

A Corpus Study of the Use of “Sorry” from the Perspective of Politeness Principles

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Abstract:

Traditional pragmatics considers “sorry” as an expression of apology. However, in the context of new media communication, its function has expanded beyond simple apology and demonstrates great pragmatic adaptability. This study draws on data from Weibo, an anonymous social media platform in China, and analyzes the functions of “sorry” by combining politeness and impoliteness principles. The findings reveal that “sorry” in new media communication serves at least four key functions: first, apologizing, its prototypical function, to mitigate conflict or minimize offense; second, a strategic buffer, helping to soft the tone; third, sarcasm, using mock politeness to convey criticism or irony; and fourth, humor, enhancing conversational cohesion. Compared to traditional discourse, “sorry” in new media exhibits greater interactivity and adaptability, reflecting the dynamic construction of speaker identity. Through corpus analysis and a pragmatic framework, this study explores the evolving functions of sorry on Chinese social media platforms, offering new insights into digital pragmatics.

Keywords:

Politeness principles, Sorry, Apology

1. Introduction

From the semantic perspective, some words, like “sorry”, are devoid of purely truth-conditional, or, in relevance-theoretic terms, conceptual meaning, contributing instead to sentence meaning by lexicalizing the illocutionary forces of apologizing. When borrowed into other languages, the expression “sorry” doesn’t supplant the native terms for expressing the speech acts of apologizing, but functions complementarily [1]. The function of apologizing of “sorry” is its prototypical function, and corpus-based analyses reveal that it fulfills different functions in English. The diverse semantic features and high frequency of “sorry” collectively reflect its multifaceted pragmatic functions in interpersonal communication. However, social media offers an anonymous platform for people to freely say what they want to say, so social media languages may drive the occurrence of new functions of the apologizing word “sorry”.

Therefore, the study aims to investigate the use of “sorry” on Chinese social media and the reasons for the changes of its functions.

2. Research Data and Framework

2.1. Data collection

The data are collected from Weibo, which is one of the most popular media and attracts people to post their lives. According to official data on the Weibo website, the number of active monthly users in December 2024 is 590 million [2]. Weibo allows users to search for keywords to view public posts posted by its users, which is something other software cannot do. By directly collecting public content posted by users, the writer can conduct qualitative analysis from the emic perspective, avoiding interference of interviews or questionnaires on subjects.

To investigate how people use the polite expression “sorry” online, the writer searched “sorry” in the search interface of Weibo at random periods for 20 days, and took 10 posts every day as samples. Since the goal of this study is to identify the various roles that “sorry” plays, it is imperative to rule out those celebrities or those who are influential. The writer selected those blogs from users with fewer than 50 fans, because these accounts with few followers are less likely to hide their inner thoughts, thus adding credibility to this study. Consequently, 200 Weibo posts from 200 distinct users that included the word “sorry” were gathered and used as the foundation for further analysis. Concerning ethical issues with data extracted from social media, any identifiable private information have been left out.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The writer combines five politeness super-strategies for performing FTA (face-threatening act) proposed by Brown and Levinson [3] and opposite impoliteness strategies proposed by Culpeper [4] to investigate different functions of “sorry” on Chinese online social media comprehensively.

To maintain face while performing a potentially FTA, one must apply appropriate politeness strategies. The speaker first assesses the level of face threat by weighing factors such as relative power, social distance, and the imposition of the act, which determine the “weightiness” of the FTA—greater weightiness requires greater politeness. On this basis, Brown and Levinson identify five super-strategies for handling FTAs [3], which vary in politeness based on the degree of face threat, ranging from the least to the most face-threatening, and each of these politeness super-strategies has its opposite impoliteness super-strategy [4], shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Politeness and impoliteness strategies.

Number	Politeness strategies	Impoliteness strategies
One	Bald on record	Bald on record impoliteness
Two	Positive politeness	Positive impoliteness
Three	Negative politeness	Negative impoliteness
Four	Off-record	Sarcasm or mock politeness
Five	Withhold the FTA	Withhold politeness

3. Data Analysis and Findings

3.1. Data analysis

Previous studies of the use of “sorry” focus on apology, and there is no clear classification of its different functions in other contexts. It’s crucial to refrain from immediately imposing a predetermined taxonomy because the purpose of this study is to investigate its meanings and functions on Chinese social media. Consequently, NVivo (version 11 plus) is used to analyze the 200 microblogs.

The writer read through the samples and coded them into different categories based on politeness and impoliteness strategies shown in Table 1 and reviewed by three professors. Then the writer collected some related papers to modify the classification. Moreover, the classification was checked by another postgraduate who did research on politeness principles with relatively full understanding of hedges to guarantee the validity and reliability of annotation. After these steps, the writer concluded four pragmatic functions of “sorry”: apology, strategic buffer, sarcasm and humor. Some samples involve two or more functions, so the writer included them in different categories. In this way, 200 microblogs yielded a total of 224 episodes. Additionally, some posts contain emojis and memes, and the writer translated them into words, which are integral parts to express the posters’ emotions. Second, private information was all eliminated, including the real names or nicknames mentioned and details of the things they’re talking about.

3.2. Findings

This section analyses the functions of “sorry” qualitatively by coding representative posts and quantitatively by displaying the frequencies and percentages of these functions. Table 2 shows basic information of the 200 microblogs collected, each of which contains at least one “sorry”.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of functions of “sorry” in the posts.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Apology	78	34.82
Strategic buffer	48	21.43
Sarcasm	42	18.75
Humor	56	25
Total	224	100

As shown in Table 2, the main function is still apology, and the humor function ranks second, 25%; the percentages of strategic buffer and sarcasm are similar. The following subsections will analyze each function in detail.

3.2.1. Use “sorry” for apology

The most basic function of “sorry” is apology, and when it is borrowed into Chinese, the major function remains the same. Because Weibo allows anonymous users to post everything they want (if it is legal), many people post their inner feelings, which is a popular phenomenon among young people. Therefore, it’s not surprising to see apologies on it, 34.82% in this study. The writer can find the target objects of these apologies vary. Here are the percentages of the objects of apologies shown in Figure 1.

About half of these apologies were for online friends or strangers, 24 of 78 (30.8%) are related to people in their lives, and 10.3% are objects, for example, animals. These three themes were illustrated in the following three examples respectively.

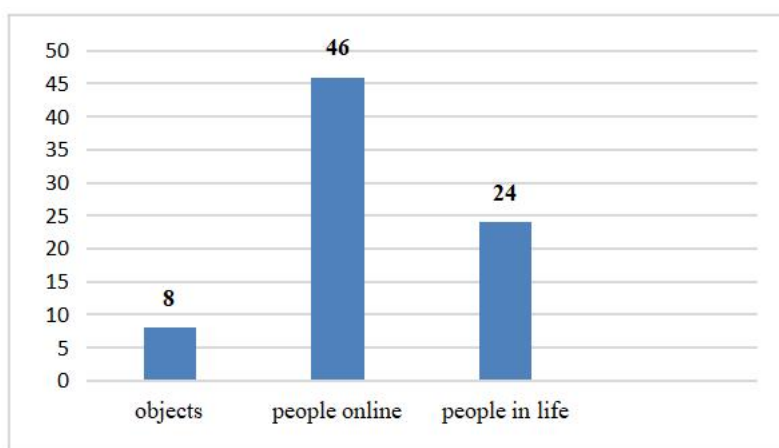


Figure 1. Percentage (%) of the objects of apologies.

(1) 刚刚有人告诉我只知道这张图不能商用。为了避免和该 IP 粉丝发生冲突，原博已权限，真的很 sorry。

gāng gāng yǒu rén gào sù wǒ cái zhī dào zhè zhāng tú bù néng shāng yòng. wèi le bì miǎn hé gāi IP fēn sī fā shēng chōng tū, yuán bó yǐ quán xiàn, zhēn de hěn sorry.

I was just informed that this drawing is not commercially available. To avoid conflicts with the IP fans, the last post has been deleted. I'm sorry.

(2) 社交活动我永远是第一个走的。Sorry 了和我一起聚的朋友们@xx.....但我真的社恐。

shè jiāo huó dòng wǒ yǒng yuǎn shì dì yī gè zǒu de. Sorry le hé wǒ yì qǐ jù de péng you men @xx.....dàn wǒ zhēn de shè kǒng.

I'm always the first to leave social gatherings. Sorry to my friends who hang out with me @xx... but I really have social anxiety.

(3) 近期又撞车、又掉底盘、有时轮胎没气，SORRY! 宝宝跟着我受苦了。

jìn qī yòu zhuàng chē, yòu diào dǐ pán, yǒu shí lún tāi méi qì, SORRY! bǎo bǎo gēn zhe wǒ shòu kǔ le.

Recently, there have been car crashes, a fallen undercarriage, and sometimes flat tires. Sorry! My baby has suffered along with me.

In Example (1), this apology was made to his followers because of his negligence regarding copyright. Most of the apologies posted on the internet are aimed at netizens because real friends may not be able to see these apologies. Such timely apologies are consistent with polite principles since they bravely acknowledge their mistakes and conform to the generosity maxim. Meanwhile, apologizing on a public online platform does a good job of maintaining harmonious online relationships.

In Example (2), the blogger apologized for his/her early leave to friends dating with him/her. When the blogger posted this apology, he/she also mentioned friends to read, which serves as an apology made to his/her friends. The reason for online apology may result from the blogger's shyness, which remains to be explored, and can protect his/her negative face to some degree compared with apologizing face to face.

In Example (3), the car was the object to be apologized for by its owner. Such apology involves different functions because it can also be included in apology to objects or strategic buffer, or humor.

3.2.2. Use “sorry” for strategic buffer

(4) 果然年纪大了，对情话毫不感冒，甚至有点嗤之以鼻（sorry，我真的冷漠）

guǒ rán nián jì dà le, duì qíng huà háo bù gǎn mào, shèn zhì yǒu diǎn chī zhī yǐ bí
(sorry, wǒ zhēn de lěng mò)

It's true that I'm getting older, because I won't be moved by words of love, and even scoff a bit (sorry, I'm indifferent.)

Weibo is an anonymous platform, and the risk of being discovered by close friends is low. Like the post in Example 4, there is no clear target audience, so it isn't an apology made to promote harmony in interpersonal relationships. “Sorry” in this sentence expresses an apology on the surface, which is consistent with the modesty maxim in the politeness principle, that is, to minimize praise to self and maximize dispraise for others. At the same time, it also has a certain humility, suggesting that the speaker realizes that his/her indifference may not meet the other party's expectations, so he/she uses “sorry” to soften the tone and make the words less direct or harsh. But it is worth noting that it is not out of real apology, but more like a strategic buffer, making expressions such as “I become indifferent and even scoff” seem less tough. Therefore, this function of “sorry” tends to protect the users' positive face, instead of attacking other people's face.

Under these circumstances, anonymous platforms like Weibo have become a tool for self-presentation, and these polite expressions allow users to shape their identities — often subverting standard meanings.

3.2.3. Use “sorry” for sarcasm

One of impoliteness super-strategies is mock politeness, which means the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations [4]. The anonymous nature of Internet makes such usage of all polite expressions ever more prominent, shown in Example 5-6.

(5) 我展现出惊人天赋，却换来了一个人莫名其妙的敌意？她用各种损人不利己的道具卡，自己少分，也要让我减了 11 分，结果最后我还是第一，sorry 啦~

wǒ zhǎn xiàn chū jīng rén tiān fù, què huàn lái le yí gè rén mò míng qí miào de dí yì?
tā yòng gè zhǒng sǔn rén bù lì jǐ de dào jù kǎ, zì jǐ shǎo fēn, yě yào ràng wǒ jiǎn le 11
fēn, jié guǒ zuì hòu wǒ hái shì dì yī, sorry la~

(5) I showed off my amazing talent, but I received a person's inexplicable hostility in return? She used all sorts of prop cards to my detriment, even though she would also lose points. She made me lose 11 points, but I still ended up in first place... Sorry about that!

(6) Sorry 啦，我家 xx 随便帅帅。

Sorry la, wǒ jiā xx suí biàn shuài shuài.

(6) Sorry, my xx is so cool.

This function is a new use of the polite expression “sorry”, which seems to show the speakers' politeness but actually doesn't. The development of cultural intercommunication and Internet language push forward such usage; and the new function does not imply politeness, it opens up a new dimension for “sorry” in modern ages.

From the perspective of politeness principles, both of the speakers appear to follow the tact maxim and generosity maxim. In example 5, the use of “Sorry about that!” can be seen as a mitigating phrase, especially after describing a situation in which the other party responded to him/her with hostility. By using “sorry”, the speaker tries to show his/her care about the possible negative impact, although this is not entirely an apology. “Sorry” in example 5-6 reflect a slight humility, especially after describing that the speaker gained an advantage, mocking a certain degree of “regret”, which helps to alleviate the potential impression of arrogance. From the perspective of impoliteness principles, “Sorry” in these two sentences show irony or false politeness. Rather than using too unfriendly words when describing the other party’s hostile behavior, the speakers use “sorry” to convey a slightly mocking tone. It does not express a deep apology, but a certain indifference to the other one’s failure, as if to say, “Even though I won, I don’t really care about your sadness.” This use of irony can make the other party feel that their face is threatened.

Each social media platform exhibits distinct styles and develop its own target users. Weibo, for instance, primarily targets at younger audience, and many of its users use it to retrieve the latest news regarding celebrities. One notable feature, Super Topic, facilitates the formation of interest-based communities, enabling users to share posts and interact with like-minded individuals. Consequently, Weibo fosters the emergence of in-group linguistic practices, whereby users repurpose existing words or symbols to convey group affiliation or ideological stance. Such semantic shifts and the emergence of novel linguistic functions are relatively prevalent within these digital communities.

3.2.4. Use “sorry” for humor

(7) 不是，专四我都过了怕你六级？Sorry 我真的怕。

bù shì, zhuān sì wǒ dōu guò le pà nǐ liù jí? Sorry wǒ zhēn de pà.

(7) No, I’m who have passed TEM 4, will I be afraid of such a CET 6? But sorry, I’m really afraid.

This function is inclusive, because “sorry” used in many posts also has this function. In this category, “sorry” doesn’t have conceptual meanings but is like an idiomatic expression. In example (7), the blogger doesn’t mean to apologize to CET 6 or others. From Leech’s politeness principle, “sorry” softens the tone and increases the other party’s sense of identity, making the contradictory expression more acceptable. From Culpeper’s impoliteness principle, “sorry” actually strengthens the ironic effect, forming a self-deprecating “politeness”. Overall, it not only shows the effect of self-humility and softening the tone, but also enhances the humorous effect through self-contradictory expression.

4. Conclusions

This study investigated the pragmatic functions of the polite expression “sorry” employed by Chinese users of Weibo. The results indicate four functions, apology, strategic buffer, sarcasm, and humor. The major function of “sorry” is still apology (34.82%), which aligns with the modesty maxim. Nowadays, “sorry” is no longer just used to apologize, but a mixture of meanings. The study suggests that “sorry” has taken on new pragmatic roles in online communities, which aligns with Leech’s idea that politeness is dynamic and context-dependent.

Owing to the anonymous nature of social media and the proliferation of online communities, conventional expressions of politeness have undergone notable functional shifts. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory [3], linguistic strategies that were traditionally associated with positive or negative politeness—such as honorifics, hedges, and deferential forms—are increasingly being recontextualized in digital environments. Rather than mitigating face-threatening acts in the classic sense, these expressions are often employed ironically, playfully, or strategically to signal in-group membership, construct online personae, or reinforce subcultural norms. Simultaneously, anonymity in online discourse has given rise to more salient impoliteness. From the perspective of impoliteness studies [4], such usage is not merely a deviation from politeness norms, but a resource for identity construction, social positioning, and community formation. In this sense, the changes of the use of “sorry” partly results from in-group cultural norms and anonymity in online discourse.

The present findings indicate that these netizens may have renegotiated pragmatic norms on social media, in that “sorry” does not violate the norm in online communication as it does in face-to-face communication. Instead, “sorry” may serve as a local ritual for communities on social media.

Nevertheless, our choice of this specific corpus, which is collected from an anonymous platform, may have influenced the frequencies and explicitness of the functions. In a later study, a larger corpus should be adopted and etic methods should be combined.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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