Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral Dissertation Thesis

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The Social Function of Apologies in the Japanese, American and Hungarian Media

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Theme selection

The Japanese apologize frequently not only in their personal lives but also on television, in which “apology interviews” are held in various situations. There are such media events in Europe and in the United States as well, but apologies are less frequent. In addition, Japanese apologies tend to have similar patterns, but Europeans and Americans apologize in various ways, sometimes just merely uttering sorry.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how apologies function in different cultural fields, by scrutinizing the differences of media apologies in each culture. This paper argues that the apology interviews held in Western cultures predominantly imply both social and economic responsibilities, while in Japan, apologies are mainly for emotional appeals. Further, the Japanese apologize within a day after the incident, but in Europe and the United States, it is common that the apology comes 3 or more days after the incident; if at all. The purpose of the Japanese apology interview is to express the apologizer’s remorse in an effort to mitigate the public’s anger and media’s criticism. In shaping of Japan’s media apologies, TV journalists assume key roles as mediators between the accused and accusers.

The structure of the dissertation

The dissertation has two main part. The first one contains a content analysis from 1984 to 2009 collecting all apology newspaper articles from the top three Japanese newspapers in order to examine how apology in the media has changed during the last 25 years. The second part of the thesis compares apology conferences in the media from Japan, Hungary and the United States, and analyses the apologies with understanding the cultural background of crisis communication. The three countries were Japan as a collectivist country, the United States as an individualist, and Hungary as a fusion since it has changed from collectivism to individualism after the collapse of the communist system. The aim of this research is to clarify the apology differences in each country and create a cultural typology of apologies.
Conclusion

Japanese apologies have changed during the past 20 years. Since apologies has started to be covered extensively by the media in the early 2000s, the press took over the position of the audience and became the one to decide whether forgive the apologizers or not. This transformation of the roles in apology led to the exclusion of the audience from the structure and the formalization of apologies. The reason why the Japanese media had the power to take over the position from the audience and formalize the apology was its exclusive press club system, known as kisha kurabu, which exercises a strong agenda-setting influence.

In order to show the uniqueness of the Japanese shazai kaiken, this paper conducted a comparison of apologies in the United States, Japan and Hungary which represents the individualist, collectivist and post-collectivist cultures. The results of the research not only shed light on the types of apologies differs in the three countries, but also explain how concepts of responsibilities differ between collective and individual corporate cultures, and therefore accurate understating and proper training of apology is necessary.

By comparing the three countries' apologies, similar patterns in America and Hungary can be found, while the Japanese apology manner is completely diverse. In the case of Europe and the United States, usually an interview is held, and the apologizer utilizes the self-punishing method. In these countries, it is understood that self-punishing is one of the processes needed to eventually receive societal approval, leading to forgiveness. However, in Japan, punishing yourself is represented in the change of appearance (marugari; cut or sometimes shave the hair) or an act (bowing, dogeza). In Western apologies, sincerity is shown by the apologizer through participation in some type of “volunteer” activities. There is a tendency to destroy the image by yourself and to restore it with volunteer activities. However, in Japan, there is no volunteer activity, indicating that the apology process ends with the apology itself. In other words, the apology itself has an important role in Japan, and it always assumes a fixed style.

In the corporate apologies, the structure is different. In case of a foreign company, either a general apology announcement is released or there is no apology at all. However, in Japan, similar to individual apologies, companies apologize within a day after the
accident and they definitely bow in front of the media. To provide clarity for the reasons behind this, it is necessary to understand legal and cultural differences.

In all three countries, in case of corporate incidents, there is a distinction between legal responsibility and moral responsibility. In Western cultures, legal responsibility and moral responsibility are clearly distinguished, but if someone admits his failure, it is believed that this is acceptance of both legal and moral responsibilities. In cases where responsibility is decided by the trial, moral responsibility is usually not expressed, but if the case is not a legal problem, many companies take moral responsibilities. However, even in the case of moral responsibility, usually only apology announcements are released.

In the United States and Hungary, it is understood that the apology shows the admission of responsibility, and this action will not be profitable for the trial. In other words, if an apology is issued prior to the trial verdict, it means that all mistakes are accepted and it is believed that it will affect the judgment. However, in Japan, these responsibilities are clearly separated, and the apology includes moral responsibility, but not legal. This is why Hungarian and American companies avoid apologies even in a moral sense, and it is the reason why Japanese companies are unconcerned about apologizing immediately after the incident.

From a cultural point of view, individualistic Americans, even if they own companies, do not take responsibility for the failure of another person. Of course, they will make efforts to restore the damaged company image, but apologizing in front of the media for the failure of other employees is uncommon. Furthermore, in European and American companies, it is clearly defined who is responsible for what, and therefore, easier to tell who made the mistake. However, in a collectivist country like Japan, the company is a united group, and thereby is responsible for the individuals of this group. The company is like a family and success and mistakes are equally shared. In short, this is why corporate apologies are similar to individual ones.

In this cross-cultural comparison of apologies, the most important aspect is the setting where the apology is held. Apologizers must apologize to viewers on each setting, and the apology needs to be setted to every society. Even if they apologize in the same way
and use the same words as in their own cultural background, in a different social orientated community it might not be understood. Furthermore, when considering an apology as performance, there is a possibility that a completely different meaning will be conveyed unless the performance is tailored to the new setting. There are important characteristic apology marks in each cultural setting which are essential in presenting a suitable act. In America's case, it is important to take responsibility, but in Japan responsibility is a secondary question; the speed and the visualization of apology matter more.

Finally, it is possible to clarify the structure of apology in foreign countries and in Japan. The apology presented in a foreign country is different in the case of individuals and companies, but in Japan it is similar for both. Furthermore, Japanese companies' apology in the United States lose the Japanese characteristics and visualize elements of apology, and much more emphasis is placed on the question of responsibility. On the other hand, foreign companies apologizing in Japan showed a typical form of Japanese apology including bowing and typical apology expressions. In short, the most important matter when apologizing is to adjust actions to the cultural expectations where the apologies are performed.

Apology is a global phenomenon. With an apology conflict cannot be avoided, but apology is a gesture to accept what happened and bring closure. It is a transaction between the apologizer and the victim, a gesture to show regret and confession which is motivated by self-interest but performed due to social pressure. It is an act that shifts from the past to the future. As a conclusion the research shows the variation of apologies in intercultural aspects. In the Japanese apology visualization is the most important element, strongly reflects the social norms and cultural characteristics of Japan. Outside of Japan, in all apologies aside from visualization responsibility is a delicate but serious topic, which needs to be clarified. Each social field needs to be researched and fully understood what the cultural expectations are in apology and every act and verbal manifestation need to format to those apology expectation in order to achieve transculturally forgiveness.
Publications and presentations


2015.07.04.
メディアで現れる「謝罪」の比較研究 (Comparative research of Apology in the Media)
Musashi Sociology Conference, Tokyo, Japan
2015.06.13-14.
社会的機能としてのメディア“謝罪”〜メディア・イベントとしての“謝罪”的実証的比較研究〜
(The social function of media apology:comperative study of apologies as media events)
Japan Society for Studies in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kioto, Japan
2015.03.5-6.
Media features’ cultural background in the Modern Ages: Apologies in the Individualist and Collectivist Societies
Nordic Association for Japanese Studies, Lund, Sweden
2014.04.25.
The transformation of apology in the Japanese Media,
British Association for Japanese Studies, SOAS London, UK
From traditional bowing to media manipulated actors: The transformation of apology in the Japanese Media
Nordic Association for Japanese Studies, Helsinki, Finland
2013.06.25-29.
A comparative content analysis of the use of apology in the Japanese and the Hungarian media,
IAMCR Annual Conference, Dublin, Ireland
2012.09.
The power of the Japanese media
MECCA Annual Postgraduate Conference, University of Loughborough, UK