

The Speech Act of Complaining: Definition and Characterization

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As the gateway to our understanding of complaints and complaint-responses strategies, previous studies will be introduced in this short review. At the beginning, various definitions and characterization of complaints and complaint-responses are going to be introduced.

Keywords: Complaining; Speech Act; Complaint Responses

1. Introduction

The study of complaints is done in pragmatics—or the study of speakers' knowledge of the world and of one another (Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995; 2006). Complaints have also been studied as language games (Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 2014), as pragmemes (Salmani Nodoushan, 2013, 2016) and as practs (Salmani Nodoushan, 2017).

There are two kinds of complaints: direct and indirect. Direct complaints are face-threatening acts through which speakers make complaints about someone or something that is present in the speech act scene (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b; 2008; 2014). Indirect complaint (also known as griping) can be described as a non-face-threatening speech act in which the responsible party or object of the complaint is not present during the interaction within which the speech act is performed (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b; 2008). This short review will discuss complaints and explain them.

2. Definition of Complaints

Using Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969, 1979) Speech Act Theory and their classifications, many researchers have explored the actual forms and functions of different speech acts in different languages. As for complaint, Trosborg (1995) defines it as “an illocutionary act in which the speaker (the complainer) expresses his/her disapproval and negative feeling towards the state of affairs described in the proposition and for which he/she holds the hearer (the complaine) responsible, either directly or indirectly” (1995, p. 311; see Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b; 2008). According to Searle's (1976) typology, complaint belongs to the category of expressive speech acts, expressing the speaker's approval as well as disapproval of the behavior which the complaine has already done or failed to do. Moreover, when a complaint is issued, a directive act may be implied or added (Trosborg, 1995, p. 320). Trosborg (1995) suggests that this involves an attempt to make the complaine repair the damage he/she caused, and/or an attempt to prevent a repetition of the deplorable act. So when the speaker complains, rather than just expressing his/her moral censure or blame, he/she is tending to request the hearer to perform a remedial act to compensate for the loss of the speaker. Therefore, the speech act complaint involves both expressive function and directive function.

The concept of a face threatening act (FTA) derives from Politeness Theory, as first proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), and extensively developed since then. Brown and Levinson define “face” as “the public self-image that every member (of a society) wants to claim for himself” (1987, p. 61). They recognize that everyone has similar face wants and they distinguish between two aspects of face— positive face and negative face. While positive face concerns the hearer's desire to be appreciated and approved of by selected others, negative face “represents the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction” (Brown &

Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Everyone has both negative face and positive face, and both of these aspects of face are, at times, threatened by another (Brown & Levinson, 1978). When an act of verbal or non-verbal communication “run (s) contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker”, this is called a “face-threatening act” (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 70).

In the speech act of complaining, the speaker (S) “expresses displeasure or annoyance” (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p.108), and “disappointment or grievance” (Clyne, 1994, p. 49), in response to an action that is seen by the speaker as unfavorable. It is “an expression of dissatisfaction addressed by an individual A to an individual B concerning behaviors that A feels on the part of B is unsatisfactory” (Laforest, 2002, p. 1596). Clearly, complaining is an intrinsically face-threatening act (FTA) (Murphy & Neu, 1996; Sauer, 2000; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). It threatens the hearer’s positive face because of the speaker’s damage to his/her self-image, or the speaker’s accusation and anger on the hearer’s previous wrongdoing; in addition, it also threatens the hearer’s negative face because the complaint has an implicature of requesting some compensation from the hearer. The conflictive nature of complaining might result in a breach of the social goal of maintaining comity and harmony between speaker and hearer (Leech, 1983).

3. Classifications of complaints

In order to reveal the strategies of responding to customer complaints, it is necessary to find out the characteristics and categories of complaints first.

According to Boxer (1989), two categories of complaint can be distinguished in terms of their patterns and functions: direct complaints and indirect complaints. In the first category, i.e., direct complaints, the addressee is held responsible for the perceived offence and is expected to acknowledge or change the undesirable state of affairs (Boxer, 1993). Direct complaints display the situations that hearers express their displeasure or annoyance immediately and face to face when they are perceived by the speaker as affecting him unfavorably. A direct complaint involves an explicit or implicit accusation and at least one explicit or implicit directive (Clyne, 1994, p. 54). By stating or implying that the addressee is responsible for a perceived offence, direct complaints threaten the addressee’s positive face, i.e. the need to be approved of and liked. Moreover, by stating or implying that the addressee should undertake some action to change the undesirable state of affairs, the complaint impinges on the addressee’s negative face, or their need to be unimpeded and autonomous (Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe, 2003).

An indirect complaint is defined as a long or repeated expression of discontent not necessarily intended to change or improve the unsatisfactory situation (Clyne, 1994). It differs from a direct complaint in that the addressee is neither held responsible nor capable of remedying the perceived offense. Data from a large study on indirect complaint among native speakers showed that indirect complaints are frequently employed as positive strategies for the purpose of establishing points of commonality (Boxer, 1993). They function to provide emotional release, or to off-load negative effect, rather than provoke actions to redress the offense. In other words, indirect complaints are not prototypical FTAs; rather, they are typical ways of establishing rapport with others. In business communication, customers are likely to complain directly in order to express their dissatisfaction and redress the offense. Therefore, the present study focuses on direct complaint.

4. Characterization of complaint-responses

As mentioned in 2.1.2, the FTA of complaint threatens both hearers' positive and negative face, and the hearer is also involved in the situation where he/she should do something to compensate for the loss of the speaker, which would be considered as a complaint response. While the act of complaining, like several other FTAs, has been dealt with in a few studies, the response to complaining has been considered far less often (Laforest, 2002, p. 1605).

If we take the complaint as the first part of an adjacency pair, there is no typical corresponding second part from an interactional standpoint (Laforest, 2002). "In Austin's terms, the 'perlocutionary intent' of a complaint is negotiable—a hearer cannot be said to recognize by convention what behavior will satisfy the complaint" (Edmondson, 1981, p. 280). According to Laforest (2002), the complaints can be followed by, apart from acceptance, denial, rejection, justification, making excuse, etc. Laforest (2002) has classified complaint-response realization patterns into four large categories:

- (1) acceptance of the complaint,

Him: You are damned wasteful!

Her: Ah I was going to put it away. I'm sorry. (apologetically)

- (2) partial acceptance ('yes but' response)

Her: Now you've got egg yolk in your hair! (clearly disapprovingly)

Him: (laughs) Do you promise me not to tell your sister about it? (She is an only child)

Laforest (2002) explained that "in this example, the response to the complaint does not testify to a refusal of responsibility for the act, but humor is used to make fun of it to a certain extent, so that there is not too much loss of face by the speaker."

- (3) rejection of the complaint

Him: You ate all of them! (containers of yogurt)

Her: No! I ate the big one. There is still some left.

- (4) disregarding the complaint

Her: Hey! Are you through spitting on me?

Him: (3-s pause)

Guffey (2003) categorizes complaint-responses in terms of the approaches of conveying responses into two types: direct approach and indirect approach. According to him, a direct response is normally used to state the good news. It begins with the main idea or best news, followed by relevant explanatory details and ends with an appropriate, friendly paragraph; an indirect response is used for conveying bad news messages, including refusing a replacement or refund, declining requests or favors, and conveying other negative news. Guffey (2003) suggests that the bad news must be conveyed carefully since the reader or the listener would be irritated, angered, or disappointed with bad news messages.

5. Conclusion

The scholars mentioned above have contributed much to the study of complaint responses, and laid a solid foundation for further studies on this subject. However, they all focus on

pragmatic strategies of complaint-responses in daily conversations, without any consideration of English for Specific purpose, especially for Business English. Thus, it is necessary to encourage more researchers to explore the use of complaint response strategies in Business Communication.

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