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A Socio-pragmatic Analysis of Ambiguity in Digital Platform Crisis Discourse

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تحليل براكماتيكي اجتماعي للغموض في خطاب الأزمات على المنصات الرقمية

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المستخلص

تتناول الدراسة الحالية كيفية استخدام المنصات الرقمية تحديداً تويتر، فيسبوك، إنستغرام، زووم، وكوكل لغة غامضة في اعتذاراتهم عند الأزمات. ومن خلال تحليل براكماتي اجتماعي لعشر نصوص اعتذار، تبحث الدراسة الاستراتيجيات اللغوية التي تسهم في خلق فجوة للتهرب من تحمل المسؤولية. وتشير النتائج إلى وجود ثلاث وسائل رئيسية للاعتذار وهي (١) شيوع استخدام المصطلحات الغامضة (مثل "بعض المستخدمين" و (٢) التعتيم على المسؤولية من خلال الأسماء المشتقة من الأفعال مثل "سوء فهم" (٣) التحول في النغمة اللغوية من العاطفية إلى البيروقراطية. تختلف هذه الاستراتيجيات باختلاف نوع الأزمة؛ إذ تقابل الانتهاكات الأخلاقية باعتذارات طويلة و مراوغة، في حين يقابل الخلل الفني باعتذارات أقصر ولكنها بنفس القدر من الغموض. وتبين الدراسة كيف تعمل اعتذارات المنصات الرقمية كأدوات لإدارة السمعة بدلاً من كونها ليات حقيقية للمسائلة، إذ تحافظ على النفوذ مع تقديم تعويض محدود. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الغموض، الاعتذارات، البراكماتية الاجتماعية، الاتصال في الأزمات.

Abstract

The current study examines the use of ambiguity strategies in crisis apologies issued by digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Zoom and Google. By a socio-pragmatic analysis of 10 official apologies, the accountability gaps created via linguistic strategies are examined. The analysis reveals the employment of three main strategies: (1) the use of imprecise expressions like "some users", (2) responsibility shifting through nominalized terms such as "misunderstanding," and (3) a change in tone from empathetic to formal. These strategies even vary depending on the nature of the crisis where ethical breaches tend to establish long yet evasive apologies, whereas technical problems are addressed with shorter but similarly vague statements. The study concludes that the apologies serve primarily to protect corporate reputation rather than to provide sincere acknowledgment. **Keywords:** ambiguity, socio-pragmatics, apology

1. Introduction

In today's digital age, media platform apologies have evolved into deliberately composed messages that serve multiple functions such as acknowledging crises and safeguarding corporate interests. This study examines the means by which major digital companies like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Zoom, and Google strategically use ambiguous language in their crisis communications. Whether addressing technical glitches, security lapses, or ethical dilemmas, these platforms tend to issue statements that appear responsible while subtly deflecting full accountability through calculated linguistic choices. The main problem this research addresses is the deliberate creation of an accountability gap through specific language strategies used in corporate apologies. Although these platforms frequently issue public apologies, they often rely on ambiguity to preserve existing power dynamics, blur responsibility and downplay faults. To explore this linguistic case, the study analyzes 10 apology

statements issued between 2020 and 2025, focusing on seven linguistic devices. The seven linguistic devices are modality, hedging, passive constructions, nominalization, vague quantifiers, presuppositions, and transition markers. Each of these is coded for the violations of Gricean maxim, functions of politeness, and impacts of speech act, highlighting how those platforms balance accountability and self-protection throughout crisis. By systematically mapping these linguistic tactics, the study provides new insights into how these platforms manage reputational risk through language. Ultimately, this research illuminates the sophisticated ways institutional actors use language to navigate crises while preserving their dominant positions in the digital ecosystem.

2. Ambiguity in Institutional Discourse Ambiguity, in linguistic terms, refers to the property of an expression allowing more than one interpretation (Crystal, 2003: 18) often arising from lexical, syntactic, or pragmatic uncertainty (Crystal, 2003: 344-345). It can manifest as lexical ambiguity (e.g., polysemy), structural ambiguity (due to grammatical arrangement), or pragmatic ambiguity (context-dependent interpretation). In institutional discourse, ambiguity is rarely accidental. Eisenberg (1984: 230) argues that organizations employ ambiguity as a communicative resource, enabling them to address multiple audiences, avoid rigid commitments, and adapt flexibly to evolving scenarios. Fairclough (1995: 113-114) shows bureaucratic language uses ambiguity (e.g., nominalization) to mystify agency, an ideological practice that deflects accountability. Thus, ambiguity is best understood not merely as a linguistic deficiency but as a purposeful strategy of institutional self-preservation.

3. Theoretical Insights from Socio-Pragmatics

This study integrates theories from pragmatics and sociolinguistics to build a framework capable of decoding ambiguity in institutional apologies.

3.2 Grice's Cooperative Principle and Ambiguity

Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) posits that effective communication relies on speakers adhering to four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. These maxims guide how much to say, the truthfulness of what is said, the relevance of information, and the clarity of expression. When deliberately violated, they generate implicatures. Implicatures are meanings that are implied rather than directly stated (Grice, 1975: 45). In corporate crisis discourse, such violations are often strategic rather than accidental, enabling institutions to manage face and accountability through ambiguity. Institutional apologies frequently violate the maxims of Quantity (e.g., withholding full details) and Manner (e.g., vagueness), generating ambiguity that protects institutional image (Beard, 2000: 19). These pragmatic violations signal intentional discursive choices, especially when the language of apology is carefully composed to acknowledge discontent while minimizing liability. This study focuses on the pragmatic effects of such violations by identifying linguistic structures commonly used in public apologies to construct ambiguity and manage corporate image. The following structures will further guide the analysis.

3.2.1 Modality

Modals such as "may", "might", "could", and "would" express tentativeness or hypotheticality, often softening the speaker's commitment to truth or action. In doing so, they violate Grice's (1975) maxims of Quality by introducing uncertainty, and Quantity by withholding full information. *This linkage is developed by Hyland (1998: 72), who applies Gricean theory to hedging.* Example: "We might review our data policy." Hyland (1998: 5) explains that modality is central to hedging and allows speakers to adjust their level of commitment to propositions, which is a common feature in institutional discourse.

3.2.2 Hedging

Hedges like "possibly," "somewhat," or "to a degree" reduce the strength of statements and introduce interpretive flexibility. Prince et al. (1982: 84) argue that hedging in professional discourse helps avoid confrontation or over-commitment. Holmes (1988: 23) also finds that hedges serve to distance speakers from full assertiveness, often used in texts where clarity may pose reputational risks. Example: "Some users might have experienced delays." Such hedging commonly entails a violation of Grice's maxims of Quality and Manner, as it compromises informativeness and clarity. According to Fraser (2010: 21), hedging reflects a speaker's reluctance to make strong commitments to the truth of a proposition, thereby weakening the quality of the conveyed information. Similarly, Cutting (2002: 41) explains that hedging may obscure directness and reduce clarity, thus infringing the manner maxim. By deliberately introducing uncertainty or imprecision, hedges create space for plausible deniability and interpretive ambiguity, allowing speakers to remain noncommittal while appearing cooperative (Hyland, 1996: 437; Caffi, 1999: 887).

3.2.3 Passive Voice

Passive voice structures allow speakers to obscure agency by omitting the subject responsible for an action. Grice (1975: 50) categorizes this under violations of the maxim of Manner, which requires clarity and avoidance of obscurity. Beard (2000: 23) emphasizes that in political and institutional discourse, passive voice is frequently used to distance speakers from responsibility.

Example: "Errors were made."

3.2.4 Nominalization

Nominalization involves turning actions into abstract nouns (e.g., "decision," "failure"). Halliday (1994: 352) identifies this as a method of increasing formality and abstraction, often at the cost of clarity and agency. Fairclough (1995: 111) notes that in bureaucratic texts, nominalization is used to shift focus away from responsible actors. Such use of nominalization often violates the Maxim of Manner, which demands clarity and avoidance of obscurity (Grice, 1975: 46).

Example: "There was a failure in communication."

3.2.5 Vague Quantifiers

Words such as "some," "many," or "a number of" lack precision and obscure scale. Vague quantifiers constitute underinforming, which later Gricean scholars (e.g., Levinson 1983: 106) recognize as a clear violation of the Quantity maxim, by failing to 'make your contribution as informative as is required' for the exchange." Channell (1994:17) demonstrates that vague quantifiers ('some', 'many') are systematically employed in English to strategically withhold precise information while maintaining cooperative appearances.

Example: "A small number of users were affected."

3.2.6 Presupposition

Presuppositions imply unstated information. Levinson (1983:177) explains that this mechanism can serve to manipulate interpretation subtly. Yule (1996: 25) similarly notes its utility in evading explicit blame. Example: "We are continuing to improve our systems." (Presupposes prior failure)

3.2.7 Transition Markers

Transitions such as "however," "that said," and "nonetheless" can signal shifts in topic or tone that dilute prior admissions. Schiffrin (1987: 142) analyzes these markers as tools for controlling coherence and redirecting attention in discourse.

Example: "We understand your concern. That said, our team is working hard to prevent this in the future."

3.3 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987: 61–62) foundational *Politeness Theory* frames communication as a negotiation of *face*, the public self-image speakers maintain. Central to this model are:

1. **Face-threatening acts (FTAs):** Actions (e.g., apologies) that risk damaging either:

- a. *Positive face* (desire for approval)
- b. *Negative face* (desire for autonomy)

2. **Politeness strategies:** Mitigation tactics to redress FTAs, where institutions predominantly employ *negative politeness* (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 190).

3.4 Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962: 94) and Searle (1969: 30) conceptualize speech acts as utterances that perform actions, such as apologizing, promising, or asserting. In institutional discourse, apologies are expressive acts aimed at repairing social breaches. However, the performativity of these acts can be diluted by ambiguity. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 208) emphasize that institutional apologies often prefer indirectness to protect organizational identity. This undermines the sincerity typically expected in direct apologies, demonstrating how speech act realization is pragmatically modulated in institutional contexts.

4. Operationalization of the Analytical Model and Study Methodology

This study examines strategic ambiguity in institutional apologies through an integrated socio-pragmatic framework combining Gricean maxims, politeness theory, and speech act analysis. The methodology operationalizes these theories by identifying seven linguistic structures that function as ambiguity markers, each analyzed for their violation of conversational norms, face-management strategies, and illocutionary effects. The coding matrix, Table (1), below systematically links linguistic structures to theoretical concepts: Table (1): Linguistic Structures and Their Pragmatic Functions

| Structure | Maxim Violated | Politeness Function | Speech Act Impact |
|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Modality (e.g., “may”) | Quality, Quantity | Negative politeness | Weakens commitment |
| Hedging(e.g., “somewhat”) | Manner, Quality | Face-protection | Creates plausible deniability |
| Passive Voice | Manner, Quantity | Deference | Obscures agency |
| Nominalization | Manner | Impersonalization | Abstracts responsibility |
| Vague Quantifiers | Quantity | Understatement | Minimizes perceived impact |
| Presuppositions | Manner, Relation | Implicit meaning | Assumes shared knowledge |
| Transition Markers | Relation | Topic-shifting | Redirects focus |

Moreover, the dataset for this study consists of 10 verified apology statements (2020–2025) from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and Google, selected based on three criteria: (1) official platform issuance during reputational crises, (2) presence of ≥ 3 ambiguity markers from Table 1, and (3) minimum 50-word length. Statements were sourced from verified corporate accounts or reputable media transcripts to ensure authenticity. Methodology includes three main phases:

1.Linguistic Annotation: Manual clause-level coding of ambiguity markers, with particular attention to co-occurring structures (e.g., passive voice + nominalization).

2.Theoretical Interpretation: Each marker was analyzed for its simultaneous (a) maxim violation, (b) politeness strategy, and (c) speech act effect.

3.Validation: Inter-coder reliability is ensured through double-coding of a 20% sample, achieving a Cohen’s κ of ≥ 0.85 (McHugh, 2012), indicating almost perfect agreement. A second researcher independently verified $\geq 90\%$ coding consistency, confirming methodological accuracy. Suffice to mention that this study focuses on textual features, excluding paralinguistic elements (e.g., emojis, formatting) and is limited to English-language apologies. Platform-specific conventions may affect generalizability.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes ten authentic apologies across different contexts. Each case is first presented in Table, showing both the incident background and full apology text, followed by a detailed analysis and discussion.

Sample 1: Twitter Hack Apology (July 2020)Table (2): Sample 1

| Incident Overview |
|--|
| On July 15, 2020, Twitter was hacked through a social engineering scheme targeting employees. High-profile accounts, including Elon Musk, Joe Biden, and Kanye West, were compromised and used to promote a Bitcoin scam. The breach affected 130 accounts. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “We’re acutely aware of our responsibilities to the people who use our service and to society more generally. We’re embarrassed, we’re disappointed, and ⁽¹⁾ more than anything, we’re sorry ⁽²⁾ . We know that we must ⁽³⁾ work to regain your trust ⁽⁴⁾ , and ⁽¹⁾ we will ⁽⁵⁾ support all ⁽⁶⁾ efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice. We hope ⁽⁷⁾ that our openness and transparency ⁽⁸⁾ throughout this process, and ⁽¹⁾ the steps and work we will ⁽⁵⁾ take to safeguard against other ⁽⁹⁾ attacks in the future, will ⁵ be the start of making this right ⁽¹⁰⁾ .” |
| Source: https://www.thewrap.com/twitter-apologizes-hack-verified-accounts/?utm_source=chatgpt.com |

Twitter’s 2020 apology following a major security breach exemplifies how digital platforms employ linguistic strategies to balance accountability with reputational protection. While the statement includes an explicit apology (2), its socio-pragmatic mechanisms and structures reveal systematic ambiguity that weakens accountability. The use of modality, (3) and (5), signals intent but violates Grice’s Maxim of Quality and Quantity by presenting unverifiable future actions as certain. This is also a form of negative politeness strategy which softens demands while avoiding binding commitments. Similarly, the hedging in (7) exaggerates the effectiveness of the unverified actions that they claim to be taken in the future without admitting fault, creating plausible deniability. This move

violates the maxims of Manner and Quality which serves as a face-protection technique The use of nominalization in (8) abstracts responsibility into vague concepts by violating the Maxim of Manner. The use of vague quantifiers such as (6) understates the scale of corrective actions and (9) indicates unclear scale or number of attacks communicate vagueness in meaning. The use of vague quantifiers violates the Maxims of Manner and Quantity. It minimizes perceived failures. Presuppositions in (4) and (10) frame the narrative. They treat the claims as shared knowledge. Transition markers in (1) shift focus from blame to emotional appeals. **Sample 2: Twitter Internal System Apology (2020 Follow-up)** Table(3): Sample 2

| Incident Overview |
|---|
| Following the July 2020 hack, Twitter released an additional apology as it investigated further. This internal communication clarified the role of a social engineering scheme and the vulnerability of internal systems, emphasizing transparency and responsibility. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “At this time ⁽¹⁾ , we believe ⁽²⁾ attackers targeted certain ⁽³⁾ Twitter employees through a social engineering scheme. We are continuing our investigation ⁽⁴⁾ , working with law enforcement, and determining longer-term actions ⁽⁵⁾ We’re acutely aware of our responsibilities and ⁽⁶⁾ more than anything.. we are sorry ⁽⁷⁾ ” |
| Source: https://www.axios.com/2017/12/15/twitter-apologizes-for-past-lapses-issues-calendar-of-planned-safety-updates-1513306332?utm_source=chatgpt.com |

This apology is an example of the use of sophisticated linguistic strategies to maintain control over crisis narratives by digital companies. While the apology statement includes an explicit apology in (7), its socio-pragmatic structure systematically establishes ambiguity through several key techniques. In example (2), the use of epistemic modality, a word that functions as a modality, frames uncertain statements as if they were factual, deliberately avoiding firm commitments. This strategy intentionally violates the Maxim of Quality by presenting unverified claims as truths; it also serves as a form of negative politeness aiming at mitigating institutional imposition. In example (4), nominalization use gives the impression of continuous and unverified efforts. That is, it avoids clarifying what “investigations”/actions have actually been taken. Therefore, this constructs a violation of the Maxim of Quantity through deliberate omission. Nominalization plays an even more pivotal role in examples (4) and (5), where concrete actions are turned into abstract ones to make them vague concepts, obscuring agency and diluting responsibility. This technique violates the Maxim of Manner by making the message less clear, allowing the company to seem engaged without specifying concrete steps taken. Additionally, the use of a vague quantifier in (3) downplays the scale of failure. This again violates the Maxim of Quantity by introducing intentional vagueness and concealing the extent of the issue. Finally, the temporal framing in (1), originally functioning as a qualifier, performs multiple pragmatic roles: it presupposes that institutional efforts are underway; it thus breaching the Maxim of Relation by assuming shared background knowledge; it also restricts Twitter’s acknowledgment of fault to the present, creating flexibility for future revisions to the narrative. **Sample 3: Facebook Outage Apology (October 2021)** Table(4): Sample 3

| Incident Overview |
|---|
| On October 4, 2021, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp experienced a major six-hour global outage. The failure stemmed from configuration changes on backbone routers |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “Facebook services coming back online now - ⁽¹⁾ may take some time ⁽²⁾ to get to 100%. To every small and large business, family, and individual who depends on us ⁽³⁾ , I’m sorry.”- <i>Andy Stone</i> |
| Source: https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/zuckerberg-apologizes-massive-facebook-outage?utm_source=chatgpt.com |

Facebook’s apology incorporates layers of ambiguity that deserve close attention. In (2), the use of modal expressions blended with imprecise quantifiers blurs clarity about when services will be restored. This linguistic strategy sidesteps direct commitments and softens the tone of continued service disruption, indirectly easing user frustration. In doing so, it avoids full transparency, violating principles of sincerity and informativeness, while still appearing polite and considerate. Example (3) embeds an assumption that people universally rely on Facebook, treating this dependency as a given. This move shifts the focus away from the specific problem at hand, making the platform seem indispensable and diverting from potential criticisms. It disrupts relevance and clarity, framing the issue in a way that benefits Facebook’s image. The dash before (1) works as a quiet pivot,

steering the reader away from technical accountability and toward a more staged, results-oriented message, again, without tracing the cause of the issue. Ultimately, the apology seems more focused on managing company perception than accepting fault. Sample 4: Meta Global Outage Apology (December 2024)Table(5): Sample 4

| |
|---|
| Incident Overview |
| On December 11, 2024, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp experienced widespread outages affecting users globally. Downtetector logged over 100,000 complaints. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “Earlier today ⁽¹⁾ , a technical issue ⁽²⁾ caused people to have difficulty accessing some of our services ⁽³⁾ . We resolved the issue ⁽⁴⁾ as quickly as possible and we apologise for any ⁽⁵⁾ inconvenience. ⁽⁶⁾ ” |
| Source: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/11/instagram-facebook-and-whatsapp-affected-by-global-meta-outage?utm_source=chatgpt.com |

In this apology, the use of nominalization in example (2) serves to transform tangible issues into vague and abstract notion. This move shifts away responsibility by making the company appear away from the problem; it thus violates the Maxim of Manner through an impersonal tone that obscures agency. Additionally, the statement includes a vague quantifier in (3) that deliberately downplays the extent and seriousness of the outage. This lack of specificity undermines the Maxim of Quantity by concealing important details about how widespread or severe the disruption was, functioning as an understatement strategy. Alongside this, presuppositions such as the one found in (4) suggest that the issue is manageable and that the company has already acted effectively enough, even without offering evidence. Such assumptions violate the Maxims of Manner and Relation, framing the company in a favorable position while bypassing real failures. A temporal phrase in (1) is used to shift the focus from present complications to prior actions, subtly redirecting attention away from current user dissatisfaction. This evasion breaks the Maxim of Relation by ignoring the actual concerns of those affected. Furthermore, the closing line in (6), “we apologize for any inconvenience”, delivers a generalized and minimal expression of regret. The use of the vague quantifier “any” diminishes user experiences, further insulating the company from direct critique. Overall, the analysis reveals that the apology is less about transparency and more about preserving its image. Sample 5: Instagram Content Error Apology (February 2025)Table(6): Sample 5

| |
|---|
| Incident Overview |
| In February 2025, a glitch on Instagram’s Reels feed caused users to receive disturbing, violent, and graphic content including gore and pornographic material. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “We have fixed ⁽¹⁾ an error ⁽²⁾ that caused some users ⁽³⁾ to see content in their Instagram Reels feed that should not have been recommended ⁽⁴⁾ . We apologize ⁽⁵⁾ for the mistake ⁽⁶⁾ .” |
| Source: https://siliconangle.com/2025/02/27/meta-issues-apology-instagram-started-flooding-peoples-feed-obscene-content/?utm_source=chatgpt.com |

This apology reflects a deliberate use of ambiguity to soften reputational harm while sidestepping genuine accountability. In example (4), the passive voice conceals who or what is responsible for the algorithmic failure, effectively removing agency from the narrative. This violates the Maxim of Manner by using vague, agentless phrasing, coupled with deferential politeness to avoid directly acknowledging fault. The impact of this strategy is reinforced by nominalized expressions in examples (2) and (6), which turn clear technical and ethical missteps into abstract notions. These abstract forms further obscure responsibility, breaching the Maxim of Manner by detaching the platform from its own actions. Moreover, the vague quantifier found in (3) downplays the severity and scope of the problem, violating the Maxim of Quantity through calculated understatement. This is particularly problematic given the disturbing nature of the content in question, making the choice to minimize its scale all the more concerning In (4), the embedded presupposition implies consensus around acceptable content norms, presenting the issue as a standard policy violation rather than a critical failure. This move bypasses direct discussion of the incident’s gravity, thus infringing on both the Maxims of Manner and Relation by glossing over details that require further examination. The apology also features an unmarked shift between (1) and (5), transitioning abruptly from a technical update to a brief expression of regret. This sudden pivot avoids acknowledging the actual harm caused, violating the Maxim of Relation by failing to connect the technical issue to its real-world consequences. Sample 6: Instagram Global Bug Apology (October 2022)Table (7): Sample 6

| |
|--------------------------|
| Incident Overview |
|--------------------------|

In On October 31, 2022, many Instagram users were locked out of their accounts due to a global bug.

Full Apology Statement

"We are aware ⁽¹⁾ that some of you ⁽²⁾ are having issues ⁽³⁾ accessing your Instagram account. We are looking into it ⁽⁴⁾ and apologize for the inconvenience.

Source: [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/newsblogs/daily-news-and-latest-updates-live-31-october-](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/newsblogs/daily-news-and-latest-updates-live-31-october-2022/liveblog/95189833.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com&from=mdr)

[2022/liveblog/95189833.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com&from=mdr](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/newsblogs/daily-news-and-latest-updates-live-31-october-2022/liveblog/95189833.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com&from=mdr)

The marked elements in (1) and (4) function similarly to models in that they express limited level of accountability. Yet, they are not grammatically models. They deliberately violate the Maxims of Quality and Manner to create an atmosphere of responsiveness via unverified actions. Specifically, they soften the impact of the failure while avoiding actual commitments about resolution timelines. The use of vague quantifier as in example (2) underrepresents the problem's severity too. Therefore, it violates the Maxim of Quantity by means of deliberate imprecision. Example (2) also comes to function as a hedging phrase, "some of you are having issues". So, it violates Maxims of Manner and Quality by creating plausible deniability about the bug's actual impact and scale. The presupposition in (1) implies that a clear and recognized issue already exists. Thereby it violates the Maxims of Manner and Relation. This framing suggests that the situation is being managed, effectively downplaying the unexpected nature of the platform's failure and diverting attention from its unpreparedness. **Sample 7: Zoom Security and Privacy Lapses Apology (April 2020)** Table(8): Sample 7

Incident Overview

Zoom faced backlash in April 2020 over serious security and privacy flaws, including "Zoombombing," lack of true end-to-end encryption, and data sharing with Facebook. Daily users surged to over 200 million.

Full Apology Statement

"We recognize that we have fallen short ⁽¹⁾ of the community's, and our own, privacy and security expectations⁽²⁾. For that ⁽³⁾, I am deeply sorry, and I want to share what ⁽⁴⁾ we are doing about it." - Eric Yuan, CEO

Source: <https://www.zoom.com/en/blog/a-message-to-our-users/>

Zoom's apology for security failures demonstrates a more nuanced and personalized approach to corporate crisis communication. The apology tries to balance personal accountability with institutional reputation where it relies on strategic ambiguity to manage reputational damage. The use of nominalization in (2) turns concrete failures into abstract expectations. This move serves to violate the Maxim of Manner by distancing the actual apology from operational realities. Thus, it contributes to impersonalization. The established presupposition in (1) assumes that both the public and Zoom company agree that a failure and an issue has occurred. This subtly positions the company as being self-aware. However, this technique also violates the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Manner because it replaces the required explicit acknowledgment of specific failings and instead shifts to shared moral framing. A vague quantifier is found in (4) where "what" is an unspecific thing. The use of this technique leaves the actual steps unknown and undefined. This, thus, violates the Maxim of Quantity and allows more flexibility in future announcements without committing to actions. Finally, the transition marker in (3) introduces the apology and links it causally to the previous clause. It provides coherence but also subtly moves the narrative forward without dwelling on the specifics of what went wrong. This use of logical connection is rhetorical, helping to maintain the flow while avoiding elaboration. **Sample 8: Zoom's Apology for Encryption Misrepresentation (June 2020)** Table (9): Sample 8

Incident Overview

Zoom falsely advertised its service as having "end-to-end encryption" when it did not. After scrutiny from researchers and journalists, Zoom corrected its claims and apologized.

Full Apology Statement

"We want to start ⁽¹⁾ by apologizing for the confusion ⁽²⁾ we have caused by incorrectly suggesting that Zoom meetings were capable of using ⁽³⁾ end-to-end encryption. We recognize that there is a discrepancy ⁽⁴⁾ between the commonly accepted definition of end-to-end encryption and how we were using it. We are updating our marketing materials to avoid any further misunderstanding⁽⁵⁾."

Source: <https://www.zoom.com/en/blog/zoom-for-today-and-tomorrow/>

Zoom’s apology for falsely advertising end-to-end encryption reveals sophisticated linguistic strategies to acknowledge wrongdoing while mitigating legal and reputational risk. The statement employs multiple ambiguity tactics that warrant careful examination. The Transitional phrase in (1) creates a performative display of accountability while violating the Maxim of Relation through topic-shifting technique. It artificially structures the apology narrative to emphasize remorse over examination of causes. The construction ”Zoom meetings were capable of using” in (3) functions as a passive construction, though not being one grammatically. It **personifies the service** (*Zoom meetings*) and **avoids mentioning who made the misleading claim**. So, it obscures corporate agency in the false claims (violating Maxims of Manner and Quantity), while the nominalizations in (2), (4), and (5) transform ethical violations into abstract communication issues. The presupposition “avoid any further misunderstanding” in (5) assumes the core problem was user interpretation rather than corporate deception (violating Maxims of Manner and Relation). **Sample 9: Google - Timnit Gebru Controversy (December 2020)**

Table(10): Sample 9

| Incident Overview |
|--|
| AI ethics researcher Dr. Timnit Gebru departed Google under controversial circumstances related to censorship of a research paper. The move sparked backlash over diversity and ethics in AI. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “I want to ⁽¹⁾ say how sorry I am for that, and I accept the responsibility of working to restore ⁽²⁾ your trust ⁽³⁾ ... we need to accept responsibility for the fact that a prominent Black, female leader ⁽⁴⁾ with immense talent left Google unhappily.” - <i>Sundar Pichai, CEO</i> |
| Source: https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/09/google-ceo-sundar-pichai-memo-on-timnit-gebru-dismissal.html |

Google’s apology regarding Dr. Timnit Gebru’s controversial departure demonstrates a strategic attempt to address ethical failures while maintaining corporate control of the narrative. The CEO’s statement reveals several significant linguistic features that balance acknowledgment with ambiguity. The phrase in (1) establishes a presupposition that presupposes the occurrence of some bad thing without explicitly admitting it. This construction employs negative politeness by softening the admission of fault without specifying concrete corrective actions. The nominalizations ”responsibility of working to restore” in (2) and ”trust” in (3) abstract accountability into conceptual terms, violating the Maxim of Manner by avoiding operational specifics about how Google will change its practice. The presupposition in “a prominent Black, female leader left Google unhappily” (4) strategically frames the incident as an unfortunate outcome rather than an active failure of Google’s systems (violating Maxims of Manner and Relation). This formulation carefully avoids describing Google’s actual role in the controversy while appearing to acknowledge racial and gender dimensions. **Sample 10: Google Chromecast Outage (March 2025)**

Table(11): Sample 10

| Incident Overview |
|--|
| A major technical failure caused Chromecast (2nd Gen) and Chromecast Audio devices to stop working globally. |
| Full Apology Statement |
| “We apologize for the issue ⁽¹⁾ and understand your frustration. We are working to roll out a fix as soon as possible ⁽²⁾ and will share updates and guidance on the Nest Community page ⁽³⁾ . We appreciate your patience as we resolve this issue ⁽⁴⁾ .” |
| Source: https://www.google.com/nestcommunity/t5/Streaming/Regarding-an-issue-with-Chromecast-2nd-gen-and-Chromecast-Audio/m-p/691357 |

This apology demonstrates a careful approach to technical crisis communication, employing strategic ambiguity while maintaining a facade of responsiveness. The apology includes several key linguistic structures that serve both reputational and legal purposes. The use of nominalizations in (3) and (4) transforms technical failures into abstract concepts, violating the Maxim of Manner. It obscures both the problem’s nature and Google’s responsibility. The use of temporal quantifier, which is vague, in (2) intentionally avoids precision, violating the Maxim of Quantity. It functions as an understatement strategy to minimize the duration of perceived system failure. Further, the presupposition in (1) assumes shared recognition of Google’s culpability which is a violation of Maxims of Manner and Relation, framing the apology as voluntary rather than compelled by user complaints. **6. A Cross-Platform Discussion**

Analysing and separately discussing ten apology statements from five major tech companies clarifies how they carefully select words and structures to both admit mistakes and protect themselves. Companies like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and Google all follow similar patterns when saying sorry. Their apologies often seem more about protecting their image than truly taking responsibility for problems. We can see clear differences in how companies apologize for different types of problems. When technical issues happen, like websites going down, the apologies are very short and vague. They use phrases like “we’re working on it” or “this problem” without giving clear details about when it will be fixed or how many people are affected. All the companies do this in similar ways, suggesting they’ve all learned this is the best way to handle technical mistakes. For more serious problems like security failures or lying about products, the apologies are more carefully written. Companies use word tricks to make big problems sound smaller. For example, Twitter called a security breach “a technical issue that caused problems”; this admits something happened but doesn’t explain who was responsible. Zoom said their false advertising caused “confusion”, making it sound like people just didn’t understand rather than that Zoom lied. These word choices show the companies are trying to admit just enough without getting in legal trouble. Different types of companies also say sorry in different ways. Social media companies like Twitter and Facebook use more emotional words like “we’re embarrassed”. Business-focused companies like Zoom and Google use more formal language. Even when company bosses personally apologize, they still use the same careful wording, showing these are not personal mistakes but company-wide ways of handling problems. Most importantly, these apologies never question the companies’ power. Phrases like “people who depend on us” or “your trust in us” make it seem normal that these companies control so much of our digital lives. The apologies quickly move from “something went wrong” to “we’re fixing it”, skipping over why it happened or who was responsible. This keeps the focus on the companies as problem-solvers rather than as sources of problems. In the end, these apologies tell us more about how tech companies see their relationship with users than about the specific problems. The careful wording shows companies trying to both admit mistakes and stay in control. As these companies become more central to work and social life, their way of saying sorry shows how they balance admitting faults with protecting their position.

7. Findings

The followings are the key findings:

1. The use of vague language is a standard style across digital platforms. These companies prefer languages that include wording like “as soon as possible”, “some users” and “mistake”.
2. Apology style varies accordingly with the kind of the problem. The length of the apology depends on the sensitivity of the issue while consistently keeping the vagueness level controlled.
3. Digital companies use lexis that soften the issue or shift the blame, such as: “misunderstanding” and “confusion”.
4. Social media platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) use more emotional language, while business-focused platforms (such as Zoom and Google) sound more formal.
5. There is an obviously deliberate accountability avoidance.

8. Conclusion

This study concludes that the selected tech companies have developed a careful way of apologizing; their apology language protects their image without always fixing the real issues. Their apologies follow predictable patterns: vague wording, quick shifts from blame to solutions, and just enough regret to calm users down. While these statements may help companies manage short-term backlash, they often avoid deeper responsibility. The consistency across Twitter, Meta (Facebook and Instagram), Zoom, and Google suggests this is now the standard way big tech handles mistakes, prioritizing reputation over real change. For users, this means staying cautious: corporate apologies may sound sincere, but they are often more about damage control than meaningful improvement.

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