How do you react to the breakdown after it happens? Do you complain about it?: a contrastive study on the complaint behavior in American English and Persian

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Abstract

This study aims to compare American and Persian complaint realizations. Fifty five Persian university students’ complaint utterances were collected via a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) containing eight scenarios and were later coded in terms of seven major categories: opting out, no explicit reproach, indirect complaint, indirect accusation, direct complaint, request for repair and threat. Participants were also interviewed after answering to DCT about their strategy use. General findings showed that Persian complaint realizations are significantly different from those of Americans. Also, findings indicated that Americans used more indirect complaint (IC) and request for repair (RR) but Persians preferred more direct complaint (DC) and indirect accusation (IA) strategies under identical circumstances. The qualitative findings reassured the quantitative results indicating that the speech act of complaint was realized differently through following different sociocultural norms.

Keywords: Complaint; Directness Level; Discourse Completion Test (DCT); Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Research on the speech behaviour of native speakers of English compared with non native speakers' norms is important not only for describing how cross-culturally different speakers perform verbally in day-to-day interactions, but also for the purpose of making use of the findings in educational settings (Boxer, 1991) studies within the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics can have a tremendous effect on highlighting the potential areas one must look for in order to find out the functional similarities and differences between the realization of different speech acts. Although, studies on cross-cultural variations in the use of speech acts have generally focused on a variety of acts including mostly apology, request (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), compliment (Wolfson, 1981), invitation, and refusal (Beebe et al., 1990), only a few studies have been conducted on the act of complaining (DeCapua, 1986). Useful insights may be uncovered as how complaints compare across different cultures and under the effect of significant social variables such as social solidarity and power, gender and the intensity of the complainable act.

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1877-0428 © 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Selection and/or peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Uzunboylu
Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license, doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.609
2. Literature Review

Broadly speaking, complain means to express dissatisfaction of existing situations and to point out some shortcomings on the part of the person who performs some complainable action (Edward, 2005; Drew, 1998). Searle (1976) categorized complaint as a kind of expressive speech act, and as the term suggests, it exhibits the psychological state of the aggrieved party. According to Brown and Levinson (1989), expressives threaten the addressee's positive face because the addressee's desire of being respected is jeopardized when held responsible for the offense. In addition, it may intrinsically threaten the hearer's negative face, which mostly occurs when a complaint is accompanied by a request for compensation.

Olshtain & Weinbach (1988) describe the preconditions in which a complaint may take place.

1) the speaker accounts with "socially unacceptable act" (SUA)
2) the speaker perceives the consequences of it as offensive
3) the hearer is regarded as responsible for the SUA
4) the speaker decides to express his/her displeasure.

Numerous cross-cultural studies investigating the speech act performance of native speakers showed that although speech acts appear to be universal, their conceptualization and verbalization can vary to a great extent across cultures (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989). For instance, according to measures of directness, German speakers selected higher levels of directness and used fewer down-graders than did English speakers (House & Kasper, 1981). Further studies conducted on the inter-language of EFL learners include De Capua (1998) who examined the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer as a possible basis for cultural stereotypes and defined cultural stereotype as “the tendency of people of one culture to characterize the members of different cultures in overly simplified or inappropriate terms (p. 21)” He inquired why Americans stereotype Germans as rude and aggressive.

In order to answer this question he examined the pragmatic transfer of speakers’ German into English and concluded that: “Pragmatic transfer occurs when the second language learners apply the socially appropriate rules and formulas of their native language to target language situations either because they are unaware of target language routines or because they are psychologically unable to do so as the L2 norms and routines violate their L1 internalized and culturally conditioned acceptable norms of speech behavior (p. 23)”. The tone of German responses in English differed from those of the responses of the native Americans which would always lead to misunderstandings. German EFL speakers are generally judged as more direct, and aggressive than Americans in similar situations.

The work presented in this article is a cross-cultural exploration into the comparability of Persian native complaint speech with the norms governing English as reported by research.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Fifty five Persian-speaking students took part in this study, all university students majoring in different academic fields at University of Isfahan. The participants’ mean age was 22.14 for the males and 21.63 for the female students. University students were chosen as they formed a fairly homogeneous group of participants who produced speech act responses which were comparable.

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. Discourse Completion Test

The data collected for analysis included mainly a Discourse Completion type of data. Interviews as well as observations were conducted to further demonstrate the quality of the speech by Persian native speakers. Beebe & Cummings (1995) acknowledge that the advantages of the DCT include gathering a large amount of data quickly, classifying stereotypical semantic formulas and strategies, and acquiring insights into the social and psychological
elements which may affect speech act performances. DCT data also possess the quality of further manipulation and allows us to make comparisons and generalize findings based on quantitative data.

3.3. Procedures

The questionnaire was administered during the class hours and took approximately 20 minutes. The DCT data were then coded and statistically examined to reveal significant generalizations. Each situation of the questionnaire consisted of a brief description of the addressee’s bio-data. The rest of the sections included eight situations which demonstrated and characterized the effect of certain social variables on the speech act: social distance between the interlocutors, social power (the relative degree of the social dominance of each one of the interlocutors over the other), and finally the severity of the offence being committed. Having read each situation, the students then identified the persons committing the offenses in the situations and wrote down their normal language reaction.

4. Data Analysis

For every functional encounter the units of analysis are pieces of conversation forming a speech act. The unit for our analysis was either one utterance or a sequence of utterances produced by the respondents to show how they would verbally react to situations of complaint. Each unit was examined and developed into the following strategies: opting out, no explicit reproach, indirect complaint, indirect accusation, direct complaint, request for repair, and threat. Table 1 shows the coding scheme in which the complaint strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complaint Strategy</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opting Out (OP)</strong></td>
<td>Avoiding conflict</td>
<td>Stay silent or give a smile to the offender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker ignores the offense.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Explicit Reproach (NO):</strong></td>
<td>Giving general remarks without mentioning the offense</td>
<td>Never mind. No harm done. There’s no real damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker asserts neither the offense nor the hearer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Complaint (IC):</strong></td>
<td>Giving general remarks with the offense</td>
<td>It’s ok. Accidents happen. Don’t worry about it. It could happen to anybody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker asserts the offense, but avoids explicit mention of the hearer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Accusation (IA):</strong></td>
<td>Interrogating</td>
<td>Why did you open my letter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker questions the hearer about the offense.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Complaint (DC):</strong></td>
<td>The accusing</td>
<td>You opened my letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker accuses the hearer of the offense.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request for Repair (RR):</strong></td>
<td>Compensating</td>
<td>Could I have some privacy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker requests that the hearer make up for the offense or stop the offense.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat (TH):</strong></td>
<td>Stating immediate consequences caused by offense</td>
<td>If you open my letter again, I’ll move out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker asserts immediate or potential sanctions against the hearer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to this coding scheme, the linguistic realization of the act of complaining could take the form of any of the seven possible strategies available to the complainer. Table 3 displays the percentage of the strategies used by the American and Persian speakers (The English Native data was taken from Chen, 2007).
Table 2. Strategy Distribution used by NS-A and NS-P (In Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>OP</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>IC</th>
<th>IA</th>
<th>DC</th>
<th>RR</th>
<th>TH</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NS-A</td>
<td>0/7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>45/3%</td>
<td>4/8%</td>
<td>7/7%</td>
<td>38/3%</td>
<td>3/2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS-P</td>
<td>1/1%</td>
<td>2/2%</td>
<td>30/8%</td>
<td>10/8%</td>
<td>16/4%</td>
<td>34/2%</td>
<td>4/5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A major finding of quantitative analysis is that Americans and Persians differed significantly in their behavior toward complaining. Indirect complaint and request for repair are most frequently used by the American participants, while indirect accusation, direct complaint and threat were more frequent in Persian than in American. Opting out was the least frequently used strategy in both American and Persian students.

A Chi-square test was run to examine if there was a significant difference between English and Persian regarding preference of strategies employment. The results of Chi-square test are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Chi-square Results for the Relation between the Language and Complaint Strategy Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-square</td>
<td>10.483(a)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>10.522</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear by Linear Association</td>
<td>6.570</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chi-square test yielded a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=10.483$, $p<.05$) between the nationality of speakers and their compliant strategy preferences. Table 3 shows the presence of a relationship between the variables of our concern, i.e. culture and strategies of complaint. Table 4 shows the significance of this relationship.

Table 4. Test of the Strength of the Relation between Nationality and Strategy Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Approx. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phi</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cramers’ V</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 4, the strength of the relationship is 0.74 which is significant ($p<0.05$).

5. Qualitative Analysis of Strategy Usage

The first difference between American and Persian complaints was noticed in the explicitness of mentioning the offensive event by means of various remarks without directly blaming the addressee. According to the results of this study, Americans tended to let the hearer off the hook first (e.g. “It’s ok”), followed by a statement of understanding (e.g. “Accidents happen”). Persian speakers, on the other hand, tend to monitor their choice of strategies according to the context of complaining. A host never complains about a damage done by the guest or a person or child relative of the guest, however great the severity of the damage or offence. The situations of minimum solidarity give the permission to express one’s complaint in full and in agreement with the severity of the offence. The dependence of the complaint strategies on such social factors as social power difference and variable levels of solidarity is to a great degree more than what has been said about English. So, in Persian the social norm dictates that the host never complains to the guest’s complainable act. On the other hand, in the context of a restaurant, one may decide to show restraint in complaining if the complainee owns higher power. A female speaker is much less likely to complain about the quality of food than a male speaker. Expressions such as next time, I should bring with me some pair of spare cloths is said by a complainer to the waiter who spilled the soup over his clothes. A female speaker is least
likely to utter the same expression of indirect complaint; she may remain silent and wait for the waiter to express apology.

The major difference is that the density or directness of the complaint in Persian is more dependent on the social variables of the context than what is reported of English. For example, in the speech of an employee complaining to the boss about the extra hours he works, one finds more indirectness and appeal to strategies of politeness by a Persian speaker than with an English speaker:

Americans: I took the established hours believing that is what I would be working.
Persians: Sorry, I need this job. If I go late at night my family would abandon me to continue.

The Persian speaker in the extract appeals to reasons other than self-defence or right of working office hours and not beyond office hours; however, this is different when an American speaker complains.

In terms of indirect accusation, Persians were found to use wh-questions most frequently (10/8%) as strategies which tend to be direct. In situations where both the interlocutors converse in a power equal context, the complainer feels free to express the complaint in a direct and threatening manner; it seems they do that because the speaker deliberately wishes to threaten the addressee’s face straightforwardly by holding him/her responsible for the offense (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Americans and Persians also differ in the use of direct complaint which is reflected mostly in the frequency of occurrence. Native American speakers tended to prefer strategies on the softer end of the scale like IC (45/3%), more than Persians (30/8%). Another difference is related to the structures which occur when the speaker wishes to express complaint through illocution of the utterances. Persians utilize DC strategy more likely to criticize, as the complainer wishes the dissatisfaction to be explicit through the illocutionary force of the head act of complaint. For example, Persians facing addressees who are of higher social status or power usually express annoyance as follows:

The teacher talking to the student who is slow in learning the point: Teacher is getting impatient and complains:

Hamash dar-ee eshtebah mi-g-i
All the time have-you mistake continuity marker say-you
You are wrong all the time.

Request for repairs are strategies realized in terms of questions or statements that ask the hearer to remediate or redress the damage in some way. Americans request for repair frequently by questions or pleas incorporating modal verbs such as ‘can’, ‘could’ or ‘would’. The use of modal is a desirable strategy used by both American and Persian speakers in complaining. Zhang (1995) argues that Americans perceive direct expressions of the speaker’s wants without using modals as impolite. Through the use of modals in requests, the speaker gives face to the hearer by showing respect, and the powerful hearer gives face to the speaker by honouring the request in return (e.g. mishé (is it possible, emkAn dAreh, could you, would you please, would you mind, could you please). More common in the data produced by Persians was the use of a please plus the command form of the verb. In the following example, in contexts in which the American speakers tend to use would to modify the illocutionary verb like; Persian speakers choose the mitigation please followed by an imperative utterance:

American: I would like to ask you to give me extra pay.
Persian: Please,.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The present study was an attempt to find differences between American and Persian use of complaint strategies. Persian speakers exhibit the sociocultural norms of their society by choice of complaint strategies made. The use of DC strategies is more frequent in Persian complaints. The higher power or status addressee receives a fairly greater share of respect, while, on the other hand, the lower-status less powerful addressee may receive direct complaints which are deliberately made to be face-threatening. Through complaint, which a verbal expression is of openly acknowledged interpersonal difficulties (Emerson and Messinger, 1977), by exposing inner state, complainants make themselves vulnerable to how others react. This may function as a motivator for monitoring the structure of the speech act in agreement with the contextual reality. Since complaints are typically threatening to the addressee, the speakers should use tact in making them functionally appropriate; most speakers tend to skip slight offences as
the act of complaint itself might appear to be problematic. Speakers do not engage in complaining without first planning for strategies for an appropriate one. Drew (1998) argues that who to complain to and the types of complaint to be made are related to the recipients. Speakers design their complaints so as to make it possible (or allowable) for others to disattend them (Mandelbaum, 1991/1992).

The investigation into Persian complaints contributes to the debate on universality versus culture-specificity views, which have been discussed extensively in cross-cultural pragmatic research. Some researchers speak for universality of certain general mechanisms regulating human languages, which include conversational maxims (Grice, 1975), politeness theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983), and taxonomy of communicative acts (Searle, 1975). However, other researchers disagree with the claim for universality and maintain that speech acts vary in conceptualization and verbalization across languages since pragmatic knowledge is a reflection of cultural norms.

Indirect complaint, and request for repair are found to be highly frequent in both Americans and Persians’ speech. However, Americans use these strategies more frequently than Persian speakers. The complaint strategies called opting out and threat are used as a complaint strategy for circumstances of high severity and for offenders with low social status and power.

References


