

If my complaints could passions move: An interlanguage study of aggression[☆]

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Abstract

This study explores the use of the “Picture Frustration Test” (Rosenzweig, 1978a,b) which is a psychological test to measure aggression to elicit complaints by Japanese students in both Japanese and English. A significant number of subjects responded to stress or frustration using the same direction of aggression in both languages but the type of aggression was different. In L1 it was extrapeditive, which is similar to Olshtain and Weinbach’s (1993) expression of annoyance or disapproval, severity level 1. However, in L2 it was extrapersistive, which is similar to Olshtain and Weinbach’s accusation and warning, level 4 or 5. In the case of one situation, there was an effect for order of language. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The speech act of complaining has been little studied in the fields of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper and Blum Kulka, 1993). Olshtain and Weinbach (1993: 108) define complaining as a speech act where “the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance – censure – as a reaction to a past or on-going

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action, the consequences of which are perceived by S as affecting her unfavorably. This complaint is usually addressed to the hearer (H), whom the S holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action". The offensive action is later termed a "socially unacceptable act (SUA)" and is considered a pre-condition that "need[s] to be fulfilled in order for the speech act of complaining to take place". This is followed by a sequence of payoff considerations. The speaker has the option of opting out, the possibility of carrying out the complaint 'on' or 'off' the record and, finally, the choice to realize the speech act with or without redress.

The Olshtain and Weinbach study developed a scale for the perception of the severity of a complaint. The five categories along a continuum were posited as: 1) below the level of reproach, (2) expression of annoyance or disapproval, (3) explicit complaint, (4) accusation and warning, and (5) immediate threat. Their results indicate that although native speakers of English and Hebrew performed similarly in terms of severity, nonnative speakers of Hebrew tended to select less severe complaint strategies than did Hebrew native speakers.

House and Kasper (1981) looked at complaints in terms of directness and modality markers. They used four criteria to determine directness levels. The first criterion took account of implicit or explicit mention of the offense. The second criterion determined whether or not the speaker's negative evaluation of the act was expressed explicitly. The third assessed whether or not the addressee's agentive involvement was implicitly or explicitly expressed, and the fourth whether or not the negative evaluation of the addressee's action and the addressee himself were implicitly or explicitly expressed. According to their measures of directness, German speakers selected higher levels of directness and used fewer down-graders than did English speakers. However, House and Kasper point out that directness levels are not likely to be comparable, "because the value of each is derived from the value it has relative to the remaining levels, and their frequency and modality of use in the particular cultural system" (1981: 184). In other words, German speakers are not intrinsically less polite than English speakers; they only appear to be if they are unfairly compared to an English norm.

Common to these approaches is the attempt to classify complaints as a particular speech act with levels of some kind, such as severity or directness. Also common is the tacit assumption that complaints (whatever the level of severity/directness) are socially justifiable (if not obligatory) acts in reaction to a "socially unacceptable act" (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993: 108). This would imply that complaints are face threatening acts that function within the framework of interpersonal conflict. However, complaints can also function to increase solidarity through commiseration about impersonal frustrations such as 'the weather' (cf. Boxer, 1993). Nevertheless, DuFon (1995) points out that such expressions might be better labeled as 'gripping' rather than 'complaining'. Furthermore, severity/directness scales do not capture the difference between complaints that function as indirect requests (e.g. it's cold in here [*so shut the window*]) and those that function as censure (e.g. it's cold in here [*because you forgot to pay the gas bill*]). Such a distinction is difficult in many cases because of the inherent ambiguity of indirect speech acts. For example, a request with censure might be intended or understood or neither or both (cf. Weizman, 1993).

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