

“YOU DON’T SEEM TO KNOW HOW TO WORK”: MALAY AND ENGLISH SPOKEN COMPLAINTS IN BRUNEI

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Abstract

This study aims firstly to compare the complaints of local native-Malay speakers and expatriate native-English speakers in Brunei in terms of move structure and levels of directness combined with the frequency of modality markers; and secondly, it attempts to address the relationship between polite behaviour and its effectiveness in eliciting the appropriate response from the hearer. Data from an oral discourse completion task show interesting similarities and differences in the complaint move structure between the two groups of speakers. Superficially, there appears to be no significant difference between the two sets of complaints in terms of levels of directness, but a detailed analysis shows each group employing different mitigating strategies to minimise the force of a complaint. Furthermore, responses from an acceptability judgement questionnaire indicate that being indirect, and therefore polite, may not be effective in eliciting the appropriate response to a request for action in a complaint speech act.

Keywords: Complaints; Oral discourse completion task; Acceptability judgement questionnaire; Move structure; Modality markers; Effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Politeness is deemed a social value in all civilised societies. Certainly, it is a dominant feature in many forms of interactive encounters in highly differentiated societies which House and Kasper (1981: 157) call “urbanity”. Such societies place prominence on a highly developed sense of self-control (Elias 1977: 45) and also seek to maintain the preservation of another’s ‘face’ (Goffman 1967: 319). Indeed the concept of ‘face’ appears to be at the core of politeness, particularly in face threatening situations or ‘acts’ (FTAs) as Brown and Levinson call them (1999: 323). Central to their politeness model are the components “negative face” and “positive face”. Negative face is defined as “the want of every competent adult member that his/her actions be unimpeded by others” and positive face is “the want of every member that his/her wants be desirable to at least some others” (1987: 61-62). Scollon and Scollon (1995), however, claim that the terms “positive” and “negative” may mislead people into thinking of positive politeness as ‘good’ and negative politeness as ‘bad’. Instead they prefer to use the expressions “involvement” (for positive face) and “independence” (for negative face) which serve to show a clearer distinction between the two aspects of face. According to them, both aspects are projected simultaneously in any communicative event and both are in conflict in that emphasising one may risk a threat to the other.

Cross cultural studies have shown that Brown and Levinson's model may not be universally agreed upon. Kong (1998) in his study of politeness in service encounters in Hong Kong found that the power and social distance factors in Brown and Levinson's model could not be applied to polite behaviour in Chinese society. Similarly, their model may not be compatible with the Japanese discourse context (Matsumoto 1988; Okamoto 1999; Gagné 2010). Gagné (2010: 129), for example, compared Japanese native speaker and English native speaker requests and claimed that Brown and Levinson's negative face concept was inappropriate and confusing when applied to Japanese speakers.

Moreover, although we assume that speakers will use mitigating strategies in FTAs to maintain the 'face' of the hearer, we cannot discount the possibility that they may sometimes forgo such face-saving strategies with the express aim of getting an effective response from the hearer, particularly in certain situations, such as in making a complaint. This suggests that while polite behaviour may be valued highly in society, this may not necessarily mean that it would be effective in terms of the speaker getting what he/she wants from the hearer. This paper seeks to expand on the current pool of cross-cultural studies on politeness by looking at the complaint speech act in Brunei Darussalam, a non-native English speaking country where polite and non-confrontational behaviour is both valued and assumed (Hamdan et al 1991). In addition, the paper also examines polite behaviour over and beyond its 'intrinsic' social value (to save the face of the hearer) to include questioning the complaint's effectiveness in helping the speaker elicit the appropriate and intended response from the hearer. This study focuses on the complaint speech act as it was felt that polite behaviour would be seen clearly in the 'conflictive function' of a complaint (Trosborg 1995: 312). We now look briefly at what has been written about the complaint speech act.

1.1. *The complaint speech act*

Trosborg (1995: 311-312) defines a complaint as "an illocutionary act in which the speaker (the complainant) expresses his/her disapproval, negative feelings etc., towards the state of affairs described in the proposition (the complaint) and for which he/she holds the hearer (the complaine) responsible, either directly or indirectly." Thus, a complaint may be considered a "face threatening act" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 19) because the speaker can potentially dispute, challenge or baldly deny the social competence of the complaine (Edmonson & House 1981: 47-48).

The complaint speech act has been attracting an increasing amount of attention. While much of the original research work was carried out in native English (NE) speaker settings, cross cultural studies on complaints have gradually emerged in a number of non-native English (NNE) speaking contexts (Tatsuki 2000; Olshtain & Weinbach 1993; Murphy & Neu 1996; Mulamba 2009; Henry & Ho 2010). These studies have mainly focused on cross-cultural comparisons between native speaker and non-native speaker norms in complaints and polite behaviour. Conclusions drawn from these studies have found differences in the way different cultures and ethnic groups perceive polite behaviour in complaints and have made recommendations on how to help non-native speakers of a language understand and cultivate the native speaker's perception of what constitutes polite behaviour.

1.2. *Complaints as face-threatening acts*

According to Leech (1983), although complaints are by definition impolite, a complainant can, and often does, resort to mitigating devices to lessen the impact his/her complaint is likely to have on the addressee. These mitigating devices come in the form of strategies available to a complainant to avoid direct confrontation with the agent responsible for the unacceptable act. Some examples of such devices include the use of internal modifiers called “downgraders” and “upgraders” (House & Kasper 1981: 166-170) and by adopting a complaint perspective offered by Haverkate’s (1984) “focalising” and “defocalising” expressions (p.56). “Focalising” expressions are used to put the addressee at the centre of the state of affairs whereas “defocalising” expressions hold the opposite to be true. Haverkate (1992) illustrates this distinction through the use of deixis as mitigating devices in FTAs. He shows that manipulation of person and time co-ordinates can help shift the deictic center of an utterance and thus act as either a distancing or “defocalising” strategy (using the indefinite pronoun ‘one’, for example) or an all-inclusive or “focalising” strategy (using the first-person pronoun ‘I’ and ‘we’, for example). Thus, the complainant will often make use of “defocalising” expressions in order to minimise or avoid making prominent the role of the agent responsible for the unacceptable state of affairs.

Considering how threatening a complaint can be to someone’s “face”, performing it in the most polite way is challenging even for NE speakers who themselves often need to pre-plan before making a complaint (Murphy & Neu 1996). Indeed, Laforest (2002) claims that there is no prototypical structure to a complaint as it is generally indirect in form. Taking into consideration Goffman’s (1967) claim that in general, people work at maintaining one another’s “face” in interaction and that it is in every participant’s best interest to maintain that “face”, it is not difficult to understand why polite behaviour in any interactive encounter is considered to have such a high social value. Complaints inappropriately expressed may serve to cause friction, ill-will and alienate the interlocutor and thus violate the “intrinsic” social value of polite behaviour.

There is another aspect to politeness that has not been fully explored but one which we feel is nevertheless important in certain specific situations. When making a complaint, in addition to saving the face of the addressee, the complainant also hopes that his/her behaviour will effectively elicit the intended response from the addressee. Thus, while the “intrinsic” social value of polite behaviour is appreciated and has been quite well documented in the literature (Goffman 1967; Brown & Levinson 1987; Leech 1983), the relationship between polite behaviour and the effectiveness of such behaviour in eliciting the appropriate hearer response has not been adequately addressed. Yet, this is an important aspect to consider because a complaint is made with the expectation of an appropriate response from the addressee. And more often than not, this expectation is couched within the request move in the complaint. Although recent cross-cultural studies on politeness and request making in L2 English (Taguchi 2006; Pinto & Raschio 2007) have been gradually gaining attention, they have tended to focus on politeness in ordinary requests such as when asking someone for a favour. It is unclear what part politeness plays when it comes to making a more forceful request such as that found in a complaint where the request is for corrective action.

2. Purpose of the study and research questions

The complaint under study in this paper occurs in a situation commonly encountered by people in Brunei Darussalam, a predominantly Malay speaking Islamic sultanate situated on the island of Borneo in South-east Asia. Specifically, the study aims firstly to compare polite behaviour in complaints between local native-Malay speakers (NMSs) and the expatriate native-English speakers (NESs) in Brunei, in terms of discourse structure and directness. Secondly, it aims to find out how effective polite behaviour is in eliciting a response from the addressee when it comes to a request for corrective action in a complaint. The complaint speech act considered here is deemed a personal one in that the unacceptable act/situation affects the complainant him/herself personally.

To investigate the complaint speech act, the following research questions were formulated:

- (i) What are the elements that make up the discourse structure of a complaint by Bruneian NMSs and NESs?
- (ii) Is there a difference between the two groups in terms of directness and in the use of upgraders and downgraders as mitigating devices?
- (iii) What is the relationship between polite behaviour and its effectiveness in a complaint request?

3. Methodology

To answer the research questions, a two-part study was undertaken. The first part was an analysis of the complaints of NMSs and NESs, while the second part sought to evaluate the effectiveness of their requests for corrective action.

3.1. Subjects

During the first part of the study, ten NESs and ten NMSs participated in an oral discourse completion task (ODCT) related to dealing with a mechanic in Brunei. There was an equal number of male and female speakers in each group. The NMSs were all Bruneian Malays from different professions while the NESs were expatriates who had worked and lived in Brunei for a minimum of two years. All of the speakers were car-owners and had real life experiences with car repair workshop encounters in Brunei. They were asked to role play such a situation using an ODCT prompt. The second part of the study consisted of a separate group of thirty-four NESs and thirty-five NMSs who volunteered to be judges in a written complaint effectiveness judgement task in the form of a questionnaire. NE speaker judges who had resided in Brunei for a minimum of two years were chosen so as not to provoke overtly cultural specific connotations in the native English speaker contexts which may affect the results.

3.2. Data collection instruments

The data for the first part of the study were collected through an ODCT that consisted of a hypothetical situation described on a sheet of paper (see Appendix 1). The weaknesses of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) as a method of data collection have been quite well documented, chief among which is their inability to reflect the richness and complexity of natural data (Rose 1994; Beebe & Cummings 1996; Eslami-Rasekh 2005; Billmyer & Varghese 2000; Parvaresh & Tavakoli 2009). In addition, they are sometimes considered more suited to looking at “what people think they would say” rather than to “what people actually do say” in a given speech setting (Golato 2003: 111). However, they have also been used widely in sociolinguistic research on speech acts (Blum-Kulka et al 1989; Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Kasper 1989; House 1989a) as they allow for examining a large corpus of data on a wide range of difficult-to-observe phenomena in a short period of time (Beebe & Cummings 1996). In addition, Yuan (2001) found that ODCTs approximated more closely to authentic discourse than written DCTs (WDCTs). Based on these advantages it was felt that the ODCT was an appropriate tool for this particular study, which looked at a difficult-to-observe phenomenon in a highly specific situation. More importantly for this study, the ODCT provided researchers with stereotypical forms of language use in specific situations (Rintell & Mitchell 1989) and therefore allowed for greater researcher control (Turnbull 1997; Kasper & Dahl 1991).

The ODCT employed in this study was a modified version of that used in Murphy and Neu (1996). It consisted of a situation where the participant was placed in the position of a car owner whose car had broken down even though it had just been repaired by a mechanic at a garage. Following Billmyer and Varghese's (2000) suggestion that prompts should be translated into the respondents' native language, the ODCT in this study was translated into Malay for NM speaker participants.

In the second part of the study, a questionnaire was designed to test the effectiveness of different levels of politeness in complaints. Eight requests for corrective action from the corpus, each containing one of the eight levels of politeness identified by House and Kasper (1981), were selected. The criterion for the selection of each item was that the item would be easily understood by those completing the questionnaire. Thus requests that were idiomatic, incomplete, or contained references that were difficult to interpret were excluded. The questionnaire asked the participants to rate each request in terms of its effectiveness in the Bruneian context, using a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix 2) ranging from Most Effective to Least Effective. The questionnaire for the NMSs was a bilingual version with the requests in Malay and English.

3.3. Procedures

In the first part of the study, the participants were instructed to read the ODCT carefully and to respond verbally while being recorded. They were asked to give a complete response as if they were actually conversing with the car mechanic in the workshop. The speech data were then transcribed (see Appendix 3 for sample written transcripts). The NMSs' data were first transcribed in Malay and then translated into English by a bilingual research assistant and one of the researchers who is also a Malay English bilingual. The translators compared their

translations and came to an agreement over the final translated transcripts to ensure reliability. The data for both groups were transcribed using a set of transcription conventions agreed upon by the researchers.

In the second part of the study, the Likert Scale response questionnaire described earlier was distributed to thirty-four NESs and thirty-five NMSs who took on the role of “judges” to evaluate the effectiveness of each complaint request stated in the questionnaire. The judges were also reminded to take into consideration the context of Brunei in their responses.

3.4. *Methods for data analysis*

The data elicited from the ODCT were first analysed following the methodology of Swales (1981, 1990). This method allowed for the identification of the moves of the two groups of complaints. In order to establish the reliability of the analysis, we followed the procedures described in Crookes (1986) and Nassaji and Cumming (2000). Each researcher independently identified the possible moves from the speech transcripts and wrote definitions for them. The three researchers then met and discussed the possible moves of the complaint speech act. After discussion, a draft list of thirteen moves and their definitions were drawn up (see Appendix 4). The moves and their definitions were then subjected to an inter coder reliability test on the twenty transcripts from both NMSs and NESs. This initial test produced 100% agreement on eight of the thirteen moves, 66% agreement on four of the thirteen moves and 33% on one move. The discrepancies in coding were resolved through subsequent discussion by the research team which resulted in 100% agreement on all moves.

In order to compare the levels of directness between the NMSs’ and the NESs’ speech, two of the moves identified in the move analysis were chosen and analysed using the schema of directness levels described in House and Kasper (1981). This schema consisted of eight levels of directness based on the notion that directness is an indicator of politeness: the more direct an utterance is, the less polite it is perceived to be by the addressee. By applying this model we could determine which of the two groups in the study was more polite. The two moves selected were Stating the Complaint (SC), an obligatory move, and Request for Corrective Action (RCA), an optional move. It was thought that these moves could offer opportunities to investigate politeness in the complaint speech act. Each researcher independently applied the model to the data and then the team met to discuss and agree on the analysis.

As House and Kasper point out, “politeness” may not be determined by the level of directness alone but also by strategies in the form of modality markers used by the speaker to reduce or increase the force of an utterance. They identify two kinds of modality markers: downgraders and upgraders. Downgraders are defined as markers which play down the impact a speaker’s utterance may have on the addressee. On the other hand, upgraders are modality markers which increase the force of the impact an utterance may have on the addressee. In order to compare the strategies used by the two groups to modify the effect of their utterances, we used House and Kasper’s list of modality markers (see Appendix 5 for descriptors), and using the same procedures as for directness levels, we identified the modality markers for each of the two moves.

In the second part of the study, the evaluation of the NMs and NEs requests by the judges using the Likert scale were tabulated and presented in percentage terms.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Similarities and differences between individual moves used in NMSs' and NESs' complaints

The data elicited from the OCDT in the first part of the study were examined to determine the moves present in the complaint speech productions of NMSs and NESs. A total of thirteen moves (*see Appendix 4*) were identified as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of moves in NMSs' and NESs' complaints

Move	NMSs (N=10)	NESs (N=10)
Greeting (G)	1	4
Direct Opening (DO)	8	5
Background Information (BI)	5	3
Stating the Complaint (SC)	8	9
Questioning the Mechanic's Expertise (QME)	4	3
Making a Threat (TH)	4	4
Making an Accusation (AC)	4	6
Asking for a Completion Date (ACD)	0	2
Asking for an Explanation (AE)	9	3
Describing Ill Consequences (IC)	3	4
Request for Corrective Action (RCA)	7	9
Expressing Personal Dissatisfaction (EPD)	3	4
Closing Remark (CR)	0	5

The most common move employed by the NMSs' complaints was the Asking for an Explanation (AE) move. This was followed closely by two other moves: the Direct Greeting (DO) and the Stating the Complaint (SC) moves. With regard to the NESs' complaints, there appears to be greater variation in the use of the moves with the most common being the SC and Requesting for Corrective Action (RCA) moves. The Asking for a Completion Date (ACD) move was least utilised by both groups. Moreover, there were two additional moves used by NESs' complaints that were not found in the NMSs' group at all: the ACD and the Closing Remark (CR) moves.

The NESs' complaints were more likely to open with a Greeting (G) than the NMSs' complaints. It appears that a greeting is how NESs would ordinarily start a conversation, even if this was followed by a complaint:

- (1) Hi I'd like to speak to Mr. Lee
- (2) Hello; Good morning, Mr. Lee.

NMSs' complaints, on the other hand tended to open with a Direct Opening (DO):

- (3) Mr. Lee
- (4) Lee
- (5) Hey Lee
- (6) Hey Mr Lee.

It seems that NMSs tended to avoid the nicety of a greeting and preferred to use a more direct opening form instead. It may also be worth mentioning that Bruneians tend not to use a formal greeting with people they know quite well. In this instance, it may be that they were treating Mr. Lee as a well known acquaintance.

Although both the NE and NM complainants employed the face threatening moves Questioning the Mechanic's Expertise (QME), Making a Threat (TH) and Making an Accusation(AC), the linguistic content in these moves varied between the two groups. In the NMSs' data, remarks tended to be more personal, directed either at the mechanic's dishonesty or at him personally:

- (7) ...are you cheating me?
- (8) ...maybe you fixed the second hand [parts]...
- (9) Is your mechanic qualified or not?
- (11) How do you run your business?
- (12) How do you work?
- (13) ...you don't seem to know how to work!

It is not clear if this type of person-oriented criticism is reflective of the Asian and therefore local culture. In their study comparing complaints by Korean learners of English with their American counterparts in an American university, Murphy and Neu (1996) found that the Koreans' criticism tended to focus on the professor's person compared to their American counterparts when it came to getting the professor to reconsider a given grade.

The NESs' complaints, on the other hand, tended to focus on the problem:

- (14) ...cause if you can't fix it I'd like to take the car somewhere else
- (15) no, you obviously haven't fixed the problem because it did it again this morning/ if you had fixed the problem my car would have started this morning and I wouldn't have this problem any more...

NMSs' complaints were much more likely to use the move Asking for an Explanation (AE). Although this move was frequently in the form of a question, it appears to function more often as expression of frustration and accusation:

- (16) Why is there still a problem with the engine/ it's not solved?
- (17) ... how is this possible?
- (18) ...how did you repair my car, ha? So, why no, why no, no, no improvement in the repair work, like a waste."

While both groups equally tended to express some form of personal dissatisfaction (EPD), the NESs' complaints appeared to be more personal in their remarks compared to the NMSs to overtly express their feelings:

- (21) I'm not happy at all...
- (22) I do feel very disappointed
- (23) I'm not happy with the results.

With regard to describing the negative effects (IC) the car breaking down had on complainants, both groups used the move in almost equal numbers. The main difference between the two groups was that while the NMs group was purely factual in describing the effects the lack of a car had consequences of being without a car (24, 25 and 26), one of the NES group was more expressive of how he felt about the situation (27) and one emphasized the effects on his family perhaps to induce guilt (28):

- (24) Because I have one car only/ it's difficult
- (25) It's difficult for me without a car/ I've hitched a ride from my friend
- (26) I use this car/ not for cruising around/ but for my studies.
- (27) without the car working properly it cuts into my time/ I feel I'm in a situation where I'm rather powerless
- (28) I paid six hundred dollars that could be going out for my expected household towards my family This morning my wife was upset/ again/ my children were late for school.

When it came to offering a closing remark (CR), half of the NEs' complaints offered a closing remark while none of the NMSs' complaints did. In the NEs' data, the speakers' closing remarks serve to either thank the mechanic for hearing their complaint or to ask for suggestions to solve the problem:

- (28) yeah alright thanks
- (29) yes so what do you think about it?
- (30) thank you
- (31) what do you suggest I do?

It is unclear why there was no instance of the CR move in the NMSs' complaints. Perhaps they were either too upset to offer a closing remark or that the omission was deliberate to show the speaker's displeasure.

As expected with a complaint, a large percentage of both groups made requests for corrective action (RCA). Both groups used this move in a variety of ways ranging from giving implicit hints to making explicit orders:

- (32) I just paid \$600 that day, last week, so how? If it's towed, it, it's towed again here, it needs to be paid again (NM speaker)
- (33) ...give me back my \$600 (NE speaker).

This move will be examined in greater detail later in the paper when we look at the relationship between the directness of the complaints for both groups in relation to their effectiveness in getting a response.

Overall, the results in Table 1 are somewhat unexpected in that Bruneian NMSs used a considerable number of face threatening moves. This is contrary to Hamdan et al. (1991), who claim that Bruneians generally tend to avoid direct confrontation if possible and that polite language is valued. There may be two reasons for the unexpected finding. The first may be due to the personal nature of the complaint, which caused the NMs to choose a deliberately direct, and therefore, ‘non-Bruneian’ manner of complaint. The second reason may be that they assumed that Mr Lee, whose nationality was not stated during the role play, to be non-Bruneian and therefore adopted a more direct, less ‘careful’ manner of complaint. This explanation is plausible since many of the car mechanics in Brunei are Chinese from the neighbouring states of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia.

4.2. The relationship between directness levels of politeness and modality markers

With regard to the directness levels of the complaints, two moves that best reflected politeness in complaints were chosen: Request for Corrective Action (RCA) and Stating the Complaint (SC). They were also the most frequent moves found in both sets of data.

The SC move from the NMSs’ and NESs’ complaints were compared in terms of their directness using the schema of directness levels in House & Kasper (1981) with Level 1 being the most indirect, and Level 8 the most direct level. This schema, when applied to the SC moves in the NMS and NES data yielded the results shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Directness levels found in NMSs’ and NESs’ SC move

	DIRECTNESS LEVEL								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Σ
NMSs (n=11)	1	6	3	1	0	0	0	0	11
Frequency (%)	9	55	27	9	0	0	0	0	100
NESs (n=11)	0	8	0	2	1	0	0	0	11
Frequency (%)	0	73	0	18	9	0	0	0	100

Key

X = complainant

Y = agent responsible for the unacceptable act/situation

P = the unacceptable act/situation

1. X implies knowledge of P and implies that Y did P.
2. X explicitly asserts P, implying that Y did P.
3. X explicitly asserts that P is bad for him, implying that Y did P.
4. X explicitly asks Y about the conditions surrounding P, implying that Y did P.

5. X explicitly asserts that Y did P
6. X explicitly asserts that Y did P and that P is bad for X thus implying that Y is bad.
7. X asserts explicitly that Y's doing of P is bad
8. X asserts explicitly that Y is bad

There were eleven instances of the SC move in each group. In both sets of data, the most frequent level was Level 2. It occurred 6 times in the NMSs' data (55%) and 8 times in the NESs' data (73%). Some examples of Level 2 complaints in the two sets of data are:

- (34) X: this morning when I started the car it still won't start (NM speaker)
- (35) X: this morning the engine won't start (NE speaker).

Although Level 3 was the second most frequently used level for the NMSs, it was not used at all in the NESs' data set. Some examples at this level are:

- (36) X: I paid a lot, it broke down again
- (37) X: That day I paid \$600 but still it can't start.

The results appear to support Laforest's (2002) claim that the complaint act is generally indirect in form, bearing in mind that the nature of complaints predisposes them to be potentially more face-threatening than other speech acts. There were no SC moves at Levels 6, 7 or 8 in either group, showing avoidance in stating the complaints directly. Both NMSs and NESs' complaints tended to assert explicitly the wrongful act and thus imply that the mechanic was in some way responsible. In addition, the NMSs made it known how the act had negatively affected them by stating their complaints at Level 3. The NESs, while not seeming to be overly direct, nevertheless appeared to imply that the agent was responsible for the problem.

In terms of the RCA move, the analysis used House and Kasper's (1981) eight levels of directness with Level 1 being the most indirect and Level 8 the most direct type of request. The schema was applied to the NMSs' and NESs' Requests for Corrective Action (RCA) move. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Directness levels found in NMSs' and NESs' RCA move

DIRECTNESS LEVELS										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	8	Σ
NMSs No. of Instances	2	1	4	4	0	1	3	0	4	19
Frequency (%)	11	5	21	21	0	5	16	0	21	100
NESs No. of Instances	1	3	5	0	9	0	5	0	2	25
Frequency (%)	4	12	20	0	36	0	20	0	8	100

Key

Situational context: X wants Y to re-fix his/her car

X= complainant

Y= agent responsible for the wrongful act

1. Mild Hint e.g. X: I just paid \$600 last week to get my car fixed.
2. Strong Hint e.g. X: My car wouldn't start/ Why doesn't my car start?
3. Query-Preparatory e.g. X: Can you check my car?
4. State-Preparatory e.g. X: You can find out what's wrong with my car.
5. Scope-Stating e.g. X: I would like you to fix my car/ I would prefer it if you fixed my car.
6. Locution-derivable e.g. X: You should fix my car again.
7. (a) Hedged-Performative e.g. X: I must/need to/want to ask you to re-fix my car.
(b) Explicit-Performative e.g. X: I ask you to fix my car again.
8. Mood-derivable e.g. X: Fix my car again!

From Table 3, NM speaker complainants requested corrective action 19 times while the move occurred 25 times in the NESs' corpus. The NMS complainants stated their requests across a wide range of directness levels with the less direct Levels 3 and 4 and the most direct Level 8 being the most frequent occurrences. Each of these levels was used four times out of a total of 19 instances. Examples of requests at Levels 3 and 4 from the NMSs' complaints are:

- (38) X : Can you do it? (Level 3)
(39) X : If it's not working, you check again. (Level 4)

We found that three out of the four requests from the NMSs' group at Level 8 consisted of a direct demand for money back if the car could not be fixed:

- (40) X: So if you can't fix it, give me back my money
(41) X: Return it [the money]
(42) X : And then if it can't be fixed yet, return my money \$600

In contrast, the most frequent level for the NESs' set of data was at Level 5, which occurred nine times out of a total of twenty-five. Interestingly, this level did not occur in the NMSs' group at all. Examples of Level 5 requests include:

- (43) X: I'd also like you to keep the car, try and fix it properly
(44) X: I would like to know when you can fix it
(45) X: I would also suggest that perhaps there is no fee for the next payment...

Although Level 4 RCAs occurred frequently in the NMSs' complaints, it was not found at all in the NESs' complaints. Moreover, Level 8 only occurred twice out of the 25 instances. The results suggest that NESs' requests tended to favour the complainant expressing his/her intentions and desires explicitly.

Furthermore, if we take Level 4 to be the mid-point between the indirect and direct levels of requests in both sets of data, it appears that NMSs' requests tended to be at the more indirect levels. Eleven (58%) out of the total 19 requests were at Levels 1-4 while eight (42%) of the total number of requests were at Levels 5-8. In contrast, NESs' requests tended to move towards the more direct levels of politeness with 16 (64%) out of the total of 25 requests occurring at Levels 5-8 and nine (36%) out of the 25 requests occurring at Levels 1-4.

Directness levels, however, are not the only determining factor in politeness in the complaint speech act. House and Kasper (1981) identify the importance of modality markers used by a speaker to either reduce or increase the effect or impact of politeness. To investigate the resultant effect of "politeness" a complaint has on the hearer, two kinds of modality markers can be used: "downgraders" and "upgraders" (House & Kasper 1981: 166). Downgraders are modality markers used to play down the impact of a complaint on the addressee whereas upgraders are modality markers which increase the force of the impact of the complaint on the addressee (see Appendix 5). In this study, both the Stating the Complaint (SC) and Request for Correction Action (RCA) moves of the complaint speech act were subjected to analysis to investigate the use of modality markers.

Overall, the results appear to support House and Kasper's (1981) claim that the directness level of an utterance may not equal the effect/impact of "politeness" on the addressee.

Table 4 shows the interaction between directness levels and the downgraders and upgraders in the SC move between the two groups.

Table 4: The interaction between directness levels and modality markers in the SC move for NMSs' and NESs' complaints

Directness Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
NMSs	1	6	3	1	0	0	0	0	11
Downgraders	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Upgraders	0	6	2	1	0	0	0	0	9
Total no. of modality markers									10
NESs	0	8	0	2	1	0	0	0	11
Downgraders	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	4
Upgraders	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
Total no. of modality markers									7

The data shows that the preferred range of directness levels for both groups was between Levels 1 and 4; the only complaint outside this range was a NE speaker's Level 5 complaint. Thus both groups opted to make rather indirect complaints. However, there seems to be a significant difference in the choice of modality markers between the groups. Although

NMSs frequently used SC moves at the lower levels of directness, they nevertheless sought to increase the perlocutionary effect of their complaints mainly through the use of intensifier markers (found in 8 out of the 9 upgraders) to convey their displeasure. In the following examples, although the speaker avoided mentioning the agent responsible, the use of “still” and “again” seek to increase the force of the complaint on the hearer:

- (46) X: that day I paid \$600, but [my car] still can't start
 (47) X; the car broke down again

In contrast, the NESs while using the same indirect approach in their complaints, did not make such a uniform choice when it came to modality marker use. Of the six instances at the indirect Levels 1 to 4 which made use of modality markers, only two upgraded their complaints while four chose to soften their complaints with a downgrader. Moreover, the results show that NESs' complaints tended to have fewer modality markers than NMSs for the SC move, with a total of seven compared to ten for the NMSs.

These results did not support House and Kasper's findings in their study of English and German complaints (1981): they found no definite patterns emerging from their data. In this study the clear pattern described above did emerge from the NMSs' data. This difference between the two studies suggests that further research is needed, with a larger number of participants and perhaps a more sophisticated data collection instrument.

With regard to the RCA move, the strategies employed by both groups are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: The interaction between directness levels and modality markers in the RCA move for NMSs' and NESs' complaints

Directness Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
NMSs	2	1	4	4	0	1	3	4	19
Downgraders	1	1	3	2	0	2	1	0	10
Upgraders	1	0	1	1	0	0	2	4	9
NESs	1	3	5	0	9	0	5	2	25
Downgraders	1	3	4	0	8	0	0	0	16
Upgraders	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	2	8

Three patterns emerged from the data, two of which applied to both groups. The first was that when a less direct request (Levels 1 to 4) was made, rather than coupling it with an upgrader to increase the effect of the request, it was coupled with a downgrader to lessen the effect of the request. The most frequent class of downgraders used in NMSs' complaints was the gambit called a cajoler, couched in the word “try” in example 48 below:

- (48) X: Try, Mr. Lee, try to do a thorough check!

The NESs' complaints tended to show a slightly higher occurrence of downgraders, and more particularly the consultative device downgrader, as indicated in the use of "can you still do some more work or do you think...?" as shown in example 49 below:

- (49) X: I was wondering can you still do some more work on it or do you think you've done all that you can?

The second pattern, found in both groups, occurred when the speakers chose a more direct level of request (Levels 6 to 8). Rather than attempting to tone down the possible effect of the request by using a downgrader, they instead reinforced their direct request with an upgrader. Both these strategies support the findings of House and Kasper (1981), who found that both German and English native speakers adopted the same strategy when making requests. The most frequent class of upgraders for the NMSs' complaints was the lexical intensifier:

- (50) X: You better repair it again!
 (51) X: Return my money, \$600.

The NESs' complaints tended to favour the +committer class of upgraders:

- (52) X: I want you to guarantee that it's going to be fixed next time.
 (53) X: I want it to be fixed as soon as possible.

The third pattern is found only in the NESs' complaints when making requests at directness Level 5. In eight out of the nine cases at this level of directness, the preferred class of downgraders was the play-down which was present in four out of the eight cases:

- (54) I would like you to refund me my money.
 (55) I would like to know when you can fix it.

This was frequently used to tone down the effect of the request on the addressee, and so instead of using the more direct "I want...", they chose "I would like..." which has a milder illocutionary force.

Thus, when it came the RC move, the relationship between directness levels of politeness and modality markers shows that for both groups, there was no attempt to make more forceful an indirect request through the use of an upgrader. Neither was there an attempt to tone down a direct request with a downgrader. It was also found that for the NESs' complaints, the preferred downgrader, when used, was the play-down while the NMSs' complaints favoured the cajoler.

4.3. The relationship between polite behaviour and its effectiveness in complaints

From the earlier analysis of the RCA moves collected from the ODCT in the first part of the study, eight request moves representing the different directness levels of politeness were chosen from both the NMSs' and NESs' groups. These moves were listed as eight items on

an acceptability judgement questionnaire with Item 1 being least direct and Item 8 being most direct. Judges were asked to assess the effectiveness of each item based on a Likert Scale ranging from “Very effective” to “Very ineffective”. In addition, they were asked to comment on the ratings they gave. In total 35 NM speaker judges and 34 NE speaker judges completed the questionnaire.

Table 6: The relationship between polite behaviour and its effectiveness in complaint requests

Item / Level	Request item	Effectiveness scale of Complaint Requests									
		Very effective (%)		Effective (%)		Neutral (%)		Ineffective (%)		Very ineffective (%)	
		NMSs	NESs	NMSs	NESs	NMSs	NESs	NMSs	NESs	NMSs	NESs
1	I just paid \$600 that day/ last week, so how?	6	4	21	21	18	21	45	24	9	42
2	So, if that’s still not possible, if you can’t fix everything, at least if the engine can be started, it’s OK.	6	0	31	15	23	12	30	17	11	61
3	er... can you do some more work on it for the same for the money I’ve already paid you?	11	4	17	6	20	35	43	35	9	30
4	Try Mr.Lee, try to do a thorough check.	11	4	43	27	17	18	26	33	3	26
5	I would like you to refund my money.	11	18	23	24	17	30	29	12	20	26
6	If you still can’t fix it, it’s better you return the money.	23	9	26	59	17	12	20	17	14	13
7	I want it fixed as soon as possible.	6	12	36	52	21	15	27	18	9	3
8	Give me back my \$600.	9	13	27	9	15	27	27	47	21	17

From Table 6, it appears that for both NMSs and NESs, more direct requests were rated ‘very effective’ or ‘effective’ (Items 4, 6 and 7 for NMSs and Items 6 and 7 for NESs). The main reason, inferred from comments made by the participant judges, was that such requests were clear and assertive without being aggressive: “a bit sympathetic to mechanic...” (Item 4); “assertive – negotiation” (Item 6); “clear...assertive, not aggressive” (Item 7); “it’s a do or don’t question” (Item 6); “sounds assertive” (item 6).

On the other hand, indirect requests at Levels 1 and 2 were deemed to be ‘very ineffective’ or ‘ineffective’ by both groups of judges. The main reason for the ineffectiveness of indirect requests was because of their vagueness: “you need to elaborate/explain further”

(Item 1); “you have to be certain. Asking “*camana*” (why) means you’re not sure that the problem is the same one” (Item 1); “...too many words. Confusing” (Item 2); “I don’t understand what I’m saying or requesting, so how could Mr Lee?” (Item 2); “too complicated, the mechanic will not understand your objective” (Item 2). However, an extremely direct request (Item 8) was also considered to be ineffective or very ineffective for both groups. It appears that while such a request is clear, it may be too aggressive and is therefore counter-productive: “very blunt and potentially confronting. Plus car still not fixed!”; “this will not happen as work has been carried out”; “a bit rude”; and “clear, but impolite... likely to cause insult”.

Based on the above results and discussion, three maxims appear to describe the relationship between polite behavior and effective requests. Indirect requests, considered to be tentative and therefore polite, may not be effective in getting adequate attention in a complaint due to their vagueness. Secondly, direct requests which are clear, concise and even baldly stated and therefore deemed impolite, are considered to be effective. However, direct requests that border on rudeness or aggression or are aimed at being offensive are considered ineffective in complaints.

5. Limitations

The study relied on tape-recorded oral responses to a written hypothetical situation by a small number of native Malay and native English speakers. While the oral discourse completion task allowed the participants to respond quite freely, there was no actual interaction between the speakers as would happen in a normal complaint. The ideal situation would be to collect data in a setting where the complaints could be naturally elicited. It was also unclear which nationality Mr Lee, the hypothetical mechanic, was and thus the kind of power relationship that existed between the complainant and Mr Lee remained ambiguous. Perhaps differing perceptions of Mr Lee’s nationality may have been responsible for the varying degrees of politeness shown by the participants, particularly the local Malay speakers. Future research in this area could focus on identifying differences in politeness levels as the mechanic’s age and nationality varied. We would expect, for example, native Malay speakers to be more polite if the mechanic was an older Malay person who had completed the Haj (a pilgrimage to Makkah undertaken by Muslims) and so held the title ‘Haji’.

For the second part of the study, the NM speaker participant judges were predominantly well educated English/Malay bilinguals. It was unclear what influence their educational and social backgrounds might have had on their perceptions of complaints, particularly those in the NMS group. These judges had varying degrees of exposure to complaints in English through personal contact or with the English media. In contrast the NE speaker participant judges were monolingual and had no exposure to complaints in Malay. This variable is difficult to monitor since most Bruneians are to some degree bilingual and therefore exposed to the English way of complaining.

6. Implications and conclusion

This paper is yet another contribution to the growing literature on cross cultural studies focussing on politeness. In particular, it shows interesting similarities and differences in terms of move structure and levels of directness between the two groups in the complaint speech act. Both groups used fairly indirect language in two key moves of the complaint. However, we also found that the two groups employed different strategies to mitigate the social effects of their complaints and requests for action. The results appear to confirm the commonly held belief that politeness does indeed vary between cultures and we should therefore be cautious about applying universally the notion of politeness found in one culture. While a surface level analysis showed that the levels of politeness did not differ greatly between the different cultures in this study, a more detailed analysis of the actual strategies used to mitigate face threatening acts might produce different results. When it came to investigating the relationship between polite behaviour and its effectiveness in the context of a personal complaint in Brunei, it was found that both groups considered direct requests to be more effective in getting a response from the mechanic than that of indirect requests, although they also thought that a very direct request that was aggressive might not be as effective. The indication is that attention paid to the intrinsic social value of a complaint may not necessarily help in realising its extrinsic social value. Thus, being indirect, and therefore polite, may not be as effective as a more direct approach in terms of getting an appropriate response from the addressee.

APPENDIX 1 ORAL DISCOURSE COMPLETION TASK

You took your car (a Mercedes Benz) to Mr. Lee, your mechanic, a week ago because the engine had behaved erratically in stops and starts. You collected your repaired car from the workshop yesterday. However, when you tried to start it this morning, the engine wouldn't start. It was the same old problem. You feel that nothing's really been done to your car at the mechanic's. You're particularly upset since you were charged a hefty repair fee of \$600. Also he had promised that the problem has been sorted out. You decide you must speak to him about this. So, after work, you got someone to take you down to the garage. You go to the mechanic and say:

APPENDIX 2 QUESTIONNAIRE

The situation

A car owner took his car to a mechanic (Mr. Lee) to be fixed.

After the repair, the owner, who had already paid the bill, found that the car still had the same problem.

He went back to the mechanic and complained.

Part of his complaint was a request for corrective action. Please read the following list of requests for corrective action which might be used in the above situation in Brunei, and evaluate the effectiveness of each of the requests using the following scale:

1 = Very effective; 2 = Effective; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Ineffective; 5 = Very ineffective.

Request	Very effective	Effective	Neutral	Ineffective	Very ineffective
<p>1. I just paid \$600 that day last week, so how?</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>2. So, if that's still not possible, if you can't fix everything, at least if the engine can be started, it's ok.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>3. er ... can you do some more work on it for the same for the money I've already paid you?</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>4. Try Mr Lee, try to do a thorough check.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>5. I would like you to refund my money.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>6. If you still can't fix it, it's better you return the money.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
<p>7. I want it fixed as soon as possible.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					

<p>8. Give me back my \$600.</p> <p><i>Give reason(s) for your answer (if any)</i></p> <p>.....</p>					
--	--	--	--	--	--

Thank you for your co-operation!

APPENDIX 3 SAMPLE OF WRITTEN TRANSCRIPTION OF SPEECH DATA

Interview 5 (Female)

Hey Mr. Lee/ what's wrong with my car/why did my car break down again [?] Is your mechanic qualified or not [?] I've paid a lot/ it broke down again/ as if it's not repaired [!] So how now/ Mr. Lee [?] Are you going to repair it again or what [?] It's difficult for me without a car/ I've hitched a ride from my friend///Don't you have any/ how did your people repair it [?] Since this is your workshop/ you/ should have supervised them when fixing my car/// If this is the case/ it will be difficult for me to come to you again/ to repair my car/ just one week/ it's already kaput[!]

Interview 6 (Male)

Lee/ what's wrong with my car [?] That day I paid \$600/ but still can't start/ why [?] Are you cheating me [?] So/ if you can't fix it/ give me back my money/ it can't start/ it's as if it wasn't repaired/ what kind of repair work is this [?]]If you don't/ I'm going to complain/ to/ to your employer/you don't seem to know how to work [!]

Interview 7 (Male)

Hey Lee/ this one/ yesterday /you repaired my car/ this morning when I started the car/ it still won't start/ so now what else [?] I've paid you/ it's expensive/so how now [?] Do you want to repair it or what [?]But I want to know/ what you repaired that day/ what did you fix/ did you fix it /or not then [?]Or else/ make it this way/ Lee/ if you have the time/I will bring you to the house today/in fact/ I am hitching a ride from my friend// I'll bring you to the house/ you check my car/ if ok/ if you can start it/ I want you to bring it/ and repair it again/ so how [?] And then/ the charge that day/ \$600/ I want to know why I paid \$600/ for what thing/ and I also want to know/ what is wrong now [?] Can you do it/ Lee [?] [-] but if possible one thing/ Lee/ [-] [-] I want you /after this/to repair it properly/ the most important thing/ it's done properly//I use this car/ not for cruising around/but for my studies//can you do it/ Lee/ [-] [?]

APPENDIX 4

List of moves, their definitions & examples

Move	Definition	Example
Greeting (G)	Opens the complaint in a polite way	Good morning... Hello...
Direct Opening (DO)	Opens the complaint with a straight-in address	Mr. Lee... Hey Lee... Er, Lee...
Background Information (BI)	Car owner provides background information leading to the complaint	I brought my car to you... ...remember that Mercedes I brought to you...
Stating the Complaint (SC)	Car owner states the complaint	...the engine won't start... ...the engine refused to start...
Questioning the Mechanic's Expertise (QME)	Car owner's remarks pertaining to the mechanic's competence	You don't seem to know how to work! ... is this how you repair a Mercedes?...
Making a Threat (TH)	Car owner threatens to take action against the workshop/mechanic	...complain to higher authorities... ...take my business elsewhere... ... publish in Borneo Bulletin...
Making an Accusation (AC)	Car owner accuses the mechanic of inappropriate conduct	... maybe you fixed the second hand... ...did you do any work or not?
Asking for a Completion Date (ACD)	Car Owner asks for a date when the car will be repaired	When will... When will I be able to come and get it again?
Asking for an Explanation (AE)	Car owner asks why the problem persisted	I would like to know what you've done to the car... How come this morning it won't start again?
Describing Ill Consequences (IC)	Car owner states hardships suffered as a result of the unacceptable act	... really inconvenient for me... ...it cuts into my time... I'm rather powerless...
Request for Corrective Action (RCA)	Car owner makes an explicit request for corrective action	Do a thorough check! ...do it properly...
Expressing Personal Dissatisfaction (EPD)	Car owner expresses personal feelings about the situation	...I'm not impressed... ...I do feel very disappointed... ...I'm not satisfied
Closing Remark (CR)	Car owner indicates the end of the conversation	thank you yeah alright thanks

APPENDIX 5

MODALITY MARKERS FOR COMPLAINT ACT

(House & Kasper, 1981: 166-170)

X = complainant

Y = the agent responsible for the unacceptable act/situation

P = the unacceptable act/ situation

Downgraders

1. Politeness marker
Optional elements added to an act to show deference to the interlocutor and to bid for cooperative behaviour, e.g. *please*
2. Play-down
Syntactical devices used to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the addressee, e.g.
 - (a) past tense: *I wondered if ...*
 - (b) durative aspect marker: *I was wondering*
 - (c) negation: *Mightn't it be a good idea ...*
 - (d) interrogative: *Mightn't it be a good idea*
 - (e) modal: *Mightn't ...*
3. Consultative Device
Optional devices by means of which X seeks to involve Y and bid for Y's cooperation; frequently these devices are ritualized formulas, e.g., *Would you mind if ...*
4. Hedge
Adverbials – excluding sentence adverbials – by means of which X avoids a precise propositional specification thus circumventing the potential provocation such a specification might entail; X leaves the option open for Y to complete his utterance and thereby imposes his own intent less forcefully on Y, e.g. *kind of, sort of, somehow, and so on, and what have you, more or less, rather*
5. Understater
Adverbial modifiers by means of which X underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition, e.g. *a little bit, a second, not very much, just a trifle*
6. Downtoner
Sentence modifiers which are used by X in order to modulate the impact his utterance is likely to have on Y, e.g. *just, simply, possibly, perhaps, rather. Couldn't you just move over a bit*
7. – (“minus”) Committer
Sentence modifiers which are used to lower the degree to which X commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition. X thus explicitly characterizes his utterance as his personal opinion, e.g. *I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion. I think you've made a mistake*
8. Forewarn
A kind of anticipatory disarmament device used by X to forewarn Y and to forestall his possible negative reactions to X's act. Typically a forewarn is a metacomment about what X is about to do, a compliment paid to Y as a preliminary to a potentially offensive utterance, or an invocation of a generally accepted cooperative principle which X is about to flout, e.g. *far be it from me to belittle your efforts, but..., you're a nice guy, Jim, but..., this may be a bit boring to you, but...*
9. Hesitator
Deliberately employed malformulations, used to impress on Y the fact that X

has qualms about performing his ensuing act, e.g. *erm*; stuttering, reduplication

10. Scope-Stater

Elements in which X explicitly expresses his subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of his utterance, e.g. *I'm afraid you're in my seat; I'm a bit disappointed that you did P; I'm not happy about the fact that you did P*

11. Agent Avoider

Syntactic Devices by means of which it is possible for X not to mention either himself or his interlocutor Y as agents, thus, for instance, avoiding direct attack, e.g. passive, impersonal constructions using *people, they, one, you* as “neutral agents” lacking [+ definite] and [+ specific] reference. *This is just not done, Mr. Robinson*

Upgraders

1. Overstater

Adverbial modifiers by means of which X overrepresents the reality denoted in the proposition in the interests of increasing the force of his utterance, e.g. *absolutely, purely, terribly, frightfully. I'm absolutely disgusted that you left the bathroom in such a state*

2. Intensifier

Adverbial modifier used by X to intensify certain elements of the proposition of his utterance, e.g. *very, so, such, quite, really, just, indeed. I'd be really pleased if you could help me*

3. + (“plus”) Committer

Sentence modifiers by means of which X indicates his heightened degree of commitment vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, e.g. *I'm sure, certainly, obviously, really. You should certainly have informed me*

4. Lexical Intensifier

Lexical items which are strongly marked for their negative social attitude, e.g. swear words. *That's bloody mean of you*

5. Aggressive Interrogative

Employment by X of interrogative mood to explicitly involve Y and thus to intensify the impact of his utterance on Y, e.g. *Why haven't you told me before?*

6. Rhetorical Appeal

In using a rhetorical appeal, X attempts – by claiming or implying the non-possibility of not accepting that P – to debar Y from not accepting that P, e.g. *You must understand that, anyone can see that, it's common knowledge that. You must understand that this is public property.*

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