American and Chinese complaints:  
Strategy use from a cross-cultural perspective  

YUAN-SHAN CHEN, CHUN-YIN DORIS CHEN, and MIAO-HSIA CHANG  

Abstract  

Complaining has been an under-represented speech act in cross-cultural pragmatics. Unlike the well-defined speech acts such as apologizing, requesting, and complimenting, complaining is comparatively more complex in that it has no pre-determined forms and the interpretations are often negotiable. In this study, a total of 40 American and Taiwanese university students were recruited and asked to fill out a discourse completion test (DCT) containing eight complaint-provoking scenarios. The DCT was employed as the major instrument because it elicits the most critical part of the speech act under investigation and allows for cross-cultural comparisons. Six complaint strategies (opting out, interrogation, accusation, request for repair, and threat) were identified and analyzed in terms of their overall and combined use across the eight scenarios. The quantitative results indicated that the American and the Chinese participants shared similar distributions in both overall and combined strategy use. The qualitative findings, however, showed differences in their choice of linguistic forms and expression of semantic content. Such similarities and differences are then discussed from the universality/culture-specificity perspective.  

1. Introduction  

A speech act is the smallest unit in human communication used to perform acts such as requesting, apologizing, complimenting, and thanking. Since the 1980s, considerable efforts within and across languages have been devoted to examining the extent to which the realization patterns of a given speech act is potentially universal. However, these speech-act studies have been criticized as being ethnocentric in that most of them have focused on Western languages (Wierzbicka 1991). Even the quite comprehensive Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989), which
examined the apology and request realization patterns across seven different languages, was biased toward Western languages (Yu 2005).

Fortunately, further research in recent years has compared Western and non-Western speech-act behaviors in recent years. The contrastive pragmatic studies on American English and Chinese may be good cases in point to illustrate such a change. The act of inviting is a good example. Unlike in American English, a successful invitation in Chinese may not be achieved within one attempt (Mao 1994). When receiving an invitation, the invitee may turn down the offer first in order not to appear too greedy. The inviter, on the other hand, needs to insist on acceptance in order to show sincerity. Such a “seesaw battle” between the inviter and invitee often confuses a Westerner because it is hard to tell when a Chinese person really means “yes” or “no” (Ma 1996). Another example is compliments. Researchers have found that Americans in general express direct compliments, defined as positive remarks, whose illocutionary force is explicit and unambiguous (e.g., “I really like your T-shirt”), while Chinese tend to express indirect compliments, defined as the utterances whose positive semantic carriers are missing at the linguistic level (e.g., “Wow, what did you do with your hair?”). Moreover, when it comes to responding to compliments, there is a tendency that Americans accept the compliment upon receipt, while non-acceptance seems to be the norm for Chinese people (Yu 2005).

Such a difference is not surprising since language reflects the culture of a community in such a way that it is a channel through which its speakers’ beliefs and values are communicated. Since American culture is individualistically oriented, it is reasonable for Americans to express directness to reflect this core value to preserve their own desires and territories. On the other hand, Chinese culture is collectively oriented, so indirectness is often found in Chinese language to project humility and to show one’s position in relation to other members of the group or society. This demonstrates that although languages may share major categories of strategies in realizing a given speech act, the attached social meanings and their applications vary from culture to culture.

In view of the differences between American English and Chinese, this study intends to widen the scope of cross-cultural pragmatics by studying the complaint performances of American and Chinese native speakers. Notice that the term “complaints” here refers to those addressed to the hearer (i.e., a direct complaint) as opposed to those addressed to a third party who is not present at the moment of speaking (i.e., an indirect complaint) (Boxer 1993). Through systematic investigation into strategy use, we hope to find the sociocultural mechanism that governs the similarities and differences of this speech act in both languages. The first research question to be answered is, What are the similarities and differences between the American and the Chinese partici-
pants in terms of overall strategy use in performing the act of complaining in English and Chinese?

In addition, we are interested in how these two groups of participants combined the main strategies in a complaint sequence. Therefore, the second research question we seek to answer is, What are the similarities and differences between the American and the Chinese participants in terms of combined strategy use in performing the act of complaining in English and Chinese?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The act of complaining

House and Kasper (1981), in their discussion of politeness markers in English and German, state that in the act of complaining, the addressee Y must have done an action P, which the speaker regards as bad for him/her. They argue that expressives, which have the features of “post-event/anti-X,” can be referred to as complaints. In English, these verbs include “criticize,” “accuse,” and “reproach.” Edmonson (1981: 145) claims that, “in making a complaint, a speaker potentially disputes, challenges, or bluntly denies the social competence of the complainee.” Under this circumstance, a complaint flouts the hearer’s supportive maxim. However, since the hearer has already flouted this maxim in a socially offensive event, the grounds for the complaint are justified. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) set out the preconditions in which a complaint takes place. The speaker must expect a favorable event to occur, but the hearer performs a “socially unacceptable act” (SUA), the consequences of which are perceived by the speaker as offensive to him/herself, or even to the general public. Then, the speaker regards the hearer as responsible for the SUA and decides to express his/her displeasure or frustration verbally to convey the censure.

The above arguments indicate that complaint is seen as an illocutionary act in which the speaker expresses negative feelings toward the hearer. The speaker does so because s/he thinks that the hearer should be responsible for a socially unacceptable past event. Therefore, the act of complaining has three major characteristics. First, it is a face-threatening act. Complaint threatens the hearer’s positive face wants of being admired or appreciated because the speaker holds a negative attitude toward the hearer and passes moral judgment. It may also threaten the hearer’s negative face wants of being free from imposition, a threat that occurs mostly when a complaint is accompanied by a request for compensation (Brown and Levinson 1987). Second, complaint can be addressed at different directness levels. A rational complainer will compute the weightiness of such a face-threatening act based on three criteria: social distance (D), relative power (P), and ranking of imposition (R) (Brown and
Levinson 1987). The evaluation may make the complainer choose not to complain, complain bald-on-record, or complain with repressive actions (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). Finally, complaint has no typical corresponding second part, as the perlocutionary act of a complaint is negotiable. Such an act is, by nature, not explicit because many assertions intending to carry the illocutionary function of complaining may be regarded as simple comments, while many observations that do not intend to carry such illocutionary function may be taken as complaints (Edmonson 1981; Laforest 2002).

2.2. Previous studies on the act of complaining

The research on the act of complaining has been conducted intralinguistically and interlinguistically. Of the limited number of intralingual studies, complaint has been investigated in languages such as American English, Canadian French, and Chinese. For American English, Hartley (1998) studied the complaints made by 120 American university students. Her analysis showed that direct complaints occupied only 20% of the utterances, while 75%–80% of the elicitations were mitigated complaints, indirect complaints, and the choice of opting out. Later, Laforest (2002) analyzed the complaint/complaint response sequence in family conversations in Montreal. The realization patterns taken from the family corpus did not particularly redress the actions, and the complainees tended to reject the blames addressed to them. This finding was in part due to the intimate relationships between interlocutors. In Chinese, three studies have been conducted to date. Du (1995) collected the complaints from the university students in Mainland China in response to a situation in which the speaker was bothered by the noise from a neighbor’s evening violin lesson taken in the evening. The results showed that there was a tendency for the Chinese to avoid open confrontations by complaining in a modest and casual manner for the sake of the hearer’s face. The studies that followed explored complaints in different age and sex groups in Taiwan. Chang (2001) analyzed the tape-recorded and questionnaire data produced by a total of 300 students from elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, and college. The results showed no difference in the use of these strategies across age groups. All the subjects preferred using explicit complaint, followed by threat. Accusation and warning and expression of annoyance or disapproval shared similar frequencies of occurrence, while below the level of reproach was least frequently used. The use of more direct strategies in Chang’s study could be attributed to the fact that the subjects complained to status-equal interlocutors, namely friends or classmates, in the school setting, in both the naturalistic tape recordings and written questionnaire productions. Lin (2007) examined gender differences in Chinese complaints. By collecting responses from 60 college students, she found that females were more likely to respond to a complaint
situation and produced longer utterances than males did. In addition, females preferred the strategies of explicit complaint and opting out, while males used threat most often. Lin’s findings are in agreement with previous research that women are more polite and considerate conversationalists than men.

These intralingual studies vary because they look at strategy use from different perspectives: males/females, status-equal/status-unequal interlocutors, and natural/elicitation setting. It is therefore hard to conclude any universal principle governing this speech act across languages. On the other hand, the interlingual studies have been more systematic. The comparisons conducted so far include English and German (House and Kasper 1981), English and Danish (Trosborg 1995), English and Korean (Lee 2000, Murphy and Neu 1996), and English and Japanese (Shea 2003). Some simply aim to find the similarities and differences in the two languages under study, while others intend to understand learners’ transfer patterns by drawing analogies between L1 and L2. These studies have presented three major findings. First, there is a tendency for the two languages being investigated to use a similar range of strategies. For example, Trosborg (1995) compared the complaints performed by native speakers of English and Danish. She found that the strategies used by the two groups had very much in common, with annoyance occurring most often and hints, accusation, and blame less often. Second, despite the fact that languages share a similar range of strategies, they evidence differences in certain aspects as well. For example, House and Kasper (1981) found that the Germans expressed direct complaints to a greater extent than their English counterparts. Trosborg (1995) showed that when speaking to an authority figure, English speakers adjusted their strategies to a greater extent than did Danish speakers. Lee’s (2000) study revealed that Koreans were more sensitive to the power parameter than Americans. Shea (2003) indicated that Americans and Japanese differed greatly in frequency, order, and content of the strategies such as justification, disapproval, and expression of empathy. Finally, the differences between L1 and L2 lead to negative transfer in learners’ speech act performances. For instance, Trosborg (1995) also found that when addressing a person of higher standing, Danish learners of English varied their strategies frequently. Shea (2003) argued that the differences in the frequencies of some strategies found in Americans living in the United States and Japanese living in the United States were due to negative L1 transfer.

Building on previous works, this study aims to investigate the similarities and differences in American and Chinese complaint behaviors for the following reasons. First, although cross-cultural studies of speech acts have investigated a variety of languages, Chinese, as one of the most important languages in the world in that it has the largest populations of speakers, is relatively understudied (Yu 2005). Second, complaining is a rather intricate behavior and is more difficult to capture than other speech acts. The reason is that unlike
request, apology, complimenting, inviting, and thanking, complaint has no predetermined form (Edmonson 1981, Laforest 2002, Nguyen 2008). Finally, such a cross-cultural study contributes to the illumination of culture-specific norms and values. It also enhances interaction across cultures (O’Driscoll 2007), which is one of the ultimate goals of teaching L2 pragmatics in language classrooms. By understanding L1 and L2 complaints, language teachers can identify learners’ pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic difficulties and teach them how to avoid cross-cultural miscommunications in real-life encounters (Chen 2007; Chen, Chen, and Chang 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Forty university students participated in this study: 20 Americans in the United States (NS-A) and 20 Chinese (NS-C) in Taiwan. The American participants were undergraduate students from a university in the state of Washington in the United States. All the Americans were Caucasians, and none were immigrants from other countries. The Chinese participants were students selected from a private university in central Taiwan. Since English education is compulsory in junior high school in Taiwan, the Chinese participants were restricted to those whose TOEIC scores were 350–450 to avoid possible influences from the target language. The average age was 19.83 for the Americans, and 18.41 for the Chinese. For each group, half of the participants were females and half of them were males.

3.2. Instrument

We asked all the participants to fill out a written questionnaire in the form of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (see Appendix) during their normal class hours. The extent to which the DCT matches naturalistic interactions has often been questioned. In recent years, there has been a consensus that the choice between DCTs and naturally occurring talk for a particular study depends upon the research questions to be answered (Golato 2003). If the researcher is interested in interlocutors’ actual language use and the underlying rules that govern the interactions, natural data is more appropriate than DCTs. On the other hand, if the purpose of an investigation is to reflect the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of a particular speech act held by a certain speech community, then DCTs are a preferable choice. Since the present study aims to examine people’s values in the target cultures through the act of complaining, we believe that the DCT is suited to this study because it mirrors
“what speakers believe they should say” as opposed to “what people actually do say” in a speech event (Golato 2003: 111).

In order to elicit a wide-range of complaint strategies, we developed the DCT in three stages. First, we conducted group interviews with 15 Taiwanese undergraduate students and 10 American exchange students and asked their perceptions regarding when and how they would make complaints in their respective culture. Having gathered these opinions, we referred to the scenarios described in the past literature (Lee 2000; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987, 1993; Shea 2003; Trosborg 1995) and sorted out a list of possibilities. Next, we decided to construct our questionnaire based on power (P) and distance (D) variables, since American and Chinese cultures view these two parameters in a very different way (Brown and Levinson 1987). The social power variable has two dimensions: whether the complainer or the complainee is higher in status. The social distance variable has also two dimensions: whether the interlocutors know (−D) or do not know (+D) each other. The $2 \times 2$ dimensions resulted in four combinations: [+distance, high to low], [−distance, high to low], [+distance, low to high] and [−distance, low to high]. Finally, we eliminated the idiosyncratic scenarios from our list and selected the ones which best corresponded to the power-distance construct. To be more reliable, each situation was tested with two scenarios, making a total of eight. Table 1 shows a summary of the scenarios:

To ensure the equivalence of the American and Chinese versions of the DCT, we employed the technique of “back translation” proposed by Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike (1973). First, we invited a fluent Chinese-English bilingual to translate the English questionnaire into Chinese. Then another Chinese-English bilingual was invited to translate the Chinese version back to English. Finally, we compared the two English versions and investigated the degree of equivalence, especially in meaning. Having consulted with several Chinese and American native speakers, we made necessary changes and then finalized the Chinese version.

Table 1. Summary of the DCT scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>P and D relationship</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Interlocutor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>+D</td>
<td>Drink ordering</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Customer vs. waiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H-L</td>
<td>T-shirt return</td>
<td>Store</td>
<td>Customer vs. clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>−D</td>
<td>Phone talking</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Older sibling vs. younger sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H-L</td>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Teacher vs. Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>+D</td>
<td>Movie ticket</td>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>Young man vs. Old man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L-H</td>
<td>Appointment</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Student vs. Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>−D</td>
<td>Part-time job</td>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Employee vs. Employer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L-H</td>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Teenager vs. Mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3. **Data analysis**

We developed a coding scheme based on the data collected. Six main strategies were identified, which include **opting out**, **dissatisfaction**, **interrogation**, **accusation**, **request for repair**, and **threat**. These strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct, as indicated in Table 2. The degree of directness was judged by the presence or absence of propositional content (complainable), complainer, and the accused (complainee) (Trosborg 1995).²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Complainer</th>
<th>Complainable</th>
<th>Complainee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opting out (OP)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction (DS)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogation (IN)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusation (AC)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for repair (RR)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat (TH)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The symbol “+” means that the specific criterion exists in the strategy, while the symbol “−” means that the specific criterion does not exist in the strategy.*

---

3.3. **Data analysis**

We developed a coding scheme based on the data collected. Six main strategies were identified, which include **opting out**, **dissatisfaction**, **interrogation**, **accusation**, **request for repair**, and **threat**. These strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct, as indicated in Table 2. The degree of directness was judged by the presence or absence of propositional content (complainable), complainer, and the accused (complainee) (Trosborg 1995).²

**Opting out** is used when the complainer does not say anything, usually in cases where issuing a complaint is a socially acceptable act. When using **dissatisfaction**, the complainer asserts the complainable, but avoids explicit mention of the complainer. It is generally expressed in the form of a simple statement beginning with “I,” “My + noun phrase,” “We” or “Our + noun phrase” (e.g., “My letter was opened”).

**Interrogation** is used when the complainer presupposes that the complainee is guilty of offense and questions him/her about the offense. It is usually expressed in terms of “wh-” and “yes-no” questions (e.g., “Why did you open my letter?”). By using **accusation**, the complainer charges the complainee with having committed the offense. It is generally expressed in the form of a simple statement beginning with “You” or “Your + noun phrase” (e.g., “You opened my letter”). Despite the fact that these two strategies incorporate both the complainable and complainee, **interrogation** is less direct than **accusation** since the former leaves room for the hearer’s explanation as to why such an offense has occurred.

**Request for repair** consists of two functions: The first function is compensation, in which the speaker expects the hearer to make up for the offense, and the second function is behavior change, in which the speaker expects the hearer to stop the offense or prevent repetitions of the offense. The linguistic forms of this strategy are categorized according to the request forms identified in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989). Finally, **threat** occurs when the speaker attempts to
American and Chinese complaints

attack the hearer openly by stating potential consequences caused by the offense. The linguistic form is generally realized by an if-clause (e.g., “If you open my letter again, I’ll move out”).

The American data were coded by two American teachers in Taiwan, and the Chinese data were coded by the researchers themselves. Each meaning unit, which was matched syntactically to an independent clause in general, was specified or tagged through one strategy. The coders worked independently and coded all the idea units. The interrater reliability was 0.85 for the American data and 0.90 for the Chinese data. For the items that showed disagreement, the coders talked until they reached an agreement.

Our analysis proceeded in two steps. First, like most cross-cultural pragmatics studies, we analyzed overall strategy use to provide a general overview of how each individual strategy was used by the American and the Chinese participants across the eight scenarios. Additionally, we analyzed how the American and the Chinese participants combined strategies to make complaints. We did this because as shown in Table 3, less than 30% of the productions (NS-A: 28.18%, NS-C: 26.38%) employed only a single strategy within a conversational turn, while more than 70% of the productions (NS-A: 71.82%, NS-C: 73.62%) combined strategies in a complaint sequence.

For both overall and combined strategy use, a non-parametric test using \( \chi^2 \) statistics was run to see if there was any significant difference in the frequency produced by the American and the Chinese participants. In addition, qualitative assessments were provided to examine the linguistic forms and content expressed via these strategies and patterns.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Overall strategy use

The American participants produced a total of 311 strategies, and the Chinese a total of 283 strategies across all the scenarios. The quantitative findings showed no statistically significant difference between the American and the Chinese productions in terms of the frequency of the six strategies used.
However, the qualitative analysis indicated that they differed in the linguistic forms, particularly in *interrogation* and *request for repair*.

Figure 1 shows the overall tendency of how the American and the Chinese participants used the six strategies:

![Distributions of the six main strategies](image)

In Figure 1, the horizontal axis depicts the six strategies, and the vertical axis shows the percentages. The values for each strategy produced by the American and the Chinese participants were plotted on the diagram and connected along the horizontal axis. This figure shows that *dissatisfaction* and *request for repair* were most frequently used, while *opting out* and *threat* were least frequently used by the American and Chinese participants. *Interrogation* and *accusation* were in between. The chi-square test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the overall strategy distributions between the American and the Chinese productions, $\chi^2(5, N = 40) = 7.271$, $p = 0.201$.

This finding is in consistent with Olshtain and Weinbach’s (1987: 203) assertion that there is a “distinct bulging in the center and lessening of usage at the two extremes of the scale.” They investigated native and non-native Hebrew speakers and found that both populations prefer *disapproval*, *complaints*, and *accusation*, which are located at the center of the directness scale, to *below the level of reproach* and *threat*, which are placed at the extreme ends of the scale. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) further proposed the payoff consider-
ations to explain such a tendency, which will be described in detail in the General Discussion.

Despite the fact that the American and the Chinese participants shared similar strategy distributions, we looked further into the linguistic forms used within each strategy since languages may share an identical set of strategies, but differ in linguistic manifestations (Blum-Kulka, 1983). Our qualitative analysis revealed that *interrogation* and *request for repair* had the most different linguistic realizations that differed the most, as shown in the following.

4.1.1. *Interrogation*. In terms of *interrogation*, the American participants were found to use “wh-” questions most frequently (75%) as shown in (1). Unlike the American participants, the Chinese participants were found to use yes/no questions with negative orientation most frequently (65%) as indicated in (2), followed by yes/no questions with neutral polarity, as shown in (3) (31%). “Wh-” questions had the least frequency of occurrence (3%).

(1) *Why did you open my letter?* (NS-A 1)

(2) *Ni bushi daying wo buzai kai wode xin ma?* 2SG didn’t promise me not again open my letter (Q) (NS-C 6)

‘Didn’t you promise me not to open my letter again?’

(3) *Ni you kai wode xin ma?* 2SG have open my letter (Q) (NS-C 10)

‘Did you open my letter?’

(Scenario: Privacy)

The tendency for the Americans to use “wh-” questions as in (1) seems to be contrary to Stiver’s (2010) findings that yes/no questions, rather than “wh-” questions, are primarily used in American English conversations. Such a contradiction could be ascribed to the fact that Stiver’s data was collected in naturally occurring situations in which the questions were generally used for information requests, initiation of repair, confirmation requests, assessment, and suggestions/offer/request; whereas our data was collected in a hypothetical, complaint-provoking situation where the complainer presupposes that the complainee opened the letter and thus asked for a reason.

On the other hand, our data showed that the Chinese tended to use yes/no questions to make complaints. According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972), yes/no questions with negative orientation as in (2) have two assumptions. The old assumption refers to the speaker’s positive attitude, which shows his/her hopes or wishes, while the new assumption refers to the speaker’s negative attitude, which expresses his/her disappointment or
annoyance. Therefore, in (2), the complainer implies that a promise was made previously with the complainee (old assumption). At the same time, the complainer shows his/her disappointment at the complainee’s act of breaking the promise and disturbing privacy (new assumption). However, yes/no questions with positive orientation as in (3) do not trigger any presupposition that the complainee is guilty of the deplorable act (Grundy 2000). In their much-cited work on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that assuming something on behalf of the hearer threatens that person’s negative face wants of not being imposed upon. Therefore, negative questions are less polite than their positive counterparts. Clark and Schunk (1980) supported Brown and Levinson’s argument by demonstrating empirically that negative questions were rated significantly lower on the politeness scale than their positive equivalents.

4.1.2. Request for repair. With regard to the linguistic forms of request for repair, the major difference between the American and the Chinese productions occurs when the speaker wishes to express requestive intention through illocutionary verbs. Eighty-five percent of the American participants used the modal verb “would” to modify the illocutionary verb “like,” as shown in (4). However, 82% of the Chinese participants employed subjectivizers such as “wo xiwang” (“I hope . . .”) or “wo xiangyao” (“I want to . . .”) to make requests, as shown in (5) and (6):

(4) I would like to ask you to give me extra pay. (NS-A 4)

(5) Wo xiwang wo yihou keyi zhunshi xiaban.
    1SG hope 1SG later can on time off duty (NS-C 10)
    ‘I hope I can get off duty on time in the future.’

(6) Wo xiangyao zhunshi xiaban.
    1SG want to on time off duty (NS-C 15)
    ‘I want to get off duty on time.’
    (Scenario: Gas station)

Based on the CCSARP coding scheme for requests, we coded (4) as hedged performative, which is defined as an “utterance whose illocutionary verb expressing the requestive intention is modified by modal verb,” while we coded (5) and (6) as want statement, which is defined as “the utterances which express the speaker’s desire for the hearer to carry out the act” (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989: 18).

Though coded differently, these two request forms are functionally equivalent because both of them are desire statements concerning the speaker’s wish or want that the hearer will perform the act. The only difference lies in the different perceptions of want statement between American English and Chinese.
Zhang (1995) argues that Americans perceive the expressions of the speaker’s wants as impolite or even rude, while Chinese perceive such expressions as soft, tentative, and polite. Yu (1999) also argues that Chinese are inclined to employ “wo xiwang” (“I hope . . .”) when addressing a higher-status person because this linguistic form can reflect the Chinese value of solidarity politeness. Through the use of this routine formula, the speaker gives face to the hearer by showing respect.

In summary, the quantitative and qualitative analyses of overall strategy use showed that the American and the Chinese participants shared similar strategy distributions, but differed in the degree of directness. When questioning the complainee about the offense, the American participants tended to be more direct than the Chinese participants. Such directness is evidenced by the use of “wh-” questions, which presupposes that the complainee is responsible for the deplorable act. On the other hand, the Chinese participants tended to be less direct than the American participants in that they used negative questions, which imply positive face redress for the hearer. In addition, the American and the Chinese participants were found to perceive the want statements in a very different way. The American participants in general considered this request form as impolite, while the Chinese participants perceived it a conventionalized form showing tentativeness and respect to the complainee.

4.2. Combined strategy use

In this study, we identified six major types of combined strategies, including dissatisfaction + request for repair (DS + RR), accusation + request for repair (AC + RR), dissatisfaction + dissatisfaction (DS + DS), interrogation + dissatisfaction (IN + DS), request for repair + threat (RR + TH) and interrogation + interrogation (IN + IN). The quantitative analysis showed that the American and the Chinese participants shared a similar tendency in the number of the six combined strategies. However, when examining the content carried by each strategy pattern, these two participant groups differed in dissatisfaction + request for repair (DS + RR), especially when used in a low-to-high relationship.

The American participants produced a total of 130 combined strategies, and the Chinese participants produced a total of 120 combined strategies. Figure 2 shows the tendency of how the American and the Chinese participants tended to use the combined strategies. In this figure, the use of the combined strategies follows a similar trend in the American and Chinese productions, with DS + RR occurring most frequently. The chi-square test showed that there was no statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(5, N = 40) = 9.862, p = 0.079$.

According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) and Trosborg (1995), there are two major purposes of making a complaint. The first purpose is to show the
complainer’s negative attitudes, which include frustration, dislike or disagreement toward the bad act performed by the complainee. The second purpose is to ask the complainee to refrain from the bad act or to compensate for the damages he/she has caused. This explains why there was frequent use of DS + RR as this pattern pertains closely to these purposes, with dissatisfaction aiming to express censure, and request for repair to ask for compensation.

Despite the similar trends, we investigated the content of each combined strategy expressed by both groups of participants. The reason was that, as stated above, although different languages may employ identical strategies for realizing a speech act under investigation, what counts as appropriate content in a speech community varies from culture to culture (Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin 2005). Our analysis showed that the content of DS + RR was similar when the Americans and the Chinese participants were addressing lower-status interlocutors, but different when they were addressing higher-status interlocutors.

4.2.1. **DS + RR when addressing a lower-status person.** When addressing someone lower in status, such as a younger sibling or a waiter, about three-fourths of the American and the Chinese participants were found to express similar content:

(7) *I’m talking to my classmate. Would you please be quiet?*  (NS-A 7)
In (7) and (8), we can see that the complainer (= the older sibling) expressed the fact that s/he was talking to the classmate and then asked the complainee (= the younger sibling) to stop the complainable (= making noises). Such a similarity in content can also be found in the Drink-ordering scenario, where the waiter spills the drink all over the customer:

(9) Oh, it’s OK. Can you bring me some napkins or a towel though, please? (NS-A 4)

(10) Meiguanxi zai gei wo yibei guozhi haoma?  
It’s OK again give 1SG a glass juice (Q)  
‘It’s OK. Give me another glass of juice, OK?’ (NS-C 10)

In (9) and (10), the American and the Chinese participants let the complainee off the hook first (e.g., It’s OK), followed by a request for compensation to repair the damage the complainee has caused. From (7) to (10), we can see that the American and the Chinese participants expressed very similar content when speaking to someone lower in status. However, they differed in content when speaking to someone higher in status, as indicated in the following.

4.2.2. DS + RR when addressing a higher-status person. When addressing a higher-status person (e.g., an employer), the American participants (85%) tended to express facts of annoyance through the use of the dissatisfaction strategy. To be polite, they used a downgrader prior to this strategy to reduce face threat, as shown in (11).

(11) I love working here at the gas station, and I took the established hours believing that is what I would be working. Is there any way that I can possibly get off exactly at 10? (NS-A 6)

In (11), the American participant expressed facts of annoyance by saying, “I took the established hours believing that is what I would be working,” but employed a downgrader (i.e., “I love working here at the gas station”) prior to the dissatisfaction strategy to avoid producing an act that was too face-threatening to the employer. However, most Chinese participants (73%) in the same situation did not resort to facts of annoyance, but used excuses instead:

(12) Wanshang zhemowan huijia tai weixian wo jiaren at night so late go home too dangerous my family
butai fangxin wo xiwang neng zaodian xiaban.
'do not release heart 1SG hope can earlier off duty
'It's too dangerous to go home so late, and my family is worried. I hope
I can get off duty earlier.' (NS-C 13)
(Scenario: Gas station)

The family worries in (12) served to reduce face threat, which is similar to “I
love working here at the gas station” in (11). However, the American and the
Chinese participants placed such a downgrading device in different positions,
as shown in Table 4.

In short, the qualitative analysis of the combined strategy use indicates that
the American and Chinese participants expressed similar content when speak-
ing to a lower-status person, while they expressed different content when
speaking to a higher-status person. Such a divergence may be explained from
the cultural norms3 of the two societies. In American society, there is a sup-
pression of asymmetric power relations and social distance in day-to-day inter-
actions (Brown and Levinson 1987), so the American participants tended to
state facts of annoyance in most situations, even when speaking to a higher-
status person. However, this does not imply that they do not show respect to
someone superior. As shown in our data, they used the downgrading devices to
reduce face threat as a means to show deference to the employer. Compared
with American complaints, Chinese complaints seem to be more complicated.
The belief that the younger or inferior should pay respect to the older or
superior has been much more emphasized in a vertical class structure like Chi-
nese society. This explains why the Chinese participants varied their com-
plaints based on the interlocutor status to a greater extent than the American
participants.

In sum, the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the combined strategies
indicated that although the American and the Chinese participants did share
similar trends in combined strategies, they differed in terms of the content
when speaking to higher-status interlocutors. The findings coincide with
Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin’s (2005) argument that cultural values are often
reflected in the content carried by a certain strategy. The tendency to express
facts of annoyance at all times indicates that the American culture stresses so-
cial equality and that social power has less influence. On the other hand, the
varied content expressed by the Chinese participants depending on interlocutor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. The American and Chinese downgrading devices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS-C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Cultural norms refer to the shared knowledge and beliefs that govern behavior in a society.
status suggests that social power is an overriding factor in Chinese society. More detail on how American and Chinese cultures influence the act of complaining is provided in the General Discussion section.

5. General discussion

The investigation into American and Chinese complaints contributes to the debate on universality versus culture-specificity, which has been discussed extensively in cross-cultural pragmatics research. In terms of universality, the literature has recognized that there are certain general mechanisms regulating human languages such as conversational maxims and a taxonomy of communicative acts. When it comes to the act of complaining, we found that there are at least two universals among the languages investigated to date, which include American English (Hartley 1998, the present study), British English, Danish (Trosborg 1995), Korean (Murphy and Neu 1996), Hebrew (Olshtain and Weinbach 1987, 1993), and Chinese (the present study). The first universal is that when facing an offensive act, most competent adult members of a given society are expected to make complaints rather than opt out of the situation. The second universal is that there is a preference for less-direct strategies as opposed to more direct strategies.

The payoff considerations proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) provide a plausible explanation for the two universals. When facing an offense, the first decision the complainer has to make is whether to issue a complaint or not. The complainer may avoid performing the act, especially when the complainee is higher in status or is not very close. Such non-performance may be regarded as tactful or polite, but there is a possibility that the complainer will remain frustrated by the dissatisfaction or annoyance. On the other hand, if the speaker chooses to carry out the complaint, s/he may mention the offense unmitigatedly and accuse the complainee as guilty of the offense. In so doing, the complainer may benefit from expressing the censure clearly, but s/he also runs the risk of destroying the relationship with the complainee. A rational human being should therefore choose to strike a balance between expressing annoyance and preserving social harmony by using less-direct strategies to redress the action. This explains why in our study, both the Americans and Chinese employed dissatisfaction more frequently than interrogation, accusation, and threat, and why such a preference for less-direct strategies holds true for other languages as well.

In addition to universality, culture-specificity can be observed in the present study, too. Researchers who disagree with the claim for universality maintain that speech acts vary in conceptualization and verbalization across languages because pragmatic knowledge is a reflection of cultural norms. The most
representative proponent is Wierzbicka (1991), who argues that universality is actually Anglo-Saxon biased because modern pragmatics has been heavily influenced by British and American philosophers.

Our study showed that compared to American complaints, the Chinese complaints seem to be more sensitive to social power. Looking at a broader sense, Hofstede’s (1980) individualism-collectivism dimension can be adopted to explain such a phenomenon. This dimension describes the extent to which an individual relates to a larger group, which is the most important property to distinguish one culture from another. The related individualism index (IDV) assesses a culture’s relative position in the individualism-collectivism continuum. Countries such as the United States, Australia, Great Britain, and Canada have very high IDVs. Conversely, countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, and Peru have low IDV values. Cultures with high IDVs have highly individualistic populations. They place great importance on their personal rights, and the autonomy of the individual is paramount. They take care of themselves and their immediate families only. The words that best reflect their attributes are “self,” “privacy,” and “independence.” However, cultures with low IDVs tend to be group-oriented. People living in those societies must be loyal to the group to which they belong. The absolute obligation to the group and the group’s best interest always come before individual interest, and the individual expects to be taken care of by the group.

In the high IDV cultures (e.g., the United States), politeness is not subject to external pressure from the general public. Brown and Levinson (1987), from a Western point of view, define the core element of politeness—face—as the self-image that every competent adult member wants to claim for him/herself. Politeness is achieved through interlocutors’ efforts to maintain each other’s face wants in interactions, which include the desires to be unimpeded (negative face wants) and the desires to be appreciated (positive face wants). Therefore, people of high IDV cultures tend to support egalitarian values and consider the power differential of unequal relationships to a lesser extent (Spencer-Oatey 1997). This explains why the American participants expressed facts of annoyance across all the situations, even though they mitigated their complaint by employing downgraders when speaking to a higher-standing person as recognition of unequal power relationship between the employer and the employee.

On the contrary, in the low IDV cultures (e.g., Taiwan), face is treated as a public image that reflects the communal demand of the society. In Chinese, there are two words that carry the meaning of “face”: mianzi and lian. The former refers to “a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation,” and the latter refers to “the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation” (Hu 1944: 45). The loss of mianzi occurs when a person’s social performance fails to reach the expectations of others,
but it can be regained through compensatory actions. The loss of lian, on the other hand, occurs when a person transgresses the boundary of moral codes of the society and cannot be regained. Mao (1994) criticized the associations of mianzi with negative face and of lian with positive face in that Chinese mianzi is obtained through one’s dependence on society’s recognition, rather than through one’s claim to freedom from imposition. Moreover, Chinese lian seems to be similar to positive face in that both recognize a person’s desire to be liked. However, this resemblance is limited because the moral tone of lian is not reflected in the notion of positive face. In short, face in Chinese culture is not a “God-given” right, but is “earned through an interactional process” (Mao 1994: 460). A lower-status person is supposed to maintain the higher-status person’s dignity and to maintain his/her face to show deference. On the other hand, a higher-status person is entitled to the respect of the inferior. This explains why the Chinese participants in this study were more sensitive to social power and varied their complaints based on the interlocutor status.

6. Conclusion

Our study has shown that although the American and the Chinese participants share similar distributions in overall and combined strategy use, they differ in the linguistic forms and content carried by certain strategies or patterns, which are influenced by different cultural norms. This finding coincides with Yu’s (2003: 1704) analysis of American and Chinese compliment response behaviors, which indicates that while there are general principles or concepts governing this speech act, the strategy preferences of the two speaker groups are subject to “a culture’s ethos and its own specific way of speaking.” Seen in this light, culture can never play a minor role in speech-act performances across languages, since according to Wierzbicka (1991: 26), “different cultures find expression in different systems of speech acts, and different speech acts become entrenched, and, to some extent, codified in different languages.”

The present study is subject to the following limitation. For the convenience of research design, the social power and social distance variables had only two dimensions (+P/-P, +D/-D). However, human relationships are more than dichotomous. In fact, Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) argue that there are three dimensions of social power: the speaker is higher than the hearer, the speaker and hearer are equal, and the speaker is lower than the hearer. There are also four dimensions of social distance ranging from the least intimate to the most intimate: strangers, acquaintances, friends and relatives. Future research may consider the inclusion of these dimensions to simulate real-life human relationships in the design of the discourse completion task.
Notes

1. A preliminary version of this study was presented at the AAAL 2008 (The American Association for Applied Linguistics), Washington, D.C., March 29–April 1, 2008.

2. Trosborg (1995: 315) points out the factors determining the directness level of a complaint:

   (1) The complainable is or is not expressed directly in the propositional content.
   (2) The complainer’s negative evaluation of the propositional content is implicitly or explicitly expressed.
   (3) The agentive involvement of the complainee is implicitly or explicitly expressed.
   (4) The complainer’s negative evaluation of the complainee’s behavior is implicitly or explicitly expressed.
   (5) The complainer’s negative evaluation of the complainee as a person is implicitly or explicitly expressed.

3. As pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers, the American and Chinese cultural norms could also be interpreted in terms of how they evaluate the weights of compassion, reason, and law. Law may prioritize in American society, which in turn affects the participants’ act of complaining by asking the employer to respect a stated contract in our study. On the other hand, compassion may prioritize in Chinese society, which is expressed by bringing up personal hardship and asking for sympathy when making complaints to the employer.

References


274  Yuan-shan Chen, Chun-yin Doris Chen, and Miao-Hsia Chang


**Appendix: DCT scenarios**

1. You ordered a drink at a restaurant. When the waiter brings you the drink, he spills it all over you. Your new shirt got wet.

   Waiter: Oh, I’m really sorry about that!
   You:

2. You work part time at a gas station from 6 to 10 p.m. every night, but you usually cannot go home until 12 a.m. You discuss this situation with your employer, Mr. Brown.

   You: Mr. Brown, may I talk to you now?
   Mr. Brown: Yes, of course.
   You:

3. You are talking on the phone to your classmate. Your 10-year-old younger brother, Peter, is playing and making a loud noise around the house. You can hardly hear your classmate.

   You: Peter! Peter!
   Peter: Yeah?
   You:

4. You are waiting in line to buy movie tickets. You have been waiting for a long time. Suddenly, an old man cuts in line in front of you.

   You: Excuse me!
   Old man: Yes?
   You:
5. You bought a T-shirt at a store. When you got home, you found that there was a small hole in it. You go to the store the next day. You want to return the T-shirt.

   Clerk: May I help you?
   You:

6. You teach your neighbor’s child English every Wednesday night. You have caught the child not paying attention several times. Now, the child has not been paying attention again and has misspelled the word you just taught.

   You: Now let’s spell the word “book.” B-O-O-K.
   Child: B-O-C-K
   You:

7. You have an appointment with the chairperson of your department, whom you’ve never talked to before. You’ve been waiting for over an hour. The chairperson finally shows up, but seems to have forgotten about the appointment.

   You: Excuse me. May I talk to you now?
   Chairperson: Sure. What can I do for you?
   You:

8. You think you are old enough to have some privacy. Therefore, you told your mother not to open your letters, and she agreed. Coming back from school one Friday night, you find that a letter from your friend has been opened.

   You: Mom! Mom!
   Mom: What’s the matter?
   You:

*Corresponding address: yuanshan@ncut.edu.tw*