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## THE SPEECH ACT SET OF DIRECT COMPLAINTS IN AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN CULTURES

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This study investigates the speech act set of direct complaints performed by American speakers and Russian native speakers. This article explores the semantic categories that speakers in each language group used to structure their complaints and the order of occurrences of the categories from the point of view of face-saving strategies, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978 [1987]). The data was obtained through a combination of oral responses to a discourse completion questionnaire and an assessment questionnaire.

The findings demonstrate that speakers in each language group used the same range of semantic categories to structure their complaints. However, the frequency and the order of the categories greatly differed, which revealed differences in politeness norms and cultural values in American and Russian cultures. The results of the study indicate some language- and culture- specific features of complaints, which can have a significant effect on problem negotiations across cultures.

**Key words:** Direct complaints, face-saving strategies, politeness, English, Russian, cross-cultural communication

### Introduction

While there is a growing body of research on speech acts across cultures, the empirical data on direct complaints remains scant (Schaefer 1982; Piotrowska 1987; Olsh-tain and Weinbach 1987, 1993; Trosborg 1995; Arent 1996; Murphy and Neu 1996; Kraft and Geluykens 2002, 2007; Tanck 2002; Tran 2002; Gershenson 1994, 2003; Umar 2006; Prykarpatska 2008). The research on complaints is important for investigating politeness in problem negotiations and exploring the effect of cultural values on social interactions both within and across cultures.

Given the limited research on complaints, this study investigates the speech act of direct complaints (DCs) that occurs when a speaker addresses a complaint toward a hearer and holds him or her accountable for their dissatisfaction, as defined by Boxer (1993) (1). Larina (2009: 287—295) refers to such complaints as *admonition, rebuke, and reprimand* in English and *неодобрение, осуждение, порицание, and упрек* in Russian.

The primary goal of this research is to establish semantic strategies that American and Russian native speakers use to structure their complaints. The present study explores the strategies from the point of view of politeness theory, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978 [1987]). Based on empirical data, this study will provide valuable insights into linguistic politeness and cultural values in American and Russian cultures.

### Politeness and the notion of face in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory

Scholars commonly have conceptualized linguistic politeness as strategies that speakers employ to avoid conflicts in communication (Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987; Fraser 1990). To carry out a complaint, speakers need to consider what linguistic or non-linguistic choices to make in order to achieve their communica-

tive goals, and, at the same time, to avoid damaging relationships with the interlocutors. Leech (1983: 105) described complaints as a *conflictive act* because their “illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal”. According to Leech, conflictive acts are by nature impolite because their performance causes offense; therefore, complaints are intrinsically threatening for social interactions.

Brown and Levinson (1987) identified complaints as *intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTA)* because their realization can damage the speaker’s and the hearer’s positive and negative face. According to their theory of politeness, interlocutors mutually respect each other’s face in a social interaction in order to communicate successfully. In order to avoid a FTA, or at least to minimize the threat, the speakers may use a certain strategy, which depends on their estimation of risk of face loss. In the case of DCs, the speakers may decide to *opt out of the FTA* and not to complain, or they may choose *off-record strategies*, which are indirect and do not attribute clear communicative intention to the speakers (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). For example, *The dishes haven’t been washed again*. In contrast, the speakers may clearly express their intentions using *on-record strategies*, performing an act *without redress, baldly* (1987: 69). For example, *You haven’t washed the dishes again*. However, the on-record strategies may lead to open confrontations between the interlocutors, particularly in formal settings.

Since the publication of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, scholars have challenged the universality of politeness strategies and the notion of face that Brown and Levinson proposed. Despite this criticism, the present study has adopted Brown and Levinson’s face-saving concept of politeness because, as research has shown, their notion of face provides valid parameters for a cross-cultural analysis (cf. Ogiermann 2009a). Their theory offers an appropriate framework for this study because they focus on the speaker’s linguistic strategies, which constitute the core of the present investigation.

### **Participant profile and methodology**

The data was elicited from a homogenous population for each language group among university students of college age. ASs were recruited at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in 2010, and male participants were recruited at Swarthmore College in 2011. The Russian data was collected at Moscow State University in Moscow and Herzen State Pedagogical University in Saint Petersburg in 2010.

The data from 30 American speakers (ASs) and 30 Russian native speakers (RSs) was included in the final analysis. Participants were excluded from the study if they came from a mixed heritage background, failed to complete the assessment questionnaires, skipped situations in their oral responses without giving reasons for doing so, or described their reactions by saying, *I would say*, or *Я бы сказал(а)* instead of using direct strategies.

#### Study design

Participants in the present study responded in oral to an open-ended discourse completion questionnaire (DCQ) and provided written responses to an assessment questionnaire (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). They were instructed on how to record their responses and left alone to complete the oral and written tasks. The present study

employed this method because it allows participants to react to the scenarios orally, which is closer to their natural language than written responses to DCQ. The greatest weakness of this methodology was a lack of interaction with another speaker. However, the methodology used in the present study can provide more authentic data than the alternative method requiring an interaction with a tester, which would involve acting out various identities by the tester and the participant during the same setting. As other studies have shown, the power relationship between participant and tester is difficult for the participant to ignore in a role-play (Owen 2001; Shardakova 2009).

The DCQ in the present study consisted of 15 scenarios, 12 of which featured complaints. The scenarios were carefully designed by considering social distance (an interaction with a friend or a stranger), social status (an interaction with a professor or a person whom the speaker hired), and different degrees of severity of offense (severe, moderate, or not severe at all). The scenarios presented complaint situations that are typical and frequent in everyday life in both cultures. In this way, the participants could base their responses on similar prior experiences rather than attempting to imagine an unfamiliar complaint situation.

#### Coding

In their study on apologies, Olshtain and Cohen (1983: 20) identified semantic patterns of the realization of a given speech act as a *speech act set*. They defined a speech act set as an *internal composition of semantic formulas*, which are universal for a certain speech act, but their realization may be language-specific (Olshtain and Cohen 1983: 20—21).

Scholars have proposed a various number of the major semantic realization patterns of the speech act of DCs, and they have sometimes employed different terminology (Schaefer 1982; Piotrowska 1987; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987; Trosborg 1995; Murthy and Neu 1996; Prykarpatska 2008). Most of the studies relate to the realization of complaints in English. This study adopted Schaefer's and Piotrowska's realization patterns of DCs, as well as Murthy and Neu's speech act set of DCs. The present study utilized these classifications because they allow for the capturing of differences in structural patterns of complains between the two language groups, whereas other speech act sets such as those developed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) or Trosborg (1995) were too broad to reveal the cross-cultural differences between ASs and RSs.

The lack of consensus among scholars on the semantic components that constitute the speech act set of DCs reflects the complexity of this speech act. It also suggests possible difficulties that speakers in one culture may encounter when negotiating a problem in a complaint situation in another culture.

### **Results and discussion of the findings**

#### The speech act set of DCs of ASs and RSs

To properly interpret the utterances in a complaint, the present study considered the utterances' *sequential, situational, and functional criteria*, which the authors in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) have identified (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984: 200).

Based on the overall performance of the speakers in each language group in all complaint situations, this study established the following semantic categories that ASs and RSs used to structure their complaints:

- 1) **Opener** (2) (*Привет!*)
- 2) **Explanation of Purpose**, which explains why the speaker initiates a conversation (*Can you talk to me about the library book that you- that you borrowed from me?*)
- 3) **Act Statement** (3), which directly or indirectly refers to the wrongdoing, the hearer, or both (*Что-ж ты мне книгу раньше-то не отдала? Теперь мне за тебя надо платить штраф.*)
- 4) **Justification of the Speaker**, which explains why the speaker is making the complaint and the effects of the wrongdoing on the speaker (*I really don't — I really cannot afford to be late to my job.*)
- 5) **Justification of the Hearer**, which gives a reason or excuse for the hearer who committed the wrongdoing or expresses the effect on the hearer (*Я понимаю у тебя были дела.*)
- 6) **Societal Justification**, which appeals to socially accepted values and norms of behavior (*У нас какие-то законы есть то что после одиннадцати нельзя чтобы вы там мешали соседям.*)
- 7) **Request for Explanation**, which calls for an explanation of the hearer's behavior (*So um- is this how you usually charge?*)
- 8) **Apology** (*I'm really really sorry to be the stereotypical annoying neighbor.*)
- 9) **Blame** (*Я из-за тебя теперь опоздаю на подработку.*)
- 10) **Threat** (*If this ever happens again I have to let you go.*)
- 11) **Valuation**, which expresses the feelings of the speaker such as dislike, disappointment, or dissatisfaction about the hearer, the problem, or both (*It's disgusting and: making me regret living here.*)
- 12) **Conciliation**, which expresses the speaker's attempt to restore harmony (*Ладно ничего страшного ничего страшного.*)
- 13) **Remedy**, which proposes some action to solve the problem expressed in a complaint (*I was just wondering if we could reschedule um- our conversation about my master's thesis.*)
- 14) **An Expression of Gratitude** (*Спасибо что выслушала меня.*)
- 15) **Closing** (4) (*Thanks.*)

Graphic representation  
of the semantic categories

The graphic representations below demonstrate the distribution of the semantic categories in all situations for both language groups. The distribution is based on means and standard deviations (SDs) for each category. As Figure 1 and Table 1 exhibit, ASs and RSs most frequently employed Justification of the Speaker, Remedy, Opener, and Act Statement. Like ASs, RSs most frequently stated their complaint and followed it with Remedy, but they justified their reactions less frequently than ASs.

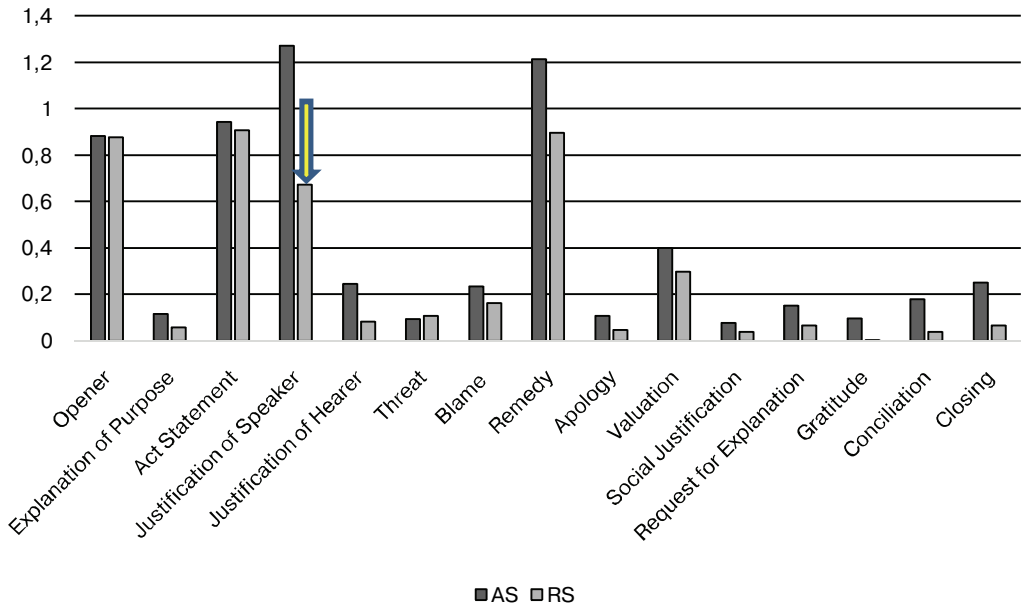


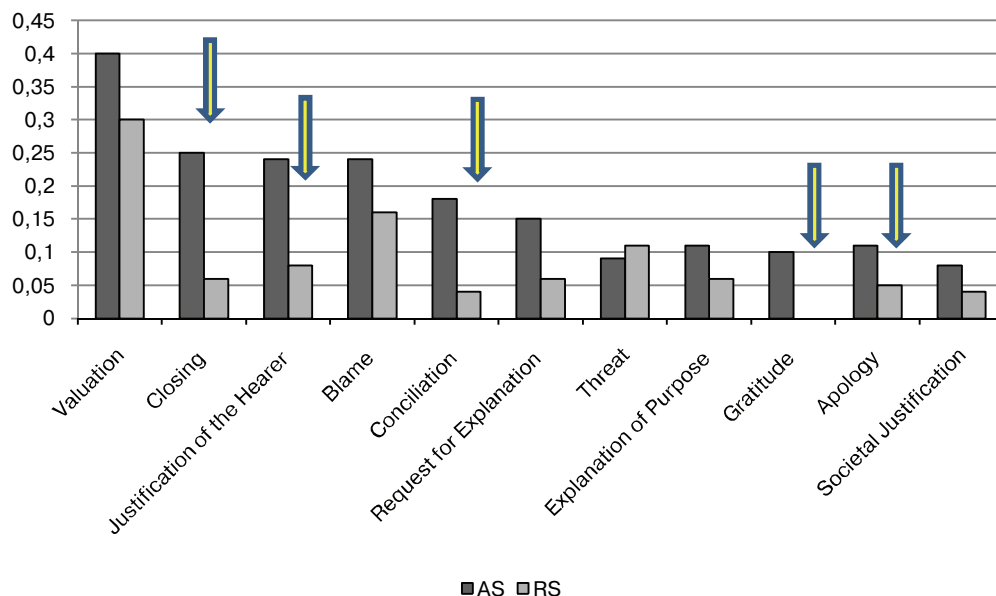
Figure 1. Distribution of the semantic categories in all situations for each language group

Table 1

Means and SDs for the most frequent semantic categories for ASs and RSs based on all situations

Semantic Category	AS Means and SDs	RS Means and SDs
Justification of the Speaker	1.27 (1.25)	0.67 (0.83)
Remedy	1.21 (0.94)	0.90 (0.74)
Act Statement	0.94 (0.24)	0.91 (0.30)
Opener	0.88 (0.67)	0.88 (0.67)

Figure 2 demonstrates the semantic categories that ASs and RSs employed less frequently. As the figure exhibits, ASs mostly differed from RSs in their expression of Gratitude, Conciliation, Closing, Justification of the Hearer, and Apology. These results demonstrate that ASs expressed their gratitude toward the hearer, justified the hearer’s wrongdoing, used apologies, and tried to restore the harmony with the hearer more frequently than RSs. ASs utilized these categories to minimize the offense, which was attributed to face-saving strategies. In a complaint situation, they employed semantic categories to save their own face and the hearer’s face. In this regard, RSs did not try to minimize the imposition upon the hearer, but they openly showed their disappointment toward the hearer who let them down. Their strategy selection showed that RSs were less concerned with saving their face and the hearer’s face in their interactions with friends, strangers, and persons whom they hired.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of less frequent categories

The role of order of semantic categories  
in complaints

The order of occurrences of semantic categories used by ASs and RSs in their complaints differed, which affected the features of their complaints. According to the most frequent structural patterns of complaints in the Russian data, after getting the hearer's attention, RSs used Valuation or Blame. They then justified their complaints, and, at the end, they proposed Remedy to the situation. It appears that RSs structured their complaints in this way to intensify their complaints. They used Valuation immediately before or after stating their complaint, which intensified their dissatisfaction, as in the following example:

- (1) RS (Late for Project): *Слушай Борис! (Opener) Мне это надоело (Valuation) что постоянно опаздываешь. (Act Statement) Поэтому я не хочу больше работать с тобой. (Remedy)*

ASs also used Valuation before or after stating their complaints in order to intensify them, in particular in their interactions with friends, but not as often as RSs. Example 2 shows Valuation in the data of ASs:

- (2) AS (Late for Project): *You can- you can't come to me Boris like this late all the time. (Act Statement) It's disrespectful. (Valuation following Act Statement)*

In interactions with strangers, ASs hardly ever used Valuation because they avoided confrontations in public, while RSs openly showed their disappointment toward strangers, as in the following example:

- (3) RS (Subway): *Женщина! Вы с ума сошли!? Вы можете аккуратно со своим мороженым? Как я теперь пойду в таком виде?*

Such behavior in public can appear impolite and even rude by American standards, but it occurs often in Russian culture. As Larina (2009: 148) stated, “По отношению к «чужим»... русские часто допускают невежливость и грубость.” In the present study, the strategy selection of RSs indicates that they were emotional and confrontational in public, and they showed fewer concerns about face-saving strategies than ASs.

As the data has demonstrated, ASs preferred not to start their complaints by first stating the problem. Rather, they started their complaints by giving reasons for their dissatisfaction that often justified the hearer’s wrongdoing. ASs used Gratitude, Justification of the Speaker, and Justification of the Hearer, Request, or Apology before stating their dissatisfaction in order to reduce the imposition upon the hearer, as in the following examples:

- (4) AS (Tutor): *Um- so I really appreciate you helping me (Gratitude) and I feel like I like you know the material and that I can learn a lot from you (Justification of the Hearer) but I would really appreciate if you could go **slower** for me (Remedy / Request) I’m not really able to keep up with you when you go at that pace (Act Statement).*

ASs often apologized or showed their gratitude in order to mitigate the imposition upon the hearer, while RSs rarely used Apology or Gratitude. In a complaint situation, they showed their gratitude only when they negotiated a problem with a professor, which indicates the effect of social status on social interactions in Russian culture (cf. Larina 2009).

In sum, the order of occurrences of semantic categories in complaints of ASs and RSs differed, which served the speakers to intensify or mitigate their complaints. Speakers in American culture structured their complaints differently than RSs in order to save their own face and the hearer’s face. Overall, ASs were more careful and hesitant in stating the problem, more apologetic, and more reluctant in proposing a solution to the problem than RSs. They also excused the hearer’s behavior, which rarely occurred in the Russian data. ASs used these strategies to avoid conflicts and to minimize imposition upon the hearer. In contrast, RSs openly showed their emotions that threatened their own face and the hearer’s face except for situations in which they interacted with a person of a higher social status.

### Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the speech act set of DCs can be perceived as universal because in a complaint the speakers express their dissatisfaction about the wrongdoer or the wrongdoing; however, its realization is language- and culture-specific (Olshtain & Cohen 1983: 20—21).

The findings show that speakers in each language group made use of the same range of semantic categories in the speech act set of DCs, but the frequency and order of these categories differed, which revealed differences in both the concept of politeness and the cultural values underlying politeness in American and Russian cultures. Speakers in both cultures differently structured their complaints because they assigned different values to politeness: Speakers in American culture tried to minimize the degree of imposition upon interlocutors in a complaint situation, while RSs preferred straightforwardness over the utilization of face-saving strategies.

The strategy selection of the speakers in American culture reveals a desire to avoid confrontation because of respect for the hearer's autonomy and private space, whereas speakers in Russian culture demonstrated a preference for directness. Similar to other studies, the present study showed that Russian speakers value directness in social interactions because they associate it with sincerity and solidarity, while speakers from Anglo-Saxon cultures can perceive directness as rude or an imposition upon the interlocutor's independence and individualism (Wierzbicka 1985, 1991; Hoffman 1989; Rathmayr 1994; Bergelson 2003, Larina 2009; Ogiermann 2009b). The results indicate that speakers across cultures need to be aware of politeness rules and cultural values in a specific culture in order to successfully negotiate a problem and avoid cross-cultural miscommunication.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Scenarios for the Discourse Completion Questionnaire (two examples in English and Russian)

*Please read aloud each scenario and respond spontaneously to the following situations (voice your responses into the tape recorder). Please do your best to react as you would do in real life. You may say nothing if in a real life situation you would not respond.*

*Do not describe what you would say, instead speak as if the person is next to you.*

1. You have already talked a few times to Andrew, your friend and roommate, about taking care of the kitchen that you share with him in the dormitory apartment. Today, he again left a pile of dirty dishes in the sink although it was his turn to take care of the kitchen. You see Andrew and say:

(If you decided not to say anything, please explain why)

Уже несколько раз Вы разговаривали с Андреем, Вашим другом и соседом по комнате, на тему поддержания чистоты на общей кухне. Сегодня он опять оставил массу грязной посуды в раковине, хотя была его очередь уборки кухни. Вы видите Андрея и говорите

(Если Вы решили ничего не говорить, объясните, пожалуйста, почему.)

2. You have a new neighbor next door in the dormitory. You don't know him yet. Since he moved in five days ago, he has been listening to loud music every night. You already overslept once, and you were late for work. Today, you cannot sleep because the music is loud again. It is already midnight, and you have a terrible headache. You go to your neighbor and say:

(If you decided not to say anything, please explain why)

У Вас новый сосед, который живет в соседней с Вашей комнате в общежитии. Вы с ним еще не знакомы. С тех пор как он переехал сюда пять дней назад, он слушает громкую музыку каждую ночь. Один раз Вы уже проспали из-за него и опоздали на работу. Сегодня Вы опять не можете заснуть, потому что опять громко играет музыка. Уже полночь, и у Вас страшно болит голова. Вы идете к Вашему соседу и говорите ему:

(Если Вы решили ничего не говорить, объясните, пожалуйста, почему.)



## Appendix 2. Assessment Questionnaire for Russian Speakers

*Подчеркните, пожалуйста, ответ, который Вы выбрали.*

- I. Уже несколько раз Вы разговаривали с Андреем, Вашим другом и соседом по комнате, на тему поддержания чистоты на общей кухне. Сегодня он опять оставил массу грязной посуды в раковине, хотя была его очередь уборки кухни.
1. Как вы оцениваете серьезность этой ситуации?  
а) очень серьезная    б) относительно серьезная    в) совсем несерьезная
  2. Надо ли Вы выразить недовольство в этой ситуации?  
а) безусловно    б) да    в) сомневаюсь
- II. Скажите, пожалуйста, как Вы оцениваете описание ситуаций и технический метод записи ответов на магнитофон?
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### NOTES

- (1) Boxer (1993) distinguished two categories of complaint: *direct and indirect*, which have their origin in D'Amico-Reisner's (1985) study on disapproval. *Indirect complaint* occurs when the speaker does not hold the hearer responsible for the offense but conveys dissatisfaction about himself/herself or someone/something that is absent (1993: 106—107). For example, *He is such a bad driver*.
- (2) The names of the categories and most of the descriptions were adopted from Schaefer's work (1982: 14—15) and Piotrowska's analysis (1987: 44—46) on complaints. The category, Explanation of Purpose, comes from Murthy and Neu's (1996) classification.
- (3) A detailed analysis of the strategies within the Act Statement can be found in Moskala-Gallaher 2012, chapter 4.
- (4) This study identified the expression of thanking that the speakers uttered to finish their complaints as Closing and not as the category of Gratitude.

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