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“Sorry does not pay my bills” The Handling of Complaints in Everyday Inter- action/Cross-Cultural Business Interaction

Abstract

This article is concerned with the teaching of pragmatic functions when training students for a future career in intercultural business communication. Having outlined six important constellations likely to result in success or failure, we focus on strategies for the successful handling of customer complaints seen in comparison with responses to complaints in everyday interactions. It is suggested that transfer of behaviour considered suitable in everyday face-to-face interaction to business interaction may lead to unsuccessful processing of customer complaints.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread consensus among those involved with language learning and teaching that language teachers need to address issues of language use in their classrooms (see Rose 1997: 125 for references). Teachers need to move away from a focus on language forms alone to a focus on pragmatics, i.e. how language is used to do things in social contexts. This is of particular importance when training students for a future career in intercultural business communication.

Even though the teaching of pragmatics has long been considered an essential component of language teaching programs, we still lack a coherent theory of language use and a comprehensive and reliable account of what constitutes pragmatic competence (Rose 1997: 125). An important distinction has been drawn between pragmalinguistic competence which we describe as knowledge of the linguistic inventory used to perform pragmatic functions, and sociopragmatic competence as knowledge of when to use these forms in actual social situations (see

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also Canale 1983; Thomas 1983; Trosborg 1995). Parameters such as social status, social distance, age, etc. must be taken into account. A further aspect, which has received almost no attention in pragmatics research, is potential differences between everyday pragmatics and business pragmatics.

Moreover, little research has been conducted on whether instruction in pragmatics is effective, or which type of instruction is most effective under which conditions. The few studies done so far indicate that learners do benefit from instruction, and that some form of metapragmatic information - that is, explicit information about pragmatics rather than exposure to appropriate language use alone - is necessary for learning (see Wildner-Bassett 1984; Billmyer 1990; Bouton 1994; House 1996; Tateyama *et al* 1997).

In this article we briefly discuss the need for teaching pragmatics. We then focus on what to teach, outlining strategies for responding to complaints in everyday pragmatics in comparison with behaviour recommended for the handling of customer complaints. We then report on a pilot study teaching these strategies to Danish students of business English at university level (1. semester) in a first attempt at developing a pedagogy of pragmatics.

1.1. Inappropriate pragmatics

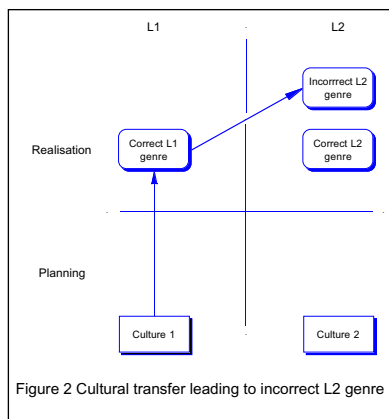
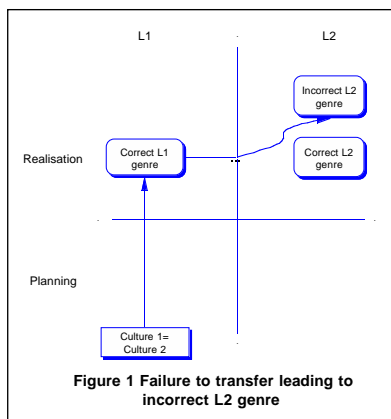
Danish students of English at university level typically have a high level of fluency in the language but often perform rather poorly in terms of stylistic range and grasp of pragmatic requirements (see Faerch & Kasper 1989; Trosborg 1995). There are many possible reasons for this poor performance.

Learners may make decisions about sociopragmatic appropriateness on the basis of L1 experience that is then transferred or generalised to new contexts. However, this is only what learners may do. Trosborg (1995) has shown that in many everyday interactions Danish students' non-standard performance is often a consequence of processing difficulties rather than a genuinely cross-cultural problem (Figure 1) — and this of course reflects the closeness of Scandinavian and Anglo cultural norms.

Lack of transfer may be due to a number of factors: 1. the learner is not aware of the structure in question in her/his L1 and therefore fails to

transfer it to the FL; 2. the learner is aware of the structure but lacks the appropriate target language equivalent; 3. *transfer of training* may lead to faulty expectations about target language cultural patterns.

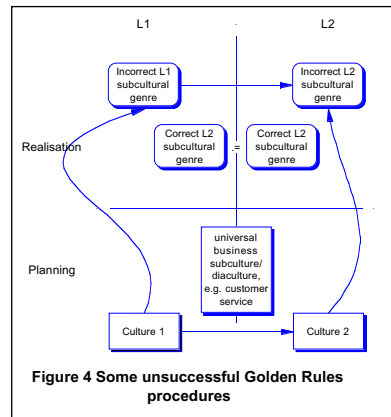
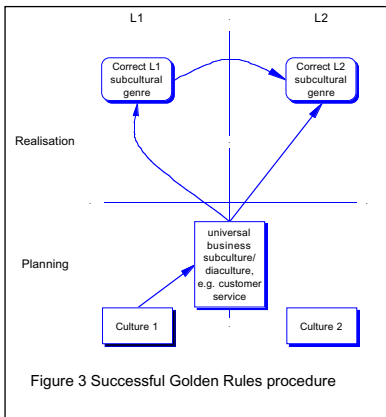
Alternatively, inappropriate pragmatics may be due to ignorance of the expectations of FL culture in the given situation. A common problem in interlanguage pragmatics is that learners assume universality (and transferability) when it is not present. The influence of the learner's native language and culture results in incorrect FL speech acts (Figure 2). A typical problem for Danish learners of English is that they are not polite enough towards authority figures. Power distance is relatively higher in Great Britain compared with Danish culture, which has a flatter hierarchy. This results in underuse of politeness markers compared with English norms in cases of transfer. Conversely, Danish students may be too polite as an effect of transfer of training (cf. teaching induced errors).



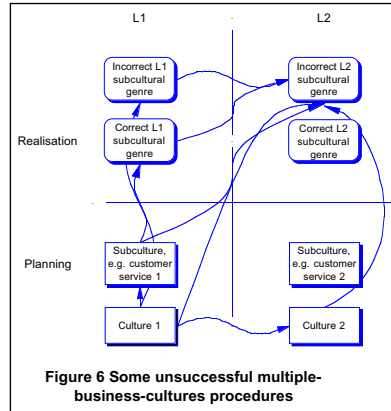
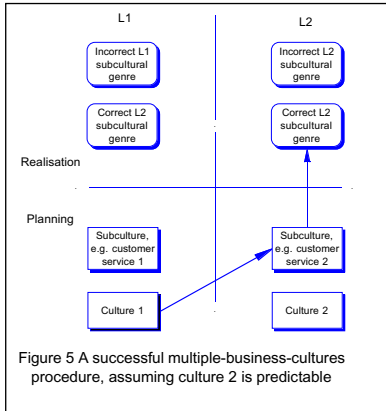
1.2. Business pragmatics and everyday pragmatics

Business language students have to learn to function in a foreign language in a particular professional diaculture (Pöchhacker 1995). There is some evidence that aspects of such diacultures are valid across national-culture boundaries, so that 'Golden Rules' could be given for appropriate behaviour (Figure 3). Indeed Pöchhacker (1995) argues that such a common diaculture provides a matrix for conference interpreting. Okamura & Shaw (1998) found that professionals from a wide

variety of national cultures tended to adopt a single pragmatic strategy in a professional situation, and that non-professionals were unable to identify this strategy (Figure 4). A similar finding was obtained by Dow (1997) for negotiation strategies. In as far as the diacultural pragmatic patterns are not those of everyday life, even participants using L1 have to learn new behaviour, while for business language students there are at least two levels of difficulty (coping in a foreign language, coping in a business situation).



There may in fact well be three levels of difficulty, because it is widely claimed (Hofstede 1992; Trompenaars & Hamden-Turner 1997) that the business culture of one country is different from that of another (Figure 5). In relation to pragmatics, it has been pointed out that business presentations in an American linear and explicit style actually go down quite badly in Italy, so that at least in this area one cannot speak of a single pragmatic strategy that is valid within the diaculture across national cultures. Thus in theory even a student familiar with a Danish business culture routine might be ignorant of its British equivalent (Figure 6).



In sections 2 and 3, we offer analyses of complaints processing, contrasting everyday pragmatics (as obtained by Trosborg (1995) and others) with strategies recommended for the handling of customer complaints by Time Manager International (TMI 1993). Transfer of behaviour considered suitable in everyday face-to-face interaction to business interaction may result in unsuccessful processing of customer complaints.

1.3. Prescriptive and descriptive pragmatics

However, the situation is even more complicated. While research on everyday pragmatics is typically descriptive, work on business pragmatics is usually evaluative in that the aim is to find out which strategies or behaviours are associated with success. Thus investigations of the actual pragmatics of the business diaculture, like those of Spencer-Oatey (1998) and Xing (1998) relate observed behaviour to its success. There is also a large prescriptive literature on how various transactions *should* be carried out, teaching people how to perform functions like giving presentations, negotiating, and serving customers. These normally assume that there is one correct way of doing the function, usually the way that would work best in the US. So while the teaching of everyday pragmatics is based on reasonably accurate description of how people in a given culture *do* behave, the teaching of diacultural patterns - mainly business - is based largely on how they *should*. There are good reasons for this, in that people in business do not want to do what everyone else does, but what is successful.

Still, in both everyday pragmatics and business pragmatics, L1 cultural disposition may play a role. Learners may feel inhibited in adopting strategies foreign to their own cultural behaviour patterns and refrain from performing according to patterns they are taught. This is the case for, for example, Chinese speakers communicating in English in certain contexts (Lin, personal communication) and for Dutch managers in business interaction (Wijnands, personal communication). The reasons are both psychological and social. Strategies for pragmatic behaviour are closely tied to self-identity and social identity. This has also been clearly shown by informant's comments (see e.g. Robinson 1992; Siegal 1994).

2. Responding to everyday complaints

2.1. The speech acts complaint and apology

Complaint and apology constitute an adjacency pair. A complaint is a first part act, with an apology as a 'preferred' second part, that is, a complaint can be immediately followed by an apology without further comments (cf. Levinson 1983:1983).

Complaints have been treated extensively in Olshtain & Weinbach (1987) and Trosborg (1995), presenting strategies ranging from a low to a high degree of offence. A complaint has been defined as an illocutionary act in which the speaker (the complainer) expresses her/his disapproval, negative feelings etc. towards the state of affairs described in the proposition (the complainable) and for which s/he holds the hearer (the complaine) responsible, either directly or indirectly. This explains why a complaint is a 'face-threatening act' (cf. Brown & Levinson 1978: 19). As formulated by Place (1986) 'the act of moral censure or blame is an act of social rejection - an act whereby the accuser breaks ties of affection, mutual support and cooperation'. Edmondson & House (1981) point out that a complaint flouts the hearer-supportive maxim, but the complaint is justified in so far as the complaine has already flouted this maxim in committing a social offence which constitutes grounds for the complaint (p. 144). In order to restore harmony and trust between a complainer and the complaine, remedial behaviour is required. See Trosborg (1995: 311-334) for a detailed description of complaint strategies.

Responses to complaints have been treated in a number of studies, mostly under the topic ‘apology strategies’ (e.g. Cohen & Olshtain 1981; Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Trosborg 1995). We present a short outline of these strategies in order to be able to compare the handling of complaints in everyday situations with strategies for responding to customer complaints. Apologies have the effect of paying off a debt thus compensating the victim for the harm done by the offence (Searle 1969; Katz 1977). The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to ‘set things right’.

The restoration of a complainable may be performed directly by means of an explicit apology utilizing one of the verbs directly signalling apology (*apologize, be sorry, excuse*, etc.), or it can be done indirectly by taking on responsibility or giving explanations. A complainee may find reasons to minimize the degree of the offence. If the offence in question is a grave one, a verbal apology may be insufficient to restore the damaged relationship and compensation is called for.

Thus apologies are offered to express regret for having offended someone. As such, they imply cost to the speaker and support for the hearer. Apologies typically occur post-event to restore harmony when an offence has been committed, but there is also an element of face-saving involved: 1) a protective orientation towards saving the interlocutor’s face, 2) a defensive orientation towards saving one’s own face (cf. Goffman 1972: 325). The culpable person must let the offended person know that s/he is sorry for what s/he has done, so the act is highly hearer-supportive and often self-demeaning (Edmondson & House 1981: 45).

The apologizer’s response has, therefore, a twofold aim: S/he must placate the complainer to restore social harmony and s/he must restore her/his own social status. Apologies have the social functions of admitting responsibility for a state which affected someone in an adverse way, asking to be forgiven, showing good manners, assuaging the addressee’s wrath, getting off the hook (cf. Norrick 1978: 280). Thus apologies are made in the hope of being forgiven or in the hope that the addressee will dismiss the matter.

In the following, we describe the major response categories likely to occur in response to complaints. The outline is built on response categories observed in situations where, subsequent to an offence, an apology is called for (Trosborg 1995). See also Owen (1983); Olshtain

and Cohen (1983); and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). Apologies may be expressed directly or indirectly.

2.2. Apology strategies

In everyday conversation, when an infraction has been made, the apologizer may choose to express her/his apology explicitly. A direct apology involves a routine formula generally accepted to express apology. Various formulae can be distinguished with regard to level of formality and restrictions on occurrence. The following examples exemplify the semantic content of an expression of regret, an offer of apology, or a request for forgiveness:

Expression of regret: e.g. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry to keep you waiting.

Sorry about that.

I'm sorry to have been so long in getting in touch with you.

Offer of apology: e.g. I apologize.

I (hereby) apologize for ...

Please accept my sincere apology (for ...)

My client would like to extend his apologies to you for the inconvenience involved.

Request for forgiveness: e.g. Excuse me; Please, forgive me; Pardon me.

Please, forgive me, I'm terribly sorry (about ...)

Excuse me, I'm sorry for interrupting you, but...

Pardon me, I didn't hear what you said.

2.2. Indirect apologies

A precondition for apologizing is that the infraction is acknowledged. A complaineé who chooses to *acknowledge responsibility*, can do so implicitly or explicitly and with varying degrees of self-blame. The sub-categories outlined below are all hearer-supportive and self-demeaning, and they are ordered with respect to the degree of recognition with which the complaineé accepts the blame (from low to high intensity):

Implicit acknowledgement: *I can see your point; Perhaps I shouldn't have done it.*

Explicit acknowledgement: *I'll admit I forgot to do it.*

Expression of lack of intent: *I didn't mean to.*

Expression of self-deficiency: *I was confused; You know I am bad at...*

Expression of embarrassment: *I feel so bad about it.*

Explicit acceptance of the blame: *It was entirely my fault; You're right to blame me.*

A complaineé may try to mitigate her/his guilt by giving an *explanation* or account of the situation. Various kinds of mitigating circumstances serve as indirect apologies and may be put forward on their own or in addition to a direct expression of apology. A distinction is made between an implicit and an explicit explanation or account:

Implicit explanation: *These things do happen, you know.*

Explicit explanation: *Sorry I'm late, but my car broke down.*

In an explanation or account, a complaineé admits that what s/he has done was undesirable, but s/he tries to lessen the blame which can be attached to her/him by referring to mitigating circumstances that may excuse his behaviour. Thus an explanation or an account serves as an 'excuse' for a committed offence. An explanation can either occur on its own as an indirect apology or in combination with an explicit apology.

2.4. Remedial acts

So far remedial strategies have taken the form of verbal compensations (apologies, explanations, etc.). In more severe cases in which verbal remediation is insufficient, strategies attempting a remedy of the complainable may be required. An *offer of repair* is often required in cases in which a verbal apology is felt to be insufficient to restore social harmony. Repair may be offered in its literal sense or as an offer to pay for the damage or in situations in which actual repair is not possible (not wanted, etc.). The complaineé may offer some kind of 'compensatory' action or 'tribute' to the complainer, e.g. *I'll pay for the cleaning; You can borrow my dress instead* (compensation). A *promise of forbearance* relates to future behaviour, and the strategy of *expressing concern for*

hearer serves as an additional attempt to placate the complainer. Remedial strategies will be further discussed in connection with business pragmatics, where they are of considerable importance.

2.5. Opting out

Although an apology is the act by means of which a complainee can restore her/his own social standing, the complainee may refrain from performing this act. If the complainee apologizes, s/he accepts the complainer's criticism to the effect that s/he is an irresponsible member of society, which is implied if not explicitly stated in all complaints. Therefore, the complainee may find her/himself in a position of "inner conflict" (Edmondson & House 1981: 145). In receiving a complaint, s/he sees her/his social competence challenged and s/he may choose to deny responsibility.

A number of factors are likely to influence her/his behaviour: degree of sense of guilt, felt need to apologize, one's subjective view of one's responsibility. Her/his own perception of the degree of the severity of the offence is often decisive, but s/he may also take into consideration the recipient's point of view, her/his perception of the degree of offence, the extent of the expected reprimand, etc. Other influential factors are the age, familiarity, and social status of the two participants.

A denial of responsibility can take on various forms, from blunt refusals to evasive responses. Trosborg (1995) observed five different strategies. The complainee may make an **explicit denial of responsibility** with arguments like *I know nothing about it, I can assure you/You know that I would never do a thing like that* or s/he can make an **implicit denial of responsibility**, for example by ignoring a complaint, by talking about something else, etc. Furthermore, the complainee may provide a **justification** to the effect that no blame can be attached to her/him. Either the complainable has not occurred at all, or it can be fully justified. The complainee may also seek to **evade responsibility** by blaming someone else, and finally, if s/he lacks an adequate defence for her/his own behaviour, s/he may choose to use the strategy of **attacking the complainer** instead.

2.6. Evasive strategies

Evasive strategies are closely related to the strategies in which the complainee fails to take on responsibility. The difference lies in the fact that the complainee does not deny responsibility. Instead, s/he seeks to minimize the degree of offence, either by arguing that the supposed offence is of minor importance, in fact is ‘hardly worth mentioning’, or by querying the preconditions on which the complaint is grounded. Finally, the complainee may be only partly responsible. The following three sub-strategies apply:

Minimizing: *Oh what does that matter, that’s nothing; What about it, it’s not the end of the world.*

Querying preconditions: *Well, everybody does that.*

Blaming someone else: *I didn’t take the order. My colleague did.*

The strategies outlined in the handling of complaints in everyday interaction are outlined in Figure 7. Even though an apology is a ‘preferred’ response when reacting to a complaint, a bare apology is hardly sufficient to restore harmony. Other strategies such as explanations and repair strategies may be needed as well.

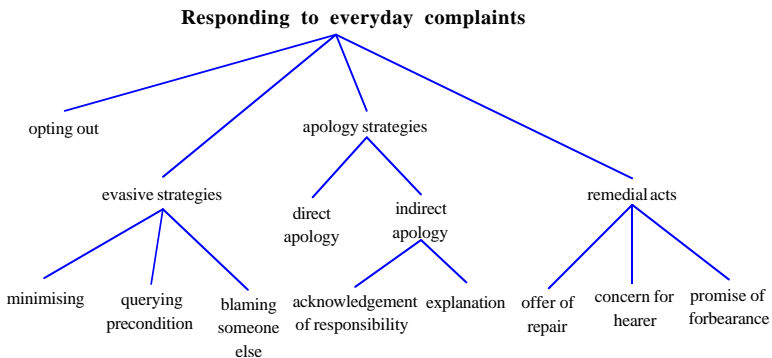


Figure 7: Responding to everyday complaints

3. Responding to customer complaints

We now turn to business situations, and to the handling of customer complaints in particular. An organisation’s quality assurance comprises

at least five kinds of quality: Personal quality, departmental and team quality, product quality, service quality, and company quality. With regard to service quality, a customer's perception of a specific service is influenced by two kinds of quality: the technical or "hard" quality and the human or "soft" quality. Hard quality refers to the concrete aspects of service, e.g. menu and wine list, train timetables, seating comfort on an aeroplane, opening hours, parking facilities, insurance policy, etc. Soft quality refers to the emotional aspects of a service provided, e.g. commitment, attitude, friendliness, flexibility and attention, atmosphere, reliability (keeping arrangements), etc.

The soft side is very important. In principle, an organisation can increase its turnover in at least two ways: It can increase sales to existing customers or it can win new customers. According to TMI (1993: 7), it costs at least 5 times more to win a new customer than it does to keep an existing one. Customer satisfaction is crucial to increase sales to existing customers. Satisfied customers come back, they are usually prepared to buy new products or new services from the company and the positive image they spread helps the organisation to win more. It is often the case that potential customers are more inclined to listen to existing customers than to the organisation's marketing campaigns. In contrast, dissatisfied customers rarely come back and they are likely to share their dissatisfaction with other people. This may give the organisation a bad reputation, and make even the most powerful marketing campaigns ineffective.

When the service offered does not meet the customers' expectations, they are likely to change the service provider, often without complaining first (TMI 1993: 6). In cases where customers do complain, it is reported that more than half of all attempts to process customer complaints lead to even greater dissatisfaction (TMI 1993: 17). One reason for the dissatisfaction could be ineffective and inappropriate handling of complaints. Hence the way an organisation processes complaints from customers is crucial to the customer's perception of the organisation's quality. Processing complaints effectively may lead to increased customer satisfaction.

In order to achieve service recovery, it is important that the organisation and all its staff with customer contacts know how to handle complaints effectively. If an organisation is to have any chance of recovering its customers' confidence by processing complaints effectively, it

needs to create a good “complaints culture” and to have a clear policy for securing satisfied customers. Clear strategies, policies and procedures to ensure customer satisfaction are an important part of an organisation’s complaints policy. The customers must feel that their complaints are welcome. They must know who to complain to and how to complain. Dissatisfied customers may refrain from complaining because they are afraid that their complaints will not be welcomed. They fear that they will be treated with suspicion and doubt and that nobody will be willing to take responsibility for their problems. Furthermore, it is time-consuming and a burden to the customer to complain.

Therefore, the way the organisation processes complaints and views service recovery is of great importance. Without insight into customer complaints, the organisation cannot react in time. A prerequisite for handling complaints effectively is that the staff who receive customer complaints have the right attitude and behaviour. They should see that complaints form a basis of improvement within the organisation. TMI present the idea that a complaint is a “gift”, in that it gives the organisation a chance to correct mistakes and recover the customer’s confidence. In addition to adopting this positive attitude, staff need to know how to process verbal complaints effectively. Below we discuss strategies recommended for the handling of customer complaints to be compared with the strategies for everyday pragmatics outlined above.

3.1. Thanking for the complaint

In order to avoid the negative dialogue¹ likely to occur when infractions have been made, a hearer-supportive act of thanking must be issued to restore harmony between speaker and hearer. The company’s immediate reaction to a customer complaint determines whether it will succeed in creating a satisfied customer, or whether it is likely to create an even more dissatisfied one. It is therefore recommended that the first reaction to a complaint should always be an expression of thanks regardless of who the customer is or what the complaint is about. To thank somebody for a complaint runs contrary to expectations and has a powerful effect. By complaining, the customer is giving the company a chance to develop and improve its quality. There may be situations

¹ Goffman (1971) distinguishes between positive and negative ritual. Positive, or ‘supportive’ interchanges arise out of a need for mutual support, while negative dialogues occur when infractions have been made.

where it is even more important to listen to the customer and express understanding of the problem than it is to do something about the actual complaint.

The second step is to elaborate on the appreciation. Saying “thank you” without an explanation may easily sound like a meaningless cliché. The prescription is therefore that that complaineer should explain why the complaint is appreciated, using language like:

Thank you, I appreciate your pointing out this mistake - it gives me a chance to correct it.

Thank you for taking the trouble to complain - I realise it has taken both time and effort.

Thank you, we take your complaint as an opportunity to improve ourselves and to keep you as a satisfied customer. (TMI 1993: 30)

Service personnel are recommended to thank the customer, to apologise and to promise to do something about the complaint before asking the customer any questions. This paves the way for a conversation with the customer without too many negative feelings. Having achieved this, the complaineer can ask for the information necessary for correcting the mistake and finding the best solution. The aim at this stage should be to get all the right information, to prevent any further mistakes occurring when processing the complaint, while avoiding a “cross-examination” or an interrogation.

3.2. Direct apologies

The prescription is that a direct apology is an essential response to a customer complaint. An unreserved apology must be issued, no matter whether the mistake was made by the person who receives the complaint, one of her/his colleagues, the manager, a member of the staff, a supplier, or someone outside the organisation. Even if the mistake is due to circumstances beyond individual control, such as power failure, weather conditions, traffic jams, changes in legislation, illness, holidays, etc., an apology is advised. Similarly, an apology is a recommended tactic even if the complaint is not quite justified or is due to a misunderstanding, so that the customer is treated better than s/he can reasonably expect. In contrast, it is not necessary to explain who made the mistake, as it is not a question of finding out who is the guilty person.

3.3. Indirect apologies

In everyday pragmatics, an *acknowledgement* may count as an indirect apology. In business pragmatics, responsibility must always be taken, but acknowledgement need not be expressed; if a direct apology is expressed right away, acknowledgement is implicit. Acknowledgement, if expressed, should be done without self-blame and always be followed by a direct apology.

With regard to *explanations* we noted that in everyday pragmatics an explanation or an account could satisfy as an ‘excuse’ for a committed offence and often be enough to restore the complainer’s face and to soften her/his feelings. In business situations, it is seldom necessary to offer lengthy explanations. It is crucial to explain why you appreciate the complaint, but not how the mistake occurred.

3.4. Remedial acts

In business pragmatics pertaining to the handling of customer complaints, remedial acts play a much greater role than they are likely to do in everyday situations. When a customer complains, the gravity of the offence is a severe one (perceived or real), and a verbal expression of apology is hardly enough to placate the offended person. An obvious reason for complaining is the anticipation of some kind of compensation in remedy of the offence, and an *offer of repair* is expected. Furthermore, additional support may be offered, either in the form of verbal *expression of concern*, or promises with regard to future behaviour (cf. *promise of forbearance*). While in everyday situations, explanations and justifications may satisfy, remedial acts are most likely to be required in business situations.

3.4.1. Offer of repair

In the case of customer complaints, it is important that the customer feels that the complaint has been given proper attention and is settled promptly. Service personnel should assure the customer that something will be done about the complaint immediately. They should explain what action can be taken and what the organisation is prepared to do to ensure customer satisfaction. If the matter cannot be satisfied immediately, rapid feedback can be promised, but it is crucial to avoid making promises that cannot be kept.

3.4.2. Checking customer satisfaction

In order to pacify a complainer, the complainee may express concern for her/his well-being, her/his condition, etc. However, in business pragmatics, it is not enough to placate the customer. It is also necessary to check the customer to make sure that s/he is satisfied and will stay a customer. A positive attitude towards customers and a genuine interest in correcting mistakes is a prerequisite for processing complaints effectively. The routines used must recognise that the customer who complains has a right to complain. And more important, s/he is still a customer who has some confidence in the organisation and may be made a “goodwill” ambassador, if the organisation succeeds in correcting the mistake to her/his satisfaction. The company may even give the customer verbal or non-verbal acknowledgement for having complained, for example in the form of a thank-you letter, a telephone call or a symbolic gift.

3.4.3. Prevention of future mistakes

When apologising the speaker takes responsibility by expressing regret, and s/he will be expected to behave in a consistent fashion and not immediately to repeat the act for which s/he has just apologised. This ‘commissive’ aspect can be made explicit in a promise of forbearance. With respect to future behaviour, a complainee can promise either never to perform the offence in question again, or to improve her/his behaviour in a number of ways, e.g. *It won't happen again, I promise.*

In an organisation, it is important to take steps to prevent future mistakes and reduce the risk of them occurring again. It has been recommended that all complaining customers should be interviewed about their satisfaction with the way the organisation processes complaints to find out why the customer was dissatisfied, what went wrong, what was the reason(s) for the mistake, etc., to cure the cause of the mistake, rather than the symptom.

3.5. Rejections

Whereas rejections and evasive strategies are of frequent use in ordinary conversation, these strategies are almost condemned in business interaction. In business situations, the customer is always right and opting out is per definition excluded. Still, rejection of the complaint is

a typical reaction to a customer who complains. Very often the customer is rejected with remarks like: *I'm afraid there is nothing we can do under the present circumstances - it's company policy; You should have complained earlier; You must have handled it wrongly; etc.*

In customer interaction, it is not unusual for the complainee to avoid personal responsibility: *I don't make the rules here. I just work here; I didn't serve you. My colleague did; Anyone can make a mistake; It must have happened at the factory.* Furthermore, questions which stem from doubt about the customer's motive, competence or right to complain should be avoided altogether – such questions as: *. How can I be sure that what you say is true? Are you sure you bought it here? Did you follow the instructions? Are you sure you didn't drop it? Anyone can make a claim like that. You just wouldn't believe the number of people who tell us all kinds of stories* (TMI 1998: 25). Rejection of customer complaints affects customer satisfaction in a extremely negative way and should be avoided altogether. Neither should the customer be met with the “It's not my department” attitude and referred to somebody else: *It is not this department; Try phoning another number. I'm sure somebody will help you there; You should contact the retailer who sold you the product* (not the manufacturer), etc

The customer should be given the impression that s/he has come to the right person because everybody in the organisation takes responsibility for ensuring customer satisfaction. The person who receives the complaint thanks the customer for the complaint, explains why s/he appreciates the complaint and apologises for the mistake, before s/he puts the customer in touch with the right person.

Figure 8 summarizes the strategies outlined for handling complaints in customer interaction. When responding to customer complaints, the recommended behaviour is somewhat different from the behaviour observed in everyday interactions. The two ritual acts of thanking and apologizing are recommended as obligatory and must be followed by serious attention to the complaint and correction of the mistake through remedial acts. Explanations occur in connection with thanking, rather than as indirect apologies. Finally, great importance is attached to remedial acts. All 8 strategies must be taken into account, and the order is more or less fixed, while in everyday interactions, a more limited combination of strategies are likely to suffice. It is notable that the prescriptions reject the strategies of opting out and evasion.

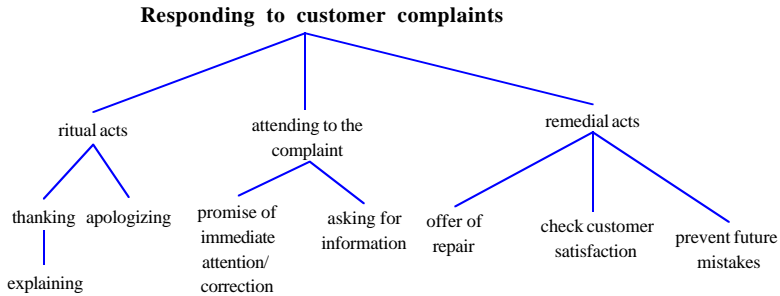


Figure 8: Responding to customer complaints

The strategies outlined in sections 2 and 3 can serve as the basis for the construction of teaching material. It is crucial to point out the differences between strategies employed in everyday conversation and those recommended for the handling of customer complaints. A further point worthy of attention is the question of directness vs. indirectness. While being indirect is generally considered a ‘virtue’ when requesting and complaining in that it diminishes the inhibition made on the addressee, indirectness works the other way round for apologies. A sincere apology must be expressed directly and at best intensified by an upgrader (*very/terribly sorry*), whereas indirectness hedges the illocutionary force and consequently does not set things right to the same extent as a direct apology. Learners are often criticized for being too direct. However, in apologizing they may be criticized for being indirect. The question for learners is then to figure out when indirectness is a virtue and when it is a vice.

4. The pilot study

Having considered what material to present to students of business English, the question that arises for the teacher is then what approaches will be of use in teaching diacultural pragmatics, and what impact the prescriptive nature of the behaviours to be taught has on the learning process. It is possible, for example, that explicit information will be of more direct use in acquiring pragmatics than in language acquisition since development is not prevented by acquisition orders as is the case for grammatical development (see e.g. Clahsen 1984). Explicit instruction in syntax is often ineffective because of sequences of developmen-

tal order or complexification hypotheses, but no such phenomena have been proposed for pragmatics (see Fahnestock 1993; Freedman 1993a; Freedman 1993b). Neither has a critical or a sensitive period been claimed. On the contrary, we continue to expand our pragmatic competence throughout our lives.

It is likely that pragmatic information, like grammatical information, benefits from being taught via a consciousness-raising approach. This is in agreement with the findings of Schmidt (1993). He argued that for syntactic and pragmatic information to be noticed and thereby made available for further processing, it has to be attended to, or stored in short-term memory. Attention is required for converting available input into intake, and some level of awareness or understanding is also required.

The importance of a consciousness-raising approach in language teaching stems from the work on grammatical consciousness-raising (see e.g. Ellis 1991; Rutherford 1987; Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith 1985; Sharwood-Smith 1988; VanPattern 1990; VanPattern & Cadierno 1993). Given Schmidt's (1990, 1993, 1994) work on the role of consciousness in second language learning (including pragmatics), applying a consciousness-raising approach to the teaching of pragmatics is a logical extension of earlier work on the teaching of grammar. In fact, a number of researchers have argued for adopting a consciousness-raising approach to the teaching of pragmatics (see, e.g. Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Rose 1993, 1994, 1997).

In order to make the recording situation plausible we focused on telephoned complaints. This meant that we were actually working on a key area of modern business training: the training of multilingual workers in 'calling centres', where European customer service has been concentrated.

4.1. Aims of the study

Our pilot therefore was a preparation for examining three quite basic questions which might help to establish a methodology for pragmatics teaching.

The first two arise out of the parallel between syntax learning and pragmatics learning:

- Is there a marked difference between the efficiency of learning pragmatic behaviours by explicit information and by exposure? (cf Freedman, etc).
- Is it important to direct learners' attention to what they are learning? (cf Ellis; Schmidt, etc)

The third arises from a comparison of Trosborg's data for 'everyday' complaints with the requirements of the 'new culture' of business:

- Is it demonstrably easier to learn behaviours which are currently masked by processing difficulties, than those which are not being performed because they are not part of the cultural repertoire? In particular, are behaviours which are prescribed but 'unnatural' harder to learn than behaviours more rooted in everyday pragmatics?

This third question is to some extent in contrast with the second, since culturally 'new' features might be expected to be more prominent.

4.2. Method

The design involved a pretest followed by three short teaching sessions, followed by a post-test. Given the students' high level of fluency, it was possible that a minimal amount of attention to the relevant speech acts would result in learning. First we recorded two small groups of students carrying out role-plays involving complaints, drawn from our knowledge of the Danish business scene. We then used 10-15 minutes at the end of three successive weekly classes to 'teach' these students the aspects of politeness identified in the 'Golden Rules' described in section 3. The sessions took place in a language laboratory.

With one group we used a 'deductive' approach, as follows:

Session 1: students give feedback on their own recordings; written material on the Golden Rules distributed.

Session 2: Golden Rules presented; practice with a new role-play 'Super-Electric'.

Section 3: more discussion of Golden Rules: students listen to model role-play of 'Mad Toaster' and try to identify instances of the rules, then enact the role-play.

With the other we used an 'inductive' approach:

Session 1: students were asked to read a model dialogue based on ‘Super-Electric’, and then to re-enact it from memory.

Session 2: Students saw a British TV comedy sketch involving a complaint about a defective toaster, and were asked to re-enact it ‘correctly’.

Session 3: Students listened to model (unscripted) enactments of ‘Super-Electric’ and ‘Mad Toaster’, and then repeated the sentences used by the receiver of the complaint.

After the three very short teaching sessions we interviewed some students about the experience and then recorded them again, doing a new unseen role-play called ‘Westwind’.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Effects of method

We were able to analyse a total of fifteen speakers who took part in both recordings, including two repeated (‘before’ and ‘after’) dialogues with the same roles from the ‘inductive’ group and two from the ‘deductive’ group. As the discussion below shows, there were no discernible differences between the progress the members of the two groups had made. Clearly explicit information may be more or less effective than implicit, but the difference is not very gross. This result is in conformity with the few method comparisons which already exist (Bouton 1994; House 1996; Tateyama *et al* 1997) ...

Table 1 compares the performances of those speakers who took the same role, generally with the same partner, in both the pre-test and the post-test.

The tables show that the post-test revealed a similar range of behaviours in both groups. Only one receiver in either group had learnt to thank for the complaint as prescribed by our source, but most in both had started to apologise for the problem before interrogating the customer.

Table 1: Occurrence of certain features in post-test transcripts.
Receiving a complaint

Receiving a complaint	Implicit					Explicit		
	HK(f)	T(f)	V(f)	A(f)	L(f)	G(f)	Ja(m)	A(m)
Thanks + explanation	+	-	-	-	-	-	-(late)	-
Apology/regret	+	+	-(+ late)	-	+	+	+	+
Promise...immediately	+(?)	+(?)	-	-	-	+	+	+
Avoid blaming victim	+	-	-	+	-	+	+	+
Information collected	+	+	+	-(!)	-	+	+	+
Early interrogation avoided	+	-	-	+!	-	+?	+	+
Own problems concealed	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+
Firm defence against unreasonable demand	+	n/a	+	-/a	+	n/a	-	-
Avoid Excuses	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-

Complaining	Implicit:					Explicit	
	La(m)	Je(m)	HR(f)	S(f)	M(f)	MBL(f)	GL(f)
Complaint prepared	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Complaint apologised for	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Focus on complainable	+	+	+	?	+	?	+
Complaint effective	+	+	+	+	?	+	+
Complaint supported	+	+	+	?	?	+	+
Threat avoided	-	+	-	-	?	+	+
response anticipated	+	?	+	?	?	+	+
insistence	+	-	+	?	?	-	+

4.3.2. Effects of focus on particular moves

The second issue was the effectiveness of focus. As the account of the experiments above shows, the teaching focus in both groups was on the way the complainees spoke, rather than on the complainer.

The results showed very few changes in the *complainers'* behaviour in all four dialogues, with the incidence of threatening remarks, direct accusations, etc. much the same. This may reflect the location of teaching focus, because one of the moves we focused on for the *complainees* – apology – did show some development even over this short period. This is illustrated by the following transcripts, from the pre-test and post-test respectively: J apologises immediately.

Students GL & Ja Pre-test

This is GL. from Vision Express in London. I'm calling to er make a complaint about some of your products.

Yes

Em we've had two customers complaining about the poor sound quality in er the aids supplied

Yes

And er one of our assistants noticed that er a third was not up to standard before it was sold. What do you suggest we do about it?

Well, er could I get your name one more time please?

Post-test

I'm calling you to make a complaint. .. A while ago we em we wanted to do something about the environment and we invested in an experimental wind turbine from you and it was promised to , they promised us to get it up in November and it was finished a month later. And now it's March and the generator has broken down and er

I'm sorry to hear that I'm very sorry to hear that...

In fact, as Table 1 shows, most of the subjects apologised in the post-test, but only three did so in the pre-test. The implication is that the focus on apology in the teaching was effective.

4.3.3. Effects of natural/familiar moves vs. prescribed/new ones

The third question relates to the 'culturally new' vs. 'culturally familiar' in what was to be learnt. The 'familiar' was the idea of apologising for the error causing the complaint, which is part of the 'everyday' routine and perhaps omitted largely because of processing difficulties. This was learnt very effectively, and the 'after' dialogues are characterised by extensive apologising, as shown above. The 'culturally new' was the idea of thanking for the complaint. This came from our business-training source (TMI 1993). Although it was conceivably not appropriate in the kinds of complaint we were practising, it provided a test case of a focused item that was culturally unexpected. The move proved more difficult to learn: only one subject (the most able, as end-of-year tests showed) thanked for the complaint, though another thanked for the call.

4.3.4. Student awareness

We let some students listen to themselves and asked them for comments on their performance. We received the following nine responses:

Table 2: student self-evaluation

Number mentioning:	
politeness/aggression	3
knowledge/understanding	3
fluency/confidence	3
appropriateness of moves	3
Quality of arguments	1

While the respondents seemed to focus on appropriate areas, their judgements were not convincing. The following performance as a complainer seemed good to us, but was judged by its producer as ‘hesitating, too nice, should be a little more rude’

Yeah well em I am working in a large chain of opticians in Britain, and recently we started to sell your high-quality hearing aids

Oh lovely to hear

Yes, and em they ARE in competition with the low quality aids because they are much more expensive (yeah) and therefore we would like to have a er really high quality and the first consignment we received from you was really fine and and the customers now wants to buy some more, (yeah) but the problem is that in the second consignment we got from you er there was a very bad sound and we got complaints from a lot of customers

Oh

This mismatch of performance and judgement is interesting, and it sounds as though the speaker was judging with Danish ears what she had intuitively said ‘right’ for a British interlocutor.

4.3.5. Processing problems

Finally, we noticed that there was a danger of interpreting linguistic weakness as cultural difference. The ‘rudeness’ in the following example was associated with evidence of linguistic processing problems:

We bought a .um a wind turbine from you about a year ago and um we have some problems with it

What sort of problems?

Well, firstly, you promised that you’d um set up the um turbine in um ... what comes before November..October

October

And it didn’t happen until November, so you were actually a month late, so that’s a pretty bad beginning..

5. Discussion and conclusions

In so far as one can conclude from such a small-scale experiment, we can say that pragmatic features can be learnt by implicit or explicit means, that features focused on are more likely to be learnt, and that culturally different features are incorporated in behaviour more slowly than culturally familiar ones. Our data suggest that transfer of strategies

such as querying the preconditions on which a complaint is built and other evasive strategies typically used in everyday encounters account for some of the errors made by our learners, while other errors can be ascribed to the lack of familiarity with the strategies prescribed for the handling of customer complaints, such as thanking for the complaint.

The key interesting area here in our view is the learning of speech acts prescribed by customer-service gurus which are not necessarily natural parts of either everyday social behaviour or actual business interaction. We would like to do further investigations of the relationships between guru recommendations and actual behaviour. We would like to know about the relevance of the recommendations to monocultural situations: would South Americans, for example, actually prefer the recommended pattern even though it is culturally alien? We would also like to know how multilingual telephone service centres deal with the culture associated with the language, and whether they indeed adopt a once-size-fits-all approach based on expert recommendations.

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