The Public Apology as a Reputational Paradox

Introduction
Organisations are increasingly facing demands from the media and from other stakeholders to apologise for their transgressions in this ‘Age of Apology’ (Harris, Grainger and Mullany 2006). As a result, we have seen growing numbers of organisations choosing to offer a public apology for corporate misbehaviour and for the consequences of crisis events. Indeed, Kampf (2009, 261) has suggested that such frequent realisations of apologies have conventionalised the practice and established a norm for apologising for misdeeds. This trend has been fuelled in part by Public Relations advice that a full apology can be a “positive reputational action”, capable of repairing a damaged corporate reputation (Coombs, 2007, 172). This reflects the growing importance of reputation and image to public figures and organisations who attempt to use the apology as a means of maintaining and restoring public trust.

Despite their increasing frequency, the corporate apology is a high-risk strategy for organisations, attracting much criticism. Many have attributed this risk to the public nature of the apology. Corporate apologies remain in the public domain, documented by the media as they occur and frequently referred to again in further citations. Furthermore, the presence of an audience, whether journalists or the general public changes the dynamic of the apology, highlighting the offender’s reputation and the need to protect image (Tavuchis 1991). The offender becomes a public ‘performer’, who is compelled to apologise yet needs to protect reputation and image at the same time. This tension, suggests Kampf (2009, 259) results in apologetic realisations that lack authenticity and sincerity, one of the most common failings of public apologies.

Unfortunately for those tasked with managing reputation, the public tend to hold organisations to higher standards of foresight than individuals for the same offence (Bauman 2011), often perceiving any apology as insincere (Brown 2000). Rather than helping to protect or restore the corporate image, an apology that is perceived as weak, being either delayed, unconvincing or insincere, causes further damage to reputation. Corporate apologies have been frequently criticised for this lack of sincerity and for their formulaic nature, seen as being carefully crafted in order to avoid responsibility and subsequent compensation claims. L’Etang (2008, 59) suggests that corporate apologies are often little more than impression management tactics. For example, in the case of investment firm Merrill Lynch, Hearit and Brown (2004) note that the company offered no more than a form of words in order to appear apologetic for public relations purposes. Given that a weak apology results in further damage to corporate image, then apologies are themselves problematic as a communication strategy (Brown 2000). This leads to a reputational paradox: organisations need to apologise for the sake of their corporate reputation, yet a poor apology does even more damage to that reputation. Consequently, organisations are damned if they do apologise, and damned if they don’t.

The public apology “is a performance in which every expression matters and every word becomes part of the public record” (Kellerman, 2006, 74). It is notable however, that within reputation management research, language use in the corporate apology is not closely examined. This suggests a need to move beyond the apology as a communication strategy to examine the linguistic realisation of the apology in the corporate context. This paper therefore examines the language of the corporate apology as a means of addressing its criticism.
The Apology in Crisis Communication

Corporate communications researchers have closely examined the apology as one of the strategic communication responses to an organisational crisis, proposing and categorising broad communication strategies. Research falls into two categories; one research stream is embedded in a text-oriented, rhetorical tradition where the focus is on verbal defence strategies, the other examines crisis communication from a strategic or context oriented perspective (Frandsen and Johansen 2010). Studies in the rhetorical vein are epitomized by the work of Benoit (1995, 2004) and Hearit (1994, 1995), as well as Marsh (2006), Toth (2000) and Toth and Heath (1992). Most studies agree that to be effective, the corporate apology must be truthful, voluntary, sincere, timely, performed in an appropriate context and well communicated to all stakeholders (Hearit, 2006, 64).

Benoit’s work (1995), the most frequently cited, identifies five over-arching strategies for restoring corporate image following a crisis, the last of which, ‘mortification’, refers to the apology, an admission of responsibility and a request for forgiveness (Dardis and Haigh 2009). The goal of such communication activity for Benoit (1995) is the maintenance and repair of corporate image and reputation. A frequent criticism of the listing of potential strategies is that labels, such as ‘corrective action’ or ‘mortification’ do not themselves explain or justify, but instead “…substitute classification for clarification” (Liebersohn et. al. 2004, 931). This labelling of rhetorical strategies fails to attend to the linguistic realisation of each crisis response, providing no more than a ‘laundry list’ of potential strategies (Rowland and Jerome 2004).

Hearit (2001, 507) suggests that when it comes to apologising, organisations benefit from the ambiguities inherent in language because “when the term apology is used, it gives the impression of a close parallel between individual and corporate apologies”. He maintains that the primary purpose of the corporate apology is “to put on the public record that the company is responsible for an act” (Hearit, 2001, 507). In a recent review of corporate apologies, Coombs et. al. (2010) draw on Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) study of ‘apologia’ (apogetic speeches composed of responses to charges made against a person's character) to define corporate apologies as a “communicative effort to defend the corporation against reputation/character attacks” (Coombs et. al. 2010, 338). In this respect, the corporate apology differs from the personal apology where the motivation is relationship building rather than the provision of a rhetorical defence.

Data and Analytical Approach

The data consisted of explicit public apologies offered by organisations in response to crises, available either online on corporate websites or in the press between 2004 and 2012. These included full apologies (where available), apology utterances and mediated apologies. During the search, results were filtered to identify a sample of mass public corporate apologies in response to crisis events which had the potential to cause significant reputational damage. Apologies from organisations to named individuals for a specific act were removed on the grounds that although they were apologies in the public domain the apology was not considered to be a ‘mass’ apology that affected many. A total of 49 apologies from 39 different companies were derived from the search.
The analytical approach adopted in this study was based on previous linguistic studies of business and public apologies conducted by Harris et al. (2006), Cubajevaitė and Ruzaitė (2007) and Kampf (2009a and b). The data was analysed to identify common linguistic patterns, including rhetorical moves, apology forms and frequencies, voice and agency. Thus, the analysis concentrated on specific linguistic forms within the apology rather than the categorisation of apologies into broad communication strategies.

Findings

1) **Rhetorical Moves**
Move analysis (Swales, 1981, 1990) explores the structure of texts, identifying the sequence of moves that constitutes their internal structure. An analysis of full apologies found that text is organised in specific, recognisable and highly structured ways. In these apologies up to 8 ‘moves’ could be identified, commonly starting with an offer of regret (e.g. *We would like to apologise* N. Dews 2010), and concluding with a statement of re-assurance (*I also want to reassure customers that no-one will be left permanently out of pocket...* S. Hester 2012). Centrally positioned is a description of the action taken to resolve the problem (*We have been working with customers on a case-by-case basis* N. Dews 2010) and a reminder of organisational strengths (*Customer service is of paramount importance to us* A. Applegarth 2007). The moves accord with Rowland and Jerome’s (2004) identification of strategies for corporate image maintenance following a crisis i.e. to demonstrate concern for those affected, to bolster organisational values and to demonstrate that steps have been taken to prevent a re-occurrence.

2) **Apology Forms and Frequencies**
Although three apology forms were present (apologise, sorry and regret), ‘apologise’ is the most frequent. The dominance of the ‘apologise’ form indicates the formality of the corporate apology and the severity of the offence, and differentiates the corporate apology from other more routine business apologies (e.g. management/staff) and everyday apologies. This pattern supports Aijmer’s (1996) observation that the term ‘apologise’ is more likely to be restricted to formal situations. The term is also found most frequently in isolation, rather than supported by other forms, which suggests that this is a powerful, emphatic form of apology.

3) **The object of the apology**
The words ‘apologise for’ require an object (Boyd, 2011, 302). What, then, appears as the object of the apology in the corporate statement? It is notable that few corporate apologies explicitly reference the event that prompted the apology. Speakers apologise for the impact of the event rather than the event itself. Avoiding mentioning the event is a means of creating distance between the organisation and the negative event, categorised by Benoit (1997) as a denial strategy. If the event is mentioned at all, it is externalised (i.e. the cause is attributed elsewhere) or doubt is cast on whether it actually occurred, e.g. “I presided over the worst deal of the century, apparently ...” (Time Warner/AOL 2010)

4) **The passive voice and agency**
An examination of the object of the apology verb however reveals another dominant pattern. Speakers adopt the passive voice in corporate apologies to obscure agency,
avoiding stating who or what was responsible for the crisis. While this is likely to be a legal requirement designed to avoid the acceptance of blame, it further distances the speaker from those affected.

5) Ambiguity
Many corporate apologies move beyond indirectness towards even more ambiguity and obfuscation. This trend is most noticeable in severe crises situations where explicitly accepting responsibility could have legal and financial consequences. These apologies are so careful that they do not ultimately work as an apology, being no more than 'semantic gyrations’ (Hearit and Brown 2004).

6) Lack of admission of guilt
For an apology to be perceived as sincere it must entail an acceptance of guilt (Kramer-Moore and Moore, 2003, 165). Yet, it is very unusual to find examples of organisations that explicitly admit, without ambiguity, that they are to blame for an event. There are only five explicit admissions of guilt and responsibility in the data. This includes the apology provided by Fiona Dawson at Mars who stated simply “We made a mistake. We apologise” (Mars 2007).

Conclusion
The findings indicate that corporate apologies are realised in such a way that they act as distancing strategies protecting the organisation, rather than relational strategies designed to build bridges with those affected. Rather than apologising for an event, organisations rarely refer to the crisis, they apologise for the result of the problem rather than the problem itself, and they avoid agency using the passive voice and through linguistic ambiguity. The lack of admission of guilt results in the apology being perceived as insincere.

The primary purpose of the corporate apology is to protect reputation and therefore the apology becomes a carefully crafted rhetorical act designed to achieve that aim. Rather than being a remedial exchange to repair and maintain equilibrium, to the benefit of both parties and to their continuing relationship, the corporate apology primarily benefits the speaker and the organisation as a face-saving act. It is a defence rather than an apology. This clearly differentiates the corporate apology from other forms of business communication that emphasise ongoing relations (e.g. management/staff communications) and from everyday apologies in conversational exchanges.

Organisations are advised that apologising can protect and repair reputation, and the increasing number of apologies over the last decade indicate that they heed this advice. However, the constraints that surround the communication of the apology result in realisations that are indirect, obscure and lacking in agency and consequently open to criticism. Further emphasis on the motivation for offering the apology may prompt organisations to weigh the need to protect and defend corporate reputation against the need to repair relationships with those affected. This would require that the organisation move from a rhetorical defence to a relational communication strategy

The realisation of the apology is greatly influenced by the context in which it is produced i.e. a situation that has the potential for serious reputational, financial, legal or, for the CEO, personal consequences. The apology itself is in the public domain
and is likely to attract negative media coverage. The media plays a significant role in disseminating apologies, cognisant of the news appeal of corporate wrongdoings and eager to identify and capitalise upon the news value of any discrepancies between the “backstage behaviour and front-stage performance” of organisations (Kampf, 2009,261). Much of the criticism of apologies is fuelled by this media coverage. The media actively track stories of corporate wrongdoings because they lead to higher ratings. Indeed, the media often act as ‘agents provocateurs’ in news coverage of corporate transgressions, thereby intensifying the conflict (Frandsen and Johansen 2010). Thus, the stakes are extremely high.

This study concludes that the context and the type of offences prompting the apology both determines and constrains the linguistic realisation of the apology, leaving little room for manoeuvre and resulting in formulaic apologies that are perceived as insincere. The study concludes that the realisation of corporate apologies as rhetorical defence strategies further distances the organisation from its customers, and militates against relationship repair and reputation protection.
References


