

The Pragmatics of Public Apologies on Social Media within the Sociolinguistic Framework of Cancel Culture

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Abstract: The advent of cancel culture in the digital world has changed the entire notion of social responsibility, particularly in the light of the increased number of social media apologies made on social media. This paper will look at how these apologies are compiled and their pragmatic and sociolinguistic perceptions. The research will address the problem of the role of linguistic strategies in the perceived sincerity and efficacy of apologies in the situations of the public backlash. The overall aim is to analyze practical aspects and discourse patterns of apology messages on various social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. This paper adopts a discourse-analytic approach to qualitative study, supported by corpus-based observations, which are biased, to examine a corpus of publicly available apologies. The findings indicate that there are routine patterns that are recurrent, such as the responsibility acceptance strategy, deflection strategy, intensifiers, and image repair strategies such as the mortification strategy and corrective action. The study concludes that the effectiveness of the apologies by the government depends on the agreement between the linguistic selection and expectations of the audience. The following are just some of the lessons that can be extended to the field of sociolinguistics and digital communication to demonstrate how the role of language in identity, accountability, and social norms negotiation in the online setting alters.

Key Words: cancel culture, pragmatics, public apologies, social media discourse, sociolinguistics.

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Introduction

Over the last few years, the concept of cancel culture has changed the information landscape of online discussions to a great extent. Cancel culture is a shared action of publicly outing and disavowing people or organizations that are seen to have transgressed social conventions, in most cases leading to reputational harm and social ostracism. This phenomenon is highly entrenched in the sociolinguistic process, and language, power, and social identity converge in the online platform (Rahman, 2024). The increasing use of social media has intensified this culture and can now easily disseminate criticism and raise the amount of scrutiny of a person.

To this end, apologies to the masses have proved to be a significant form of communication that people and organizations have been hoping to employ in recovering their damaged image. Apologies are not only meant to show regrets but are also a tactic of language to regain credibility and minimize backlash. In the case of apologies, as we have seen in the reputational repair literature, there is usually some sort of rhetorical bargaining and speakers have to strike a balance between responsibility, defence and anticipations of the audience (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024). Even the invention of some sort of a communication as an apology is a footprint of more general alterations in the digital discourse where the

feeling of urgency, visibility and interaction with the audience re-establishes the conventional expressions (Lavrent'eva & Steksova, 2025).

Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are some of the social media platforms that are at the heart of influencing the form and the response to such apologies. These media reinforce brevity, multimodality, and interactivity that influence the manner of apologizing and receiving apologies. Studies of strategies used in online apology emphasize the differences in linguistic decisions depending on context, such as platform-specific and cultural norms (Aldossary & Mahzari, 2023). The everyday interactions on the Internet reveal the manner in which the displays of apology are often informal, fragmented, and edited in response to the principles of conversation, which are open to greater sociopragmatic variations (Fadilah & Vinola, 2024).

Theoretically, the discussion of the issue of public apologies can be put in the background of pragmatics, particularly in the background of the speech act theory and politeness theory. Apologies are regarded as illocutionary acts that fulfill the role of accepting the wrongdoing and reconciliation. However, in the virtual world, such activities can be enclosed in the strategic linguistic contrasts that are influenced by the mentalities of the readers and social pressures. Other related works on internet emotional expressions, e.g., condolences, further indicate the linguistic variation as the expression of the social norms and communicative purpose in an online context (Morady Moghaddam & Tommerdahl, 2023).

Although the literature on the topic of digital discourse is growing, the intertwined examination of the phenomenon of public apologies in the joint pragmatics and sociolinguistics framework, especially in the situation with cancel culture, is still a very large gap. Even though the existing literature has examined these three factors separately, e.g., the strategies of apology, multimodal, and audience engagement, there is a gap in the literature that examines the relationship between these three aspects to establish the meaning and reception of these factors in high-stakes public situations (Yang, 2025; Spilioti & Giaxoglou, 2024).

Hence, this paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the pragmatics of social media apologies by the government. The study aims to specifically do the following:

- (1) examine the language aspects of official apologies,
- (2) discuss the pragmatic strategies used in the discourse of apology, and
- (3) Be aware of the tendencies in the way people are informed in the sphere of cancel culture.

This approach will assist the study on the path of a more in-depth understanding of how the language is performed as an instrument of negotiation, identity creator and social control instrument on the online domain.

The paper is divided into six parts. Section 1 presents the idea of cancel culture, the importance of making apologies to the people, and the aim of the research. Section 2 examines some of the major theories in pragmatics, politeness, and sociolinguistics, as well as the current research on digital discourse and cancel culture. The qualitative method, gathering data on the social media sites, and the analytical framework are outlined in Section 3. In section 4, the structural, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic analysis of the public apologies are discussed including supporting tables and figures. Section 5 provides an interpretation of the findings to the theoretical perspectives and digital communication practices. Lastly, Section 6 outlines the important insights, implications and proposes future research directions.

Literature Review

The pragmatics approach to theory also provides an opportunity to understand the way meaning is constructed in a context and, namely, via speech acts. The apologies can be classified as illocutionary acts whereby the speaker will be involved in the action of regretting or admitting that something is wrong by word. Such actions are usually premeditated long before engaging in conversation with a person over the internet, in order to create some kind of impression, such as to regain confidence or to reduce the amount of backlash. This alteration of apology as a genre of the contemporary discourse can be viewed as an indication of the increased complexity of these illocutionary functions, in the context of the public and mediated discourse (Lavrent'eva & Steksova, 2025).

Recent studies point out that discourse of online apologies tends to include hybrid forms of communication, which are an amalgamation of personal expression, institutional communication, and rhetorical positioning. As an illustration, a study of apology letters of corporations can be employed to demonstrate how speakers alter their language in different media contexts and the use of different discursive strategies to be legitimate (Yang, 2025). These results imply that speech act theory needs to be extended to explain the multimodal and interdiscursive aspect of digital communication.

One theory that has enabled us to appreciate the importance of face management in communication is the theory that has been developed by Brown and Levinson. The notion of apologies is also tightly linked with face-saving actions, as it helps to reorganize the relationships in society and restore the reputation of the speaker. However, in the case of the cancel culture, the apologies as well qualify as face-threatening behavior as publicly acknowledge the committal of evil and put the speaker at an even greater risk of scrutiny.

Studies carried out on the apology strategies on the Internet have revealed that the speakers utilize various mechanisms of politeness such as intensification, mitigation, and indirectness as a means of balancing such opposing demands. Using the example of the study of apologies of corporations on Twitter, the language techniques used to negotiate responsibility and minimize the bad publicity can be seen as bargaining (Aldossary & Mahzari, 2023). In the same line, sociopragmatic study of everyday digital communication hints that even informal apologies possess a history of politeness provisions that are culturally and contextually informed (Fadilah & Vinola, 2024).

The findings point to the relevance of the politeness theory to the conversation of the balance that users find between self-presentation and social norms in online apologies.

Sociolinguistics of digital communication is the study of the variation in the language use of social settings, identities, and power relations. Social media is dynamic in that the practice of language is affected by technological potential and socialization. The research on the subject matter focuses on the importance of language as a pointer of the bigger social processes, including identity formation, cultural standards, and ideological location (Rahman, 2024).

The major features of digital discourse are speedy evolution of the language, multimodality, and interactivity with the audience. The study of online communication involving condolences and protest discourse reveals the way the language is modified by the affordances of the online space and how social relations and group identities are also manifested in the online space (Morady Moghaddam & Tommerdahl, 2023; (Banikalef et al., 2023). Moreover, sociolinguistic studies of social media in the context of political

and cultural events show how language is turning into an ideological negotiation zone and identity construct (Kamalova, 2025).

The discourse also has a huge contribution by the media and popular discourse. Using celebrity scandals and media coverage as an example, the language is used to construct and manipulate the stories to form the perception and response of people (Zulfie et al., 2023). These findings indicate that language, media, and power are in digital space and are interrelated in a complex manner.

Cancel culture is a type of online accountability in which people and organizations are accountable to their deeds by being subject to social criticism and evaluation. This is normally achieved by making a mutual decision, moral evaluation, and obliging individuals to repent. The cancel culture studies pay special attention to its application as a social control tool, where language forms the core of the establishment of blame and redemption discourses (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024).

The dynamics of the cancel culture are directly related to the media ideologies and involvement of the audience. The social media behavior literature indicates that the social actors in high-status positions might find themselves in a position of having to cope with various demands on them to either apologize, withdraw, or reframe their behavior (Spilioti & Giaxoglou, 2024). The audience, on their part, turn into inactive participants in the process of evaluating these responses, which defines the success or the unsuccessfulness of reputational repair activities.

Also, the wider sociolinguistic studies on the policy of language and social movements prove the way in which the discourse of the masses could make an impact on the institutional practice and cultural norms (Maraf & Vanci Osam, 2023). This implies that the cancel culture is not a one-off show on the internet, but rather a process, in a broader sociolinguistic framework of bargaining power, identity and responsibility.

The fact that there is a gap in the analysis of the phenomenon of public apologies in the context of the cancel culture does not nullify the existing studies that can make a valuable contribution to the study of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and digital communication. Despite numerous research studies being done on the strategies of apology, linguistic differences and the audience behaviour, very little research has been done on how such positions can be unified in understanding how the pragmatic and sociolinguistic variables interact to determine the apology conversation.

In particular, the impact of linguistic elements, including the use of lexicon and syntactic patterns in the dialogue with social variables, including power relations and requirements to the speaker, on the effectiveness of the public apologies is under researched. This is a critical disjuncture that must be bridged in order to come up with a holistic perspective of digital communication and its contribution in the modern social processes.

Research Methodology

Figure 1 presents the overall scheme of the procedures involved in this study, which is a logical flow of the research design to the analysis procedures. The theoretical framework of the work is the implementation of the interpretive discourse analysis, which supports the process, beginning with the qualitative and mixed-method approach. It goes further to the data collection stage where 20-50 public apologies are selected on social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube based on criteria such as high engagement and backlash by the people. The acquired data are further disaggregated using the assistance of a multi-layered analytical platform, which consists of pragmatic, discourse, and sociolinguistic analyses. To be more specific, pragmatic analysis deals with the identification of speech

acts and the illocutionary force; discourse analysis deals with the selection of lexicon and structural patterns; and sociolinguistic analysis deals with the issues of power and interaction with the audience. This mixed approach, as Figure 1 shows, will ensure an in-depth understanding of how such a phenomenon as public apologies works linguistically and socially within the context of the cancel culture.

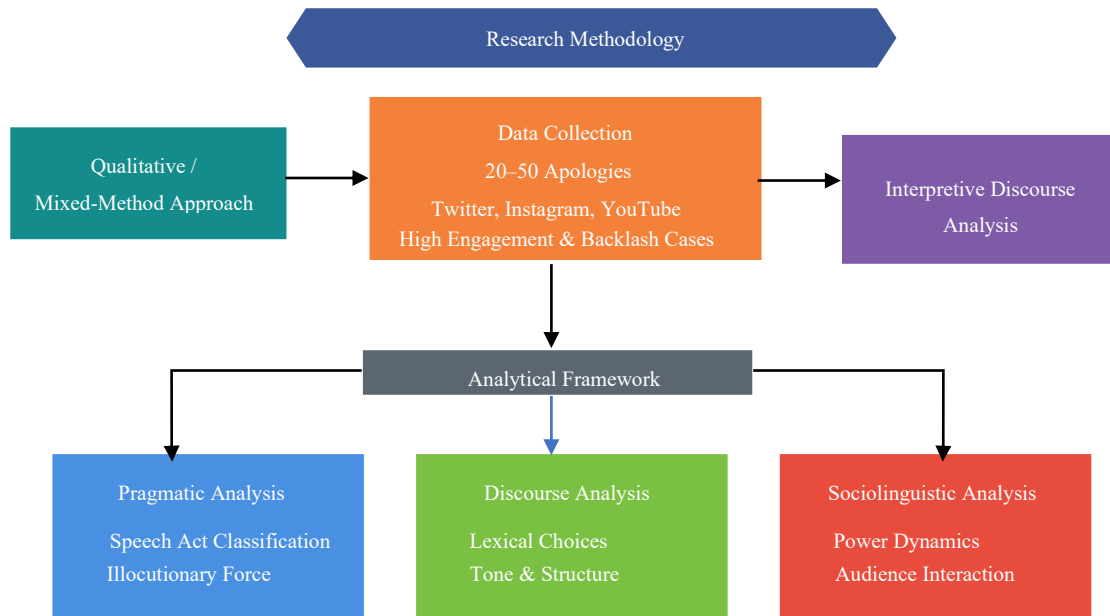


Figure 1: Research Methodology Flow Diagram for the Analysis of Public Apologies in Cancel Culture

Research Design

This research paper follows a qualitative research design yet takes the selective nature of a mixed methodological research approach to the study of the pragmatics of public apology in the sociolinguistic framework of cancel culture. The qualitative approach is also the most suitable approach that will be used in this study since it will assist in investigating the linguistic nature of the issue, contextual meaning, and communicative strategies that are inherent in the discourse of apology. At the same time, very little quantitative data, such as frequency of some linguistic patterns, are also provided to help to establish as well as validate interpretative results.

The study is based on the interpretive discourse analysis which emphasizes on the meaning construction by use of language in digital space. The pragmatics and sociolinguistics allow the analysis of the functional (what apologies do) and the social aspects (how perceived and negotiated in online communities) of apologies in the study.

Data Collection

The information that will be employed in this work is a purposive sample of 20-50 public apologies that are published on big social media platforms, i.e., Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms were selected as the most impactful ones to shape the public discourse and have an effect on the cancel culture dynamics.

The sampling is carried out based on some criteria that are aimed to render it relevant and analytic:

- High engagement: Apologies that were actively discussed and the likes, shares, comments, and press coverage of the media were measured.

- Public backlash cases where individuals (e.g., celebrities, influencers, or other members of society) were subjected to a lot of criticism or controversy and were required to publicly apologize.

Various types of apologies, such as written words, video apologies, and posting screenshots, are present in the information, which allows considering multimodal communication in its entirety and textual communication, too. All the information is collected based on the publicly available data and is ethical and transparent.

Analytical Framework

The multi-layered framework involved in the analysis includes the pragmatic approach and discourse and sociolinguistic approaches to provide a complete understanding of the strategies of apology.

Pragmatic Analysis

On a pragmatic level, the paper explores the speech acts of apologies, their intent in communication, and illocutionary force. In each apology, it is decided:

- Whether it constitutes a direct or indirect apology
- The presence of explicit expressions of regret (e.g., “I apologize,” “I’m sorry”)
- The degree of responsibility accepted or deflected

The research will help in establishing how speakers perform the act of apologizing and the extent of their statements, which are conformable to the classic conventions of sincerity and responsibility.

Discourse Analysis

The texts of apology are discussed in terms of the use of discourse analysis as the textual and linguistic properties. Key aspects include:

- ***Lexical choices:*** Use of intensifiers, hedging expressions, and emotive language
- ***Tone and structure:*** structure of apology statements having the opening recognition, explanation, justification, and closing statement.

The strategic use of language to build the narratives of remorse, justification, or self-defense is given special attention.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

The sociolinguistic dimension is related to the social context in general in which the apologies are produced and consumed. This includes:

- ***Power dynamics:*** The relationship between the speaker (e.g., celebrity, corporation) and the audience
- ***Audience interaction:*** Public responses such as comments, reposts, and acceptance or rejection of the apology

In this level of analysis, the emphasis on the role of social norms, cultural expectations, and general judgment in defining the success or failure of given apologies is highlighted, as well as the co-construction of the meaning between the speaker and the audience.

Data Analysis and Findings

In this section the author introduces the analysis of the public apologies gathered on the social media platforms and elaborates on the structural, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic features of these apologies. The results show patterns and strategic differences in the language use that are repeated and reflect the dynamics of the cancel culture.

Structural Patterns of Apologies

The analysis reveals that there are distinct structural differences in the manner in which the public apologies are drafted, especially in regard to explicitness, grammatical form, and format.

One of the main differences is created between explicit and implicit apologies. Direct expressions like "I am sorry" or "I apologize" are explicit apologies since a clear indication of the wrong action. On the other hand, implicit apologies are always founded on the non-selective statements, e.g., "There were mistakes made" or "I am sorry that it happened" and this can often tend to blur the responsibility of the speaker. The statistics show that explicit apologies are more probable to be viewed as being truthful, and implicit ones are likely to render the individuals suspicious.

The other notable tendencies is the passive voice which is used as a manipulative tool of language in an attempt to avoid the responsibility. This is because such statements as there have been mistakes made, situation was mismanaged etc. place no responsibility on the agent in the action and, consequently, less responsibility is assigned to the agent. This is in line with general trends of the wider discourse in society where people seek to excuse blame.

Apologies differ quite significantly depending on length and format. Twitter apologetic messages are often short, as have a character constraint, and Instagram and YouTube permit more detailed, wordy messages and even apology videos. Apologies with a narrative and explanatory element and appeals to emotion are more common in longer apologies, and those that are shorter often concentrate on immediate damage control.

All these structural features are summarized in Table 1, according to which it is possible to distinguish among various types of apology strategies that were identified in the dataset.

Table 1: Types of Apology Strategies

Strategy Type	Description	Example Pattern
Explicit Apology	Direct expression of regret	"I sincerely apologize..."
Implicit Apology	Indirect acknowledgment	"Mistakes were made..."
Passive Construction	Avoidance of agent	"The issue was mishandled..."
Narrative Apology	Extended explanation or storytelling	"This happened because..."
Multimodal Apology	Use of video/image alongside text	Video apology on YouTube

Pragmatic Strategies

Pragmatically, public apologies can be seen as negotiating speech acts that aim to negotiate the meaning and control audience perception.

Among the most striking aspects is the conflict of acceptance and deflection of responsibility. The apologies that are specific to taking responsibility (I am fully to blame) are more likely to produce a positive reaction in the audience. On the contrary, when statements redirect the blame to external elements (these were taken out of context), then tend to be viewed as evasions and fake.

The other important characteristic is the intensifiers used i.e. deep, true and sincere which have been used to give an emotional effect of the apology. The purpose of these linguistic signs is to increase the perceived sincerity but overuse of these linguistic signs may counter the purpose, whereby the audiences may view the apology as an acting.

Further, justification and explanation are the norm in most apologies, and speakers may provide background or reasoning for what have done. Although this may help resolve some misunderstandings, there is a risk that it may be taken to mean that one is trying to justify evil. Striking the right balance between accountability and explanation is thus paramount for determining audience reception.

The occurrence of these linguistic features is shown in Table 2, where their frequencies are presented according to the dataset distribution.

Table 2: Frequency of Linguistic Features in Apologies

Linguistic Feature	Frequency (Approx.)	Observed Function
Explicit Responsibility	High	Builds credibility
Passive Voice	Moderate	Deflects accountability
Intensifiers	High	Emphasizes sincerity
Justifications	High	Provides context / defense
Emotional Language	Moderate	Appeals to audience empathy

Image Repair Strategies

Image repair strategies are closely related to public apologies in the context of cancel culture, as speakers seek to reestablish their social and professional reputations.

Three dominant strategies are identified:

- **Denial:** The speaker denies the accusation or its validity. The given strategy is uncommon in the data set because outright denial tends to amplify the backlash.
- **Mortification:** The speaker accepts his/her responsibility and shows remorse. This is the most efficient approach regarding audience acceptance, since it aligns with expectations of accountability.
- **Corrective Action:** The speaker outlines measures to mitigate the problem and prevent it from recurring. The strategy will often be used in conjunction with mortification since it is a display of devotion to change.

Such strategies are frequently found together, creating a multi-layered reputation management strategy. An example of a normal apology includes mortification, explanation, and corrective action.

The connection among these factors is depicted in the structure shown in Figure 2, which presents a generalized model of apology construction.

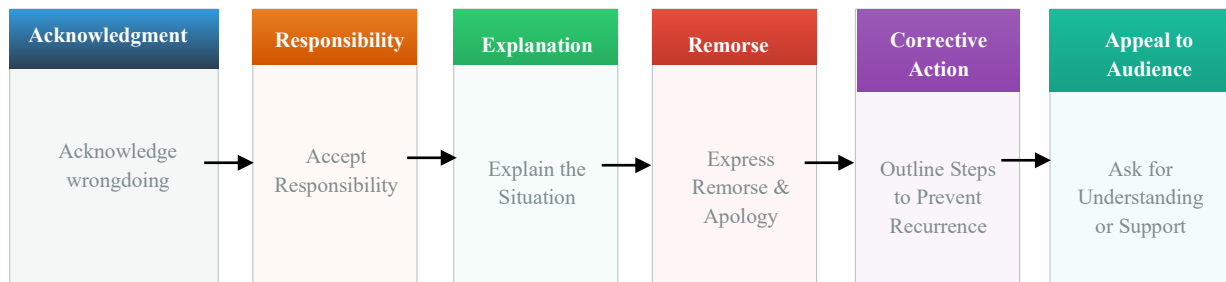


Figure 2: Apology Structure Model

Sociolinguistic Observations

In the sociolinguistic analysis, it is found that social context, power relations, and audience expectations play an important role in the creation of public apologies.

The impact of audience pressure is among the most important. Users of social media are also actively involved in the appraisal and reaction to apologies, leading to a feedback loop that contributes to the construction of the apology. The elevated rates of the social investigation tend to make the speakers more formal with a carefully constructed language.

It is also very important that power relations exist. The apologies of celebrities/public figures are different from those of a regular user. Famous people are more likely to use more tactical, professional language, usually buttressed by PR teams, while non-celebrities create 20-50 apologies.

It has been proven that there is cultural diversity in how people apologize. The factors that influence the formulation and understanding of apologies are linguistic norms, politeness, and accountability expectations. To illustrate this, some emphasize collective responsibility, while others emphasize individual responsibility.

These results emphasize the need to consider the sociocultural context in the analysis of digital communication.

Audience Response Trends

The extent of audience reception is a predictor of the success or failure of public apologies.

An important trend observed is the difference between acceptance and rejection. The apologies, which consist of clear responsibility, emotional sincerity, and corrective action, are likely to be accepted. On the contrary, individuals who are seen as indistinct, defensive, and insincere tend to be criticized further.

Virality is another important aspect. The more viral it is, the more scrutiny and variety of reactions there are among the audience, and the harder it becomes to find a consensus with the apology. Even properly calculated apologies cannot always meet the expectations of the entire audience in such situations.

The audience's reaction is usually polarized, reflecting the larger social and ideological differences. An apology might be enough for some users, whereas others will still want them to be held further accountable.

Discussion

The results of this paper support the applicability of pragmatic and sociolinguistic theories in the interpretation of the public apologies in cancel culture. In terms of speech act theory, apologies are illocutionary acts that serve to restore social balance. Still, the data provided show that their success is highly dependent on the strategic use of linguistic factors. Direct expressions of apology, which explicitly admit the wrong, are more in line with traditional expectations of illocutionary force, in contrast to indirect or diluted ones, which tend to dilute the perceived communicative act. In the same way, the concepts of politeness theory can be seen in the compromise between face-saving and face-threatening strategies. Orators seek to maintain their image in the community's eyes while meeting the requirements of accountability, leading to the emergence of a hybrid discourse that is sincere and strategically presents them.

Pragmatics plays a key role in determining whether apologies issued by authorities are perceived as genuine. The analysis shows that sincerity is not only about what is said but also about how it is said. Intensifiers, emotional expressions, and explicit responsibility markers are linguistic features used to create authenticity, but when overused, can give the impression of insincerity or performativity. This is even more complicated by the strategies of passive constructions and justifications, since in most cases the audience takes it to mean an escape from responsibility. That way, pragmatic competence, specifically the capacity to fit linguistic options to the contextual needs, becomes one of the most influential factors in the acceptance or rejection of an apology.

The other important revelation is the role of digital audiences as moral judges in evaluating public apologies. Social media also allows the audience to engage in real-time communication in a group, as opposed to the traditional communication setting, where the apology was a form of negotiation. The audience's responses through comments, sharing, and reactions have a dynamic influence on the course of reputational repair. This type of participatory process results in some form of decentralized moral regulation, in which collective opinion establishes social norms. The article demonstrates that, when it comes to digital apologies, audiences are likely to require more than just verbal apologies, making the case more challenging and riskier.

Comparing two discourses of apology in the traditional context and the public apologies in the cancel culture, it is possible to identify the differences in the structure and role, as well as the acceptance. The two forms of traditional apologies offered are typically in a low-profile or limited context, focus on interpersonal reconciliation, and receive little scrutiny. Conversely, digital apologies are very performative, multimodal, and influenced by the capabilities of social media. Have to meet a wide range of, and sometimes opposing, audience demands and risk going viral and facing a lengthy wave of criticism. The consequences of such changes for linguistic theory and digital communication ethics are immense. Theoretically, suggest extending the current paradigms of pragmatics and sociolinguistics to address problems in mediated communication. On the ethical front, pose questions about authenticity, responsibility, and the pressures of social judgment in the virtual world, and note that a higher level of sophistication is required for communicating in the digital era.

Conclusion

The pragmatics of social media apology has been presented in the paper as an aspect of the sociolinguistic phenomenon called cancel culture, and it has been found that linguistic strategies, social norms, and online processes predetermine the textual strategies of apologies on social media. The results

also show that structural characteristics such as explicit recognition, active voice, and a logical overall narrative structure have a significant impact on audience perception. Practical factors, such as the admission of responsibility, proper use of intensifiers, and moderation of justification, are critical to the perception of the apology's credibility. Additionally, image repair tactics such as mortification and corrective action are identified as more effective at restoring credibility than denial or deflection. The paper also highlights the significance of pragmatic competence, as the success of the government's apologies is determined not only by their content but also by the language strategies used in specific contexts. Sociolinguistically, cancel culture is more of an online form of accountability, in which viewers are co-opted into assessing and imposing social norms. This emphasizes the modernity of the language in its developmental stage today, becoming a bargaining chip for identity, power, and legitimacy on the Internet. Further research can take this area a step further and expand on it through offering cross-cultural comparisons of the strategies of apology, examining a newly emerged phenomenon in the form of AI-generated apologies, and researching longitudinally to trace the evolution of the discourse of apology. These directions will help gain a better understanding of communication practices in the digital era.

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