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## A Comparative Investigation into Interpersonal Meaning of

### Two Corporate Apology Letters

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#### 1. Introduction

Companies, like individuals, are supposed to remedy unfavorable situation and restore reputation after alleged wrongdoing. Corporate apology letter is an important genre helping companies achieve such aims in an unfavorable business setting, through which companies seek to both attract new customers and maintain profitable relationships with existing ones (Rapp & Collins, 1989). However it receives less notice than it deserves in applied linguistic research despite plenty of business theoretical and practical studies on this corporate act. This study takes a linguistic turn to such genre on the theoretical basis of systemic functional grammar and in so doing it restricts its lens to appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005) within interpersonal meaning of language use while making a comparison between two apology letters. One of the letters was given by Toyota, a Japanese automobile corporation, apologizing for its recalled defective vehicles and its wordings have aroused much criticism from its customers involved and the general public; the other letter was extended by JetBlue, an American airline, expressing regret for its delayed flight service and its apology letter is widely taken as acceptable.

As I have found and confirmed in this study, interpersonal and evaluative language choices on interactive plane of such a high-stake genre are so important that they make a difference in acceptability and success of corporate apology.

#### 2. Corporate apology: framing the context

Apology in business context is viewed as “an expression of regret that acknowledges fault, is accompanied by steps ensuring that the harmful act will not occur again, and is coupled with compensation for the harmed party” (Conlon & Murray, 1996). So apology letters will be delivered by companies usually in the name and voice of the CEO or president as is concerned in this study when a negatively unexpected situation arises. Undesirable situation in this study involves faulty products and delayed service as the two apology letters unfold. Generally when delivering corporate apologies CEO cannot send personal letters to everyone involved so an official, well-crafted and timely letter is often on the company’s website. Therefore, readers of corporate apology letters are not only customers or stakeholders affected but probably include the general public as well. In other words, with regard to this genre, readers are a wider group of people than addressees.

Most of the time, companies think highly of public apology as it marks the difference between the rebirth of a company and decline after a public relation crisis (Taryn, 2002). As a response to public expectations of ethical corporate behavior, the primary communicative purpose of corporate apology is to protect a company’s reputation and trustworthiness and restore consumer confidence and public opinion. As Taryn comments, corporate apology has the power of “mitigating fault, repairing a damaged relationship, and demonstrating a commitment to the public to take social responsibility for the

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problems it may have caused" (2002, p. 84). But importantly, readership is critical to the success of the communicative purpose as acceptance of an apology depends on whether the readers find the apology acceptable (Conlon & Murray, 1996). So writers of corporate apology letters try to intervene in texts, make evaluations, interact and build solidarity with readers. Such a discursive feature justifies and sustains this study's focus on appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005) within interpersonal meaning of language use because these evaluative linguistic resources are frequently employed by writers to "to negotiate evaluations with their addressees and to construct solidarity around shared values" (Thompson, 2013, p. 80).

### **3. Appraisal system in SFL: an overview of the literature**

Language serves and performs "ideational", "interpersonal" and "textual" functions and meanings in texts (M. A. K. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013; Thompson, 2013). While ideational meaning carries out representation of information and ideas delivered, interpersonal meaning exercises important functions, facilitations and influences on the accomplishment of communicative purposes of discourse. As M. A. K. Halliday (1979, pp. 66-67) comments, interpersonal meaning functions as "a continuous motif or colouring" to ideas communicated throughout discourse and "the effect is cumulative". Interpersonal meaning concerns negotiating writer's opinion and evaluation, engaging and building solidarity with readers (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & White, 2005; Thompson, 2013). Appraisal system is developed by Martin (2000; 2005) mostly as semantic resources of attitudinal meaning complementing Halliday's modality (1994) within interpersonal functions which relates to writer's opinion concerning the likelihood of various events.

Appraisal is an interpersonal system at the level of discourse semantics, realized by three interacting domains: 'engagement', 'attitude' and 'graduation' (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005; Thompson, 2013). Engagement deals with sourcing attitudes and discursive spaces around opinions in discourse so it is not appropriate for this study to incorporate engagement resources as the genre of corporate apology letter does not aim communicatively to negotiate on sourcing facts and ideas. Therefore I will focus on attitude and graduation. Attitude is concerned with writer's emotional reactions, judgments and evaluation of behavior and things, which in this study each unfavorable business event touches. Graduation refers to the ways that writer intensifies or weakens his or her evaluations. Less refutably, under the circumstances of corporate apology writer attempts to employ attitude and graduation to convey their attitudes in a bid to gain forgiveness and understanding of those who are involved and mitigate the adverse situation.

### **4. Methodology**

This study based on attitude and graduation resources in appraisal system (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005) aims to investigate the differences in forms, frequencies and functions of these resources used in two corporate apology letters collected. The contrastive analysis is made with reference to parameters of evaluative entity, evaluative expression and evaluative stance (Hyland & Tse, 2005a, 2005b). Subsequently, linguistic evidence will be built up to underpin the public's assessment of these two apology letters.

The three parameters are re-adjusted from Hyland and Tse's definitions to the business setting of this study. Evaluative entity signifies what the proposition following that refers to, either the unfavorably unexpected event, customers' sufferings, the company's actions or the company's

reputation. Evaluative expression denotes whether the writer uses affect or appreciation as well as attitude or graduation resources. Evaluative stance refers to the use of positive or negative tone of voice. All the resources are coded in these two letters, and please see Appendix One (Toyota's apology letter), Appendix Two (JetBlue's apology letter) and Appendix Three (Coding scheme).

In a nutshell, this research tries to inquire the following questions: (1) what attitude and graduation resources do the two letters use? (2) what are the significant frequencies? (3) what the differences are between the use of these resources in terms of evaluative entity, expression and stance?

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Similarity in the use of attitude and graduation

In both Toyota and JetBlue apology letters, attitude and graduation resources are heavily used by writers to express their attitudinal involvement, concern and their evaluations.

In Toyota's apology letter of 300 words, there are 28 instances of attitude resources and 17 cases of graduation. They account for 15% of the whole words and in other words the writer makes more than one evaluation resource every 10 words. These attitude and graduation uses show the CEO and the company's attitudinal involvement and concern about the unexpected event and its impact on the company's reputation. Besides, the writer stamps far more positive tone of voice than negative one, in which there are 40 cases of positive tone of voice and 7 cases of negative one, in order that optimism is essential in this genre to exhibit the company and its administration's confidence to put right the adverse situation and regain customers' hope and trust in the company. Similarly, 45 instances of attitudinal resources and 22 cases of graduation appear in JetBlue's apology letter of 330 words. Alternatively they make up more than 20% of the whole words, which means the writer use two evaluative items every 10 words. It repeatedly informs us that the frequent use of positive attitude and graduation shows JetBlue Airline attaches importance and commitment to the delayed service and inconvenience incurred, through which to build solidarity with customers and the general public. Examples are listed below.

- (1) Some of the actions we've taken are unprecedented [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**]. Stopping production is never an easy [**- APPRECIATION (complexity)**] decision – but we're confident [**+ AFFECT (security)**] it's the right [**+ APPRECIATION (valuation)**] thing to do for our customers. Ensuring your safety [**+ APPRECIATION (quality)**] is our highest [**+ FORCE (enhancement)**] priority [**+ APPRECIATION (valuation)**]. We'll continue [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] to do everything [**+ FORCE (quantity)**] we can to meet – and exceed [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] – your expectations, and justify [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] your continued [**+ APPRECIATION (quality)**] trust in Toyota. [Toyota's apology letter]

In the last paragraph of Toyota's letter regarding the actions that have been taken, the writer labels the company's actions unprecedented, which leaves a strong impression on customers that the company is making every effort. Although 'easy' is negative appreciation of complexity but negation of 'never' before it and contrastive emphasis of 'but we're confident...' (signaling writer's affect of security) minimize discouragement and maximize endeavor and hope. Other positive appreciation 'your safety', 'our highest priority', 'continue', 'exceed your expectations', and 'justify' all contribute to display of company's commitment and assurance.

- (2) Words cannot express [**+ FORCE (enhancement)**] how truly [**+ FORCE (intensity)**] sorry [**-**

**AFFECT (happiness)]** we are for the anxiety [- **APPRECIATION (impact)]**, frustration [- **APPRECIATION (impact)]** and [+ **FORCE (intensity)]** inconvenience [- **APPRECIATION (impact)]** that you, your family, friends and colleagues [+ **FORCE (intensity)]** experienced. This is especially [+ **FORCE (intensity)]** saddening [- **APPRECIATION (impact)]** because JetBlue was founded on the promise [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)]** of bringing humanity [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)]** back to air travel, and making the experience of flying happier [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)]** and easier [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)]** for everyone [+ **FORCE (quantity)]** who chooses to fly with us. We know we failed to deliver on this promise [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)]** last week. [JetBlue's apology letter]

In this highly attitudinal paragraph, the writer intends to show his caring for customers' suffering, mitigate customers' disappointment and shorten the distance with customers, which can be evidenced by the intense use of appreciation and force. Take the first sentence for example. The writer conveys affect of unhappiness for the customers' negative feelings and experiences (anxiety, frustration and inconvenience). This is further intensified by consecutive intervention of writer's appreciation and caring and by writer's recognition of expanded group of people affected (you, your family, friends and colleagues).

The forms and frequencies of attitude and graduation in the two letters are listed in Table 1.

Toyota's apology letter		JetBlue's apology letter	
Forms	Frequencies	Forms	Frequencies
<b>Affect</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Affect</b>	<b>5</b>
Happiness	1	Happiness	4
Inclination	0	Inclination	1
Security	2	Security	0
Satisfaction	0	Satisfaction	0
<b>Appreciation</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>Appreciation</b>	<b>37</b>
Quality	11	Quality	14
Complexity	3	Complexity	2
Impact	7	Impact	20
Valuation	3	Valuation	1
<b>Judgment</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Judgment</b>	<b>3</b>
Social sanction	1	Social sanction 2	2
Social esteem	0	Social esteem 1	1
<b>Force</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Force</b>	<b>21</b>
Quantity	10	Quantity	9
Intensity	2	Intensity	7
Enhancement	4	Enhancement	5
<b>Focus</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>1</b>
Valeur	1	Valeur	1
Fulfillment	0	Fulfillment	0
<b>Tone of voice</b>		<b>Tone of voice</b>	
positive	40	positive	47

negative	7	negative	24
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Table 1 forms and frequencies of attitude and graduation

Interestingly from the table above, appreciation is used far more than affect and judgment in both two apology letters. Linguistically, affect deals with the emotional responses of the appraiser, whereas judgment and appreciation focus on the qualities of the appraised entity (Martin & White, 2005; Thompson, 2013). Writer as the appraiser inserts less emotional responses possibly because in corporate apology letter what writer is supposed to do is not overwhelmingly remorse for unsatisfactory services or products. As Wagatsuma and Rossett argue, a meaningful apology must communicate five essential components: (1) the harmful act happened, caused injury, and was wrongful; (2) the apologizer was at fault and regrets participating in the act; (3) the apologizer will compensate the injured party; (4) the act will not happen again; and (5) the apologizer intends to work for future good relations (Wagatsuma & Rossett, 1986).

### 5.2 Contrastive analysis

Even though Toyota's apology letter and JetBlue's apology letter are of the same genre and share in common much similarity mentioned above, Toyota's apology letter is not perceived as satisfactory one but "an amateur hour" (Hoffman, 2012). At the beginning of the letter, the writer inserts densely appreciation as follow "For more than 50 years **[+ FORCE (quantity)]**, Toyota has provided you with safe **[+ APPRECIATION (quality)]**, reliable **[+ APPRECIATION (quality)]**, quality **[+ APPRECIATION (quality)]** vehicles and first-rate **[+ APPRECIATION (quality)]** service." However, the evaluative entities carrying these positive attitude are not customers' disappointing experiences but the company's service and products, which to some extent aroused the general public's disgust. As Hoffman (2012) comments, Toyota has just issued a recall that impacts more than 2 million cars but the company itself is leading with heritage and adjectives.

Another significant difference between Toyota and JetBlue apology letters is evaluative stance, in which JetBlue uses more negative tone of voice than Toyota. In contrast with positive tone of voice on the company's actions and commitments, negative tone of voice are employed on the company's affect and remorse for the delayed service and customers' suffering and in the meantime on the company's repulsion against the repercussions of the delayed service on customers. Take the following sentence for example. "Many of you **[+ FORCE (quantity)]** were either stranded **[- APPRECIATION (impact)]**, delayed **[- APPRECIATION (impact)]** or **[+ FORCE (enhancement)]** had flights cancelled **[- APPRECIATION (impact)]** following the severe **[- APPRECIATION (complexity)]** winter ice storm in the Northeast." The writer understands customers have had a terrible experience (stranded, delayed or flights cancelled). All the three consecutive negative appreciation of impact shows the writer is taking the same position with customers against these unpleasant repercussions and in this way these expressions can help reduce the distance between the writer or the company and customers and build interpersonal solidarity between them.

## 6. Conclusion

Interpersonal meaning plays an important role in the genre of corporate apology letter, in which the writer aims to alleviate the disappointment of people concerned, repair a damaged relationship and demonstrating a commitment to the public to take corrective actions. As is observed in this study, frequent use of appreciation of quality and impact help to exhibit the writer and the company's

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involvement and caring about customers' suffering and emphasize their commitment to put things right. Besides, positive tone of voice render customers and the public much hope of the company's future operation. But ideal effects can be achieved on the premise that evaluative expressions and stance are stamped on the right evaluative entities which are most closely pertinent to the exigence of the genre.

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## Jetblue\_apology letter

Dear JetBlue Customers,

We are sorry [- **AFFECT (happiness)**] and embarrassed [- **AFFECT (happiness)**]. But most of all [+ **FORCE (quantity)**], we are deeply [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] sorry [- **AFFECT (happiness)**]. Last week was the worst [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] operational week in JetBlue's seven year history [+ **FORCE (quantity)**]. Many of you [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] were either stranded [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**], delayed [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] or [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] had flights cancelled [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] following the severe [- **APPRECIATION (complexity)**] winter ice storm in the Northeast. The storm disrupted [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] the movement of aircraft, and, more importantly [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**], disrupted [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] the movement of JetBlue's pilot and inflight crewmembers who were depending on those planes to get them to the airports where they were scheduled [+ **JUDGMENT (social sanction)**] to serve you. With the busy [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] President's Day weekend upon us, rebooking opportunities were scarce [- **APPRECIATION (valuation)**] and hold times at 1-800-JETBLUE were unusually [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] long [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] or not even [+ **FOCUS (valeur)**] available [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**], further hindering [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] our recovery efforts [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**].

Words cannot express [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] how truly [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] sorry [- **AFFECT (happiness)**] we are for the anxiety [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**], frustration [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] and [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] inconvenience [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] that you, your family, friends and colleagues [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] experienced. This is especially [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] saddening [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] because JetBlue was founded on the promise [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] of bringing humanity [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] back to air travel, and making the experience of flying happier [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] and easier [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] for everyone [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] who chooses to fly with us. We know we failed to deliver on this promise [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] last week.

We are committed [+ **AFFECT (inclination)**] to you, our valued [+ **JUDGMENT (social esteem)**] customers, and are taking immediate [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] corrective [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] steps to regain your confidence [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] in us. We have begun putting a comprehensive [+ **APPRECIATION (complexity)**] plan in place to provide better [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] and more [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] timely [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] information to you, more [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] tools and resources for our crewmembers and improved [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] procedures for handling operational difficulties. Most importantly [+ **FORCE (intensity)**], we have published the JetBlue Airways Customer Bill of Rights – our official commitment [+ **JUDGMENT (social sanction)**] to you of how we will handle operational interruptions [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**] going forward – including details of compensation. We invite you to learn more [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] at [jetblue.com](http://jetblue.com).

You deserved better [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] - a lot [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] better [+

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**APPRECIATION (quality)** - from us last week and we let you down [- **APPRECIATION (impact)**]. Nothing is more [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] important [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] than regaining your trust [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] and all [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] of us here hope you will give us the opportunity to once again [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] welcome [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] you onboard and provide you the positive [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] JetBlue experience you have come to expect from us.

Sincerely,

David Neeleman,

Founder and CEO

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## Toyota\_apology letter

Dear Toyota Customers:

For more than 50 years [+ **FORCE (quantity)**], Toyota has provided you with safe [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**], reliable [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**], quality [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] vehicles and first-rate [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] service. I am truly [+ **FORCE (intensity)**] sorry [- **AFFECT (happiness)**] for the concern our recalls have caused, and want you to know we're doing everything [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] we can – as fast [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] as we can – to make things right.

We have launched a comprehensive [+ **APPRECIATION (complexity)**] plan to permanently [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] fix the vehicles we've recalled because in rare [+ **APPRECIATION (valuation)**] instances, accelerator pedals can, over time [+ **FORCE (quantity)**], become slow [- **APPRECIATION (quality)**] to release or get stuck. We know what's causing this and what we have to do to fix it. We've tested our solution rigorously [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**], and we are confident [+ **AFFECT (security)**] that it works.

We're working day and night [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] with Toyota dealers to make our recalls simple [- **APPRECIATION (complexity)**] and trouble-free [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**]. Here are some of the things we're doing:

1. The precision [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] parts we've engineered to reinforce [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] the pedals are already [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] being shipped and dealers are being trained to make the repair.
2. We're writing to all [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] customers affected by the Pedal recall, as well as the Floor Mat recall, to let them know how to schedule a convenient [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] appointment with their local dealer.
3. Many [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] of our dealers will be working extended [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] hours – some of them 24/7 [+ **FORCE (quantity)**] – and adding [+ **APPRECIATION (impact)**] staff to get through the repairs as quickly [+ **APPRECIATION (quality)**] as possible [+ **FORCE (intensity)**].
4. We've temporarily [- **FORCE (enhancement)**] halted production of these models to focus fully [+ **FOCUS (valeur)**] on fixing this problem in the vehicles that are on the road. Our entire [+ **FORCE (enhancement)**] organization of 172,000 North American employees and dealership personnel is committed [+ **JUDGMENT (social sanction)**] to you.

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Some of the actions we've taken are unprecedented [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**]. Stopping production is never an easy [**- APPRECIATION (complexity)**] decision – but we're confident [**+ AFFECT (security)**] it's the right [**+ APPRECIATION (valuation)**] thing to do for our customers. Ensuring your safety [**+ APPRECIATION (quality)**] is our highest [**+ FORCE (enhancement)**] priority [**+ APPRECIATION (valuation)**]. We'll continue [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] to do everything [**+ FORCE (quantity)**] we can to meet – and exceed [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] – your expectations, and justify [**+ APPRECIATION (impact)**] your continued [**+ APPRECIATION (quality)**] trust in Toyota.

Sincerely,  
Jim Lentz  
President and Chief Operating Officer  
Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

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**Personal Biostatement**

Feng JIANG is a lecturer and director of business English office with Harbin Normal University and he was the winner of Cambridge International Business English Teacher Competition and won a funded study trip at Cambridge University. His research interest includes disciplinary discourse, corpus analysis and genre study. He has got his articles published in the journals of *Contemporary Linguistics*, *China ESP Journal* and *Business Language and Communication*.