

WHAT CONSUMERS REALLY FEEL ABOUT CORPORATE APOLOGIES

A Discourse Analysis of Reactions to Apologies on Economic and Financial Scandals in Tweets

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Abstract – The economic, financial and environmental crises that have involved many international companies over the past twenty years have been the concern of various disciplines, e.g. Genre Studies (Rutherford 2005; Zanola 2010), Critical Discourse Analysis (Howcroft 2012) and Crisis Communication (Coombs and Holladay 2012). Interestingly, the number of studies carried out in these academic areas have paid attention to the linguistic and discursive strategies adopted by managers to persuade their audience to trust them. In particular, they have focused on *apologia* and *apology* as activities of trust-building, while neglecting the audience's actual reactions to corporations' *suasive* attempts. These responses are remarkable in blogs, social networks, and other forms of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) genres (Puschmann 2010). Adopting an approach which integrates Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring 2001; Androutsopoulos, Beißwenger 2008), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2006) and Pragmatics (Austin 1962; Searle 1975), the paper focuses on the *perlocutionary* acts enacted in blogs, tweets and user-generated articles that respond to corporate apologies. In particular, it investigates how corporate scandals and wrongdoings are experienced by readers. To achieve this goal, the paper is carried out on a corpus consisting of tweets disputing the Volkswagen (VW) diesel scandal over the period 2015 to 2017. Findings show that customers tend to react with anger, disappointment and irony to the crisis communicative stances enacted by the VW management.

Keywords: corporate apology; CMC genres; CDA; pragmatics; tweets.

1. Introduction

On December 6th, 2017, Oliver Schmidt, the general manager in charge of Volkswagen (VW)'s environmental and engineering office in Michigan, was sentenced to seven years in jail as he was found guilty of concealing software that the VW used to cheat on emissions tests. This is just the last act of the Dieselgate saga that started in September 2015 and has not yet ended.

The "diesel dupe" is one of the many scandals that have upset the world of economy and finance. The impact of these events has attracted the interest not only of economic, political and social actors, but also of researchers from other disciplines, including Critical Discourse Analysis (Howcroft 2012) and Crisis Communication (Coombs, Holladay 2012).

In the area of corporate communication, scholars have been mainly concerned with the strategies and policies adopted by the companies before, during and after a crisis (Coombs 2010, pp. 19-24). Much attention has been paid to the crisis and post-crisis phases, as the proliferation and diversification of theories on crisis communication proves: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, Holladay 1996), Image restoration theory, a.k.a. Image Repair Theory (Benoit 1995, 1997), Contingency Theory (Cameron *et al.* 2008), and Apologia Theory (Hearit 2006), just to mention a few.

The main fields of application of these theories are to be found in the CEO and Chairman's Letter to the Shareholders, which form part of the Corporate Annual Report and, recently, in Computer-Mediated Genres, i.e. blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, etc., used by companies to communicate with their customers and stakeholders. Notably, in the crisis and post-crisis phases, managers tend to use various communicative strategies, such as denying, bolstering, differentiating, or scapegoating, attacking the accuser, apologizing, regretting, and triggering compassion, with the ultimate aim of saving their company's public image, winning back their stakeholders' and shareholders' trust and reliance, and refashioning public opinion (Benoit, Drew 1997; Fuoli, Paradis 2014; Fuoli, Hart 2018). These studies have zoomed in on the linguistic and discourse strategies that corporate management adopt to cope with the crisis in an attempt to manage and persuade their audience that their company can still be trusted. Particular attention has been devoted to the apologies that managers adopt to express their responsibility, mitigate their audience's anger and repair their reputation (Coombs, Holladay 2008; Chung, Lee 2017) in their apologies.

Yet, "understanding how individuals perceive and cognitively process crisis events and post-crisis messages is crucial to the crisis manager" (Fediuk *et al.* 2012, p. 635). Studies on this aspect of crisis communication are still in their infancy (McDonald *et al.* 2010), or seem to have almost neglected to investigate how the readers react to the persuasive attempts by companies. These reactions are identified in blogs, social networks, and forms of crowdsourcing journalism, which instantiate Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) genres (Puschmann 2010). Considering their interactional and dynamic nature, CMC genres call into action the methods and tools of different disciplines, including pragmatics and computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). The latter is viewed as an "approach" rather than a "theory" or a single "method" (Herring 2004, p. 4), that can be used to study the variety of aspects that characterize web genres.

Adopting an approach which integrates Crisis Communication Theories (Coombs 2010; Hearit 2006), Pragmatics (Searle 1976, 1995), and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring 2001; Androutsopoulos, Beißwenger 2008), this paper investigates how stakeholders and the public as a whole react to the corporate communication strategies used by companies that have committed some wrongdoing or fault. More specifically, emphasis is placed on how stakeholders re-contextualize some apologetic strategies (i.e. *apology*, *differentiation*, *scapegoating*) implemented by companies in corporate communication statements (e.g. letters to the shareholders, full-page ads, and private letters to customers), into CMC genres, in particular in tweets. The analysis is carried out on a set of corpora that include tweets in English (not necessarily written by Native English speakers) delivered by users after the revelation of the VW scandal in September 2015; the aim is to shed light on the true public sentiment towards VW's behaviour and their managers' attempt at apologizing.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of Crisis Communication theories. Section 3 deals with tweets as forms of CMC genres and as speech acts. Section 4 is concerned with the methodology adopted in the research, which integrates Searle's Speech Act Theory (1976) and Hearit's *apologia* theory (2006). Section 5 introduces the VW case study and provides the findings of the analysis carried out on the corpora of tweets. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research.

2. Corporate Crisis Communication

Concepts that are critical to the present study are *crisis* and *apology* as they have been devised in crisis communication theory and in pragmatics.

The number of studies on *crisis* has grown significantly over the last three decades, especially in the field of Crisis Communication, which is a form of communication which may concern individuals as well as institutions and organizations (Coombs 2010, p. 51), and which revolves around three theoretical indices: Benoit's rhetorical Theory of Image Restoration (1995), a.k.a. image repair (Benoit 1997; Benoit, Pang 2005), Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory or SCCT (Coombs 2010), Cameron, Pang and Jin's Contingency Theory (2008), and Hearit's Apologia Theory (2006).

For the present purposes, I will mainly refer to *crisis* as it is used in Coombs (2010) and Coombs and Holladay (2012):

A crisis can be viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance. Crises are largely perceptual. If stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organization is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not. A crisis violates expectations; an organization has done something stakeholders feel is inappropriate. (Coombs 2009, p. 100)

This view of crisis is developed according to a methodology that combines Attribution theory (Weiner 1986, 1995) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, Holladay 2007, 2009, 2010), whereby crisis communication research is built on the *formal* research method¹ suggested by Stacks (2002).

The distinctive feature of this method is that it is audience-oriented, in the sense that it is concerned with the stakeholders' reaction to crises; stakeholder reaction management refers to how stakeholders perceive the crisis, the organization in crisis, and the organization's crisis response. This becomes relevant in cases of crises emerging from transgression or intentional organizational misconduct.

As Coombs (2010) argues, the stakeholders' reaction can be triggered by a variety of factors, including either non-human-induced events or human-triggered actions. Crisis resulting from guilt transgression negatively affects the stakeholders perception of a company, thus jeopardizing their trust and reliability. McDonald *et al.* (2010) claim that the strength of the stakeholders' emotions increases as their involvement in the crisis grows, and their reactions to crises depend on the type of crisis itself. Stakeholder responses include annoyance, protest, boycott, and de-legitimation of the company itself. According to Coombs, Fediuk and Holladay (2007), the most common emotion generated by crisis in stakeholders is anger, which is expressed through negative word-of-mouth, or what they "term the negative communication dynamic." (Coombs *et al.* 2007, p. 59) Anger increases in stakeholders depending on how much they believe the organization is responsible for the crisis (Coombs, Holladay 2005; Coombs *et al.* 2007), and how much they feel themselves involved in the crisis (McDonald, Härtel 2000; Coombs *et al.* 2010). By contrast, it tends to fade away as time passes by, unless the impact of the crisis has achieved high levels. Moreover, it impacts significantly on organizations in crisis: as anger grows, the stakeholders purchase intentions decrease (Coombs *et al.* 2010).

¹ The other two research methods are the *informal* and the *transition* methods. The former is a subjective research method based on the unsystematic collection and interpretation of data. The latter is based on content analysis; it is between the formal and informal methods: although the data collection is unsystematic, it allows researchers to make generalizations.

Negative communication dynamic has further spread (Schlosser 2005) with the Internet. Stakeholders' reactions, opinions and feelings find much visibility in the blogosphere and twittersphere through CMC genres or Internet genres, or consumer-generated media, as is described in Section 3.

3. Tweets as Genres and as Speech Acts

Internet genres enable “new kinds of participation, new kinds of fragmentation, and new ways of co-constructing meaning that transcend traditional notions of conversation, narrative, exposition, and so forth (Herring *et al.* 2013, p. 9). As Herring points out, the genre of the Web 2.0 involves “participatory information sharing; user-generated content; an ethic of collaboration; and use of the web as a social platform” (Herring 2013, p. 12).

Web-genres are characterized by a multitude of aspects: to start with, the increasing role of *form* and its impact on the *content*; secondly, the high level of interaction among the participants which involves real-time discussions; the possibility of quoting and re-contextualizing someone else's words as a message delivered on an Internet genre is never a self-contained text but refers back and forward to other texts (Herring 2001); third, multimodality, since messages in CMC genres include not only the verbal text but also videos and sounds, images and hyperlinks.

Web genres, as Yus (2011) suggests, involve at least four types of communication, i.e. system-to-user, user-to-system, user-to-user and user-to collectivity. Moreover, web-mediated communication can be synchronous or asynchronous (Yus 2011). Tweets are representative of asynchronous, user-to-user communication genres, in which

users often connote their messages with innovative forms of text (emoticons, repetition of letters, creative use of punctuation, etc.) so as to enrich texts with an additional layer of information. If addressed from a cognitive point of view, these creative uses of typed text generate interpretive gaps that have to be filled by the addressee by using inferential strategies. (Yus 2011, pp. 18-19)

As such, tweets also represent forms of speech acts, by means of which Tweeters perform different actions and interact. Tweet acts, as they have been renamed by Vosoughi (2016), have a high level of performativity, which pertains to both verbal and non-verbal discourse.²

Studying tweets via speech acts can help us understand the users' state of mind and their reactions towards an event. Adopting Searle's speech act taxonomy, Vosoughi distinguishes the speech acts according to their topic, i.e. the subject discussed in one or more tweets, and the type, i.e. the nature of the topic, (is the topic Entity-oriented, Event-oriented or Long-standing?), thus collecting important information at the semantic and syntactic level. Similarly, Zhang *et al.* (2011) use speech act recognition, such as sharing information, asking questions, making suggestions, expressing sentiment, in order to understand tweet content. Finally, to Hodgkin (2017), “Twitter is a system of interrelated Status Function Declarations (SFDs)” (2017, p. 20). SFDs are examples of speech acts whose repetitive use contributes to the construction of social institutions. Tweets are forms

² This pragmatic function has also been acknowledged to hashtags, as they guide the readers in their inferential processes, thus facilitating interaction (Scott 2015). Vosoughi proposes “a supervised speech act classifier for Twitter [...], in order to be better understand [sic] the meaning and intention behind tweets and uncover the rich interaction between the users of Twitter” (Vosoughi 2016, p. 711).

of institutions as well, which result from the combination of new forms of language use and new language technologies. Notably, Twitter “has an interstitial role to other media forms” (Hodgkin 2017, p. 105), in the sense that it tends to encompass other media, i.e. images, videos, sounds, web pages, thus bridging different genres. Twitter, then, can be considered as the environment where different genres mix.

Genre bridging implies the *re-contextualization* of the discourse of one social practice in another, where the term *discourses* refers to different ways of representing aspects of the world and *social practices* involves the articulations of discourse (language) with other non-discoursal social elements (Fairclough 2003). In web-mediated genres, including tweets, recontextualization plays an important meaning-making role since

the re-presented action may gain new meaning facets and/or lose others. As a meaning-making process, recontextualization serves to realise interactants’ communicative aims. ... By recontextualizing a social semiotic practice, the current actor conveys their perspective (stance) towards the recontextualized action. (Gruber 2017, p. 2)

The research presented in this paper investigates how tweets recontextualize the speech acts performed in other genres, thus entailing a change in their *direction-of-fit*, *illocutionary point* and *expressed psychological state*.

This pragmatic method has been widely utilized in the study of *apologize* as a speech act performed by individuals or organizations to repair wrongdoings. The method applies to conventional genres and, more recently, tweets. These are viewed as a means that users adopt to offer apologies and, in general, to tackle crisis situations. Page (2014) draws upon speech act theories, namely Blum-Kulka *et al.*’s (1989) pragmatic framework whereby apologies may be conveyed via illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), and other devices, and upon Benoit’s crisis communication, in order to explain the form, rather than the function, of corporate apologies posted on Twitter. The list includes a variety of pragmatic studies on apology, which entail the relationship between social media and crisis communication from a pragmatic point of view (Flew *et al.* 2013; Wendling 2013; Rasmussen 2017; Cheng 2018).

Liu *et al.* (2011) use the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model that helps organizations generate desirable crisis outcomes through understanding how publics use social media (p. 345). Park (2011) adopts sentiment analysis³ to investigate positive and negative sentiments in a corpus of tweets posted by consumers in response to the apology offered by the CEO of E-Mart after the fake beef labelling incident.

A significant study which is closely related to this research is Swaminathan and Mah’s research published in the *Harvard Business Review* (2016), where they present the findings of a study carried out on a corpus of some 100,000 tweets posted by customers when they discovered that VW had cheated on the federal emissions tests. The authors are mainly concerned with how the public perceived the VW scandal. Notably, they explore the public reactions to the company’s attempt at recovery and the extent to which social media caused the proliferation and reverberation of negative news. Relying on tweets collected in the period in which the scandal peaked, the authors broke down the data according to the categories of frequency, vocabulary and sentiment, shifting from highly negative sentiment, soon after the outburst of the scandal, to positive and neutral sentiment as the time passed and the company was striving for recovery through apology and car

³ Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, deals with the judgments, feeling and opinions of people on a certain topic, an event or a character. Sentiments are retrieved through social media analytics and data mining. Sentiments can be positive, negative or neutral.

recall. Their analysis is meant to help managers understand the consumers' reactions and, consequently, take the right countermeasures.

The majority of the above studies are based on the sentiment analysis of tweets. Since, in crisis and post-crisis periods, tweets, as well as other social media, are used because they favour emotional venting, emotions in tweets have been examined, to date, in relation to the understanding of the sentiments expressed by the consumers. For instance, using a positive/negative sentiment analysis, some authors (González-Ibáñez *et al.* 2011) try to identify the lexical and pragmatic characteristics that users employ to express sarcasm in tweets.

However, the limits of such studies, as Roberts *et al.* (2012) warn, is that they are carried out on large-sized corpora while attempting to make generalizations about certain emotions and consider such realizations as representative of the whole. By contrast, the authors claim for the individual labelling of “a smaller unit of tweets with a grained set of emotions” (Roberts *et al.* 2012, p. 3806).

4. Methodology

This section describes the methodology used to carry out research concerned with two threads: 1) the analysis of the strategies that companies adopt in the aftermath of a scandal or any other critical event; and, 2) the study of the stakeholders' reactions, in tweets, to the scandal and the company's strategies.

The methodology adopted to investigate the first research strand combines Searle's Speech Act Theory and Hearit's Apologia Theory. Searle's theory provides methodological tools and criteria to classify illocutionary acts, in particular 1) *direction of fit* (Searle 1976), which enables us to study the different relations between words and the world. In brief, direction of fit refers to the way in which our actions and behaviours prove that our words are consistent with the world, and viceversa; 2) the *illocutionary point* (Searle 1985), i.e. the internal purpose of our illocutionary acts. In other words, it is the purpose that we achieve in performing speech acts: for example, the point of an order is to get people to do things (Searle, Vanderveken 1985); and, 3) the *expressed psychological state*, i.e. the sincerity condition of the illocutionary act performed (Searle 1976, p. 4). The psychological state varies depending on the context and the attitude that the speaker takes on with respect to the propositional content. Each illocutionary act expresses a different psychological state: “when one makes a statement one expresses a belief, when one makes a promise one expresses an intention, when one issues a command one expresses a desire or want.” (Searle, Vanderveken 1985, p. 124)

These criteria apply not only to *speech act verbs*, which are speech acts *par excellence*, but also to other IFIDs such as *word order*, *verb mood*, *tone*, *punctuation*, *intonation* and *stress*. In this sense, IFIDs can help recognize the real purpose and direction of fit of utterances in any discourse, in that the point and direction of fit of a propositional content can vary from culture to culture, from language to language and from genre to genre, in case of re-contextualization. Moreover, IFIDs can be explicit or implicit. In the latter case, the performativity of the utterance is realized by means of an assumed subordinator, i.e. an implicit illocutionary verb, followed by *that*, *whether* and *if* + the propositional content (Blum-Kulka, Olshtain 1984; Schiffrin 2005; Válková 2013).

Recent research (Falco 2017) has shown how a methodology based on speech act theory can be used to investigate corporate communicative strategies in time of crisis. The strategy enacted by corporations involved in crisis is often *apologia*, i.e. “the act of giving

a defense” (Hearit 2004, p. 4). *Apology*, along with *differentiation* and *scapegoating*, are forms of *apologia*. Specifically, they are communicative stances enacted by corporations involved in some crisis or caught in some wrongdoing or scandal. *Apology* is used when a corporation admits its fault and offers remedies to repair the wrongdoing. *Scapegoating* is the act of blaming someone else, whereas *differentiation* is the act of distancing oneself from one’s own guilt. In this case, there is the acknowledgment of one’s own responsibility but mitigating factors are invoked to limit one’s own culpability.

On these methodological grounds, the aim of the first research strand is to verify if the VW management are sincerely sorry about their wrongdoings or if they are using an apology to defend themselves from accusations and/or scapegoat someone else.

The second thread of our research is concerned with tweets posted by stakeholders in response to the VW scandal and to the CEO’s crisis communication strategies. Specifically, our assumption is that *apology*, *scapegoating* and *differentiation* used by the VW group are recontextualized in public tweets, thus generating different sentimental reactions, such as disillusion, anger and irony or sarcasm, the latest being the most difficult to identify as it is conveyed implicitly. To carry out the sentiment analysis over Twitter microblogs, we adopted an approach which was fundamentally empirical as we used the analytical tools of corpus linguistics; it included data collection, compilation, classification and analysis of two corpora. The corpora were compiled manually using Twitter Advanced Search and analyzed with WordSmith Tools 7, focusing on key words and key phrases that presumably conveyed the users’ feelings, emotions or moods.

The first corpus consisted of 355,565 tokens, with the highest number in the month of October and the first half of November 2015, that is in the aftermath of Müller’s appointment as CEO of VW in Germany (25 September) and Horn’s testimony before the US Court (8 October). Müller longs for “win(ning) back trust for the VW Group – by leaving no stone unturned and with maximum transparency”; Horn tries hard to save the company’s reputation and blames two software engineers for the cheat, although almost two weeks earlier he had publicly declared that the company had “totally screwed up”.

The second corpus consisted of tweets delivered soon after Müller’s letter to the Shareholders in the 2015 Annual Report, published in April 2016; it was intended to verify how people reacted to and re-contextualized the CEO’s *differentiation* strategy via the *special items*. To delve into the stakeholders’ reactions to this strategy enacted by VW, a corpus was created typing “special items”, VW and Volkswagen in Twitter Search and using as time range April 2016 to date, as the expression was used in the Letter to the Shareholders contained in the 2015 Annual Report, which was delivered in April 2016

Tweets were organized as *topical*, i.e. tweets that are mainly informative and descriptive of a subject, and *evaluative*, i.e. tweets that convey users’ opinions, reactions and sentiments (Zhao, Jiang 2011; Vosoughi, Roy 2016; Gruber 2017). Evaluative speech acts, in turn, were manually classified according to the sentiments that expressed anger, disappointment and irony/sarcasm. The textual representations of these sentiments in the tweets were studied focusing on lexical items, including keywords and their collocations.

Specifically, a wordlist was obtained from the corpus consisting of tweets. Words in the wordlist were grouped according to their conceptual-semantic and lexical relations, or synsets, i.e. their relations of synonymy, that also included hyperonymy and hyponymy relations, using WordNet 3.1 (Princeton University 2010).

5. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis conducted on the statements delivered by the German and American executive managers of the VW Group soon after the outbreak of the scandal in September 2015. The outcomes are functional to the understanding of the second research thread, which involves the investigation of the tweets reacting to the VW's scandal and to the apologies offered by the German company.

The statements include: a) the speech given by Matthias Müller on his day of appointment as new CEO of the VW Group in Germany (25 September 2015); b) the sworn statement of Michael Horn, President and CEO of Volkswagen Group America, before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce (8 October 2015); c) the *Letter to the Shareholders* delivered by Müller in the *VW Annual Report 2015*, which was published in April 2016. The outline of this part of the research is followed by a description of the strategies of *apology* and *differentiation*, implemented by the corporate managers in their statements and re-contextualized by stakeholders in their tweets.

5.1. Offering Apologies

After the scandal, both the German and American executive managers made their apologies to their customers. The analysis of the IFIDs⁴ used in their statements show that, besides apologies, the CEO also performs other communicative strategies, including *scapegoating* and *differentiation*, in order to defend the VW Group from attacks. The investigation of the illocutionary force conveyed by speech acts and speech act sets in the CEO letter of the *VW 2015 Annual Report* and other management statements, demonstrates that the ultimate strategy adopted by the corporation to repair their image is not so much apologizing for their wrongdoings, as providing an apologia to disclaim responsibility for the damage they caused. The ultimate goal of VW is in fact *apologia* (Hearit 2006), which is achieved by means of at least two crisis communication stances: *scapegoating* and *differentiation*.

Scapegoating is used by Horn in his Testimony; it is achieved by means of explicit IFIDs, i.e. negative polarity, mood and, in particular, speech acts. At a first glance, the speech acts enacted by Horn might be interpreted, in accordance with Searle's speech act taxonomy, as *assertives*, i.e. acts that represent a state of affairs. In fact, Horn is disclaiming the company's responsibility, and following Searle and Vanderveken (1985), "disclaim" is classified as a *declarative* speech act, i.e. an act that creates a new state of affairs. His message is a speech in *defence* of the company; it is a *counteroffensive* against accusations of wrongdoings, which is enacted by blaming someone else for the fault, as Example 1 shows:

(Example 1) This was not a corporate decision, from my point of view ... This was a couple of software engineers who put this in for whatever reason.

The second apologetic stance enacted in the VW management statements is *differentiation*. *Differentiation* is performed through implicit IFID's and the re-contextualization of content and purpose from one genre into another, specifically through a change in the *direction of fit* and the *illocutionary point* of the utterance. In his *Letter to the Shareholders*, the VW CEO, Matthias Müller, re-contextualizes the same content of

⁴ The results of this analysis were presented at CADAAD 2016 and CLAVIER 2017.

the *Notes to the Financial Statements* in the *VW Annual Report 2015*: the illocutionary act, which is evidently assertive in the *Notes*, as these are only intended to represent the financial situation of the corporation, takes on a declarative illocutionary force in the *Letter to the Shareholders*. As Example 2 shows, the CEO is in fact *disclaiming* his Company's responsibility for the loss in the operating result rather than simply apologizing for the wrongdoing, as one would expect in the Letter. *Apologia* is performed by a declarative illocutionary verb, which is left implicit, unsaid; it is expressed through an assumed subordinator (i.e. an assumed illocutionary force followed by *that*, *whether* and *if*) + the propositional content (Schiffrin 2005), as the recontextualization of the expression *special items* from the Notes to the VW CEO's Letter illustrates:

(Example 2) (**I declare that**) *without these special items*, the operating result would have slightly exceeded the prior-year level

(**I declare that**) *Without the special items* we would once again have been able to talk about a successful year overall.

(Source: VW's CEO's Letter to the Shareholders: my emphasis)

5.2 Replying to Apologies

The second research thread is concerned with tweets posted by stakeholders in response to the VW scandal and to the management's crisis communicative stances of *apology*, *scapegoating* and *differentiation* as shown in Section 5.1.

5.2.1 Case study 1: #sincereapology

I started with a focus on tweets that contained the words *apology*, *apologies*, *apologize*, *apologizes*, *apologizing*, *apologise*, *apologising*, *apologises*. 69 occurrences were found in all.

In pragmatic terms (Austin 1962), in order for the apologies to be effective as perlocutionary acts, the stakeholders should accept the apologies offered by the Group. In fact, none of the tweets seems to meet this expectation. The speakers use either explicit or implicit linguistic devices to convey:

Anger

Anger is used as an umbrella word to include also sentiments of *indignation*, *annoyance*, *conditioned emotion response*, *rage*, *bad temper*, which are considered its synsets by WordNet 3.1. These sentiments are manifest either directly in tweets where customers admit to be angry about VW or indirectly in tweets where customers complain about *cheating*, use disease metaphors to talk about the scandal – a frequent metaphorical concept is DIESELGATE IS CANCER – reject VW's apologies or even utter swear words.

- 1) You should be deeply ashamed @*VWcanada* ***dieselgate***
<https://twitter.com/mamajudd3/status/661211348710354944>
- 2) Whoever did this should be ashamed of themselves ***dieselgate
- 3) @VW @Volkswagen apology NOT accepted. A blatant & premeditated. My TDI is a worthless embarrassment. #VWcares really? Then show me.

Disappointment

Disappointment is associated with feelings of *dissatisfaction* and *dashing hopes*. Often, it co-occurs with the sentiment of anger and is evidenced directly by the use of verbs such as *deceive* and *disappoint* and their nominalized forms, e.g. *disappointment*, *deception*, *deceptive*, *deceit*, or indirectly by the lack of reply or information from the VW.

- 4) This is one class action suit that I think is justified given #*VW* 's blatant deceit! #**dieselgate**
- 5) Doubt the world has even seen such a blatant case of fraud, its extent, or the scope of the ramifications @*haloefekti* (**typo fixed)☹️
- 6) How about an apology to owners in Australia? We're still waiting.. #Volkswagen

Irony or sarcasm

WordNet associates *irony* with satire and language of scorn as well as the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs. Remarkably, in the majority of tweet acts expressing *irony*, the IFID is not explicitly given. Also, this sentiment mainly occurs in evaluative tweets, where the illocutionary act is, in some cases, utterly *assertive*, with a words-to-world direction of fit, whereas in others it is *declarative*, with the direction of fit apparently words-to-world and implicitly world-to-words:

- 7) LOL @*Volkswagen* offering me a free touque. How bout an apology for all the lies? #*VolkswagenScandal* #**dieselgate** pic.twitter.com/x6aUhbJlq6
- 8) roberto1975 Retweeted Yonhap News Agency Not looking for apology... unless there is a check in the envelope. #*tdi* #**dieselgate** <https://twitter.com/YonhapNews>
- 9) Finally got a #*perfunctory* letter of apology from @*Volkswagen* @*VW* #*VWGate* #**dieselgate** #*VWCares* 2 replies . 0 retweets 0 likes Re
- 10) Got VW apology letter re: my TDI. They take full responsibility, which is good b/c I was starting to worry it was my fault

The irony or sarcasm in the tweets above is conveyed by the fact that the tweeter's psychological state seems to be one of *belief*, and the direction of fit is words to world, i.e. he/she seems to commit to the truth of the expressed proposition, which is typical of assertive acts. In fact, the vocabulary and the structure of the utterances, e.g. *offer a free touque*, *unless there is ...*, *perfunctory*, etc. turn the direction of fit into world to words and the psychological state in disbelief, thus causing an ironic effect. This becomes more explicit whenever the verbal text comes along with non-verbal texts, such as pictures.



Interestingly, the most frequent collocates of *apology* (L1) is the pre-modifier *sincere* and the recurring pattern is

The VW boss offers/makes 'sincere apology' to ... /for cheating

Indeed, this re-contextualizes Horn's speech to the shareholders and stakeholders.

On behalf of our company, and my colleagues in Germany, I would like to offer a sincere apology for Volkswagen's use of a software program that served to defeat the regular emissions testing regime.

By recontextualizing, through quoting the CEOs' apologizing acts, the tweeters question their sincerity. The IFIDs used to perform their acts are mood and modality, as the example below shows:

.@Volkswagen + @VW - thank you for the **apology**. It seemed sincere. Now buy back my 2010 A3 TDI and we can talk about moving forward. #VWGate

The same irony and pragmatic device are found in concordances with *sorry*, as in

- 11) We're sorry you got affected by **dieselgate**. Here's \$500 to pimp your car. **Volkswagen** **facepalm**
- 12) **Dieselgate** letter from **Volkswagen** received. They need to learn how to say sorry. "We were not aware" is weak, guys! pic.twitter.com/6PYTMnn36B
- 13) VW may be sorry for **Dieselgate**, but 'rolling coal' polluters make no apologies: **misterfleming** report,
- 14) Sell More ZEVs **Dieselgate**... <http://fb.me/Gw0dPCew> **elon** ↑ @elonliveAT 18 dic 20 15 @DriveEv ++ sorry dudes, time of peace & flower power, #VW bulli and positive "herbs" is over. its the year of #gr

The verbal phrase *be sorry* is generally used as an expressive illocutionary act, where the content in the utterance complies with the sincerity condition. In fact, the tone, the use of certain words and the word order, in the tweets in the corpus, suggest lack of sincerity. This means that the speaker is not genuinely sincere but uses lexis, grammatical and semantic negative polarity as well as tone, e.g. question marks to achieve an ironic effect.

5.2.2 Case study 2: #without special items

As seen in Section 4.1, the prepositional phrase *without special items* introduces an utterance whereby the CEO, Matthias Müller, re-contextualizes the content of the Balance Sheet in the Letter to the Shareholders, thus bringing a change in the illocutionary point, from assertive (words-to-world) to declarative (words-to-world and world-to-words). By blaming these “special items” on the responsibility of the financial failure, the CEO is disclaiming the Group’s responsibility for the scandal. In Hearit’s terms, the CEO is instantiating *differentiation*, i.e. the strategy of

It’s Not Our Fault. ... They acknowledge that they are in some degree responsible for the act, but argue that mitigating factors limit their culpability. Here, for example, an organization might admit that an act occurred but claim that it was the result of an accident, or that a disgruntled employee who acted without organizational authorization was responsible. (Hearit 2006, p. 16)

In this time range, the pattern “special items” occur 176 times. Its most frequent collocates are *operating result*, *before* and *negative*. The majority of tweets are topical, i.e. they just acknowledge the negative impact of the diesel scandal on the company’s profits. The utterances have mainly an assertive illocutionary force, with a words-to-world direction of fit. Therefore, the tweets seem to re-contextualize the content and purpose of the Balance Sheet rather than the declarative purpose of the Letter of Shareholders, as in:

- 15) The negative special items relating to the diesel issue amounted to €16.2 billion and were recognized in the operating result.
- 16) The operating result was also impacted by special items relating to restructuring expenses in the trucks business (€0.2 billion) and in the passenger cars area in South America (€0.2 billion).
- 17) Overall, negative special items recognized in the operating result therefore amounted to €16.9 billion in fiscal year 2015.
- 18) Excluding the special items, the Volkswagen Group’s operating result in fiscal year 2015 was on a level with the previous year, at €12.8 billion.
- 19) The operating return on sales before special items was 6.0 (6.3)%. Negative special items totaled €6.9 billion. As a result, the operating result declined sharply to €- 4.1 (12.7) billion;

There is only one case of evaluative tweet in which the tweeter’s sarcasm unveils the company’s real attempt at disclaiming their own responsibility. He is re-contextualizing the purpose of the letter and, consequently, replying with irony, thus denying the CEO’s attempt at apologia:

- 20) Since when is “Operating Profit before special items” a thing? “We made €10bn profit, but that’s excluding our massive cock up” #Volkswagen.

The implicit IFID used to communicate sarcasm in the utterance is represented by the tone of both the rhetorical question and the answer.

6. Conclusions

This research has shown that tracking and monitoring speech acts and other implicit IFIDs in tweets can help scholars understand how stakeholders really react to corporate scandals and to the executive managers’ attempt at offering apologies. A useful methodological tool

in this regard is represented by the analysis of tweets as forms of re-contextualization (Fairclough 2003; Grüber 2017) of the illocutionary point and direction of fit (Searle 1976) that are performed in other genres. The study carried out on the Dieselgate scandal suggests that: 1) the crisis communication stances implemented by the company's CEO enact a strategy of *apologia* rather than of *apology*; 2) these strategies tend to fail. As the investigation of the tweets posted by customers in the aftermath of the scandal has shown, sentiments of anger, disillusion and irony prevail in users. Considering the multimodal nature of tweets, as well as of other CMC genres, future research should also pay close attention to non-verbal forms of expression, e.g. videos, images, web pages. Focusing on the written text only can impair the final outcome of the analysis, as IFIDs should include not only lexis, word order, tone, punctuation, but also visual and aural meaning-making devices.

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