

A Pragmatic Analysis of Corporate Public Relations Apology Strategies on Weibo

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Abstract: This study explores the pragmatic strategies of corporate public relations (PR) apologies on Weibo and their effectiveness, adopting an integrated framework of Speech Act Theory and the Politeness Principle. Through qualitative analysis of 20 official apology statements (2024–2025) and in-depth study of 4 representative cases, two core findings are derived: First, corporations employ five integrated pragmatic strategy patterns, which form a progressive system from emotional repair to identity reshaping. Second, strategy effectiveness relies on adaptation to Weibo’s features such as short-text constraints, real-time interactivity, and information fragmentation. This study supplements Western-centric pragmatic theories with Chinese new media context insights and provides guidance for corporations to design context-appropriate Weibo apology strategies, enhancing crisis management and trust restoration.

Keywords: Corporate PR apologies; Pragmatic strategies; Speech act theory; Politeness principle; New media context

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of new media communication, Weibo serves as a pivotal platform for corporations to conduct crisis public relations (PR) work due to its rapid and extensive information dissemination. In this context, corporate apology discourse on Weibo is not merely a linguistic expression of regret, but a dynamic pragmatic practice. It requires aligning linguistic choices with two key factors: the platform’s real-time interactive context (e.g., public sentiment volatility, short-text communication constraints) and the audience’s cognitive expectations. The ultimate goal of this alignment is to achieve the communicative intent of trust restoration. For crisis PR, therefore, an urgent question arises: how can corporations design apology strategies from a pragmatic perspective? To address this, two core steps are necessary: optimizing speech acts to fit contextual needs and applying politeness norms to mitigate public resistance.

In this regard, Speech Act Theory (SAT), initially proposed by J. L. Austin (1962) and further developed by J. R. Searle (1969), centers on the concept of “doing things with words” and provides a structural analytical

framework for deciphering the essence of corporate PR apologies ^[1-2]. Meanwhile, the Politeness Principle (PP), introduced by G. N. Leech (1983), complements SAT by focusing on the strategic side of pragmatic communication ^[3]. It offers theoretical support for interpreting the ways in which companies adjust their language to preserve the public's "face" and reduce psychological resistance from the audience. These two theories construct the dual-dimensional analytical framework of "act type plus politeness strategy" for solving a key pragmatic conflict in apology discourse, that is, how to "admit fault" honestly while still "protecting the brand's image."

2. Literature review

Existing research on PR discourse has laid a theoretical foundation for this study, with scholarly attention evolving from traditional media contexts to new media environments. In traditional PR settings, early studies focused on grounding discourse analysis in pragmatic theories. Zhang applied Speech Act Theory (SAT) to systematically analyze the constitutive rules of PR discourse, providing a theoretical framework for multi-dimensional characteristics ^[4]. Li further refined the specific application of the Politeness Principle (PP) in PR discourse, validating the positive impact of politeness strategies on public trust ^[5]. From the perspective of the interaction between the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle, Wang pointed out the pragmatic phenomenon of "violating cooperation with politeness" in PR practice, such as using vague expressions to maintain the public's face, providing a new perspective for the strategic study of apology discourse ^[6].

As research shifted to a new media context, scholars began addressing platform-specific influences on PR strategies. Zhu highlighted the influence of new media communication matrices on PR strategies. Her focus, however, remained on channel innovation, lacking integration with the comprehensive application of SAT and PP ^[7].

Overall, existing research has the following three main limitations. First, prior studies mostly focus on offline or general media contexts, and thus lack a systematic analysis of the pragmatic strategies of PR apologies tailored to the Weibo setting, which is characterized by conciseness, wide reach, and rapid dissemination. Second, previous studies are largely grounded in Western pragmatics frameworks, yet Jiang and Hu have pointed out that these theories are mostly derived from Western social backgrounds or English linguistic contexts, and often neglect the differences and particularities of apologies in other cultures and languages ^[8]. Therefore, it is necessary to supplement existing theories within the Chinese native social context. Furthermore, while existing research has applied SAT or PP in isolation, they have not yet constructed a dual-dimensional analytical framework of "act types + politeness strategies" to explain how the two theories interact. Additionally, existing work does not reveal how apology strategies adjust across different crisis stages, leaving a gap in understanding dynamic pragmatic adaptation.

To address these gaps, this study integrates SAT and PP to systematically analyze the pragmatic strategies of PR apologies on Weibo. Specifically, it focuses on the synergistic application of speech acts and politeness maxims, with the aim of providing empirical evidence and theoretical guidance for corporate PR practice in the new media era. Based on this, this study proposes the two core research questions: 1) What types of pragmatic strategies do corporations employ in their PR apologies on Weibo, and 2) how do these strategies achieve (or fail to achieve) effective communicative outcomes?

3. Theoretical framework

Grounded in Speech Act Theory and the Politeness Principle, this study constructs a dual-dimensional analytical

framework of “act types plus politeness strategies” to systematically unpack the pragmatic mechanism of corporations’ PR apologies on Weibo. Speech Act Theory, proposed by J.L. Austin in 1962, emphasizes that language is not merely a tool for expressing meaning, but also a medium for performing social acts in specific contexts ^[1]. Later, Searle further categorizes speech acts into five types: expressive, assertive, directive, commissive, and declarative, providing a clear framework for analyzing discourse strategies ^[2]. However, in PR apologies, defining what to say is insufficient; the key lies in how to express it to effectively soothe public sentiment and repair trust deficits. Therefore, this study adopts Leech’s Politeness Principle as a pragmatic framework ^[3]. Comprising the maxims of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy, this principle governs expression at the psychosocial level, helping to mitigate psychological resistance among audiences in highly sensitive contexts, thereby enhancing apology acceptance and facilitating trust repair.

Notably, when applying the aforementioned theories to Weibo, its distinctive media-specific characteristics require full consideration, like short texts, high interactivity, and profoundly influencing the ways in which speech acts are realized. For instance, declarative acts need to be concise and to the point to adapt to platform reading habits; expressive acts require more emotional concretization to evoke empathy.

Furthermore, as the social media environment drives users to curate their image, it heightens public demand for authenticity. This prompts organizations to actively employ expressive and assertive acts for emotional disclosure in apologies, thereby constructing a sincere and transparent institutional image and sustaining public relationships. Consequently, corporations often integrate multiple speech acts to achieve both factual clarification and emotional compensation within the limited text length, thereby responding to Weibo users’ dual expectations for informational efficiency and emotional identification. In summary, within Weibo’s specific context, only through the synergistic application of speech acts and the Politeness Principle, adapted to the platform’s communicative environment, can apology messages be accurately understood and widely accepted. Therefore, in the empirical analysis of Part V, based on the above framework, this study will systematically explore the strategic coordination between types of speech acts and the Politeness Principle.

4. Research method

Guided by the integrated analytical framework of SAT and PP, this study adopts a qualitative approach to systematically collect and analyze the corpus of corporate PR apology discourse on Weibo.

4.1. Corpus acquisition

The study’s corpus comprises 20 original PR apology statements, which were all released via official Weibo accounts of corporations between January 1, 2024, and June 1, 2025. The four corporate cases selected for in-depth analysis—Chapanda, Haidilao, Pang Donglai, and Woodpecker Maintenance—each garnered no less than 46.3 million reads on their related Weibo trending topics, indicating significant public attention. These cases cover typical crises such as food safety, product defects, service failures, and false advertising, and have high public attention and representativeness. Additionally, to ensure corpus integrity, all apology texts collected are original statements and key follow-up explanations (e.g., supplementary commitments on compensation) released by corporations via their official Weibo accounts. Meanwhile, popular public comments and media reports were also tracked to gauge sentiment and apology effectiveness.

Through the categorization and sorting of cases, the study found that corporate apology discourse can be

classified into five types based on Searle's (1969): expressive, assertive, commissive, directive, and declarative ^[2]. Representative examples are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Types and examples of speech acts in the Weibo corporate PR apology corpus

Speech act type	Examples
Expressive	(1) "We are deeply grieved and regretful" [Chapanda] (2) "We feel deeply remorseful and grieved" [Woodpecker Maintenance]
Assertive	(3) "In the early hours of February 24, 2025, two men urinated in the hot pot base after dining in a private room at Haidilao's Shanghai Waitan branch" [Haidilao]
Commissive	(4) "Pay cash compensation equal to tenfold the amount of each order"; "Allocate 1 million RMB" [Chapanda] (5) "We will provide a full refund for the meal, plus cash compensation equal to tenfold the order amount." [Haidilao]
Directive	(6) "Stop cyberbullying" [Pang Donglai] (7) "Provide order receipts"; "Call the special hotline" [Haidilao]
Declarative	(8) "Dismiss the employees involved"; "Close the store and terminate the contract" [Chapanda] (9) "Abandon PR and accept public inspection"; "Open all comments" [Woodpecker Maintenance]

4.2. Analytical method

This study employs an integrated method combining content analysis and case study. First, content analysis is employed to classify the types of speech acts within the apology texts, examining their realization and pragmatic functions in the Weibo context. Second, the study further analyzes how corporations embed politeness strategies in different types of speech acts to mitigate conflicts and repair public trust. Finally, case analysis examines differences in apology strategies both across different crisis types and the effectiveness of these strategies among corporations facing similar crises.

5. Pragmatic strategy patterns

This section analyzes five typical cases through the established theoretical framework. It reveals that successful apologies depend not on the mere combination of speech acts and politeness maxims, but on their effective integration. The following subsections examine the application and effects of these strategies in specific crisis scenarios.

5.1. Expressive speech act + sympathy + modesty strategy

In the initial stages of a crisis on Weibo, where public anger is often triggered by moral misconduct or emotional harm, the Expressive speech act becomes crucial. To be effective, it must integrate the Sympathy and Modesty Maxims, facilitating emotional repair through resonance and responsibility acknowledgment.

Case 1: Chapanda's "Fat Cat Incident"

Chapanda employed highly concise expressive acts, such as "deeply grieved and regretful" and "extremely shocked and angry" (**Table 1**, Example (1)), to convey negative emotions. This aligns with the Sympathy Maxim by fostering emotional alignment with the public. Simultaneously, by criticizing the misconduct and admitting management oversight, Chapanda enacted the Modesty Maxim through proactive accountability, thereby demarcating the brand from the deviant behaviors.

Notably, these emotional expressions are highly concise, which aligns with Weibo's short-text constraint

(typically within 140 characters for a single post). In the platform’s context of limited word count, overly lengthy emotional descriptions would risk losing audience attention or being truncated, while concise phrases like “deeply grieved and regretful” can quickly deliver the core of remorse without sacrificing emotional intensity. This linguistic brevity is a pragmatic adaptation to Weibo’s format, which ensures that the Sympathy Maxim (strengthening emotional resonance) and Modesty Maxim (admitting responsibility) are communicated efficiently.

The case demonstrates that the “Expressive speech act + Sympathy + Modesty” strategy effectively lowers public psychological defensiveness and aids trust repair through emotional resonance and self-criticism. These findings empirically support Page’s claim that the sincerity demonstrated in corporate apologies significantly influences their public acceptance ^[9]. From a pragmatic perspective, such intensified expressions align with the tendency of native Chinese speakers to strengthen linguistic tone when making apologies, serving not only to demonstrate politeness and sincerity but also acting as an effective face-saving strategy ^[10].

In Weibo’s highly interactive environment, this strategy adopts a modest and accountable stance that acknowledges public sentiment while demonstrating corporate responsibility, thereby helping to restore brand credibility in the early stages of a crisis. However, if the crisis arises from informational ambiguity or factual dispute, reliance solely on emotional expression proves ineffective, necessitating a shift towards assertive strategies to rebuild credibility with facts.

5.2. Assertive speech act + tact + agreement strategy

In crisis PR on Weibo, assertive speech acts—including factual statements, responsibility delineation, and process explanations—are essential for establishing credibility. To mitigate public anxiety stemming from information asymmetry, these acts must be strategically integrated with the Tact and Agreement maxims.

Case 2: Haidilao

Haidilao explicitly asserted factual details such as, “In the early hours of February 24, 2025... two men urinated in the hot pot base” (**Table 1**, Example (3)), and reinforced this with precise data, including a “complete timeline” and “4,109 affected orders.” Additionally, by stating it would “transfer the right to the police and judiciary”, Haidilao ceded authority to objective institutions, thereby avoiding self-justification and enhancing external credibility.

This strategic use of assertive acts is a direct adaptation rooted in Weibo’s information traits. The platform’s tendency for information fragmentation and rumor proliferation makes detailed, data-backed assertions crucial. By adhering to the Tact Maxim (proactively acknowledging managerial failures to demonstrate respect for public sentiment) and the Agreement Maxim (presenting a verifiable timeline that aligns with established public knowledge to build consensus), Haidilao effectively bridged information gaps, thereby reducing asymmetry and upholding procedural justice.

The case demonstrates that the “Assertive speech act + Tact + Agreement” strategy effectively steers public perception from skepticism toward acceptance by constructing a credible factual framework. It provides a necessary foundation for restoring trust. However, while this strategy clarifies the truth, it cannot fully compensate for tangible public losses. After establishing factual credibility, corporations must still rely on commissive acts to convert words into substantive remedial actions.

5.3. Commissive speech act + generosity + tact strategy

Commissive speech acts, including compensation, rectification, and accountability, need to be combined with the

Generosity and Tact maxims to achieve brand image rehabilitation through supra-expected compensation.

Case 3: Chapanda “Fat Cat Incident”

Chapanda made a series of core commitments, including “dismiss the involved employees and terminate the store’s contract”, “provide tenfold compensation”, and “allocate an additional 1 million RMB to the ‘Fat Cat’ public welfare fund” (see **Table 1**, Examples (4) and (7)). These actions collectively constructed a robust remedial framework that pragmatically operationalized the Generosity and Tact Maxims.

Specifically, Chapanda’s response demonstrates a strategic alignment with both maxims through a series of concrete actions. The company upheld the Generosity Maxim by offering tenfold compensation and establishing a public welfare fund, thereby exceeding expectations and extending its commitment to a societal level. It concurrently adhered to the Tact Maxim by terminating the store contract and elevating redress through charitable donation, thereby imposing a tangible cost for misconduct and addressing broader public concerns.

Notably, these commitments are highly specific and action-oriented. On Weibo, where short texts dominate and public attention is easily diverted, vague promises often trigger skepticism. By contrast, Chapanda’s quantified pledges (tenfold compensation, 1 million RMB fund) and definitive actions (employee dismissal, contract termination) quickly convey “substantive responsibility” to audiences. This avoids the risk of information ambiguity in Weibo’s fast-paced dissemination environment, ensuring the public grasps the core of the company’s redress measures and meets the audience’s cognitive expectations, ultimately achieving image restoration.

This strategy indicates that successful commitments cannot be empty declarations; instead, they must deliver tangible value. As highlighted by Huang and Yi, the strategic use of linguistically concrete “Material Processes” in commissive acts is crucial for showcasing a company’s problem-solving ability, which forms the cornerstone of trust repair in crisis communication ^[11]. While commissive strategies can address direct losses, they often fail to fully guide public opinion. When misinformation or extreme emotions spread on Weibo, corporations need to employ directive acts to provide reasonable guidance.

5.4. Directive speech act + tact + sympathy strategy

In crisis PR, directive speech acts function to harmonize social relations, yet their effectiveness relies on the combination of the Tact and Sympathy maxims. This integration transforms “directives” from unilateral demands into bidirectional empathy, thereby enhancing public acceptance.

Case 4: Pang Donglai

In its second-phase statement, Pang Donglai issued clear behavioral guidance: “Stop Cyberbullying; do not attack or blame the involved customer” (**Table 1**, Example (6)). By curbing cyberbullying, the directives prevent the customer from suffering secondary harm, demonstrating an in-depth understanding of the customer’s emotion, which aligns with Sympathy Maxim. Simultaneously, by focusing specifically on the act of “ceasing cyberbullying”, they avoid over-restricting public freedom of speech while effectively addressing public opinion demands, thereby conforming to the Tact Maxim.

Notably, this directive is highly targeted and concise—an intentional adaptation to Weibo’s communicative characteristics. On a platform dominated by short texts and real-time interactions, vague or overly broad guidance often fails to grab attention or curb problematic behaviors, as audiences may overlook ambiguous messages amid a flood of information. By contrast, Pang Donglai’s focus on “stopping cyberbullying” and “protecting the involved customer” delivers a clear, actionable signal. This brevity and specificity ensure the directive is quickly understood and disseminated, directly addressing the risk of cyberbullying escalation in Weibo’s fast-paced, emotion-driven

discourse space.

When the two maxims work in synergy, directive acts are no longer one-way crisis management tools but evolve into a two-way communication bridge linking emotional resonance and action guidance. This strategy not only calms public opinion swiftly but also reshapes the public's recognition of the brand's responsibility through empathetic guidance. While directive strategies create favorable conditions for crisis resolution by harmonizing social relations, corporations must adopt more authoritative declarative strategies to achieve fundamental brand rehabilitation.

5.5. Declarative speech act + modesty + tact strategy

Through formal announcements on contract terminations, penalties, and donations, declarative speech acts demarcate boundaries and reshape identity in crisis PR. By applying both the Modesty Maxim to demonstrate sincerity and the Tact Maxim to align with public values, the strategy achieved its dual-oriented effectiveness.

Case 5: Woodpecker Maintenance

Woodpecker's secondary statement broke convention by declaring it would "abandon PR and accept public inspection" and "open all comments without deletion" (**Table 1**, example (9)). This self-subversive move thoroughly negated its initial perfunctory response and admitted its systemic failure, which fully conforms to the Modesty Maxim. Concurrently, by ceding all control over public commentary, it used radical transparency to respond to the core public demand for sincerity, thereby strengthening the "tactfulness" aligned with the public's psychological expectations.

The exceptional potency of this declarative strategy is deeply rooted in Weibo's communicative dynamics. The platform fosters intense public scrutiny and rewards gestures of radical honesty. The critical synergy between the two maxims is evidenced by thorough modesty (admitting failure), establishing the necessary foundation for a profound display of tact (ceding control to the public). This integrated approach makes the commitment to full transparency appear both reasonable and credible, ultimately working to rebuild certainty from the ruins of trust.

In summary, Woodpecker's deployment of the "Declarative speech act + Modesty + Tact" strategy proves highly adaptive to Weibo's communicative ecology. The synergy between Modesty and Tact renders radical transparency credible, enabling the brand to demarcate its past failures from future commitments and rebuild essential trust. This approach demonstrates the practical value of a dual-oriented pragmatic framework in effectively resolving Weibo-era crises.

Reviewing the five types of strategies discussed, corporate apologies on Weibo constitute a systematic pragmatic initiative progressing from emotional repair (Expressive) to factual clarification (Assertive), then to substantive compensation (Commissive), supplemented by relationship coordination (Directive) and identity reshaping (Declarative).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to address two core research questions: (1) what types of pragmatic strategies corporations employ in their PR apologies on Weibo, and (2) how these strategies achieve (or fail to achieve) effective communicative outcomes. Through systematic analysis of corporate apology discourse, this research reveals that effective apologies depend not on the simple superposition of speech acts and politeness maxims, but rather their strategic integration within Weibo's unique communicative environment.

First, the analysis identifies five distinct pragmatic strategies that corporations systematically employ in Weibo apologies. First, the Expressive Speech Act + Sympathy + Modesty strategy enables swift emotional repair through concise yet resonant expressions that acknowledge public sentiment while demonstrating corporate accountability. Second, the Assertive Speech Act + Tact + Agreement strategy establishes factual credibility through verifiable data and transparent disclosures that counter information asymmetry. Third, the Commissive Speech Act + Generosity + Tact strategy converts verbal apologies into substantive redress through supra-expected compensation and concrete commitments. Fourth, the Directive Speech Act + Tact + Sympathy strategy guides public behavior while maintaining social harmony through targeted and empathetic guidance. Finally, the Declarative Speech Act + Modesty + Tact strategy achieves fundamental identity reshaping through formal institutional commitments that demonstrate radical accountability.

Second, strategy effectiveness stems from adaptation to Weibo's features. The platform's short-text constraints demand linguistic brevity, making concise emotional expressions and specific commitments particularly effective. Weibo's real-time interactivity necessitates immediate emotional engagement through Expressive acts in early crisis stages. The platform's information fragmentation requires detailed, data-backed Assertive acts to counter rumor proliferation. Furthermore, Weibo's culture of public scrutiny rewards the radical transparency embodied in Declarative acts, while its emotionally charged discourse space benefits from the balanced guidance of Directive strategies.

The research indicates that these five strategies do not exist in isolation but constitute a systematic pragmatic initiative progressing from emotional repair and factual clarification to substantive compensation, relationship coordination, and finally identity reshaping. Corporations can dynamically integrate and flexibly apply these strategies according to the crisis type and development stage, thereby achieving an effective closed loop of crisis communication and trust restoration. This study supplements Western-centric theories with Chinese new media context insights and offers actionable guidance for corporations to refine Weibo apology strategies, enhancing crisis management and long-term reputation building.

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