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**Customer complaints and disagreements
in a multilingual business environment.
A discursive-pragmatic analysis**

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Abstract: This paper probes into authentic CMC business complaints and disagreements by offering a discourse-pragmatic analysis of complaint negotiation e-mails written by French- and German-language customers. The analysis focuses on an identification and description of complaint and disagreement strategies, and on the presence of internal and external modifiers. Our data, gathered ethnographically at the sales department of a Belgian multinational, shows how the customer's discourse evolves from more neutral, problem-oriented, routinized formulations in first complaints towards more confrontational, person-oriented, ad hoc formulations in disagreement e-mails as reactions to complaint refusals. This discursive change goes hand in hand with an increase in the use of direct speech act realizations and upgraders. As it appears, in the course of the complaint negotiation, face-threat to the speaker outweighs consideration of the addressee's face needs. The most notable cross-cultural difference we found between German- and French-speaking customers is a more explicit style in German and a more confrontational style in French, with cross-cultural differences gaining weight at the expense of international communicative norms in less routinized messages. Finally, the results of our study urge us to reassess concepts of directness, and on a societal level, they serve to promote intercultural awareness in business contexts.

Keywords: complaint, disagreement, French, German, business communication

1 Introduction

Linguistic studies on complaints and disagreements have either adopted a (discourse-)pragmatic approach, focusing on how these speech acts are

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linguistically realized in terms of discourse strategies and types of mitigation and intensification (for complaints, see e. g. House and Kasper 1981; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987, 1993; Trosborg 1995; Murphy and Neu 1996; Meyer 2007; Chen et al. 2011; Meisl 2010; for disagreements see e. g. Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Rees-Miller 2000; Kreutel 2007; Maíz-Arévalo 2014; Koczogh 2014; Ly 2016), or they have worked with CA methodologies to find out how complaints and disagreements are interactionally produced and negotiated over stretches of talk (for complaints see e. g. Drew and Holt 1988; Heinemann and Traverso 2009; Drew and Walker 2009; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter 2011; for disagreements see e. g. Pomerantz 1984; Kakavá 1993; Kothoff 1993; Tannen 2002). The theoretical frameworks of these studies often evolve around the popular notions of face and politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Locher and Watts 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2008). This paper aims to make a contribution to the study of complaints and disagreements by investigating these speech acts in German- and French-language business e-mails. Before presenting our data and methodology, we will first define both speech acts and offer a literature overview.

1.1 The speech act (set) of complaint

Meisl incorporates previous definitions (Trosborg 1995: 15; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987: 195) when asserting that the complainer “expresses his/her disapproval of a past or ongoing action which does not conform with [his/her] expectations and interests. The consequences of this action are at cost to the speaker, who holds the hearer at least partly responsible for or capable of remedying the perceived offence” (2010: 14). Based on these characteristics, a complaint is generally considered a face-threatening act (FTA, Brown and Levinson 1987) posing a threat to both the positive and the negative face of the hearer.¹ As Chen et al. (2011: 255), among others, note, a complaint poses a threat to the positive face wants of being admired or appreciated and a threat to the negative face wants of being free from imposition, in particular when a request for some form of repair or compensation is made explicit.

¹ Boxer (1993) makes a distinction between a direct complaint, which is a complaint addressed to the hearer, and an indirect complaint, which is a complaint addressed to a third party who is not present at the moment of speaking. Direct complaints are considered FTAs, while indirect complaints are often expressed in an effort to establish solidarity among interactants.

It has been observed that a complaint is a complex speech act because, as opposed to more formulaic speech acts such as requests, it has “no predetermined form” (Chen et al. 2011; see also Heinemann and Traverso 2009). Resulting from this complexity, researchers have classified the speech act of complaint in different ways. Whereas Searle (1976) and most other researchers label complaints as expressives, Wagner (2001) considers them as possessing both an assertive and a directive function. Indeed, through a complaint, a speaker expresses disapproval of a past or ongoing action, which is often done by asserting the negative state of affairs and by asking for repair or compensation (see also Trosborg 1995; Meisl 2010). We choose to label complaints as both expressives and directives, because when voicing them, a complainer, either implicitly or explicitly, both expresses his or her dissatisfaction with a past or ongoing act and asks for repair, compensation or forbearance. Existing taxonomies for complaints have reflected this dual, expressive-directive nature of a complaint in different ways, with some studies (Trosborg 1995; Meyer 2007) methodologically separating complaint strategies (such as expression of disapproval and accusation) from directive acts (such as requests for repair and threat), and others (Chen et al. 2011; Meisl 2010) treating all of these as possible complaint strategies. On top of its linguistic and functional complexity, a complaint has been described as a *speech act set* (Murphy and Neu 1996; Tanck 2004) because it tends to be realized as a combination of several single speech acts which together make up the full illocutionary force of the speech act.²

Since complaints are characterized as posing both positive and negative face-threat to the hearer, researchers generally assume that interactants will

² It should be noted that the speech act set as interpreted by Murphy and Neu (1996) and Tanck (2004) leaves some questions open, as it is unclear as to how the individual speech acts making up the complete speech act relate to one another: Some are to be classified as complaint strategies, while others seem to be clear examples of adjuncts (also called supportive moves). Moreover, there seem to be differing opinions in discourse-pragmatic studies on speech acts as to what constitutes an adjunct/supportive move: Is it possible to determine one head act and to label all other speech acts as adjuncts to this head act? Or does it make more sense to distinguish a head act set – a set of complaint strategies – from adjuncts/supportive moves (which are different from complaint strategies in that they could never on their own realize a complaint)? These difficulties in labeling and classification practices go beyond the scope of this paper and will be discussed in future research papers. For now, it suffices to say that, following our understanding of a speech act set, we consider the speech act set of complaint as a combination of several complaint strategies. We exclude supportive moves, since these moves could not on their own realize the complaint.

formulate this speech act in linguistically softened, face-saving ways in order to maintain social harmony (Meyer 2007; Tanck 2004; Geluykens 2007). Taxonomies for complaint strategies which have been developed to date (Olshtain and Weinbach 1987; House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995; Meinel 2010) have in common that they rank complaint strategies according to different levels of directness. These directness scales are all based on a set of five to eight criteria, which evolve, as Trosborg explains, around the degree of face-threat to the hearer:

In a complaint, the utterance may only indirectly express the complainer's ill feelings towards the complaineé, or these may be phrased in terms of a straightforward accusation or in terms of moral judgment. In the former case, the complaineé has to perform an inference process to establish a link between what is *said* and what is *intended* on the basis of the situational context. By choosing a particular level of directness, the complainer decides on the conflict potential of the complaint. (1995: 314)

The underlying assumption is that there is a positive correlation between indirectness and politeness: a more indirectly formulated complaint is less face-threatening to the complaineé, and is therefore more polite.

Although this holds true for most, if not all complaint situations, it is important to keep in mind that communicative norms strongly depend on cultural and contextual factors. Social distance, power relations, degree of imposition, language, cultural affiliation, the medium of communication, the setting, or personality, considerably influence our choice of linguistic strategy. For instance, in her study on the realization of speech acts in German and British English, House (2006) underscores the variability of communicative norms according to language (variety) and culture. Indeed, what is perceived as too direct (and thus impolite) in one language, is not necessarily perceived the same way in another.

In recent years, politeness scholars have also challenged the assumption that an orientation towards politeness is always the norm, revealing the conscious and strategic use of impoliteness strategies in certain contexts. Geluykens illustrates this when discussing complaints in service encounters, which he describes as “problem-solving interactions in which the interlocutors negotiate the outcome of the exchange whilst depending on mutual cooperation”:

They do so by weighing up, on the one hand, interactional goals, such as maintaining the social equilibrium and, on the other hand, the transactional goal of trying to remedy whatever perceived injustice they have suffered. The latter goal may outweigh any politeness considerations. [...] In other words, an orientation towards politeness should perhaps not be taken for granted. (2007: 39–40)

Clearly, in certain situations, a complainer deems saving his or her own face more important than saving the complaineé's face, which results in a lack of face-saving politeness strategies or even impolite language.

1.2 The speech act (set) of disagreement

Kakavá (1993: 36) defines disagreement as “an oppositional stance (verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action.” Rees-Miller (2000: 1088) focuses on verbal disagreement when she asserts that a “speaker S disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition P uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is *Not P*.” Disagreement has mostly been seen as a face-threatening act (FTA), posing threat to the positive and the negative face of the hearer (Rees-Miller 2000). Along the same lines, it is typically understood in conversation analysis (CA) as a “dispreferred” response (Pomerantz 1984), with “preference” being linked to the promotion of affiliation and solidarity, and “dispreference” to disaffiliation and the weakening of solidarity. For these reasons, it is assumed that speakers who voice disagreement will tend to choose linguistic strategies that mitigate face-threat to the addressee.

Studies in the field of CA have revealed that utterances of disagreement are more complex than utterances of agreement, in that they are commonly delayed, and are often prefaced or followed by softening elements such as explanations and token agreements (e.g. “yes, but”) in order to make the message more socially acceptable (Sacks 1987; Pomerantz 1984). However, as is the case with complaints, we should consider the impact of contextual factors on realization patterns. Depending on who interacts with whom in which situation, levels of directness differ (e.g. Rees-Miller 2000; Sifianou 2012). Moreover, as with complaints, “there are situations in which face-threat to the speaker outweighs consideration of the addressee's face needs.” (Rees-Miller 2000: 1100) Kotthoff (1993), for instance, has noted that in the course of an interaction, speakers might express disagreement in an increasingly direct way so as to avoid giving the impression that they are not convinced of their own opinion. Interestingly, some studies on disagreement have been able to question, or even contradict, its identification as an FTA or dispreferred second, by showing that disagreement can be an unmarked (Tannen 2002; Gray 2001; Angouri and Tseliga 2010) or even preferred, face-enhancing (Schiffrin 1984; Georgakopoulou 2001) reaction (see also Angouri and Locher 2012; Sifianou 2012).

1.3 Exploration of a new context: Business e-mail complaint negotiation

This paper aims to investigate the speech acts of complaint and disagreement by building on an authentic corpus of German- and French-language business e-mails on complaint negotiation in a B2B (business-to-business)-context. We gathered our data ethnographically at the sales department of a Belgian multinational, who is a worldwide supplier of spare parts for material handling and industrial equipment.³ We will probe further into non-English and authentic CMC business complaints and disagreements by offering a discourse-pragmatic analysis of complaint and disagreement e-mails written by French- and German-language customers.

Compared to other speech acts, such as requests and compliments, complaints and disagreements have been relatively overlooked. Moreover, when reviewing relevant literature, it becomes obvious that there is a paucity of studies on complaints and disagreements that (1) have examined written data (2) in professional contexts, (3) have worked with naturally occurring data, or (4) have looked into languages other than English:

(1) Previous research on complaints and disagreements has mainly focused on everyday oral discourse. Some exceptions for both speech acts are Hartford and Mahboob's study (2004) on complaint letters to the editors of newspapers in South Asian English and Urdu, Meinel's analysis (2010) of German- and English-language customer complaints on eBay, Vasquez' study (2011) on English negative hotel reviews on TripAdvisor, Langlotz and Locher's article (2012) on emotional stance in English online disagreements, and Maíz-Arévalo's analysis (2014) of English disagreements during an online written group assignment in a multicultural classroom. Their findings suggest that, compared to oral, face-to-face and written, collaborative contexts, complaints and disagreements in certain forms of public computer-mediated communication (CMC) are characterized by more direct, and thus fewer mitigating, strategies, and by a tendency towards more aggravating, negative language features on the part of the speaker. The increased anonymity and/or the brevity of certain types of online communication are mentioned as possible explanations for these differences (Meinel 2010; Vasquez 2011; Langlotz and Locher 2012).

³ For confidentiality reasons, we have anonymized our company, its customers and its employees. We are very grateful to the company for having granted access and thus making it possible for us to conduct our study and to help them improve their complaint-handling communication.

To our knowledge, no study has been published on complaint situations in e-mails as a private – and in our B2B context also less anonymous – form of CMC.⁴ Interestingly, research on e-mails in general has revealed an increased potential for misunderstanding because of a different and diminished use of politeness strategies in comparison with more established forms of written communication (e. g. Levy and Murphy 2006). This is often explained by referring to the medium of e-mail as a hybrid form of communication that disrupts conventional genre distinctions by combining features of oral and written discourses (e. g. Gains 1999; Baron 2003; Gimenez 2000). The tension between oral and written discourse modes seems even more noticeable in business contexts: business e-mails replace rather informal telephone calls, but at the same time adopt writing conventions of business letters and resort to formal politeness norms. As a result, writers of business e-mails shift between informal and formal as well as between person-oriented and problem-oriented styles.⁵

(2) Studies focusing on complaints or disagreements in business contexts are rare. Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter (2011) conducted an analysis of B2C (business-to-consumer) complaints in service calls to a Slovenian public transport company, finding that complaints are made explicit almost from the outset, and that they are further intensified by e. g. expressions of criticism, insults and threats. In her study on disagreements in authentic oral business negotiations in Dutch and French, Stalpers has found that, although disagreement acts in business negotiations are usually softened, speakers use fewer mitigation strategies compared to casual conversations. According to Stalpers, this is possibly because, in business talk, disagreement is not seen as an act which needs to be formulated with a lot of precaution. In other words, in business talk, participants are less afraid of possible negative effects disagreement could have on the relationship with their partners. A reason for this might be that business talk is less personal than casual conversation and that, therefore, chances to hurt or offend the partner are small (1995: 281). As an alternative explanation, Stalpers argues that “business people give priority to the conversational maxim of demanding clearness over that of demanding politeness” (1995: 281). In a similar vein, Bjorge, who studied disagreement in simulated ELF (English as Lingua Franca) business negotiations, has observed that speakers do mitigate their messages, but less so in the form of indirect strategies. Indeed, “business negotiators also need to work on the skill of getting their message across” (2012: 425).

⁴ For a classification scheme of different types of CMC, see Herring 2007.

⁵ These varying stylistic repertoires in business e-mails reveal that the “vast diversity of settings and purposes of e-mail use outweigh any common linguistic features” (Androutsopoulos 2006).

These findings on complaints and disagreements in business contexts suggest that in business interactions, face considerations are not the same as in private interactions because of differences in goals, rights, and obligations: transactional goals are more prominent, which explains a preference for more explicit and clear language, and behavioral expectations are more centered around standards of 'professional' conduct linked to one's specific roles (e. g. as an employee or customer) in the business setting. To account for some of these differences in face management in business contexts, and particularly in business negotiations, Charles (1996) introduced the concept of professional face, which he sees as distinct from personal and social face. Whereas personal face refers to an individual's self-concept and the desire to be viewed positively (e. g. "I am an honest person"), and social face to the desire to be respected and valued in our social roles (e. g. as a customer) (Spencer-Oatey 2008), professional face is related to tactical aspects of (buyer-seller) interactions. Speech acts that would be labeled FTAs in non-business contexts are considered here as tactical moves that actually protect the own professional face in business negotiations (e. g. a buyer showing disinterest). An FTA will occur when someone in a particular business setting "behaves in a manner contrary to status and/or role expectations" (Charles 1996: 25).

(3) The majority of studies on speech act realizations and politeness in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural pragmatics does not work with naturally occurring data. The main elicitation instrument which was used in the CCSARP-project (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) and in numerous studies in the same line of inquiry is the written DCT or discourse completion test. DCTs provide some obvious advantages. It is easier to gather a large amount of data in a relatively short space of time, researchers are unhampered by confidentiality issues, and the tests offer "data of high comparability due to the controlled nature of the task" (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010: 2269). Gathering naturalistic data is indeed a more complex, delicate, and time-consuming process, during which the researcher has less control over the potential contextual factors involved, which, in turn, sets certain boundaries in terms of comparability (Felix-Brasdefer 2006). Critics of DCTs and other questionnaire formats, on the other hand, argue that they are inappropriate for studying actual language: they require participants not to interact but to "articulate what they believe would be situationally appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary, interactional settings" (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005: 11). Indeed, despite the practical limitations of working with naturally occurring data, it is only authentic material that can give us reliable insights in actual language use and language interaction. We therefore believe that within the framework of our study, the advantages of working with authentic data largely outweigh the disadvantages.

(4) A fourth element underlining the singularity of this study is the fact that it compares German-language and French-language data. Many studies in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural pragmatics are Anglo-centric: they either compare English with another language or different varieties of English. House (2006), for instance, has observed a preference for direct and task-oriented communication in German, compared to British English, whereas Béal (1993) noticed a tendency towards *l'engagement* (which also comprises an attitude of assertiveness and confrontation in interaction) in French, compared to Australian English. As far as we know, only the study of Geluykens and Kraft (2006) compares the speech act of complaint in German and French. Based on their DCT-elicited data, the authors conclude that French native speakers use more direct complaint strategies than German native speakers. Cultural differences in communication styles and behavior in business contexts have been investigated by psychologist Alexander Thomas who, on the basis of interviews and critical incident analysis, has developed a set of "cultural standards" or "Arten des Wahrnehmens, Denkens, Wertens und Handelns, [...] die von der Mehrzahl der Mitglieder einer bestimmten Kultur für sich persönlich und andere als normal, selbstverständlich, typisch und verbindlich angesehen werden [modes of observation, thinking, judging and acting which are seen by most members of a particular culture as normal, typical and binding for themselves and others]." (Thomas 1996: 112) "Directness" and an "orientation towards consensus" turn out to be two of the German cultural standards for interpersonal communication, whereas for France, "indirectness" and an "orientation towards dissent" (Demangeat and Molz 2003) are mentioned. In their comparison of German and French communicative styles in business settings, Demangeat and Molz (2003) further specify that correlations exist between German directness and their preference for written communication and French indirectness and their preference for oral communication. The authors clarify that the French practice dissent, a discussion style which can clearly be linked to Béal's *l'engagement*, particularly when speakers consider the relationship with their business partner to be solid enough; in other situations, they would be more inclined to practice their implicit, indirect communication style. However, these studies on cultural standards are based on the analysis of interviews and not actual interactions, leaving the question open as to whether these findings apply to our data. Finally, it should be noted that not all cross-cultural studies have detected differences: recent studies on CMC data have, in fact, observed a great deal of cross-cultural similarities in speech act strategies and discourse moves, which possibly signals an international communication norm in particular professional settings (van Mulken and van der Meer 2005; Meinel 2010).

The contradictory results demonstrate the need to conduct additional research in this area.

Our study, therefore, aims to obtain a better understanding of e-mail complaint discourse in professional settings for the German-French language pair. Given the importance of the e-mail genre in business communication, the increasing number of customer complaints companies are confronted with, and the impact sensitive customer-company interactions might have on well-being in the workplace, the results of our study will be useful to improve intercultural communicative competence for sales and customer service professionals working with French- and German-language clients.

2 Research questions

The following set of research questions has guided us through our study:

1. Which complaint and disagreement strategies are used by customers in our e-mail corpus of business complaints? How direct are these strategies? Which strategies constitute a prototypical complaint and disagreement e-mail, and how are the complaint and disagreement strategies (internally and externally) modified?
2. How does customer complaint discourse evolve from the initial complaint e-mail to the e-mail expressing disagreement with a complaint refusal?
3. To what extent do German-language and French-language customer complaint and disagreement e-mails differ from each other?

3 Corpus

When customers of our Belgian multinational are dissatisfied with a product or a service, they can file a complaint through phone, fax, e-mail, or the online Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. In order to avoid “he said/she said” disputes, they are encouraged to do so through CRM or at least in written form. Complaints are handled by the sales department, which is divided into several national teams, consisting of a team leader, office staff and sales representatives in the field. It is the company’s policy to address customers in their mother tongue. We focus on the complaint handling activities of the team “Germany, Austria, and Switzerland” and the team “France” (hereinafter called the German and the French team), two of the most important sales teams in the entire company, both in staff number (approx. 20 and 30 employees, respectively) and in trade volume.

The complaint interactions between customers and employees are situated in a B2B context, which means that the customers themselves are also business entities. In the case of our multinational, this also implies that customers frequently buy products from our multinational and that there is regular contact between customers and company employees. Transactional goals are obviously important in this setting, but so are interactional goals. Both customers and employees want complaint cases to be solved, and they want this to be done in a satisfactory way for both parties so that the business relationship is not damaged. It can also be assumed that in our setting, personal face is of less importance than professional face (see Section 1.3) and social face. Customers who feel badly treated by our company may experience this as social rather than personal face-threat in that they do not feel valued in their social role as a customer, and employees as recipients of customer complaints and disagreements will in most cases perceive these FTAs as directed to them in their social role as representatives of a certain company rather than to them as individuals.

Our data consists of an e-mail corpus of 177 sequences, one sequence corresponding to one complaint case and containing customer-employee e-mail correspondence. The German corpus of complaint cases consists of 104 sequences, while the French corpus consists of 73 sequences. From these sequences, we have extracted the initial customer complaints – 84 from the German and 55 from the French team – as well as the e-mails in which customers disagree with a complaint refusal. We found 28 cases in the German team in which customers expressed their disagreement with a complaint refusal via e-mail, and 25 in the French. Some of these sequences contain several e-mails, as customers can express their disagreement repeatedly, resulting in a total corpus of 42 disagreement e-mails for the German corpus⁶ and 34 for the French.⁷

As this paper focuses on the discursive-pragmatic features of customer complaint and disagreement e-mails from a generic, rather than an interactional,

⁶ Out of 84 complaints, 7 complaints are from Austrian and 8 from Swiss customers, and out of 28 disagreement cases, there is/are one Austrian and two Swiss customer(s). Due to the limited scale of our corpus, we were not able to take national (and regional) language varieties into account.

⁷ Some complaint sequences contain more than one complaint e-mail (because the same problem occurred several times or because there are several problems with one part over a stretch of time). Not every complaint sequence contains a first complaint (because a customer might also have filed his or her complaint through the CRM system), not every sequence contains a complaint refusal (because not all complaints are refused), and not every complaint refusal is followed by a disagreement e-mail (as some customers might agree or might not express their disagreement via e-mail).

perspective, we will not take complaint refusal e-mails into account. To gain a better insight into the unfolding interactional discourse, however, it is useful to give some background on the message and style of complaint refusal e-mails in our company. A technical team in our multinational performs tests on a returned item and decides to accept or refuse a complaint based on the test results. The sales employees communicate that decision to the customers. These messages are marked by a considerably fixed generic pattern consisting of an explanation for this decision, the explicit announcement of the refusal, and a solution proposal, and they also contain a considerable amount of careful, formal and distanced formulations (Decock and Spiessens, forthcoming). Below is an example of a company refusal e-mail in German; grammar and spelling mistakes were not corrected.

Sehr geehrte Kunde,

Sie haben uns das Ersatzteil mit der Nummer [...] zurückgeschickt. Grund der Rückgabe war Garantie-Anfrage. Wie sie wahrscheinlich wissen, kontrollieren wir alle zurückgeschickte Teile bevor wir die gutschreiben. Auch Ihre Ersatzteil wurde getestet & kontrolliert. Folgendes wurde von der Technik Abtlg festgestellt: wir haben das Teil unter Spannung geprüft und alles funktionierte einwandfrei. Die Spannung wird gut geregelt.

Sie verstehen, wir können Ihre Reklamation dann auch nicht anerkennen und können diese Sache nur

wie folgt lösen:

- a) *wir schicken das Stück zurück (das Teil funktioniert)*
- b) *wir behalten das Teil und Sie bekommen eine Gutschrift mit Abzug vom 20% Einlagerungsgebühren (das Teil funktioniert) (bitte wählen Sie zwischen A&B)*

Für eventuelle Rückfragen, stehe ich gerne zu Ihrer Verfügung.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

[full name]

Dear customer,

You returned the spare part with number [...]. The reason for the return was a request for warranty. As you probably know, we inspect all returned parts before issuing a warranty. Your spare part has also been tested and inspected. The conclusion of the technical department was the following: we examined the part under tension and it worked flawlessly. The tension was well adjusted.

You will understand that we cannot, therefore, accept your claim and we can solve this only as follows:

- a) we return the item to you (the part works)
- b) we keep the part and you receive a credit note with a 20% deduction for re-storage costs (the part works) (please select A or B)

I am at your disposal for any further questions.

Kind regards,

[full name]

The *Reklamation* (in German) or *réclamation* (in French) is a specific business-related complaint type. It refers to a situation in which a customer is dissatisfied with a certain product or service and therefore desires compensation in the form of a new product, a repair, a service improvement, or a credit note. In English, this type of complaint is sometimes referred to as a claim. There are several reasons why a customer could be dissatisfied. In our data set, we distinguish five motivations for complaining: (1) a quality problem, (2) a problem with pricing, (3) a delivery problem (wrong, late or damaged delivery), (4) a problem with the way the complaint was handled, and (5) a problem with a part (the customer wants to return a part because s/he ordered the wrong part or too much, or because the part is old).⁸ A large majority (79%) of our complaint e-mails are related to quality and delivery problems (resp. 39.1% and 39.9%) and at the heart of most of our disagreement cases lies a quality problem (71.1%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Reasons for complaints.

Complaint reason	Complaint cases			Disagreement cases		
	German n=83*	French n=55	Total n=138*	German n=27**	French n=25	Total n=52**
1. Quality problem	29 = 34.9%	25 = 45.5%	54 = 39.1%	18 = 66.7%	19 = 76.0%	37 = 71.1%
2. Delivery problem	38 = 45.8%	17 = 30.9%	55 = 39.9%	5 = 18.5%	1 = 4.0%	6 = 11.5%
3. Problem with pricing	5 = 6.0%	8 = 14.5%	13 = 9.4%	1 = 3.7%	3 = 12.0%	4 = 7.7%
4. Problem with complaint handling	5 = 6.0%	0 = 0.0%	5 = 3.6%	0 = 0.0%	0 = 0.0%	0 = 0.0%
5. Problem with part (fault of customer)	6 = 7.2%	5 = 9.1%	11 = 8.0%	3 = 11.1%***	2 = 8.0%***	5 = 9.6%***

Notes: *Complaint reason for one German complaint e-mail was unclear.

**Complaint reason for one German disagreement case was unclear.

***These are cases in which the company refuses the return because the part is not in a good condition, which is then contested by the customer.

In order to understand the various aspects of the complaint-handling procedure, we conducted thorough field research. The office staff of the French and German sales teams was interviewed and observed between November 2013 and June 2016, and the e-mail corpus supplemented with contextual information gathered through questionnaires. Although this ethnographic information definitely enriches our data set, it would go beyond the scope of this article to take

⁸ In the last case, it is actually the customers who are at fault. Technically, these are no real complaint cases, even though they are treated by the company as such: when sending parts back, the customer can claim part of his/her money.

them into account during this study. We believe the corpus to be large enough (in the case of the initial complaints) and the context to be stable enough (in the case of the disagreement cases) to allow for a German-French comparative analysis.

4 Methodology

After anonymizing our data, all e-mails were coded in NVivo software, following a codebook we designed specifically for this corpus. The coding system allows us to describe the customers' complaint and disagreement strategies, and the various ways in which these strategies can be (internally and externally) modified, i. e. mitigated or intensified. Based on this coding scheme, we conducted a quantitative (proportional rather than statistical) and qualitative analysis of complaint and disagreement strategies as well as instances of internal and external modification.

4.1 Initial complaint: Complaint strategies

A classification of complaint strategies has been developed both by House and Kasper (1981) and by Olshain and Weinbach (1987). These first taxonomies were adapted by Trosborg (1995), whose own work inspired Meyer (2007), Meinel (2010), and Chen et al. (2011), among others. For our study, we have decided to underscore the duality of the speech act of complaint by clearly distinguishing between the expressive and the directive act. Building on existing classifications and adapting them to our corpus of business complaints, we have identified three complaint strategies for the expressive act (accusation, explicit complaint⁹ and expression of dissatisfaction) and one for the directive act (request for repair) (Table 2).

When applying the criteria for the directness level of complaint strategies (Trosborg 1995: 315), accusation would be the most direct strategy, followed by explicit complaint, and then by expression of dissatisfaction.¹⁰ As it happens, this

⁹ This strategy ought not to be confused with the strategy explicit complaint as labeled and defined by Olshain and Weinbach (1987).

¹⁰ Customers use different types of request strategies when voicing their request for repair. Using (extensions to) the CCSARP coding scheme, it is also possible to rank these request strategies according to level of directness, which we plan to do in future research.

Table 2: Complaint strategies and examples^a.

Complaint strategies	Definitions	Examples
<i>Expressive act</i>		
Accusation (Trosborg 1995; Chen et al. 2011)	The customer tries to establish the responsibility of the employee/company for the perceived problem	<i>Wieder einmal haben Sie meine Maßangaben in der Anfrage ignoriert!</i> 'Again you have ignored my indication of measurements in the inquiry!'
Explicit complaint (not yet identified in previous studies, indicating that it is typical for our business context)	The illocutionary force of the utterance is named by the customer by using (language- and context-specific variations of) the verb <i>to complain</i> or the noun <i>complaint</i> . These explicit references avoid any misunderstanding about the speech act that is being performed.	<i>Ci-joint une nouvelle plainte de mes techniciens [sic].</i> 'Below a new complaint from my technicians.'
Expression of dissatisfaction (Chen et al. 2011; disapproval Trosborg 1995)	The customer asserts the problematic state of affairs without (explicitly or implicitly) mentioning the employee/company, or the customer voices the negative consequences resulting from an offense for which the employee/company is held responsible.	<i>[Das Teil] passt nicht zu den Abmessungen aus dem Katalog.</i> '[This part] does not correspond to the dimensions in the catalogue.'
<i>Directive act</i>		
Request for repair (Trosborg 1995; Chen et al. 2011)	The customer asks for some kind of compensatory action or a solution to the problem.	<i>[...] nous vous demandons donc le remboursement de [la pièce].</i> '[...] we therefore ask you to reimburse [the part].'

Note: ^aAll examples in Table 2 stem from our corpus and were anonymized.

classification is not as self-evident as it may seem, because the use of internal and external modifiers can influence the level of directness of speech acts. Given that in our complaint e-mails, complaints are generally formulated through a combination of strategies, we consider them as speech act *sets*.

4.2 Disagreement with a complaint refusal: Disagreement strategies

Various classifications for disagreement strategies have been developed as well, both from a CA- and a (discourse-)pragmatic perspective (Pomerantz 1984; Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Rees-Miller 2000; Stalpers 1995; Kreutel 2007; Koczogh 2014; Ly 2016). Whereas existing classifications of complaint strategies rank strategies according to a directness scale and distinguish strategies from different types of internal and external modification, this is generally not the case for disagreements.¹¹ Instead, different types of disagreement acts are identified according to whether the disagreement act is softened/mitigated or strengthened/aggravated (Rees-Miller 2000; Maíz-Arévalo 2014). In order to allow for a comparative analysis, we have adapted existing taxonomies for disagreements in such a way as to allow for a distinction between disagreement strategies and types of internal and external modification. We have also adapted them to our corpus of business complaints – disagreements and complaints bear remarkable structural similarities as parts of a complaint negotiation process – by distinguishing between an expressive and a directive act, and by adding two strategies (accusation and request for repair) which are specific to our complaint context. This procedure results in six disagreement strategies realizing the expressive act (accusation, explicit disagreement, negative evaluation, challenge, contradictory statement, explanation) and one for the directive act (request for repair) (Table 3).

Based on previous studies, in which accusation is considered a direct complaint strategy, explicit disagreement, negative evaluation, challenge, and contradictory statement are considered examples of strong to neutral disagreement, and only explanation is considered a mitigation strategy, it seems reasonable to assume that almost none of the disagreement strategies in our corpus are primarily concerned with the reduction of face-threat to the addressee.

4.3 Internal modification

Complaints and disagreements are often found to contain downgrading linguistic (lexical, syntactic or CMC-related) markers that mitigate the original message and consequently reduce the risk of face-threat (Trosborg 1995; Stalpers 1995).

¹¹ Only Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) and Koczogh (2014) rank disagreement strategies according to the degree of directness. Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) associate directness with face-threat, while Koczogh (2014) associates it with explicitness.

Table 3: Disagreement strategies and examples.

Disagreement strategies	Definitions	Examples
<i>Expressive act</i>		
Accusation	The customer expresses disagreement by stating his or her conviction that the company is responsible for the problem.	<i>[Die Firma] hat offensichtlich schlechte Qualität geliefert!</i> ‘[The company] has obviously delivered bad quality!’
Explicit disagreement (Kreutel 2007; Koczogh 2014; Maíz-Arévalo 2014)	Customers emphatically voice their disagreement, using variations on the formula’s <i>I disagree</i> (as explicit performative), <i>I don’t accept</i> or <i>I will not pay</i> (as explicit refusals of the company decision to reject their complaint)	<i>Je ne suis pas du tout d’accord.</i> ‘I do not agree at all.’
Negative evaluation (Koczogh 2014; Maíz-Arévalo 2014)	The customer expresses a negative evaluation of the way the complaint is being handled.	<i>Das ist so nicht Akzeptabel!</i> [sic] ‘This is not acceptable in this way!’
Challenge (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Koczogh 2014)	The customer questions the employee’s prior claim and demands that the employee provide evidence, while suggesting that the employee cannot do so.	<i>[...] j’aimerais que votre service technique m’explique comment ce fait il que 2 des 4 vis on un couple de serrage égal a 0 newton, c’est une mal façon.</i> [sic] ‘I would like your technical department to explain to me how come 2 of the 4 screws have a torque equal to 0 newton, it’s a flaw.’
Contradictory statement (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Koczogh 2014; Maíz-Arévalo 2014)	The customer overtly contests the employee’s arguments concerning the cause of the problem or the handling of the complaint by stating the opposite. The disagreement e-mail is studied in close comparison with the employee’s refusal in order to detect these instances.	<i>Mann hat uns in diesen Fall nicht Angerufen!</i> [sic] ‘No one has called us in this case!’

(continued)

Table 3: (continued)

Disagreement strategies	Definitions	Examples
Explanation (Stalpers 1995, counterclaim Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Koczogh 2014; Maíz-Arévalo 2014)	The customer offers an explanation for his or her disagreement, f.i. by providing details on the working of the machine or by denying responsibility for the malfunctioning of a specific part.	<i>Mon avis est que le problème a été provoqué par une défaillance du joint de culasse, qui a provoqué une perte interne de liquide de refroidissement.</i> 'I believe the problem was caused by a default in the cylinder head gasket, which caused an internal leakage of coolant.'
<i>Directive act</i>		
Request for repair	The customer asks the company (again) to review its decision	<i>Bitte nochmals um völlige Gutschrift.</i> 'Asking again for a full credit.'

We can also detect a number of upgrading devices that increase the impact the complaint or disagreement is likely to have. Based on our corpus, we distinguish ten categories of downgraders (politeness markers, understaters, subjectivizers, markers indicating inability, markers indicating constraint, markers indicating possibility, markers of logical consequence, restrictive statements, agent avoiders, rest category¹²) and four types of upgraders (commitment upgraders, intensifiers, punctuation, layout) which are used in complaint and disagreement realizations. Classifications are grafted onto previous research and complemented with new categories based on a qualitative analysis of our CMC corpus. We have chosen to distinguish types of downgraders and upgraders by looking at their function rather than their form (Table 4).

4.4 External modification

We understand external modifiers as supportive moves that may introduce or conclude a speech act (set) and that therefore often appear at the beginning or

¹² We decided to create a *rest category* for those types of downgraders for which we found only one instance in our whole complaint and disagreement corpus.

Table 4: Internal modification types and examples.

Internal modification types	Functions	Examples
<i>Downgraders</i>		
Politeness markers (House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995)	used to show deference and to bid for cooperative behavior. They can be lexical (use of <i>bitte</i> or <i>merci</i>) or syntactical (use of tenses, conditional mood) in nature	(1) <i>Bitte prüfen Sie den Sachverhalt nochmal!</i> 'Please reexamine this case!' (2) <i>De ce fait, pourriez-vous nous dire la raison pour laquelle nous n'avons pas tout reçu en même temps [...].</i> 'Therefore, could you tell us why we have not received everything at once [...].'
Understaters (House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995)	intended to underrepresent the state of affairs	<i>[...] lors des essais nous avons rencontré quelques petits soucis [...].</i> '[...] during the trials we encountered some small problems [...].'
Subjectivizers (Trosborg 1995)	used by customers to express their attitude towards the proposition, voicing their hopes or regrets.	<i>Leider haben wir bis heute dazu noch keine Gutschrift erhalten.</i> 'Unfortunately, to this day we have not yet received a credit for this.'
Downtoners (House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995) and other linguistic devices indicating the possibility or probability of the complainable	used by customers to express uncertainty, thus leaving room for discussion	<i>Il semble y avoir une erreur d'étiquetage.</i> 'It seems that there is a labeling problem.'
Expressions of inability	used by customers to state their inability, rather than their unwillingness, to accept a particular situation	<i>Wir können diese Ablehnung keinesfalls akzeptieren.</i> 'On no account can we accept this refusal.'
Expressions of constraint	used to point to the inevitability of the complaint or disagreement	<i>[...] nous avons été contraints de passer un sous-traitant [...].</i> '[...] we were forced to work with a subcontractor.'
Markers of logical consequence	allow the customer to present the complaint as self-evident	<i>De ce fait, il n'est pas question que je paie les 20 % demandés.</i>

(continued)

Table 4: (continued)

Internal modification types	Functions	Examples
		'Because of this, there is no way I will pay the 20% that you ask for.'
Restrictive statements	used by customers to present the problem as a glitch in an otherwise excellent service	[...] <i>diesmal habe ich leider eine Reklamation zu vermelden!</i> '[...] unfortunately, this time I have a complaint to report!'
Agent avoiders (House and Kasper 1981)	syntactic or lexical devices by means of which it is possible for the customers not to mention themselves or the sales employees as agents directly, and in doing so, reducing face-threat to the sales employees	<i>La batterie a été commandée lundi et n'est toujours pas livrée.</i> 'The battery was ordered on Monday and has still not been delivered.'
Rest category	certain types of downgraders (e. g. a positive smiley to smoothen a negative message) were used only once in the whole corpus. We chose to create a rest category for these cases.	<i>La prochaine fois essaye de respecter les délais que vous donner:-) [sic]</i> 'Next time try and respect the deadlines that I give you:-)'
<i>Upgraders</i>		
Commitment upgraders (Trosborg 1995)	used by customers to express a special commitment towards the proposition	<i>Offensichtlich haben Ihre Monteur die Einzelteile [...] ohne weitere Umverpackung an die Spedition übergeben.</i> 'Clearly, your mechanics have delivered the individual parts [...] without any further packaging to the shipping agency.'
Intensifiers (Trosborg 1995)	used by the customer (1) to underscore repetition or urgency (temporal intensifiers), (2) to intensify part of the proposition (adverbial intensifiers), (3) to reveal his/her attitude through lexical choice (lexical intensifiers)	(1) <i>Wir bitten um kurzfristige Nachricht [...].</i> 'We ask for a swift message [...].' (2) <i>Nous estimons que votre geste commercial de 400 € proposé est <u>totalem</u> incongru [...].</i> 'We find the suggested commercial gesture of 400 € totally inadequate.'

(continued)

Table 4: (continued)

Internal modification types	Functions	Examples
		(3) <i>Il devient <u>plus que pénible</u> pour nous de travailler dans ces conditions.</i> 'It is becoming more than difficult for us to work under these circumstances.'
Punctuation (Meinl 2010; Langlotz and Locher 2012) – typical for CMC	use of punctuation (exclamation marks question marks, ...) to express emotions	<i>Ich bitte um Stornierung der 15% Verwaltungsgebühr! !!</i> 'I ask for a cancellation of the 15% administrative fees! !!'
Layout (Meinl 2010; Langlotz and Locher 2012) – typical for CMC	use of layout adjustments to make certain parts of the proposition stand out: bold, caps, and underlining	<i>[...] die Lieferung ist am Freitag angekommen, dies war <u>FALSCH</u>.</i> '[...] the delivery arrived on Friday, this was WRONG.'

towards the end of complaint and disagreement e-mails. Similar to internal modifiers, they can have a downgrading or upgrading effect, softening or emphasizing the force of the complaint. Our classification of external modifiers is based on previous research (Trosborg 1995) and adapted to our corpus as well as to our understanding of a speech act set. We identified four types of downgrading external modification (disarmers, provide evidence, formulaic polite closing phrases, preparators) and four types of upgrading external modification (aggressive interrogatives, sarcastic phrases, moralizers, threats¹³) (Table 5).

5 Results

5.1 Complaint strategies: Results

With regard to the level of directness of the expressive act, our results reveal a clear general preference for the expression of dissatisfaction as a more indirect

¹³ In previous studies, a threat has been labeled a directive act (Trosborg 1995) or a complaint strategy (Meinl 2010) rather than a supportive move. Particularly with regard to threat, we found that the line between a supportive move and a strategy within the speech act set of complaint or disagreement can indeed be very thin.

Table 5: External modification types and examples.

External modification types	Definitions /functions	Examples
<i>Downgraders</i>		
Disarmers (Trosborg 1995)	starting off with a positive message (including apologies and expressions of gratitude for past efforts by the employee) in order to save the employee's face	<i>Die Artikel an sich sind richtig aber eben zu klein.</i> 'The items in itself are the right ones but they are too small.'
Provide evidence (Trosborg 1995)	by providing evidence, customers justify their complaint so that it appears valid and convincing	[...] <i>je te transmets les photos en pièces jointes.</i> '[...] I send you the pictures in attachment.'
Formulaic polite closing phrases	ending in a polite way through formulaic formula's such as (1) an expression of availability for further questions, (2) a request for understanding, or (3) an expression of gratitude in advance in order to seek precommitment from the employee.	(1) <i>Je reste à votre disposition pour tous renseignements.</i> 'I remain at your disposal for further information.' (2) <i>Comptant sur votre compréhension [...].</i> 'Counting on your understanding [...].' (3) <i>Besten Dank im Voraus.</i> 'Many thanks in advance.'
Preparators (Trosborg 1995)	used to successfully organize the conversation by preparing either the speech act or the content of the proposition by referring to previous actions or communication.	[...] <i>wir haben im September eine Lieferung über [das Teil] erhalten.</i> [sic] 'We have received a delivery of [that part] in September.'
<i>Upgraders</i>		
Aggressive interrogatives (House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995)	emotionally charged questions that are often rhetoric in nature	<i>Stimmt da bei euch was nicht oder ist das ein Scherz?</i> 'Is something wrong with you guys over there or is this a joke?'
Sarcasm (Meinl 2010)	used by customers to underscore their negative emotional state	<i>Wir können Ihnen also sehr genau sagen, was Sie mit dem Teil machen sollen.</i> 'So we can tell you exactly what you should do with that part of yours.'

(continued)

Table 5: (continued)

External modification types	Definitions /functions	Examples
Moralizers	phrases in which customers indignantly refer to their own or to the employee's moral compass in order to stress the validity of the point they are making	<i>Ich sende nicht einfach so Ware zurück, die Zeit ist mir zu Kostbar.</i> 'I don't return items just like that, time is too precious for me.'
Threat	In support of their complaint or disagreement, customers threaten the employee by making clear that a disadvantageous outcome will negatively impact their future relationship or future sales	<i>Pour autant sans réaction favorable de votre part avant le 12 février je serais contraint d'envisager, avec regret, la fin de notre collaboration.</i> 'However, in the absence of a favourable response before February 12, I will be forced, much to my regret, to end our collaboration.'

strategy. French customers use this strategy more extensively than their German-speaking counterparts (90.9% vs. 79.8%) while percentages are lower for accusations (18.2% vs. 26.2%) and especially explicit complaints (3.6% vs. 15.5%) (Figure 1). This trend of higher directness in the German corpus persists when we also take subject headers of complaint e-mails into account. Subject headers often contain one of our four complaint strategies, which are then mostly repeated in the body of the e-mail. In 14 complaint e-mails, however, the explicit complaint (*Reklamation* or *réclamation*) is expressed only in the subject header and not in the e-mail body, and also in these cases, we find more explicit complaints in the German compared to the French corpus (11 German-language (13%) against 3 (5.4%) French-language complaint e-mails).

When analyzing our data, we looked for recurrent patterns of strategy combinations that make up the complaint speech act set in order to draft the structure for a prototypical complaint e-mail. We can conclude that 60.4% of all complaint e-mails consist of an expression of dissatisfaction and a request for repair. The second most recurring combination is a similar one, with an accusation added (10.1%). Below we provide an example of a prototypical complaint e-mail in French that contains an expression of dissatisfaction and a request for repair.

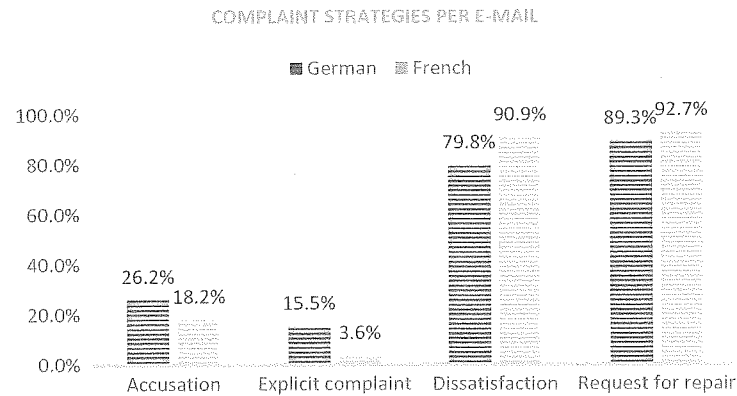


Figure 1: Complaint strategies per e-mail, German vs French corpus.

Bonjour,

Nous avons reçu ce matin les tuyaux rigides de la commande [number], comme vous pouvez le constater sur la photo les deux tuyaux (ce sont ceux de droite) références [number] et [number] ont été reçus endommagés. Nous l'avons signalé sur le récépissé du transporteur.

Merci de nous renvoyer ces deux pièces.

Bonne réception,

Cordialement,

[full name]

Hello,

We have received two rigid pipes this morning from order [number], as you can see on the photo the two pipes (on the right) references [number] and [number] arrived damaged. We have indicated this on the transport receipt.

Please send us these two pieces again.

We wish you a good reception,

Best regards,

[full name]

5.2 Disagreement strategies: Results

When looking at disagreement strategies, we observe some remarkable differences compared to our initial complaints. First, we find a larger variety of strategies (seven disagreement strategies as opposed to four complaint strategies). Secondly, although the indirect “explanation” is widely used when voicing disagreement, there is a clear increase in the use of more direct strategies,

and the request for repair occurs less frequently. Thirdly, it is now the French and no longer the German corpus which contains most direct strategies (Figure 2). The German disagreement corpus is overall slightly more direct than the German complaint corpus, but the shift is less remarkable than in the French data set. For instance, French disagreement e-mails contain accusations in 44% and explicit disagreements in 48% of the cases, where the percentages for accusations and explicit complaints were not higher than 18.2% and 3.6% respectively in the complaint e-mails.

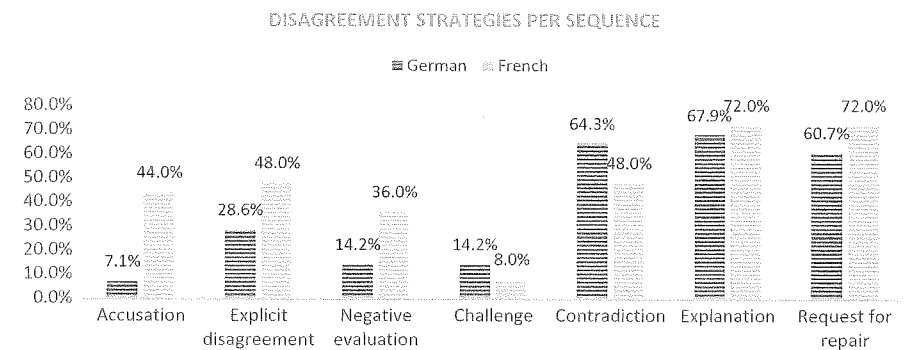


Figure 2: Disagreement strategies per sequence, German vs French corpus.

Because of the larger variety in disagreement strategies, the speech act set of disagreement is realized through more different combinations of strategies, and there is no combination that really stands out. What is clear, though, is that 85.5% of the disagreement e-mails contain at least one strategy which could be labeled as direct (i. e. accusation, explicit disagreement, negative evaluation, challenge, contradiction). The French disagreement speech act sets are more direct than the German ones: the German corpus contains 8 disagreement e-mails with indirect strategies (i. e. explanation, request for repair) exclusively (19%) against 3 for the French (8.8%). Below is an example of a short and direct disagreement in German.

Hallo [first name],

bei allem Respekt, aber das geht so nicht!

Das Gerät läuft im Lager auf einem Betonboden und nicht auf Schotter.

Hier handelt es sich ganz klar um einen Produktionsfehler dass der Kleber nicht hält.

Ich bin echt enttäuscht von Ihrem Techniker eine solche Antwort zu erhalten.

„Aber ich hätte für wetten können, dass diese Antwort dabei herauskommt“

Ich bin damit nicht einverstanden teilen Sie mir mit wie es weiter geht.

Hi [first name],
 with all due respect, but this is unacceptable!
 The device runs in our warehouse on a concrete floor and not on crushed stones.
 It is blatantly obvious that it is due to a manufacturing fault that the adhesive does not hold.
 I am really disappointed at the answer I received from your technician.
 "But I could have sworn that this would have been the answer"
 I don't agree with this tell me how we go on from here.

5.3 Internal modification: Results

From our results, we can conclude that overall, complaint strategies are more often internally downgraded than upgraded. The most commonly used type of downgrading internal modification, as can be seen in Table 6, is the formulaic politeness marker – most often in the form of "bitte", the German word for "please", in German requests for repair. The second most used type of downgrading internal modification are agent avoiders. It is important to point out that this type of downgrader is often used in accusations and explicit complaints, thus considerably reducing their face-threatening effect, e. g. "[Das Teil] ist falsch geliefert worden" ([The part] was wrongly delivered). 87.5% of all accusations and 66.7% of all explicit complaints were mitigated in this way. The most frequently encountered upgraders are temporal intensifiers, used to either refer to a repeated problem or to stress the urgency of the request for repair, and CMC-related upgraders such as the accentuated use of punctuation and layout features. It is especially German-speaking customers who seem to favor the latter.

A remarkable shift can be observed when comparing internal modification in complaint and disagreement strategies. Despite a preference for the same types of modifiers (i. e. agent avoiders, politeness markers, intensifiers and accentuated punctuation), disagreements are more likely to be upgraded than downgraded, as opposed to complaints. We see a 23.7% decrease in the number of downgraded strategies and a 31.4% increase in upgraded ones (Figure 3). When considering absolute numbers, it appears that upgraded disagreement strategies usually contain two or more aggravating elements, the average amount of upgraders found per strategy rising with 34.7% from complaints to disagreements (0.72 to 0.97). Also, agent avoiders are now more frequent than politeness markers, and adverbial intensifiers are more common than lexical intensifiers. Similar to the complaint e-mails, it can also be observed that the

Table 6: Detailed results for internal modification.

	Complaint strategies			Disagreement strategies		
	German n = 177	French n = 109	Total n = 286	German n = 72	French n = 82	Total n = 154
Downgraders	150 = 0.85*	94 = 0.86*	244 = 0.85*	53 = 0.74*	48 = 0.59 *	101 = 0.66*
1. Politeness	104 = 58.8%**	59 = 54.1%**	163 = 57.0%**	32 = 44.4%**	35 = 42.7%**	67 = 43.5%**
2. Understater	60 = 0.34	19 = 0.17	79 = 0.28	11 = 0.15	4 = 0.05	15 = 0.10
3. Subjectivizer	7 = 0.04	4 = 0.04	11 = 0.04	1 = 0.01	0	1 = 0.01
4. Downtoner	17 = 0.10	9 = 0.08	26 = 0.09	1 = 0.01	3 = 0.04	4 = 0.03
5. Inability	7 = 0.04	4 = 0.04	11 = 0.04	2 = 0.03	6 = 0.07	8 = 0.05
6. Constraint	3 = 0.02	2 = 0.02	5 = 0.02	6 = 0.08	5 = 0.06	11 = 0.08
7. Logical consequence	7 = 0.04	2 = 0.02	9 = 0.03	6 = 0.08	0	6 = 0.04
8. Restrictive	9 = 0.05	6 = 0.06	15 = 0.05	5 = 0.07	5 = 0.06	10 = 0.06
9. Agent avoider	3 = 0.02	0	3 = 0.01	1 = 0.01	0	1 = 0.01
10. Rest	34 = 0.19	47 = 0.43	81 = 0.28	20 = 0.28	24 = 0.29	44 = 0.29
Upgraders	129 = 0.73*	77 = 0.71*	206 = 0.72*	103 = 1.43*	76 = 0.93*	149 = 0.97*
11. Intensifier	69 = 39.1%**	44 = 40.4%**	113 = 39.5%**	39 = 54.2%**	41 = 50.0%**	80 = 51.9%**
Adverbial	60 = 0.34	54 = 0.50	114 = 0.40	51 = 0.71	56 = 0.68	107 = 0.69
Lexical	8 = 0.05	9 = 0.08	17 = 0.06	28 = 0.39	27 = 0.33	55 = 0.36
Temporal	10 = 0.06	16 = 0.15	26 = 0.09	12 = 0.17	11 = 0.13	23 = 0.28
12. Commitment upgrader	42 = 0.24	29 = 0.27	71 = 0.25	11 = 0.15	16 = 0.20	28 = 0.34
	3 = 0.02	0	3 = 0.01	12 = 0.17	6 = 0.07	17 = 0.11
13. Punctuation	57 = 0.32	13 = 0.12	70 = 0.24	32 = 0.44	11 = 0.13	43 = 0.28
14. Layout	9 = 0.05	10 = 0.09	19 = 0.07	8 = 0.11	3 = 0.04	11 = 0.07

Notes: *Distribution rates indicate the average amount of modifiers per strategy, based on an absolute count of downgraders and upgraders in the entire corpus.
 **Number of modified strategies (containing one or more modifiers).

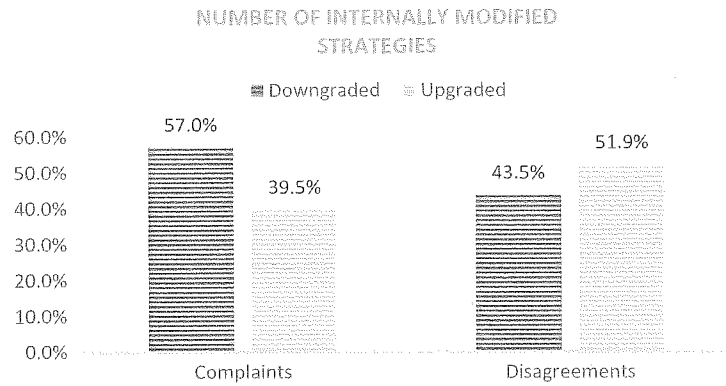


Figure 3: Internal modification in overall corpus, complaints vs disagreements.

German-speaking customers resort more often to aggravating punctuation than their French-speaking counterparts. Finally, when looking at the overall picture of internal modification in German and French complaints and disagreements, no remarkable differences can be observed between our French and German datasets.

5.4 External modification: Results

External modifiers serve to modulate the overall complaint speech act set, and are generally used in our corpus of complaint e-mails to soften the negative message. Even when excluding preparators (67.9% in the German and 78.2% in the French corpus), which seem to have much less of a downgrading effect in written than in oral communication,¹⁴ downgrading external modifiers are far more frequent than upgrading ones, with a similar number of externally downgraded (57.1% and 58.2%) and upgraded (4.8% and 7.3%) e-mails in the German and French data (Table 7).

In line with our results on internal modification, disagreements are less likely to be softened and contain higher numbers of upgraders compared to our complaints (Figure 4). Interestingly, we observe considerably less upgraders in

¹⁴ In oral everyday communication, preparators often contain downgrading modality markers (e. g. “this may come as something of a surprise to you”, Trosborg 1995: 364), whereas in our business e-mails, they tend to be formulated in a neutral way, without the use of such markers (e. g. “Die Frage die wir uns stellen” (*the question we ask ourselves*)).

Table 7: Detailed results for external modification.

	Complaint cases			Disagreement cases		
	German	French	Total	German	French	Total
Downgraders	84	55	139	28	25	53
	68 = 0.81*	41 = 0.75*	109 = 0.78*	15 = 0.54*	13 = 0.52*	28 = 0.53*
	48 = 57.1%**	32 = 58.2%**	80 = 57.6%**	14 = 50.0%**	11 = 44.0%**	25 = 47.2%**
1. Disarmer	9 = 0.11	5 = 0.09	14 = 0.10	6 = 0.21	3 = 0.12	9 = 0.17
2. Evidence	26 = 0.31	22 = 0.40	48 = 0.35	5 = 0.18	1 = 0.04	6 = 0.11
3. Polite closing	33 = 0.39	14 = 0.25	47 = 0.34	4 = 0.14	9 = 0.36	13 = 0.24
Neutral	111	58	169	5	7	12
	57 = 67.9%**	43 = 78.2%**	100 = 71.9%**	5 = 17.9%**	5 = 20.0%**	10 = 18.9%**
4. Preparator	111 = 1.32	58 = 1.05	169 = 1.22	5 = 0.18	7 = 0.28	12 = 0.23
Upgraders	4	4	8	18	16	34
	4 = 0.05*	4 = 0.07*	8 = 0.06*	18 = 0.64*	16 = 0.64*	34 = 0.64*
	4 = 4.8%**	4 = 7.3%**	6 = 5.8%**	13 = 46.4%**	15 = 60.0%**	28 = 52.8%**
5. Aggressive interrogative	3 = 0.04%		3 = 0.02	2 = 0.07	1 = 0.04	3 = 0.06
6. Sarcasm	0	1 = 0.02	1 = 0.01	7 = 0.25	3 = 0.12	10 = 0.19
7. Moralizer	0	1 = 0.02	1 = 0.01	4 = 0.14	6 = 0.24	10 = 0.19
8. Threat	1 = 0.01	2 = 0.04	3 = 0.02	5 = 0.18	6 = 0.24	11 = 0.21

Notes: *Distribution rates indicate the average amount of modifiers per strategy, based on an absolute count of downgraders and upgraders in the entire corpus.

**Number of modified strategies (containing one or more modifiers).

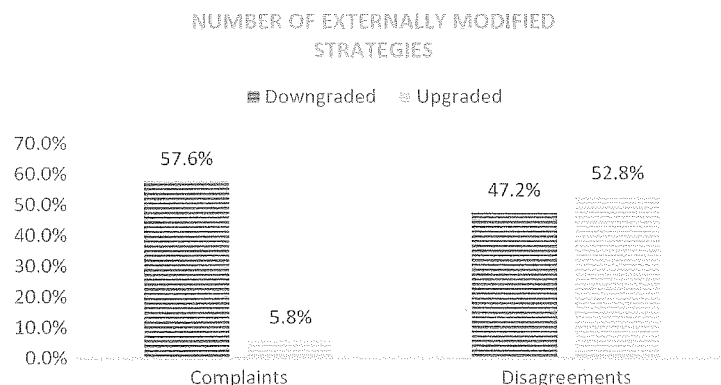


Figure 4: External modification, complaints vs disagreements.

the German compared to the French corpus (46.4% vs. 60%). It can also be observed that the German disagreement corpus contains slightly less aggravating than mitigating elements (46.4% vs. 50%), whereas we see the reverse image in French: upgraders occur more often in disagreement e-mails than downgraders (60% vs. 44%).

6 Discussion

6.1 Complaints

Our data analysis of business complaint e-mails reveals a preference for more indirect complaint strategies, with a prototypical complaint e-mail consisting of an expression of dissatisfaction as expressive act and a request for repair as directive act. Exactly the same preferred combination has been identified in Chen et al.'s study (2011) for American and Chinese DCT-elicited complaints in a variety of oral contexts, and similar generic moves are also mentioned in Hartford and Mahboob's study on letters of complaint in South Asian English and Urdu (2004). However, our business complaints are never expressed by using very indirect hinting strategies, as it turned out to be the case for oral everyday complaints, and there also seem to be differences in the use of direct strategies. When comparing our results with House and Kasper's (1981) study, which incorporates German data as well, we conclude that "direct" accusations are less common in German business complaints than in German oral

everyday complaints. Written B2B business complaints thus differ from oral complaints in that they are not expressed by strategies which lie at both extremes of the complaint directness spectrum (either hinting or strong accusation and moral judgment). Furthermore, we identified explicit complaints in our corpus, which – to our knowledge – have not been found in previous studies and can therefore be seen as typical for our corpus of business complaints. These findings tie in with the previous observation that in business communication, communicating a clear message is seen as paramount (Meinl 2010; Stalpers 1995).

Apart from a preference for to-the-point but inoffensive complaint strategies, our analysis of business data has also shown a more intensive use of downgraders as opposed to upgraders. Our business complaints thus often combine clear communication with linguistic strategies that demonstrate a concern for politeness. The most commonly used downgraders are (1) politeness markers and polite closing phrases, which reveal a prevalence of formulaic and therefore weakened politeness, (2) impersonalization (agent avoiders), a negative politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987) used by the customers to avoid (too) direct reference to either themselves or the employees, especially when expressing accusations, and (3) references to supporting evidence in an effort to solidly substantiate their claim. House and Kasper's study (1981) on oral complaints uncovers a similar trend when it comes to the relation between downgraders and upgraders.¹⁵ However, considerable differences can be detected when looking at the *distribution* of downgraders: House and Kasper's German corpus has a 2.07 rate, against 0.83 in our study. Oral complaints do not only include more mitigating elements; they seem to trigger different types of downgraders as well: instead of politeness markers and agent avoiders, House and Kasper find many downtoners, cajolers, and hesitators. This clearly indicates that the use of modifiers is bound to mode- and genre-specific norms.

Our complaints also differ significantly from customer complaints on eBay as studied by Meinl (2010), who observed not only a general preference for direct strategies, but also an increased use of upgraders. Her results suggest that, given that business-related complaints on social media are voiced in a public and more anonymous context with little or no hope for repair or compensation, these complaint types trigger fewer face considerations.

¹⁵ At first sight, Trosborg (1995), whose corpus consists of English and Danish oral everyday complaints, obtains different results, as she found either a similar amount of downgraders and upgraders (for English), or more upgraders than downgraders (for Danish). Her list of internal modifiers did not, however, include agent avoiders, which were discussed under the topic of *complaint perspective*.

The general preference for more indirect, albeit clear, complaint strategies and a comparatively low variety in strategy use reveals that complaining in our B2B context can be considered a routine task that customers are expected to perform, resulting in a rather standardized generic form and a problem-oriented communicative style. Customers tend to adopt a professional and neutral tone, with the investment in politeness being limited to the use of negative or formulaic politeness. It is clear that at this initial stage of the complaint negotiation, customers are not willing to jeopardize interpersonal relations. In order for the transactional goal of repair or compensation to be met, the use of more aggressive or emotionally charged language is not yet deemed necessary or beneficial. This finding is in tune with the recommendations formulated in handbooks on business correspondence, in which customers are advised to formulate their complaint in a “businesslike” way, sticking to the facts and staying professional (e. g. Neumayer 2006: 98–99).

6.2 From complaints to disagreements

Compared to our complaint e-mails, disagreement e-mails reveal a larger variety in strategy use, a preference for direct and clear strategies, and a tendency to underscore the disagreement message through an increased use of upgraders and a decreased use of formulaic politeness. This indicates that the norm of clear business communication still stands, but that the disagreement act, as part of a later stage in the complaint negotiation, engenders less routinized or neutral language, and gives way to more ad-hoc and person-oriented, confrontational formulations. Relating our findings to Stalper’s (1995) and Bjorge’s (2012) conclusions on disagreement acts in oral business negotiations, we can confirm that disagreements in a business context are mostly realized in a clear, direct way and accompanied by a support or explanation for the disagreement as well as other types of mitigation. However, considering the fact that both Stalpers and Bjorge focused on mitigation strategies rather than on strategies of intensification, we assume that internal and external *upgrading* devices were less apparent in their corpora, possibly because their face-to-face context required more face work.

Our findings offer further support for the claim that, in the course of a negotiation, the threat of face loss for oneself may become more important than face-threat to the addressee, leading to an increase in direct strategies (see Kotthoff 1993), and a more explicit and even aggressive language. We argue that three types of face are at stake here: social face, professional face, and – to a lesser extent – personal face. From the way customers formulate disagreements, it becomes clear that they

perceive the complaint refusal as a threat to their social face in that they do not feel valued in their role as a (loyal) customer. They sometimes explicitly refer to long-time business relations with the company and to their trustworthiness as clients. By firmly disagreeing, customers not only protect their social but also their professional face. Indeed, their extensive use of direct strategies and upgraders in this later and critical phase of the complaint negotiation could be read as a tactical, ultimate effort to obtain the repair they feel they are entitled to. Occasionally, then, customers resort to moralizers to stress their sincerity, revealing that the complaint refusal was experienced as a threat to their personal face and a challenge to their self-perception as an honest person.

House and Kasper (1981) and Trosborg (1995) found considerably fewer upgraders in requests (directive, prospective acts), as opposed to complaints (post-event acts). The request for repair being an essential component of the complaint (in which it occurs nine times out of ten in our data) results in a higher number of downgraders in the complaint e-mails. In the disagreement e-mails, then, the focus shifts to the expressive act as a reaction to the previous refusal, which results in fewer requests for repair and, consequently, a higher occurrence of upgraders.

The observed difference between our complaint and disagreement e-mails underscores the hybrid character of (business) e-mails as discussed in Section 1.3. The complaint e-mails stylistically show a closer resemblance to formal business letters, while disagreement e-mails echo the spontaneity and informality of telephone calls. This is also visible, for instance, in the increased use of informal CMC-features (punctuation and layout) in disagreement messages.

6.3 German vs. French

A comparison between our German- and French-language complaints revealed only small differences. Our results suggest that the German complaints tend to be formulated in a more direct way, but, considering the fact that accusations are in nearly all cases impersonalized and therefore realized in an indirect way, the higher directness for German complaints is primarily related to the strategy of the explicit complaint. German customers often mention the speech act in the subject header or the e-mail body, which suggests that the norm of straightforward business communication is more dominant in the German-speaking than in the French-speaking business culture. Whereas German complaint e-mails were found to be more explicit than French complaint e-mails, differences in strategy use and external modification between our German and French

disagreement e-mails suggest a stronger tendency in French towards aggressive and confrontational language. These findings resonate with Demangeat and Molz's study (2003) which points to a more explicit and direct communication style for German and an "orientation towards dissent" – especially in the context of solid relationships (which is the case in our B2B setting) – as one of France's cultural standards. The confrontational style in French can also be subsumed under what Béal (1993) terms "*l'engagement*", or the willingness in French conversational culture to make one's views public and to defend these views, a tendency that goes hand in hand with a tolerance towards confrontation in interactions. At first sight, the preference for explicit complaint in our German corpus seems to contradict the results of Geluykens and Kraft's study (2006), who found that not German but French complaints were formulated in a slightly more explicit and therefore direct way. The authors' focus on oral, everyday complaints allowed them to broadly distinguish between implicit, hinting strategies and explicit strategies, the latter including such aggressive utterances as frustration, accusations, reproaches, and insults. Given their understanding of explicitness, which does not exactly match ours, it seems more reasonable to relate their findings to the observed stronger confrontational style in our French disagreement corpus.

Our results suggest that in our business complaint data, German-speaking and French-speaking customers prefer two different types of directness, with German speakers leaning more towards *explicit* language and French speakers leaning more towards *confrontational* language. Although these findings, considering the smaller amount of disagreement cases for both languages, are still preliminary, they do raise theoretical and methodological questions related to the definition of directness and the conceptualization of directness scales. Directness scales (House and Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995) are generally established on the basis of two criteria: explicitness, and severity or face-threat. While explicitness is relatively easy to measure when examining the form and content of the utterance in relation to its context, face-threat is related to a (personal) evaluation. If the same utterance may have different face-threatening effects depending on language and culture – as we described above, a confrontational negotiation style can be more acceptable in French –, existing directness scales based on the degree of face-threat appear to be too culture-specific. Only a context-sensitive perception analysis, in which one would determine the different perlocutionary effects of various combinations of strategies (and their modification), can provide reliable information on the matter. Against this background, future research on speech acts would need to thoroughly reassess the concepts of directness and indirectness, as well as the conception of directness scales, in an effort to develop a reliable

discourse-analytic instrument allowing for the systematic cross-linguistic analysis and comparison of different types of speech acts.

7 Conclusion

With this first analysis of customer complaint and disagreement e-mails, it was our aim to obtain a better understanding of e-mail complaint negotiation in professional settings for the German-French language pair. We acknowledge that the limited data set can be considered a weakness of our study. The data was retrieved from a single company, and the number of disagreement e-mails was lower compared to the complaint e-mails. We plan additional research into a more comprehensive set of data, gathered at different companies and involving more languages. Nevertheless, we were able to identify remarkable tendencies that deserve to be further explored.

Our data shows how the customer's discourse evolves from more neutral, problem-oriented, routinized formulations in first complaints towards more confrontational, person-oriented, ad-hoc formulations in reactions to complaint refusals. This discursive change is marked by an increase in the use of direct speech act realizations and upgraders. Our study further suggests that international communicative norms apply particularly in more routine business transactions, with cross-cultural discursive differences gaining weight in business interactions which are less habitual.

The most notable cross-cultural difference we found between German- and French-speaking customers is a more explicit style in German and a more confrontational style in French. These results are in line with findings in the field of psychology, as they reflect some of the French and German cultural standards, as described by Demangeat and Molz (2003). We have now been able to observe these cultural standards in authentic interactions, giving more body to these previous findings and showing how they play out exactly in real-life situations. In our study, we were also able to demonstrate how the observed cross-cultural differences have potential repercussions on a theoretical and methodological level, compelling us to critically reassess existing definitions and applications of (in)directness. On a more practical, societal level, our results serve to promote intercultural awareness in business contexts, where improved communicative competence can help sales and customer service professionals avoid misunderstandings and damaged relationships. Sales employees who are L2 speakers of German and French might misinterpret the French confrontational style or the German use of

CMC-upgraders, and consider these as signs of rudeness. The results of our study can finally be used in language classes for L2 German and French in order to draw the students' attention to the observed pragmatic differences and their potential implications in intercultural contexts.

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