Apology in /r/Languagelearning:
applying computed-mediated discourse analysis
to the investigation of rapport management online

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Abstract

This paper is a case study that examines the practices of apologising in an online forum, /r/Languagelearning in Reddit (a website where people share the contents on the web), from the perspective of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The methodology is Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) approach, and the main data is based on the comments of 832 threads submitted to the forum between 2011 and 2014. The CMDA shows that the participants in the forum apologised for violating the forum rules and tacit netiquettes in posting a comment and managed rapport with others through these apologies. With this finding, this paper suggests that Herring's (2007) scheme of situational and medium factors of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) provides insights into how the technological characteristics of CMD can influence the participants' linguistic strategies for rapport management.

1 Introduction

The present study investigates how the participants in an online forum maintain social relationships through computer-mediated interaction by analysing their apologies from the perspective of "rapport management"

(Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In particular, this paper aims to (1) demonstrate what contextual factors can influence the participants' rapport management strategies and (2) illustrate the participants' use of apology for rapport management in an online context.

Apology has been studied as one of the common speech acts in politeness research. The area of politeness research is concerned about the interpersonal functions of language use and examined the linguistic strategies for avoiding potential conflicts in human communication. Seminal politeness theories (Brown and Levinson, [1978] 1987; Leech, 1983) consider how people employ 'politeness' in communication by choosing appropriate linguistic strategies. Since the 2000s, researchers in this area have shifted the central focus to 'interpersonal relationship' in analysis (see Culpeper, 2011). Rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) is one of the approaches emerged in this light, and it is concerned with "the way that language is used to construct, maintain and/or threaten social relationships" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.12). In previous studies, rapport management has been applied to investigating language use in various contexts including computer-mediated communication such as online chat (Gonzales, 2013a, 2013b), request emails (Ho, 2011, 2014) and an online forum (Landone, 2012). On the other hand, there is still room to discuss how the rapport management framework can be applied to the context of computer-mediated interaction. So, the present study attempts to contribute to further discussions and the investigation of what kinds of contextual factors of computer-mediated interaction can affect people's rapport management strategies online.

With this background, the present study will examine the use of apologies in an online forum /r/Languagelearning in Reddit by applying computer-mediated discourse analysis or CMDA approach (Herring, 2004).

CMDA provides an analytical perspective that views "online behavior through the lens of language" (Herring, 2004, p. 339). It has been widely used for CMD research and the present research also adopted this approach. The next section will introduce the framework of rapport management.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of rapport management

Rapport management is a framework that theorises how people manage interpersonal relations. It was first proposed in Spencer-Oatey (2000) and developed in her subsequent publications. The present study adopted Spencer-Oatey's (2008) model of rapport management, which is the latest model. Rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) views that rapport is built, enhanced and challenged by managing three interrelated components: face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals.

Face is inspired by Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which is "an image of self [being] delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (p. 5). Yet, Spencer-Oatey (2008) conceptualises face differently from Brown and Levinson's model of face (positive face and negative face), which is the most widely applied in politeness research. In the rapport management framework, face concerns people's fundamental wants that they acknowledge their positive attributes associated with their identities as "self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity)" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 14), and the multi-facets of face are emphasised.

Sociality rights and obligations refer to the "fundamental social *entitlements* that a person effectively claims for him/herself in his/her

interactions with others" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 13, emphasis original). In short, people have behavioural expectations to be treated fairly and appropriately by others, and the sense of rapport with others can be affected if their behavioural expectations are not fulfilled. Sociality rights and obligations are usually defined by contractual/legal agreements and requirements, roles and social positions, or behavioural norms, conventions, styles and protocols (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, pp. 15-16). Yet, behavioural norms and conventions are not always arbitrary. Spencer-Oatey (2008) proposes two basic interactional principles of people's beliefs about what are socially appropriate behaviours, that is, equity and association.

- Equity: "a fundamental belief that we are entitled to personal consideration from others, so that we are treated fairly"
- Association: "a fundamental belief that we are entitled to social involvement with others, in keeping with the type of relationship that we have with them"

(Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 16)

Interactional goals refer to people's wants to achieve specific goals in interactions, which "significantly affect their perceptions of rapport because any failure to achieve them can cause frustration and annoyance" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 17). Interactional goals are understood in relation to discourse functions. Brown and Yule (1983) propose that the interactional goals of discourse can be distinguished between transactional (task-oriented) and interactional/relational (relationship-oriented). On the other hand, the two interactional goals are often not clear-cut in real interactions, and interactional goals can be "transactional (i.e., task-oriented), relational or a mixture of the two" (Spencer-Oatey, 2015, p. 1289).

In rapport management, the three elements are considered to be managed at different levels of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies: the

illocutionary domain (speech acts), the discourse domain (the organisation of discourse content structure), the participation domain (the procedure of interaction such as turn-taking), the stylistic domain (concerns the choice of genre-appropriate language) and the non-verbal domain. (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 21).

Spencer-Oatey (2008) also suggests that people's rapport management strategies are influenced by several factors including contextual variables (social relations, social/interactional roles, activity types), pragmatic principles and conventions and rapport orientations. These proposed factors do not necessarily explain the medium-specific factors for rapport management in CMD adequately. Regarding the mode of communication in Reddit, it is asynchronous or a delayed interaction. The participants are not necessarily connected or present on the website at the same time, and there is a time lag between posting and reading messages. Hence, language use in Reddit is characterised as asynchronous computer-mediated discourse (ACMD). Herring's (2007) classification of CMD can be supplement for a better understanding about what types of factors can affect people's use of language for rapport management in ACMD. For example, Landone (2012) took into account the medium-specific contexts of an online forum for analysis purposes by adopting Herring's (2007) factors of CMD with rapport management. In section 4, I will also illustrate the factors of ACMD in /r/Languagelearning.

2.2 Apology in rapport management

From the perspective of rapport management explained in the above, apology is considered as a linguistic strategy in the illocutionary domain and it deals with not only face sensitive incidences but also infringements of sociality rights. Spencer-Oatey (2008) explains that:

> Apologies are typically post-event speech acts, in the sense that some kind of offence or violation of social norms has taken place. In other words, people's sociality rights have been infringed in some way [...] there is a need to restore the 'balance' by the other person giving an apology. (p. 19)

In order to restore the balance in a social relationship, people need to express their apology by choosing appropriate strategies. Linguistic strategies for apologies have been examined in the extensive literature, identifying the semantic formula of apologies (e.g., Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Olshtain, 1989; Deutschmann, 2003; Page, 2013). Based on the works by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Olshtain (1989), I adopted the following semantic formula of apologies consisting of five components: an IFID (illocutionary force indicating device), an expression of responsibility, and explanation or account of the violation, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance. People choose components to express appropriate apology in given situations, considering the social and cultural contexts. For example, people may choose an elaborate structure of apology in a formal situation. If people fail to choose an appropriate form of apology, this can affect the rapport with the interlocutor.

3　Data

The main data for the present study is a 749,250 words corpus based on 832 threads of comments submitted to /r/Languagelearning (Figure 1) between 2011 and 2014. /r/Languagelearning is a sub-forum for language learning in Reddit and the size of the forum or the number of subscribers was 39,210 people in December 2014, which is the time coinciding with the start of the data collection. In Reddit, a bulletin board system allows the

participants to post a comment to the submitted contents on the website (either text-based entries or link entries) and reply to other comments. A thread or a set of comments are organised in a 'tree' or 'threaded' structure (Figure 2), that is, users can place their comments just below a particular comment they refer to and each comment holds replies. The present study focuses on text-based entries (initial posts) and comments replied to the initial posts.

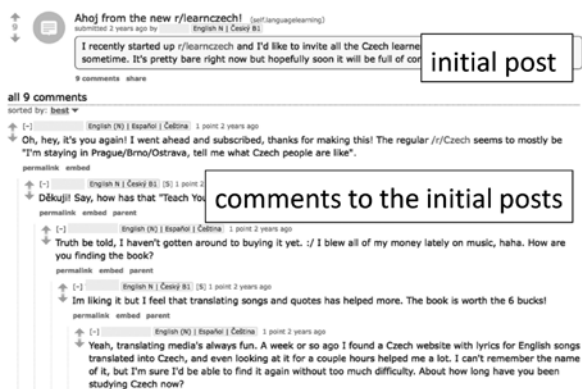Figure 1. /r/Languagelearning in Reddit

Figure 2. Tree structure of a Reddit comments thread

4 Method

4.1 Computer-mediated discourse analysis

Herring's (2004) CMDA was combined with the rapport management framework for analysis. The CMDA approach borrows methodologies in the linguistic paradigm such as conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics, text analysis and critical discourse analysis (Herring, 2004, p. 339). There are three underlying assumptions of the CMDA:

1) discourse exhibits recurrent patterns.

2) discourse involves speaker choices.

3) computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems.

(Herring, 2004, pp. 342-343)

The goal of CMDA is thus to identify the reprehensive characteristics of CMD by investigating the recurrent patterns of language use. On the other hand, Herring (2004) suggests that "[speaker choices] are not conditioned by purely linguistic considerations" (p. 342) and "discourse analysis can provide insight into nonlinguistic, as well as linguistic phenomena" (p. 343). Both linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena can be affected by the technological features of the medium.

Herring (2007) discusses what can shape the CMD in detail, proposing a classification of two factors of CMD, situation factors (social or situational contexts) and medium factors (technological contexts). The categories of each factor are based on the empirical research in the literature including Baym (1995), Cherny (1999) and also Hymes' (1974) model of the ethnography of communication. Herring (2007) suggests that the existing

mode-based classification (e.g., email, IRC) or genre approach to classifying CMD is not flexible enough to apply to new examples of CMD (p. 27). Indeed, it is true that the situational and technological contexts are expected to be different in different online forums depending on the purpose of the forums or the features of the bulletin board systems, and it is not necessarily possible to encompass such culturally and technologically diverse online environments into one single mode or genre. Thus, the present study finds Herring's (2007) approach to understanding CMD factors useful for analysis purposes and adopted it.

Applying Herring's (2007) approach, it can be assumed that the forum participants' language use is influenced by the following forum's situational and medium factors listed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Situation factors for ACMD in /r/Languagelearning

1. Participation structure	• Interaction: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many • Public/private: public and open to anyone • Anonymity: the degree of anonymity is high; the participants use nicknames and disclosing personal information is restricted in Reddit • Group size: the number of active users is not countable, but the number of subscribers was 39,210 people in December 2014
2. Participant characteristics	• Demographics: vary (the information about the participants' age, gender or occupation are not accessible due to the anonymity) • Proficiency with language: users of English as L1 or L2 • Experience with the forum: varies • Role/status of the forum: peer learners • Motivations to participate in the forum: sharing some topics and information related to learning a language
3. Purpose	• Purpose of the forum: providing a space for the participants to discuss language-learning related topics • Goal of interaction: getting and sharing information, seeking and giving advice

4. Topic or Theme	• Topic of the forum: learning a language • Topic of exchange: learning problems, learning tips, learning materials/resources, meta-discourse about the ACMD of the forum
5. Tone	• Supportive and friendly, both formal and casual, both serious and playful depending on the topics
6. Activity	• Advice giving and seeking (problem solving), information exchange, phatic exchange, joking exchange, announcements (by moderators)
7. Norms	• Norms of the forum are addressed through the forum rules such as avoiding duplicate posts
8. Code	• Language: English • Font: mostly Verdana

Table 2

Medium factors for ACMD in /r/Languagelearning

1. Synchronicity	• asynchronous communication
2. Message transmission	• one way, message by message transmission
3. Persistence of transcript	• all messages posted to this subreddit have remained (except the deleted messages) on the system, yet only the 1000 highest-ranking messages can be seen on Reddit
4. Size of message buffer	• 15,000 characters • (now it is 40,000 characters)
5. Channels of communication	• texts, hyperlinks to external web contents
6. Anonymous messaging	• your message is displayed with your user name and the user name is linked to your Reddit page
7. Private messaging	• available
8. Filtering	• search engine; options for browsing the site
9. Quoting	• available; by Markdown syntax
10. Message format	• thread is organised into a tree structure; the thread which has the newest message is on top; the newest message is on top within a thread

Based on the CMDA, the present study analysed the text data quantitatively and qualitatively. First, I identified the recurrent use of expressions for apology, searching the explicit expressions for apologies or the IFIDs (*sorry, apology, excuse me*) in the corpus with the AntConc concordance (Anthony, 2011). In the data, *sorry* is the most frequently used, and therefore the present study particularly focused on the use of *sorry*. There are 184 examples of using *sorry* and in most examples *sorry* is not proceeded by *I'm* or *I am* (Table 3)

Table 3
Frequencies of Expressions with 'sorry'

Forms	Numbers
sorry	159
I'm sorry	24
I am sorry	1
Total	184

Then, the 184 examples were closely analysed using the rapport management framework, examining in what situations the participants need to apologise and what element(s) of rapport management are managed through apologies. The next section illustrates the participants' practices of apologising in /r/Languagelearning and discusses what kinds of behaviours are negatively marked in the learning community.

5   Results and Discussion

5.1   Typical examples of apology with *sorry*

The qualitative analysis shows that apologising with *sorry* is used for

managing all three elements of rapport in /r/Languagelearning, and the four typical apologies are associated with:

a. mistakes in posting (e.g., posting in a wronug place, posting a duplicate entry)

b. content and length of a post (e.g., wrong information, missing links, length, off-topic)

c. language to compose a post (e.g., typos, spelling & grammar)

d. manners of asking and responding (e.g., asking a beginner-like question, asking too many questions, late response, limitation to offer a help)

These four types of apologies are related with the violation of the forum rules (e.g., posting a duplicate entry) and tacit netiquettes (e.g., posting a long entry), which can affect the flow of smooth interactions in the thread. Additionally, these four aspects of language use are considered to be influenced by the situation and medium factors of ACMD, especially (1) purpose, theme of the forum, tone, activity, norms and code (situation factors) and (2) synchronicity, message transmission and message format (medium factors). These situational and medium-specific features of the forum require the participants to follow the appropriate manners of submitting and composing a post in order to organise the topics and contents of ACMD properly. If the participants post a comment in the wrong place, a comment that is too long or an irrelevant comment, the organisation of comments in a thread is not reader-friendly, prompting the readers to make extra efforts to follow the discussion of the thread. This can affect the participants' interactional goal of getting and sharing information or seeking and giving advice (i.e., purpose, see Table 1), and

therefore rapport management strategies in the discourse domain are required in order to maintain the social relationship between participants in the forum. The following considers examples for each type of apologies.

a. Mistakes in submitting a post. The participants in the forum are worried about posting a comment in the wrong place or replying to the wrong comment, and there are examples of apologies for this.

(1)   Sorry, I misplaced my comment; I had meant to reply to [name]'s comment about schools. [/r/Languagelearning, 27-01-2014]

The bulletin board system of Reddit allows users to directly reply to a comment, and the person who receives a reply comment will have a notification from Reddit. So, misplacing a comment in a thread is inconvenient for the participants in two ways. One is that it takes more effort to follow the interactions if the thread of comments is not well-structured, and another is that they do not have a notification for receiving a reply comment. In rapport management, replying in an inappropriate manner can infringe the people's wants to have a smooth interaction (i.e., interactional goals) and affect the rapport with them.

b. Contents or length of a post. The participants in the forum tend to apologise about the contents and length of their posts. Particularly, like excusing a long speech in advance, they excuse the length of their long posts. This indicates that they believe that posting a long entry is not positively perceived by other participants in the forum. (2) is an example in which the participant excuses the length of the post before offering advice.

(2) Sorry about the long message :) But, here are my thoughts on the
     matter. [/r/Languagelearning, 11-09-2011]

In this example, the apology message ends with a smile :). This implies
that the participant thinks the long text is not a serious matter to be
apologised for but it is appropriate to express hesitation in imposing its
reading on others. In the rapport management framework, it can be
explained that this type of apologies can manage the participants' equity
rights in terms of time investment; the participants have rights not to
allocate extra efforts and time costs to read long comments.

c. Language to compose a post. The participants also consider the
   formatting and language used in their comments. They show apologetic
   attitudes to their abilities in composing if the texts in a post are not
   organised well and the language is not appropriate for the forum. There
   are examples in which the participants apologise for their language by
   referring to their use of digital tools.

(3) Typing on my phone. Sorry about the formatting and shortness.
     [/r/Languagelearning, 17-07-2014]

(4) I accidentaly *[sic]* deleted this already so sorry about the bluntness
     of the reply, I didn't want to have to write that essay again!
     [/r/Languagelearning, 2013-07-01]

The participants refer to the constraints of the technologies they are
using as the reason not to choose an appropriate language or writing
system ("the formatting and shortness" and "the bluntness of the reply").

The participant in (3) indicates that she/he is using the phone and is not able to format the message as he/she wants. The participant in (4) states the process of failing to post the original comment as the reason for the blunt language of the post. These examples indicate that the participants' language use for rapport management can be influenced by their use of technology. In these cases, in addition to the technological affordance of the forum (i.e., medium factors), the affordance of their digital devices and their use of such devices influence their typing skills and their use of language.

In their apologies about language, they show their awareness of what kinds of composing skills are required for participating in threads. With respect to this point, Barton and Lee (2013) identify one of the common aspects of metalinguistic discourse in online interactions as self-deprecating metalanguage or "utterances where a person downplays their own linguistic abilities" (p. 115). They demonstrate that the function of self-deprecating comments is related to ways of participating and constructing particular identities. In /r/Languagelearning, the participants also post such self-deprecating comments about their ability to compose messages and also their English abilities.

(5)   EDIT: Sorry about any English mistakes, this is not my native language!!!!! [/r/Languagelearning, 2012-01-22]

This example indicates that the participant's rapport management strategy is influenced by the situational context of CMD in the forum, that is, English is the common medium. The participants are expected to use English, yet not all of the participants use the language as their first language. In the example, the participant presents him/herself as a non-native speaker of English as part of the strategies in order not to give the

interlocutor a misconception that there is no consideration for readers leaving English mistakes.

d. *Manners of asking and responding.* In advice seeking and giving interactions, the participants (advice givers) are more likely to apologise for their limitations in offering advice when they find their advice only partially helpful for the advice seekers.

   (6)   Just to add to this, listening to something with Portuguese subtitles would be a nice intermediate step. (Sorry, I don't know a good source of materials for that language.) [/r/Languagelearning, 21-06-2013]

In rapport management, their apologies can be seen as management of sociality rights and obligations. The apology in (6) indicates that the participant assumes she/he is expected to provide "a good source of materials" in the forum, and the participant infringes this expectation by not recommending any materials. The apology in (6) can also be seen as a disclaimer; it can save the participant's own face from future criticism from other participants, pointing out the lack of information or resources as a meaningful advice message. Similarly, (7) is another example of apology as a disclaimer for being pedantic.

   (7)   Sorry if this sounds pedantic, but just in case you really got confused there. [/r/Languagelearning, 04-09-2012]

Here, the participant's apology can also function to position her/himself as a peer participant and avoid being "pedantic." This can be seen as part of his/her face claim and construction of identity and helps her/him to

negotiate a relationship with other participants in an informal learning context.

In fact, the number of apologies for the late response is the highest. In (8), it is implied that the delay in replying was influenced by the events in the offline contexts.

(8) Sorry for the radio silence. Boston>LAX>Sydney>Brisbane took a lot out of me. [/r/Languagelearning, 01-05-2014]

The last sentence "Boston>LAX>Sydney>Brisbane took a lot out of me" implies that the participant was traveling long and could not check the reply comments for a while. The delay in response can interrupt the on-going interaction on the topic and the flow of the interaction. Using an analogy of 'conversation,' the late response in ACMD can be perceived as a long silence (as the participant refers to "radio silence") in the middle of a conversation. From the perspective of rapport management, the failure to achieve the interactional goal of smooth interaction can annoy the participants, and it can be said that apologising is one of the strategies for managing the interactional goal in the forum.

5.2 Face attack apology

In addition to the aforementioned examples of apologies, there are also some examples of using *sorry* that express other meanings rather than apology. The next example is a response to the original poster who wants a tattoo in German, which is the original poster's background but he/she does not speak the language.

(9) i'm sorry but do you not see the stupidity of getting a tattoo in a

language you don't know? German is your background, then learn German! [/r/Languagelearning, 17-06-2012]

The use of *I'm sorry* in (9) can be seen as a face-attack apology, which is "uttered in situations where the remedial nature of the apology is questionable" (Deutschmann, 2003, p. 46). Leech (2014) discussed the face-attack apology as a preface to a face-threatening act (FTA) and suggested that "the most common means of expressing an apology, (I'm) sorry, is actually more of a variable signal, not always signifying an apology, and not always conducive to politeness" (p. 119). The aforementioned face attack apology is followed by a criticism and a piece of advice, which can threaten the original poster's face by giving him/her a negative attribute (i.e., stupidity). The examples of using face-attack apology show that the participants in the forum use apology expressions such as *(I'm) sorry* not necessarily in order to maintain rapport. In (9), the poster of the message holds a rapport neglect orientation in order to achieve the interactional goal of giving practical advice.

6　Conclusion

The present study examined the use of apology with *sorry* in an online community of language learning and demonstrated applying Herring's (2007) schemes of situation and medium factors to the study of rapport management in ACMD. The striking feature of apologising in the forum was that the participants apologised about their inappropriate manner of posting a comment. The four typical apologies for the manner of posting a comment indicate that the participants' apologies were situated in the situational and technological contexts of the CMD of /r/Languagelearning.

There are also examples of using *sorry* as a preface before the participants commit to challenging rapport or "face attack apologies" (Deutschmann, 2003). The analysis of the examples showed that Herring's (2007) schemes of situation and medium factors helped us understand how the ACMD contexts of /r/Languagelearning influenced the participants' apologies. Since the present study is a case study and shows some snapshots of using explicit apologies (i.e., *sorry, I'm sorry*) in rapport management, future research should examine more examples of apologies, considering how implicit apologies (e.g., *my bad*) are used for rapport management in the CMD contexts.

Acknowledgements

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