

## ABSTRACT

A recent study by Decock/Depraetere (2018) offers a critical assessment of previous, influential conceptualizations of directness and indirectness in studies on complaints (e.g. House/Kasper 1981, Trosborg 1995). The authors show that the concept of (in)directness is applied in an ambiguous way, in that it captures explicitness and implicitness as well as degree of face-threat. As this approach to (in)directness is no longer in tune with theoretical advances in pragmatics (i.e., discursive and interactional approaches, see e.g., Eelen 2001; Locher/Watts 2005; 2008; Haugh 2007), Decock/Depraetere propose to disentangle both understandings of (in)directness: on the one hand, the term ‘linguistic (in)directness’ is used to refer to the researcher's assessment of how *explicit* the linguistic realization of a complaint is. On the other hand, the term ‘perceived face-threat’ refers to perlocutionary effects, i.e., to the addressees’ specific evaluations of complaint realizations in terms of face-threat and im/politeness.

This distinction between ‘linguistic (in)directness’ and ‘perceived face-threat’ also has methodological repercussions on the empirical foundations of research on complaints. In a first step, we use a (qualitative) corpus approach to categorize complaints and complaint interactions based on linguistic (in)directness. The criteria for linguistic (in)directness are made operational for data analysis by taking into account the presence or absence of either an explicit reference to the speech act, or an explicit reference to (one or more of) the constitutive component(s) of the complaint situation. In a second step, the corpus is annotated in further detail in order to assess the different discursive realizations of these components as well, that is, in terms of the types of speech act and linguistic modification devices used. In a third step, the analysis of perceived face-threat is on the agenda. In a latin square experimental design, complaint examples from the previously analysed corpus of authentic complaints are manipulated both in terms of linguistic (in)directness and the linguistic realization of specific components. Uncommon combinations and realizations of components are excluded from the stimuli. Respondents are asked to evaluate the stimuli by rating questionnaire items probing into perceived face-threat and credibility, i.a. We hypothesize that our experiment will corroborate the proposed distinction between linguistic (in)directness and perceived face-threat by showing that there is no causal relation between linguistic (in)directness and perceived face-threat (while there is one between the linguistic realization of complaint components and perceived face-threat). The results of this experiment are complemented with insights from an interactional analysis probing into patterns of the complainees’ linguistic reactions to complaints in the corpus under study.

In short, in order to analyse complaints with regard to linguistic (in)directness and perceived face-threat without fusing both concepts into one vague notion of (in)directness, method triangulation is essential. Starting from a corpus of French-language authentic Twitter complaint interactions posted on the official Twitter page of the French and Belgian national railway companies, we will demonstrate how we applied method triangulation to tackle our research questions, and we will make explicit our methodological steps, as well as the challenges that we were led to address in the process.