how multiple communicative purposes are achieved by the systematic schematic structuring and linguistic realization patterning of the genre.” [2]There is more to study for this genre to go. Also in this essay it only contains a small number of samples. To be more objective and accurate, there need more study and exploration.

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