

## A STUDY OF THE SPEECH ACT OF COMPLAINING: A CASE STUDY

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### **Abstract:**

The present study aims to examine the speech act of complaining performed by consumers of a particular organisation by investigating the pragmatics strategies employed by the consumers in complaining. The behaviours of Malaysian non-native English speakers when making online complaints directed to an organisation is expected to have different approaches and preferences compared to complaints produced by native speakers of English. A case study approach was used in this qualitative study to investigate the preference of Malaysian non-native speakers of English language when making online complaints with respect to the components of the speech act set of complaining by analysing 50 online complaints, posted by 50 customers via [www.complaintsboard.com](http://www.complaintsboard.com). The results indicated that the component of complaining is found to be the most frequent in online complaints. Besides, it was also found that the complaints made by non-native speakers did not appear in isolation but accompanied by other components of speech act like criticism, justification, request for explanation, warning and threat and sarcasm. In addition, Malaysian non-native English speakers employed complaint strategy that lies under the third level of severity of complaint which means they produced the complaint by expressing it explicitly.

**Keywords:** speech act, complaint, criticism, sarcasm, justification, warning and threat

### INTRODUCTION

Among the primary researchers to define complaining are Edmondson and House (1981) who define a complaint as a verbal communication that involves the expression of negative views by the speaker of the past acts done by the hearer and also involves the act of challenging and denying the competency of the hearer. Abe (1982) views a complaint as identification of problems that involves the act of seeking for solutions from responsible person or a third party who has the ability to manoeuvre the situation. However, Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) believe that complaint is the result of the violation of the speaker's expectations and the hearer is often being charged with the failure of preventing unfavourable situations. The definition of complaining proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) is supported by Trosborg (1995).

Although Laforest (2002) and Edwards (2005) view complaint as a term that is tough to be defined in formal context, yet there are many researchers who have actually proposed the definitions of complaining in their own point

of views. Wierzbicka (1991) claims that a complaint is often intentional and acts as an indication that something bad has occurred to the speaker. Few years later, Hartley (1999) provides a very general description of complaint in which she defines complaints as merely a negative view of an event that takes place. Heinemann and Traverso (2009) agree with Hartley (1999) as they claim that any type of comment can be labelled as a complaint if it has even the smallest amount of negative value.

Complaining is one of the core speech behaviours (Beebe, 1997; Boxer, 1993; Culpepper, 1996). Complaining is normally charged with emotional energy that can trigger aggression and resentment in the addressee (Shea, 2003). There are a few factors influencing one's manner of complaining (Tronvoll, 2008) and one of the factors is the language itself. In international companies, customers and clients need to lodge their complaints using the international language, English, expressing their annoyance towards something or someone because the chances that their complaints to be shared around the world are high if it is expressed in English language.

### Types of Speech Act

Searle (1969) conducts further research on speech acts and argues speech acts are rule-governed forms of actions. He believes that the basic unit of communication is the speech act but claims that the rules of speech acts are influenced by one's linguistic competence. Shea (2003) agrees with Searle (1969) and claims that by increasing the understanding of the rules for speaking in a particular language, it is possible for any speaker to deliver exactly what he or she meant in any language. Searle (1969) then introduced a classification model of speech acts. He classifies speech acts into five basic categories, namely:

- 1) Representative speech acts, refers to the act of describing, concluding or asserting an event
- 2) Directive speech acts, refers to the act of requesting, questioning, or ordering the hearer to perform an action that will accord to what the speaker says and wants
- 3) Commissive speech acts, involves the act of committing him or herself (the speaker) to do something in future including promising or offering
- 4) Declarative speech acts, refers to the act of changing the state of events such as declaring a war
- 5) Expressive speech acts, involves the expression of the speaker's feelings and attitudes about an event including thanking, apologizing and welcoming.

Searle (1969) suggests that complaining falls under the category of the expressive speech acts which involves the demonstration of the psychological state of being irritated which later supported by House and Kasper (1981). However, DeCapua (1989) argues that a complaint is a result of the combination of expressive and directive speech acts.

### Politeness Theory

The politeness theory was originally established in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson in their book titled 'Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena'. According to Kitamura (2000), there are two parts in Brown and Levinson's work which is, first, a fundamental theory regarding the nature of politeness and how it is practised in interaction and the second part of Brown and Levinson's work is the list of politeness strategies.

In the first part of their work, Brown and Levinson (1978) introduce an important idea which is the notion of face. In general, face is one's self-image that they choose to present. According to Gill (2005), divided face into two parts, the positive face and the negative face. "A person's positive face is the need to be

accepted, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others", (Yule, 1996). Whereas for negative face, it is the need to be independent, freedom and not to be controlled by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) reveals that politeness can be divided into two natures which are positive politeness and negative politeness. In general, positive politeness is the act of satisfying the positive face meanwhile negative politeness is expressed by fulfilling the negative face. There are two ways in expressing positive politeness, firstly, by displaying likeliness between communicators and secondly, by showing the act of appreciation of the other person's self-image. Meanwhile, saving the speaker's face by reducing face threatening acts and pleasing the other person's wants which is by avoiding imposition are the acts of expressing negative politeness.

### Politeness in Complaining

Shea (2003) claims that the topic of linguistic politeness can be best discussed with the topic of complaining since these two topics are interrelated. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), all speech acts can be categorised as face-threatening acts. Vasquez (2011) agrees with the statement and suggests that complaining is a face-threatening act because a complaint is normally directed to individuals who are responsible for some offenses or events. The nature of complaint, which has been regarded as a face-threat, makes complaint more complicated to be produced as it may threaten both the speaker and the hearer's face (Kozlova, 2004; Orthaber et al., 2011) and speakers often employ various strategies to mitigate the face-damage as a result of the communication (Shea, 2003). Moon (1996) therefore, suggests that a high level of appropriateness is required for successful completion of complaints.

Orthaber and Marquez-Reiter (2011) propose that there are many forms of complaining act including the act of disapproving, criticising and displaying uncontrolled negative emotions or insults. There are two situations that may occur when somebody produces complaints (Orthaber & Marquez-Reiter., 2011). The first one is, when the speaker makes complaints in the form of expressing expectations that have not been met, the speaker has actually tarnished the hearer's positive face. The second situation is when the speaker makes complaints in the form of issuing orders or threats, the hearer's negative face may be damaged as a result of the communication.

According to a study conducted by Shea (2003), there are differences in the way people perceive complaints and it is highly influenced by one's own culture. Shea (2003), who conducted a research on how Japanese produces complaints in English, found that criticism, disagreement and complaint often being viewed as a face-threat by Japanese people but it is appreciated by Americans since they value self-expression. The finding is supported by Yian (2008), who investigated on the use of complaining by three groups of people; Australian native English speakers, native Mandarin speakers and Chinese non-native English learners who revealed that Chinese people are always trying to avoid performing the face-threatening acts, that is complaining, compared to Australians due to the dissimilar perception of the face concept in Chinese and Western cultures. Yian (2008) also highlighted that Chinese and Australian people differ in their preference of complaining strategies where the Chinese tend to employ strategies that are indirect and negative politeness oriented, while the Australians tend to be more direct and prefer positive politeness oriented strategies.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The number of studies on the speech act of complaining is still scarce (DeCapua, 1998; Ekmekci, 2015). Some researchers (Shea, 2003; Yian, 2008) have noted that the performance of the speech act of complaining differs according to cultures but the level of awareness of the importance of the speech act of complaining is still low (Tabatabaei, 2015). Hong et al. (2013) who analysed the productions and perceptions of complaints have also applied the complaint classification model proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) and found that non-native speakers, who are also English learners, have different preferences for complaint strategies of different severity levels and it is highly influenced by their proficiency in the language. Furthermore, the results strengthen that non-native speakers make adjustment in speech behaviours according to contexts.

Prior empirical research (Shea, 2003; Yian, 2008; Chen, Chen & Chang, 2011; Vasquez, 2011; Tabatabaei, 2015) has predominantly focussed on the speech act of complaining in English language made by non-native English speakers in comparison to native English speakers. According to Shea (2003), non-native speakers of English often fail to complain effectively in English causing the main problem remained unresolved. The research shows that there are differences in the speech act of complaining produced by non-native speakers of English in terms of the pragmatic strategies used (Shea, 2003).

Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) believe that a complaint may occur with only one condition that is if the speaker feels unsatisfied with an event or situation. They further proposed that a complaint can be categorised into five severity level of complaint namely; below the level of reproach, expression of annoyance or disapproval, explicit complaint, accusation and warning and immediate threat. Hence, they concluded that non-native speakers of English are prone to use less severe strategies in making complaints compared to native speakers. They revealed that non-native speakers prefer to avoid face-threatening act in communication. Yian (2008) used Olshtain and Weinbach's (1993) framework to conduct a study on the speech act of complaining, involving three groups of people who are native English speakers, native Mandarin speakers and non-native English learners. Yian found that there are differences in the way complaints are made by native speakers compared to non-native speakers based on the selection of complaining strategies.

According to Vasquez (2011) very few studies have been done to date, to examine the speech act of complaints produced by people in Asian countries, especially in Malaysia. Thus, this study aims to investigate the speech act of complaining produced by consumers in Malaysia when making complaints, in English language, particularly in the form of computer-mediated communication. It also hopes to discover their preference for pragmatic strategies and severity levels of complaints when making written online complaints. Since this study involves Malaysians who are non-native speakers of English, thus the result of this study is believed to be useful in identifying the behaviours of non-native English speakers when producing complaints.

This study is crucial to serve as a medium to create awareness of the necessity to have better understanding on the speech act of complaining of people from other cultures to avoid future intercultural miscommunication as well as to increase understanding on how Malaysian non-native speakers perform the speech act of complaining in English language. Thus, this study will address the following research question:

What are the components of the speech act set of complaining produced by Malaysian non-native English speakers?

## METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was used in this qualitative study to investigate the preference of Malaysian non-native speakers of English language when making online complaints with respect to the components of the speech act set of complaining and the severity levels of the complaints produced. This study employed homogenous sampling. The subjects of this study involved 50 online complaints, posted by 50 customers via [www.complaintsboard.com](http://www.complaintsboard.com) that were directed to an organisation called All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator (ASTRO). These complaints represent 42.5% Chinese, 27.5% Malays, 20% Indians and 10% from other categories. All complaints were fully written in English language. The data were analysed using the framework proposed by Murphy and Neu (1996) by examining the components of the speech act set of complaints produced. There are six main components of the speech act set of complaining, namely; complaint, justification, criticism, request for explanation, sarcasm and warning and threat.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn mainly from the complaints reported via the website and analysed using taxonomy of components of the speech act set of complaining proposed by Murphy and Neu (1996). There are 6 identified components of the speech act set of complaining. Table 1 illustrates the results.

### Speech Act Set of Complaining

Table 1: Components of the speech act set of complaining

	<b>Component</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1	Complaint	58	37.2
2	Criticism	32	20.5
3	Justification	31	19.9
4	Sarcasm	15	9.6
5	Warning and threat	7	4.5
6	Request for explanation	3	1.9
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100</b>

The following section begins with the component used most frequently in complaints produced by Malaysian non-native English speakers, which is the component of Complaint and continues in descending order of frequency to cover Complaint, Criticism, Justification, Sarcasm, Warning and threat and Request for explanation,

### Complaint

Based on the results, the complaint component shows the highest number of frequency, 37.2%. It is predictable that this component will obtain the highest number of occurrence since this study focuses on the speech act complaining. However, out of 50 complaints, there were 2 complaints that did not include this particular component in the complaint. This might be due to the fact that complainers have employed different strategy in expressing

negative evaluation instead of stating the complaint explicitly. These two complaints did have justification, criticism and warning. This perhaps occurs because complainers' preference and perception may differ from other complainers. This result is in line with Sato (2010) and Moon (1996) who found that ESL learners of English employed the component of complaint most frequently.

A: "Do you serve customers like this?"

B: "Your service is not appropriate. You should learn to be polite to your customers. Otherwise, I will inform to your manager about it."

C: "You are not willing to give a customer prompt service, you should change your job."

The differences in making complaints between A, B and C can be seen in this prompt. Although all three use hints in this situation, they expressed their complaints by voicing their vexations and their necessities to their friends instead of accusing the complaine and asking for responsibility directly. Conversely, C employed a good strategy to remind the staff about the time and asks him/her for a consideration that he/she should be aware of. Thus, it is noticeable that customers used strong complaint strategies to express their dissatisfaction.

#### Criticism

Criticism takes the second highest number of frequency, 20.5%. The explanation of this phenomenon can be clarified by looking at the characteristics of criticism itself. Criticism occurs when the speaker directly tells the hearer the unfavourable act that has been done by the hearer. Criticism may also contain further elaborations on problems and some personal attacks on the hearer.

A: Your monthly subscription keep increasing but your service keep dropping!

B: Wow... ASTRO often claims to be the best entertainment organisation but no time to entertain customers".

Accusing and disrespectful words can be included in a criticism. "subscription keep increasing.... Service keep dropping" and "...best entertainment organisation... no

time to entertain customers" sound very cynical. Thus, at times criticism can be regarded as more severe than complaint. For that reason, criticism becomes the second most preferred component after complaint. Besides, this finding is parallel to findings by Tabatabaei (2015) who discovered that the strategy of criticism was among the top three most frequently used strategies by Persian learners of English when placing complaints.

#### Justification

A total of 19.9% employed justification components in complaints. This reveals that complainers do seek justification for their action. Below are some examples extracted from customers' online complaint:

A: We are settling our ASTRO bill monthly without fail but when we report any default, it takes months for you to take action.

B: AS a customer, I deserve a better treatment. Can you send your man immediately to look into my complaint?

Shimada (2005) opined that a justification serves as a supporter to the customers, highlighting the trouble and looking for its remedy. They perceive that it is their right to demand for a solution especially when they subscribe monthly to the organisation. Murphy and Neu (1996) also suggest that justification offers credence to the complaint. Thus, complainers included justification in their complaint in order to enhance the strength of the complaint and make it look more reasonable and serious. However, Shea (2003) found that this justification is the most preferred component used by Japanese non-native speakers of English, Japanese native-speakers and American native speakers of English. The slight difference in the results might be influenced by the situations introduced to respondents in both studies.

#### Warning and threat

Warning and threat (9.6%) suggests that complainers wanted to make sure that the addressee was aware of their ability of taking more stern actions in future. The existence of this component increases the severity level of the complaint and makes it harsher (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). Below are examples of parts of complaints produced by Malaysian non-native English speakers and the underlined phrase is the warning and threat component that has been identified.

A: We are so frustrated and upset with Astro that we are going to apply Maxis and get Netflix instead.

B: Called Astro centre but no reply. I want to cancel my Astro IPTV.

These two examples, out of 15 complaints that contain warning and threat component, indicate that the utilisation of this component in complaints produced by Malaysian non-native speakers just heightened the seriousness level of the complaints. Complainers who included warning and threat in their complaints wanted the addressee to pay high attention to the trouble they have caused and indirectly demanded for immediate repair to avoid any drastic actions from taking place in future (Shea, 2003).

#### Sarcasm

Zhang (2001) advocated that sarcasm, which occurs together in the speech act of complaining, can be defined as a statement that ironically describes the problem of a particular situation. In this study, the component of sarcasm represents 9.6%. Sarcasm is used most of the time to enhance the face-threatening act that the complainers impose on the addressee. The use of sarcasm gives indication to addressee of matter that needs attention and reparation. Although this particular component appeared only seven times in the complaints, it shows that Malaysian

non-native speakers have the tendency to be sarcastic in certain situations especially in those situations that are unfavourable to them. Shimada (2005) suggests that sarcasm can be classified as one of the off-record strategies of face-threatening act which means that speakers try to carry out the act of complaining in subliminal way. Off-record strategies can be regarded as indirect strategies which can help to mitigate the impact of the face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

### Request for explanation

The component of request for explanation showed 3.2 %. This component receives a lot of attention from complainers because complainers normally produce complain with some intentions for instance, to request for explanation. Since complainers have drawn the addressee's attention to the problem at hand, many demand for explanation of why the negative act has taken place or why the complainers' expectation has been disrupted. This can be further associated with curiosity that exists in every human's mind. People with high curiosity level tend to investigate the cause of the problems and demand for clarification from the responsible party.

Based on the result, it is proven that complaints occur in a speech act set of complaining rather than in isolation. This means that when people make complaints, most of the time the complaints are accompanied by other identifiable speech acts forming usually a large speech act set. It is rare to spot a complaint that contains solely a component of complaint. All Malaysian non-native English speakers involved in this study included other components in a complaint rather than the complaint alone. This finding is supported by Murphy and Neu (1996) who suggested that a speech act of complaining will be typically formed from a combination of a component of complaint and several other components.

Diagramme showing the number of occurrence of components in complaints

### CONCLUSION

Complaint typically occurred as a speech act set and hardly in isolation. A study by Murphy and Neu (1996) revealed that complaints very often will form a large speech act set which might contain other identifiable speech acts such as warnings and advices. There were 12 components in speech act sets of complaining identified in this study. The six components are 1) complaint, 2) justification, 3) criticism, 4) request for explanation, 5) sarcasm, and 6) warning and threat. 95% of the complaints comprised the speech act set of complaining in their online complaints. This component was the most frequent speech act employed by the subjects, Malaysian non-native speakers. This result is in parallel with the nature of speech act of complaining that is to deliver complaints. However, there were Malaysian non-native English speakers who preferred to utilise other component besides complaint, in producing a complaint. The findings showed that Malaysian non-native English speakers preferred to produce explicit complaints that fall under the third level of severity of

complaint. This type of complaint can be classified as a mitigated strategy (Katz, 1977) where complainers produce a complaint by expressing it clearly but without including any components that could further damage the addressees' reputations such as warning, threat and curse.

Speech act of complaining can be regarded as an important speech act that we possibly produce in our everyday lives. This speech act of complaining does not occur in isolation; instead there are several other components that appear in most complaints made by Malaysian non-native English speakers. The researchers of this study share the same school of thought with Murphy and Neu (1996) that complaints often occur as large speech act sets. This study



shows that despite the presence of many other components in a speech act set of complaining, the component of complaint is the favourite among Malaysian non-native English speakers. Perhaps, it is a belief among complainers that expressing their dissatisfaction in a negative manner as the most effective method of placing a complaint. In addition, Malaysian non-native English speakers employed complaint strategy that lies under the third level of severity of complaint which means they produced the complaint by expressing it explicitly. Although, the researchers did not intend to study on how the complainers initiate their complaint, it was obvious that non-native English speaking complainers did not bother to make an opening or formal greeting when reporting their complaints. Instead they jumped to express negative comments and sarcasm. It could be that complainers view complaint as a serious matter that they do not think an introduction is necessary to initiate a complaint. However, Moon (1996) revealed that opening was an important strategy in complaints produced by Korean learners of English.

Another noteworthy observation was factors influencing the manner a complainer place a complaint such as the language proficiency level of complainers and the ethnic groups of complainers. Future researchers are encouraged to take seriously of these factors in order to obtain more precise results. This study proves that the production of a complaint is indeed a complex activity that requires a lot of attention but not many people are aware of that.

### Pedagogical Implications

Based on the online complaints accumulated, it can be seen that complainers were overwhelmed by negative vibes such as frustration, anger and disappointment when placing complaints. Organisations should take this matter seriously and improve their service offerings. When consumers are satisfied with excellent services from organisations, they will less likely to place a complaint that can tarnish the reputations of the organisations. Besides, organisations should monitor their complaints handling service to ensure that complaints from consumers are well-handled in order to take care of their customers and business.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study contributes new information to the existing field of knowledge of the speech act of complaining with respect to online complaints. This research can be improved and enhanced in several attributes in order to obtain better quality of results by increasing the number of online complaints involved. With more online complaints included, which serve as the subjects, more findings could be generated. Thus, it helps to generalise the results to a greater extent. In addition, this study could be carried out by specifying ethnic groups of complainers involved. In future, interested researcher can analyse complaints according to the ethnic groups of complainers as previous scholars (Yian, 2008; Tabatabaei, 2015; Ekmekci, 2015) have proved that there are differences in complaints produced by people from different cultural groups.

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