

A Genre Analysis of 5-star Hotels' Responses to Negative Reviews on TripAdvisor

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify generic patterns, most frequently used expressions and lexical choices in the hotels' responses to negative reviews on TripAdvisor, which can be of use to the teaching of business English writing. One hundred replies written by twenty Thai 5-star hotel managements were collected. Swales's notion of move analysis was applied to explore the text patterns, and thematic analysis was used to identify word selection of hotels' representative writers. Five generic moves with two to four steps were found throughout the corpus. Common expressions were also listed to provide choices for learners.

Key words: *genre analysis, TripAdvisor, ESP materials*

1. Introduction

In the age of globalization and information technology, travelers around the world can access online communities where information about tourist destinations and accommodations is available. In the tourism management field, electronic word of mouth and computer-mediated communication have been of great interest for researchers in past decades. It has been suggested that online ratings and reviews affect not only customers' decision to make a hotel reservation but also the level of hotel performances (Tuominen, 2011). Tourists may consult the experiences shared by others in their community before choosing accommodations or destinations. Likewise, service providers may take some comments into consideration and improve their services or facilities to ensure that similar complaints would not reoccur (Smyth, Wu & Greene, 2010). Most top hotels assign employees in senior positions to take care of these reviews, especially negative comments, as the spread of unfavourable reviews can harm their image and reputation. Professionalism of hotel representatives in replying to reviewers' comments can reflect the service quality and customer relation policy of the hotels.

Training tourism management students to write effective correspondences of this type should be considered. In spite of a large number of business textbooks available on the market, it can be interesting to investigate how these responses are written by professionals in authentic contexts. The findings of this study will benefit business English teaching and material development. Producing a manual that results from authentic texts is worth doing because it enables learners to assume professional practice when producing written texts on the basis of authentic guidelines. This is supported by Peacock (1997) suggesting that “teachers of adult EFL to beginners try appropriate authentic materials in their classroom, as they may increase their learners’ levels of on-task behaviour, concentration, and involvement in the target activity more than artificial materials (p. 152).

The aim of this study is therefore to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the generic patterns (moves and steps) of 5-star hotels’ responses to negative reviews on *TripAdvisor*?
- 2) What are most frequently used phrases or clauses in each move and step?

2. Literature review

2.1 Hotel reviews and responses on TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor is one of the largest web-based communities providing information about tourist destinations, accommodations and restaurants around the world from both service providers and consumers. The reason why *TripAdvisor* was selected as the data source for analysis is that this study focuses on how the 5-star hotels respond to negative reviews, so sequential messages between the reviewers and the hotels, as well as a clear systematic rating of which reviews are negative, are needed. Not only does the Hotel Review section of *TripAdvisor* provide a rating system for travelers to score the hotels to reflect their level of satisfaction (terrible, poor, average, good, excellent), but it also arranges space for them to write reviews to which only the registered hotel accounts can give responses. In other words, this section provides the opportunity for both reviewers and hotel managements to sequentially respond to each other. Other readers can only perceive the information from the two sides, but are not able to take part in the reviews. This is the feature that makes *TripAdvisor*’s Hotel Review section different from other travel forums where multiple reviewers can join and write their opinions to support either the main reviewer or the hotel under the same review.

There have been a large number of studies in the tourism management field focusing on the effects of electronic word of mouth conversations on consumer decisions and hotel performance (Filieri, 2015; Liu et al., 2015; Luo & Zhong, 2015; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). It was found that reviews, either positive or negative, could increase consumer awareness of the hotels (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Most of the previous research on complaints on *TripAdvisor* pointed out that the messages were written in the form of warnings to other

travellers or threats to the hotels. However, Vásquez's (2011) recent study on the same focus found that some complaints on *TripAdvisor* tended to be made with advice and recommendations for improvement of the hotels.

How the hotel representatives give responses to those reviews is also considerable. It basically shows that the hotels pay attention to their customer voices, whether or not they put it into action. Composing responses to negative reviews can be challenging in that the authors are dealing with customer dissatisfaction and hotel reputation maintenance at the same time. Every component of the language they use to construct the message, including words, phrases, tone, and text structure, can signify their professionalism and customer relation policy. Following positive reviews, the hotels may post short messages expressing appreciation towards the compliments. For negative comments, they tend to do more than just ignoring or simply acknowledging them. This is because hotels' responses were found to have influence on consumer ratings, which may affect hotel reputation (Xie, Zhang, & Zhang, 2014). These are the reasons why we found it worth investigating how 5-star hotels, whose representatives are expected to be professional and prudent, respond to negative reviews. It is hoped that the results of response patterns and word lists obtained from the data can be a good model for learners of business English and hotel-specific English.

2.2 Genre analysis and ESP material development

There are three main theoretical frameworks for current genre research, namely English for specific purposes (ESP), North American New Rhetoric studies, and Australian systemic functional linguistics (SFL), each of which produces different useful results for the language teaching field. In a study of definitions and analyses of genres within these three frameworks, findings suggested that ESP and SFL have been viewed as useful approaches to language learning in classroom contexts while the New Rhetoric provides insights into language use in institutional and professional settings (Hyon, 1996).

This study took the notion of Swales's (1990) ESP as a model since its emphasis is on exploring conventional patterns of text in a specific setting, which can be useful for beginner writers of business English. ESP genres are identified based on their functions in communicative events, the members of which share the same set of communicative purposes. Their content, positioning and form are recognized by users in the same discourse community, and therefore the community members can provide insights of knowledge of genre conventions. By realizing the structure, style and content that express a particular communicative purpose to an intended audience, learners could be "aware of characteristics shared by members within a discourse community, who are already making use of it" (Dos Santos, 2002, p. 170). Furthermore, they should be able to construct their texts from the suggested patterns and key words listed as guidelines for them (Paltridge, 2006).

Swales's move analysis has been widely accepted and extended. While his analysis primarily focuses on academic and research settings, Bhatia (1991) adapted this notion to analyze business-specific texts. An example of this is an investigation of two kinds of business messages: sales letters and job applications. The results suggested that both of the texts shared the same communicative purpose and moves of promotional genres. Table 1 shows the structural description of the two messages.

Table 1 Moves in sales letters and job applications (adapted from Bhatia, 1991)

Moves	Sales letters	Job applications
1	Establishing credentials	Establishing credentials
2	Introducing the offer	Introducing candidature
3	Offering incentives	Offering incentives
4	Enclosing documents	Enclosing documents
5	Soliciting response	Soliciting response
6	Using pressure tactics	Using pressure tactics
7	Ending politely	Ending politely

Although the above findings of move structures in two letter types yielded useful examples of how the business messages are formed, they still lack an insight into how to write purposefully with effective words and phrases. Effective ESP materials require more than just fixed patterns. Bhatia later developed a series of worksheets from his sales promotion letter analysis to train employees in a corporate body. It can be considered a 'thick' description of genre-based ESP materials because it contains explanation of strategies used by writers, moves identification practice and introduction to various methods of constructing an effective text in each move. As genre-based materials do not intend to throw a pattern to learners and leave them 'filling out the form' with random words, in developing an ESP material, an analysis at various linguistics levels such as lexico-grammatical should be carried out to provide learners with choices of authentic lexis rather than allow them to follow a word list presented in textbooks. However, these materials should not be considered 'prescriptive', but 'clarificatory' (Bhatia, 1991). In other words, they are supposed to give conventional models that can be learned and adapted creatively to achieve a communicative goal.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

English responding messages from 20 Thai 5-star hotels were collected from *TripAdvisor*. The rationale behind this data selection was based on an assumption that 5-star hotels are expected to assign experienced managements to deal with customers' complaints, so their

responses should be able to represent ‘business professionalism’. The selection of hotels was based upon the ranking system of the website, on which the highest scored hotels have been shown in the top ranks. The first twenty 5-star hotels were browsed. The first five responses from each of these hotels posted as replies to negative reviews in ‘terrible’ or ‘poor’ rating criteria were collected, making a corpus of 100 messages. The total number of words was 15,901, ranging from 52 to 882 words in each response.

To further elaborate, the difference in word count was because the messages contain different numbers of steps under the same moves. While the common moves could be identified in all messages, steps under each move vary. For example, in Move 3 Dealing with complaints, there are three steps, which are explaining causes of the incident, reporting investigation or corrective action, and soliciting direct contact. Some responses contain all three steps while others have only the first one - Explaining causes of the incident – and then go on to the next move.

3.2 Method of analysis

To identify the generic pattern of a message type, we have read through each response several times to explore the communicative function of each unit of text, which is a set of one or more clauses that convey a single idea or topic (Skalicky, 2013). Within an emerging move, underlying steps that were used to achieve the purpose of the move were also marked. The results were then compared within the corpus to find common features that could represent the generic structures of this genre. For reliability in data analysis, we asked a native-speaking colleague who has several years of experience in teaching business English to cross-examine the coded data.

Frequently used phrases or clauses in each step were also identified. An attempt of each hotel to adjust their messages to correspond with specific issues in particular complaints contributed to a variety of lexical choices and details in the complementary bits. However, we have tried to analyze the characteristics of words and phrases commonly used in those parts and make a list of remarkable key features. Again, the native-speaking inter-rater was asked to code the same set of data. An inter-rater reliability analysis using the Cohen’s kappa was done to examine consistency among raters.

4. Results

4.1 Generic structure

Table 2 provides information about moves and steps discovered in hotels’ responses in the corpus. Five common moves were identified together with two to four steps within each.

Table 2 Generic structure of hotels' responses to negative reviews on TripAdvisor

Moves	Steps
(M1) Opening	(S1) Salutation (S2) Greeting
(M2) Acknowledging feedback	(S1) Expressing gratitude (and/or) (S2a) Re-stating the complaint (or) (S2b) Expressing concern about the complaint (S3) Apologizing for the unpleasant incident
(M3) Dealing with complaints	(S1) Explaining causes of the incident (and/or) (S2) Reporting investigation or corrective action (S3a) Soliciting direct contact (or) (S3b) Promising to improve service
(M4) Closing remarks	(S1a) Expressing second gratitude (or) (S1b) Expressing second apology (and/or) (S2) Asking for a return visit (and/or) (S3) Soliciting direct contact
(M5) Ending	(S1) Signing off (S2) Signature (S3) Job title

4.1.1 Move 1 – Opening

This move was typical in all responses in the data. The authors started their messages with salutation (S1) to address the reviewers to whom they would provide responses. Some authors used *greeting expressions* (S2) to establish a feeling of warm welcome after addressing the reviewers' names.

4.1.2 Move 2 - Acknowledging feedback

The second move was an expression of their interest in the reviewers' opinions and complaints. Almost all of the authors in the corpus started their acknowledgement with *expressing gratitude for reviewers' sharing experience and/or staying at their hotels* (S1). After that, the hotels would *either re-state the point of complaint* (S2a) *or express their concerns of the complaint received from reviewers* (S2b). In some messages, the

re-statement of complaints was embedded in an expression of concern. For instance, in the sentence “*I was concerned to read that you were disappointed with the pricing of our babysitting service*”, the issue of “the pricing of our babysitting service” was re-stated with an expression of concern.

A few hotels directly began their responses by *apologizing for the unpleasant incident* (S3); for example, “*First of all, I would like to express my sincere apology to hear your disappointment about the concierge department*”, which could imply that the hotel humbly admitted the mistakes mentioned by the reviewer and thus instantly apologized for it.

4.1.3. Move 3 – Dealing with complaints

This move covered most of the content in the messages from hotels. The first common step found in this part was *explaining causes of the incident* (S1a), which would be used when the hotels claimed that the incident the reviewers had experienced was standard practice of the hotels (e.g. dress code, Wi-Fi service, transfer service, etc.). *Reporting investigation* (S2) could be an optional first step in this move, especially in the event that the complaints required *corrective action* such as mitigating property loss and addressing staff behavior. In some short responses, authors might omit all types of clarification and just *asked reviewers to contact them directly via phone or email* (S3a) to solicit more information about the incident for further investigation or personal negotiation. Another option to end this move was *promising to improve the quality of service or facilities* (S3b), which could be linked to a request for a return visit in the following move.

4.1.4. Move 4 – Closing remarks

Authors often concluded their responses with a *second thanks* (S1a) for the feedback or a *second apology* (S2b) for the mentioned problems. They may ask for opportunities to welcome reviewers again in the future by *encouraging a return visit* (S2) and assuring that such an incident would not happen again. The last optional step in this move was *soliciting direct contact* (S3) by which authors asked reviewers to email or call them if they intended to revisit the hotels so that the hotels could ensure a better service.

4.1.5. Move 5 – Ending

This move was as common in all responses in the corpus as it was in general business correspondences. Authors *signed off* their messages (S1), followed by *names* (S2) and *job titles* (S3). The sign-offs ranged from a formal phrase such as ‘Yours sincerely’ to the less formal ‘Warmest regards’. The most frequently used phrases will be indicated in the next section.

Certain steps were not obligatory in every response, so the word ‘or’ was put in parentheses as an indication of optionality. An example of move and step identification in the text is provided in Appendix 1.

4.2. Frequently used expressions

Following the analysis of moves and steps, common clauses and phrases emerged in the data. Although representative authors of each hotel could be different in rhetoric styles, they tended to follow certain lexical bundles frequently used in formal business correspondences. For example, ‘*Thank you for...*’ appeared 63 times in the M2S1 (acknowledging feedback – expressing gratitude). More specifically, ‘*Thank you for taking the time to*’ was found 17 times in this step across the corpus, which implies that this expression was common for starting responding messages. By obtaining this result, ‘*Thank you for taking the time to...*’ was worth listing as a useful expression for learners of business English. Table 3 shows the result of frequently used expressions within major moves and steps.

Table 3 An example of frequently used expressions within moves and steps

Move/Step	Expression	Frequency
M2S1	Thank you for taking the time to	17
M2S2b	We are I am sorry concerned disappointed to know/learn/read/hear	55 20 9
M2S3	We I apologize for	22
	Please accept our my apology for	14
	Please contact me us personally directly at	7
M5S1	Kind regards	26
	Best regards	24
	Warm regards	8

It is likely that some learners could struggle to complete their texts after these suggested expressions. In addition to providing phrases that facilitate the start of each move and step, words or clauses that follow them should be taken into account. Appendix 2 provides examples of complementary parts of the given expressions.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The main purpose of this research is to develop material to facilitate the teaching of business English, or more specifically, hotel English. Swales’ genre analysis was therefore taken as a model of study. To answer the first research question about the generic patterns in the 5-star hotels’ responses to negative reviews on *TripAdvisor*, common moves and steps were identified with examples. Reviews on *TripAdvisor* are seen by a wide audience,

and they influence customers' decision somehow. After reading reviews, hotels might attempt to contact complaining guests directly to negotiate compensation or explain the problems.

Only forms are probably not enough for a practical manual. Although recognizing structures is useful for learners as guidelines for message construction, beginners may struggle for appropriate lexical choices. To answer the second research question, most frequently used phrases or clauses in each move and step were suggested. Learners can consider the listed choices and select the most proper words or phrases to build their own messages. However, this study presented 'pattern seeking' rather than 'pattern imposing' (Bhatia, 2014, p. 40). In other words, the results obtained from this analysis are expected to provide conventional structures and linguistic features that can be of use in teaching second language (L2) learners of business English, yet it is still contextual and culturally dependent. As the real business world is always dynamic and never limited to what has been presented in the textbooks, students should learn to consider 'the relevant rights and obligations of parties to the situated transaction' (Zhang, 2013, p. 153) when producing professional texts. In dealing with customer dissatisfaction, hotel image and reputation should be also maintained. Teachers are therefore encouraged to emphasize that organizational policy and audience-specific issues should be taken into account.

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Appendix 1 Example of move and step identification in the text

MOVE 1	Dear valued Guest,	STEP 1
MOVE 2	Thank you for taking the time to provide us with your valuable feedback.	STEP 1
	It is of great concern that we were not able to meet your expectations in terms of our product and service, especially given your loyalty to the InterContinental brand.	STEP 2b
	Please accept our sincere apologies for not having your room available upon arrival.	STEP 3
MOVE 3	We were running high occupancy during your stay and while we had intended to upgrade your room as per Royal Ambassador privileges to a Club Corner Suite, we were unable to have it ready in time for your arrival.	STEP 1a
	We take guest feedback seriously and rest assured that we have shared your feedback with our senior management and appropriate departments.	STEP 1b
MOVE 4	We do hope you will reconsider and give us another opportunity to showcase our quality service when your travel brings you back to Bangkok.	STEP 2
	Please contact me personally via hiru@ihgbangkok.com so I can ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience with us.	STEP 3
MOVE 5	Yours sincerely,	STEP 1
	Hiru Daryanani	STEP 2
	Director of Rooms	STEP 3

Appendix 2 Useful expressions for responses to negative comments

(M1) Opening				
(S1) Salutation	● Dear + addressee’s name			
(S2) Greeting	● (Warm) greetings from + hotel’s name			
(M2) Acknowledging feedback				
(S1) Expressing gratitude	● Thank you for	taking the time to write/give/ share your	+ <i>feedback / comment / review / experience</i>	
(S2a) Re-stating the complaint	● You indicated that		+ <i>problem mentioned in the review (e.g. you were not satisfied with our service.)</i>	
	● We noted that			
	● We took good notes of			
(S2b) Expressing concern about the complaint	● We are disappointed to know/learn/read/hear that		+ points of complaint (e.g. your stay with us was unimpressive)	
	● I am concerned to know/learn/read/hear that			
	● We are sorry to know/learn/read/hear of			
(S3) Apologizing for the unpleasant incident	● We are (honestly) sorry that		+ unfulfilled expectation of guests (e.g. ‘our expectation was not met’, ‘our service was fall short of your expectation’)	
	● We extend a sincere apology that			
	● Please accept our sincere apologies for		+ points of complaint (e.g. the difficulties that you experienced during your recent stay)	
	● We (sincerely) apologize for			
	● I am (extremely) sorry for			
(M3) Dealing with complaints				
(S1a) Explaining causes of the incident	● Following your feedback		+ topic of comments	+ <i>please allow me to explain that....</i>
	● With regards to			
	● In regard to			
	● Regarding			
(S1b) Reporting investigation	● We have investigated		+ topic of comments	+ <i>we found that....</i>
(S2a) Soliciting direct contact	● Please do not hesitate to contact me at			+ <i>email address</i>
	● May I request you to email me directly at			
	● We would be pleased if you could email us directly at			
	● Please do give me a call or email your contact details to me at			

(S2b) Promising to improve service	● We can assure you that	+ <i>promise (e.g. we will do everything we can to make certain an experience of this nature never happens again.)</i>
	● Please rest assured that	
	● We can make certain that	
	● We will make sure that	
(M4) Closing remarks		
(S1a) Expressing second thanks	● Once again, thank you for	+ <i>feedback / comment / review / experience</i>
	● Thank you again for	
(S1b) Expressing second apology	● Once again, please accept my sincere apologies for	+ <i>unfulfilled expectation of guests</i> (e.g. ‘our expectation was not met’, ‘our service was fall short of your expectation’)
	● Once again, I would like to apologize for	
	● Once again, I am (truly/really) sorry for	
(S2) Encouraging a return visit	● We would be delighted to welcome you back to our resort/hotel.	
	● I hope you will give us another opportunity.	
	● We sincerely hope you will afford us another opportunity in the future with a return visit.	
	● It is our hope that we have the opportunity to better prove ourselves for a better score with your next visit.	
(M5) Ending		
(S1) Signing off	● Kindest regards	
	● Yours sincerely	
	● With best regards	
	● With my very best regards	
	● Respectfully	
(S2) Signature	-	
(S3) Job title	-	