

“KINDLY SEND US A DM”: THE PRAGMATICS OF TWITTER CORPORATE APOLOGIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT: *Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been a platform to many types of self-expression of its users including complaints, frustrations, and disappointments to people, events, and even customer service. These, too, have been used by corporations to reach out to their clientele especially when addressing problems and extending apologies. Thus, this paper explores the pragmatics of corporate apologies posted by customer service representatives of internet-providing companies in the Philippines. Findings showed that besides Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) tokens (i.e. sorry, regret), there were accompanying strategies employed by the companies to address concerns and issues posted by their clients online.*

Keywords: Corporate Apology, Apology, Speech Acts, Pragmatics, Social Networking Sites

1. INTRODUCTION

Twitter has been a platform of many types of self-expression of its users. One can tweet his personal views, extreme emotions, shared gossips, and any other random thoughts one could think of and feel like posting. However, with the innovations that we have, Twitter has now been a site for expressing complaints, frustrations, and disappointments to people, events, and even customer service. With this, corporations have also devised a mechanism to address such complaints to manage such clamor as this might have repercussions to their marketing and sales. For example, provided they have Twitter accounts, customers can now easily give feedback, review items, and worse, malign the products of certain brands. This phenomenon has led to the era where a supposedly private, offline communication between the customer and customer care staff can be seen and accessed publicly, subject for online scrutiny of the general public [1]. Using the conventions of Twitter discourse like mentions of username (@PLDTCares), hashtags (#nointernet), and retweets or RT (re-posting of tweets) [2], companies can easily monitor tweets concerning them (i.e. complaints). These need some remediation because complaints might pose a serious threat to the brands' reputation. Thus, this paper examines the apologies issued by three internet-provider corporations in the Philippines. Further, I argue that this social media platform is critical milieu where the companies manage their reputation by performing the speech act of apology.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEMS

This paper explores the pragmatics of corporate apologies in the Philippines. Specifically, it aims to answer the question:

1. How do Filipino companies construct corporate apologies with respect to:

a. use of *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device* (IFID) tokens, and

b. accompanying strategies that go with these tokens?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 DATA AND DATA SOURCES

This paper utilized 60 reply tweets from three internet-providing companies in the Philippines, 20 of which came from each company. The tweets were generated from the *Tweets & Replies* section of the company's Twitter account from November to December 2018. Only tweet replies from complaints regarding internet connection were used in this study. Note that two of the three companies are telecommunication providers. This means that internet connection is only one of the services that they provide for public consumption. Other services include telephone and mobile phone lines. The other one is a cable-service provider alongside internet service connection. Thus, only apology tweets in response to an internet-related issue tweet were used as these are the ones that I can read to ensure that the complaint is about internet connection (i.e. very slow to no connection), not telephone line or cable service in general.

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

As a starting point, Concordancing tools [3] was used to determine the *IFID* tokens employed in the apologies [2]. This will be followed by analyzing each apology using a content analysis instrument (adapted from [2]; see Appendix) delineated in [4]. To illustrate the coding, here is a sample data coding:

We know how important your internet service to your work, @username. Let's resolve your connection issue, please send your account details thru DM. We'll wait for your response. Thanks.

IFID-token: not stated

Greetings: not stated

Restatement of offense/Acknowledgment of offense: not restated

Explanation or account: not stated

The offer of Reparation: Let's resolve your connection issue

The promise of future forbearance: not stated

Sympathy: We know how important your internet service to

your work, @username
 Question: not stated
 Imperative: please send your account details thru DM
 Closing: We'll wait for your response
 Thanks

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) Token

Results from Table 1 show the frequency of IFID-tokens found in corporate apologies from Twitter. In total, there were 33 tokens found out of 60 corporate apologies. Most numbers of occurrences were the token Sorry (17) with Apology(ies)/Apologize coming closely with 15 hits. This result mirrors the finding of [2] where “sorry and apology were the most frequently occurring IFIDs, with sorry outranking all other forms and found in posts by all the companies” (p.33). Meanwhile, there was only one instance of Regret out of the data. Surprisingly, apology expressions such as Pardon, Afraid, Excuse, and Forgive were not used as IFID-token in the corporate apologies issued on Twitter. Although this particular finding may be surprising, this can be accounted to the fact that Filipino speakers would usually use sorry or apologize to convey remorse over some mistake or shortcoming (e.g. Former President Arroyo’s ‘I am sorry’).

Table 1 Frequency of IFID- tokens in the data

IFID-tokens	PLDT	Globe	Sky	Total
Regret	0	0	1	1
Pardon	0	0	0	0
Afraid	0	0	0	0
Excuse	0	0	0	0
Forgive	0	0	0	0
Sorry	6	4	7	17
Apology(ies)/Apologize	4	3	8	15
Total	10	7	16	33

What is noticeable about this data is that only a little more than 50% of the apologies used *IFID*-tokens. This means that almost half of the total number of apologies were token-less. As can be seen in extracts (1) to (5), these are some of the corporate apologies in the data that did not explicitly express apologetic expressions.

- (1) We'll definitely double our efforts to immediately turn your connection into fast one, @username. An endorsement was sent to our designated team for necessary actions. Any feedback will be provided once on hand. Thanks.
- (2) That's not what we want you to experience from our service, @username. I-send mo sa amin ang full details ng iyong concern via DM para matulungan ka naming maayos ito. Hihintayin namin ag iyong message. **Salamat!**
- (3) Hi @username. There is an ongoing service interruption on your area causing no internet connection on your end. Please bear with us for now as we work on its immediate restoration. Thank you.
- (4) @username We regret that you have to experience all this inconvenience. We will be needing your account details via DM for us to check and assist you. Thanks.

- (5) Got your concerns, @username. Hold on as we escalate this matter to the assigned department. Keep your lines open for updates. Thank you.

This may be attributed to the fact that apologizing, in general, is a Face Threatening Act (FTA) and that using such a speech act is a threat to the positive face of the companies [5]. However, these companies strategized for other means of addressing customers’ complaints. Aside from *IFID* tokens, they make use of strategies that may accompany or replace these tokens. These strategies are discussed in detail in the next subsection.

Accompanying strategies in corporate apologies

Closing statement and Imperative

Besides using apologetic expressions in the apology tweets, it can be obtained in Table 2 that companies seem to employ other strategies [6, 7, 2] to ensure effective conveyance of such apologies. Closing statement (45) outranked other strategies in the data.

Table 2 Frequency of accompanying strategies used in corporate apologies

Strategies	PLDT	Globe	Skybroadband	Total
Greetings	1	4	6	11
Restatement/acknowledgment of an offense	5	1	5	11
Explanation or account	1	0	5	6
Offer of repair	17	4	8	29
Promise of future forbearance	0	0	0	0
Consolation/Sympathy	5	8	2	15
Question	0	8	4	12
Imperative	9	20	13	42
Closing	20	16	9	45
Total	68	68	68	204

For example, more apologies would have closing statements such as the ones seen in extracts (6), (7), and (8)

- (6) Awwww. We're sorry for this, @username. We want to resolve this issue for you. We've created a repair ticket number and forwarded to our support team for immediate action. Rest assured that necessary actions will be implemented. **Thank you.**
 - (7) We would like to convey our sincerest apologies for the inconvenience we've caused you, @username. Please check your inbox as we replied to your message. **Thanks!**
 - (8) That's not what we want you to experience from our service, @username. I-send mo sa amin ang full details ng iyong concern via DM para matulungan ka naming maayos ito. Hihintayin namin ag iyong message. **Salamat!**
- These closing statements usually come as expressions of gratitude as in *Thank you!* or *Thanks!*, but a Tagalog counterpart like *Salamat!* was also found in the data. This is expected as these are Tweets written by Filipino agents. As can be gleaned from the extracts, some tweets were not only in English, but also in Filipino or a mix of two languages. I speculate that this is one strategy of companies to appear more intimate and relatable in reaching out to their customers. In addition to gratitude, it can be seen in extract (9) the use of an expression of looking forward to something

or a combination of this expression and gratitude as in extract (10).

(9) What's wrong? Maaari mo ba na i-elaborate ang concern mo about sa aming services? **Maghihintay kami para mabigyan namin ito ng solusyon.**

(10). We can definitely haste the process of resolving your concern, @username. Please send us a DM with your account details so we can accommodate this accordingly. **We'll wait for your response. Thanks.**

Closing statements were not only the accompanying strategies utilized in corporate apologies, what came next is the use of imperatives (42) such as the ones in (11), (12), (13), and (14).

(11) We're sorry for this inconvenience @username. Allow us to end this issue and bring back your confidence in us. **Kindly send us your account details via PM for us to make a report regarding on your service issue.** We will be waiting, thank you.

(12) Deserve mong ma-enjoy ang services namin Korbsanity, kaya we'll conduct an investigation para malaman kung anong nagiging dahilan ng pagkakaran mo ng difficulties sa internet connection namin.:) **Please send us a DM,** aayusin natin yan. :)

(13) We're sorry about this matter, @username. **May we ask for your consent to provide us your account details via DM for further checking?** We will wait for your response. Thank you.

(14) Our apologies for the inconvenience. **Please be advised to reset your cable modem to re-establish your connection then let us know if there are changes.** Thank you.

It is evident from these apologies that apologizers normally asked the customers to provide them the account details for further verification and checking. Also, there were cases where they would ask customers to do some troubleshooting from the device or internet router. This is a preliminary response by one of the companies before making a report of a service problem. Interestingly, the data showed that more corporate apologies would not contain any IFID-tokens but may have a Closing statement (in italics) and Imperative strategies (in bold), and the extracts below illustrate these.

(15) As one of our beloved subscribers, hindi mo deserve ang ganitong experience, username. **Tara, let's talk about this via DM para ma-provide namin ang assistance na kailangan mo. We'll wait for you! :)**

(16) Got your concerns, @username. **Hold on as we escalate this matter to the assigned department. Keep your lines open for updates.** *Thank you.*

As mentioned above, companies would rather employ other strategies to control and address complaints from customers than deliberately state apologies in their tweets.

Restatement/Acknowledgment of Offense

In the corporate apologies posted online, it is noticeable that restatement or acknowledgment of offense was to a minimum frequency and mostly were stated indirectly and generically like in the extracts (17) and (18).

(17) @username, we regret that you have to experience all this **inconvenience**. We will be needing your account details via DM for us to check and assist you. Thanks.

(18) We're really sorry if it's **taking too long to resolve your broadband connection issue**, @username. We're still waiting for an update from our engineering team. We ask for your cooperation and more patience.

In (17), the use of the word inconvenience suggests a generic account of unpleasant service experience. This word is too general for the supposed poor internet connection experienced by the clients. Moreover, in extract (18) although it is specific that they were not prompt at responding to their customer's complaints, the reason for the 'issue' remained implied. The use of obscure expressions may be employed on purpose as this may distance the apologizer from the offense [8] although this too can mean insincerity on the end of apologizer [9]. As [2] noted, (non)restatement of offense is a polarizing concern for these corporations. On the one hand, restating the offense may add insult to the injury. On the other hand not restating it may destroy the relationship between the client and the company.

Offer of Reparation

While saying sorry or (non)restating the offense may threaten the face of the companies, offering repair is one way of addressing the issue. This may compensate for the inconvenience that they experience; thus, it can help rebuild trust with the clients by addressing the problem [2]. As stated in extracts below, internet-providing companies exerted the utmost effort to address the concern of the clients. For instance, in (19) the agent offered not only a resolution regarding the issue but also with a sense of urgency through the use of the modifier immediate. Moreover, the use of the verb wants signals a sense of extreme desire from the company to help the client in his concern.

(19) Our apologies for the inconvenience, @username. We want an immediate resolution [on] your internet issue so we forwarded your concern to our support group for remote line testing. Rest assured that it will be properly attended. Thank you.

In a similar vein, companies also display certainty in giving assistance. This is seen in their use of modal *will* in their offer of reparation shown in (20) and (21). The use of this modal suggests that the companies take matters like this seriously and that a definite help is on its way. In turn, this might pacify clients from being irate as this can soon address their inconvenience.

(20) Deserve mong ma-enjoy ang services namin @username, kaya we'll conduct an investigation para malaman kung anong nagiging dahilan ng pagkakaran mo ng difficulties sa internet connection namin. :) **Please send us a DM,** aayusin natin yan. :)

(21) Hi @username. We understand how frustrating the situation. Be assured that we *will* conduct further isolation to find the root cause of this issue. Please expect our team as soon as possible.

Consolation/Sympathy

While doing the coding, another strategy emerged from the data used by companies. As observed, a strategy of Consolation/Sympathy is usually stated at the beginning of the apology. In (22), the apologizer mentioned that the client deserves the best of the company's services. This consoling is another way of telling the client that such inconvenience is something that she did not deserve.

(22) **We want you to have the best service that you truly deserve, @username.** As checked, remote line testing is ongoing on your service. We've created a follow up to speed up the repair process. Thank you.

Moreover, extracts (23) and (24) conveys sympathy to the clients. In the former, the apologizer describes the experience as a hassle, which may have affected the daily use of services provided by the company. This is followed by the expression *naiintindihan ka namin* (We understand you) to show that the company also feels bad whenever their customers experience dissatisfaction from the provided services. Similarly, the apology expressed in (24) also conveys sympathy to the client by stating that the company is one with the feeling of frustration felt by the client. This strategy may be another way of the companies to appease their customers and make them believe that they are sincere in their efforts to reaching out to them.

(23) **Having this kind of experience is really a hassle, @username, at naiintindihan ka namin.** Kaya naman nandito kami, to handle your concern with care. Mahalaga ka sa amin eh. :) Tara, pag usapan natin ang concern mo thru DM para ma-provide namin ang assistance na kailangan mo. :)

(24) Hi @username. **We understand how frustrating the situation.** Be assured that we will conduct further isolation to find the root cause of this issue. Please expect our team as soon as possible.

Explanation or account

In this data, explanation or account is rarely used by the apologizer as a strategy. Unlike in the previous finding [2], apologizers in the data explained the cause of internet failure experienced by the clients. In extract (25), the apologizer pointed out that intermittent internet connection is the result of 'line testing' conducted by their technical team. Similarly, the apologizer in (26) recounted that an 'ongoing maintenance' had been the reason why an unreliable internet signal was being experienced by the client. I argue that albeit the apologizers may have thought that doing such an explanation may threaten their face, it might also be a good strategy so that they can establish accuracy and honesty to their clientele.

(25) We want you to have the best service that you truly deserve, @username. As checked, **remote line testing is ongoing on your service.** We've created a follow up to speed up the repair process. Thank you.

(26) Our apologies, @username. Please be advised that **your area has ongoing plant maintenance which caused to signal interruption.** Rest assured that our team is already on top of this and doing their best to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

Greetings

Greetings in corporate apology is an indication of rapport-building made by apologizer to the client [2]. Oftentimes, these come along with the names or usernames of the clients, as presented in extracts (27) and (28), that make a feel from the receiver of the apology that these messages are sent to them individually in contrast with a generic tweet apology sent and addressed to all the users [10]. The usual greeting expressions are Hi and Good day followed by the username.

(27) Hi @username. There is an ongoing service interruption on your area causing no internet connection on your end. Please bear with us for now as we work on its immediate restoration. Thank you.

(28) Good day, @username. We're sorry to hear that you are having issues with your internet services. Sorry for the inconvenience. We already endorsed this to our support team for proper handling. Rest assured we are working hard to solve these issues. Thank you.

Question

As posited by [2], asking questions is one move in a corporate apologies and is embedded in lengthy interactions between the apologizer and the client. In this data, however, the latter claim is not true. Apologies in the data that included questions as an accompanying strategy appeared in the main tweet apology in contrast with the claim that questions usually appear in the latter part of the exchange of tweets. These are illustrated in (29) and (30).

(29) Good evening, @username. We'd like to know if you're still having issues with your internet connection. If yes, **have you tried some troubleshooting steps? How are you connected to the internet, via LAN, Wi-Fi or mobile data?** Please DM us your account/mobile number for checking.

(30) Hi, @username. To further assist you with your concern, **may we verify your account details?** Please send it to us via dm. Thank you.

In the study of [11], the move of the companies to ask questions in an apology statement did not appease customers as they may get more irritated and burdened to answer the question. However, I argue that asking questions like the ones in the extract above is a strategy to clarify on certain matters which will expedite the process of repair.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper explores the pragmatics of corporate apologies in a digitally-mediated platform, Twitter. It is interesting to find out strategies employed by the companies to address concerns and issues posted by their clients online. Since apologizing is a face-threatening act [5] which might put the relationship of the company and client at risk, accompanying strategies were being utilized to save the company's face and reconnect with its clients. Albeit this paper does not try to compare the apology markers and strategies utilized in the apologies posted by three different companies, it is evident in the data that there is no uniform distribution of these tokens and strategies. As observed, one company may use fewer *IFID*-tokens than the other ones, or another company would have employed more greetings in their apology to establish rapport while the others would not have. What is striking

though is that most Philippine corporate apologies in the data did not have apology expressions. In a previous study, corporate apologies almost always contain *IFID*-tokens and explanation of the account. This is to convey that the companies feel deeply sorry for the unsatisfactory service their customer experienced. In contrast, the data revealed that there is preponderance of imperative statements (e.g. Kindly DM us, Please check, etc.) because the companies wanted to take away their clients from the public domain and solve the matters privately [11] like asking for account details, telling the account of incident (i.e. since when did the internet connection fail), and the like. More often than not, this is also accounted to the fact that not all information can be tweeted as Twitter only allows 240 characters per tweet unlike the number of characters that the users can utilize in private messages (PM). It can be one of the reasons too why some of the corporate apologies are relatively short.

Another salient feature of Twitter corporate apologies in the Philippines is the use of consolation or sympathy as a strategy. I speculate that the Filipino culture of being sympathetic and concern to other people especially in times of distress transcends in the corporate apologies. However, expressions of future forbearance were not evident in the data. This can be attributed to the notion that since these companies deal with a technologically-dependent service, it is inevitable that technical glitch may occur from time to time; thus, a promise that inconvenience may never take place anytime in the future is next to impossibility.

Albeit the political sphere has been in the 'age of apology' [12; 13; 14] as the politicians have been accustomed to saying sorry to their constituents in times of crisis [15; 16], this phenomenon may have just started to get popular in the corporate world. Social media in general particularly Twitter remains the least explored domain of corporate apologies. This is surprising because the world wide web specifically social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) has been an avenue for different causes and concerns for the last decade already, yet there is still a dearth in corporate apology research in the digital space. Therefore, it is still worthy to further explore corporate apologies coursed through other social networking sites which may be an avenue for the companies to reach out to their clients' concerns like Instagram and Wechat and compare the nuances of the language and strategies employed in these sites.

6. REFERENCES

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