



DOI: 10.22363/2313-2299-2026-17-1-186-204

EDN: IFYKYM

Research Article / Научная статья

A Generic Structure Analysis of Arabic and English Response Letters to Complaints

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Abstract. Our study aims to examine the generic structure of responses letters to complaints in Arabic and English. A corpus of 80 letters was collected from Algerian Arabic users, EFL learners as well as American and British native speakers of English. The researcher provided the participants with three complaint situations and they were required to choose only one situation and write a response letter to it. The results revealed that response letters to complaints in Arabic and English adhere to the same generic structure composed of seven moves and twenty-one steps. It was found that several factors particularly culture and the correspondents' social rank significantly influence the overall structure of complaint letters.

Keywords: Algeria, Genre analysis, Response to complaints, Speech act

Conflict of interests: The author stated that there were no conflicts of interest.

Article history: Received: 23.08.2025; accepted: 15.11.2025.

For citation: Derki, N. (2026). A Generic Structure Analysis of Arabic and English Response Letters to Complaints. *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics*, 17(1), 186–204. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2026-17-1-186-204> EDN IFYKYM

Структурный анализ типичных ответных писем на жалобы на арабском и английском языках

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Аннотация. Целью исследования является изучение общей структуры ответных писем на жалобы на арабском и английском языках. Был собран корпус из 80 писем от алжирских пользователей арабского языка, изучающих английский как иностранный, а также американских и британских носителей

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английского языка. Исследователь предложил участникам три ситуации с жалобами, и им было предложено выбрать только одну и написать по ней ответное письмо. Результаты показали, что ответные письма на жалобы на арабском и английском языках придерживаются одной и той же общей структуры, состоящей из семи ходов и двадцати одного шага. Было установлено, что несколько факторов, в частности культура и социальный статус корреспондентов, существенно влияют на общую структуру писем с жалобами.

Ключевые слова: Алжир, жанровый анализ, ответ на жалобы, речевой акт

Конфликт интересов: авторы заявили об отсутствии конфликтов интересов.

История статьи: дата поступления: 23.08.2025; дата приема в печать: 15.11.2025.

Для цитирования: Derki N. A Generic Structure Analysis of Arabic and English Response Letters to Complaints // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Теория языка. Семиотика. Семантика. 2026. Т. 17. № 1. С. 186–204. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2026-17-1-186-204> EDN IFYKYM

Overview

Complaints and complaint responses can be seen as a two-part exchange where the two parts are functionally dependent. If we perceive complaining as the first part, then the response to a complaint can be seen as the second part. With the current age of digitalization, most complaints and responses are done through emails and websites. This, however, does not discard the importance of letter-writing. While going through the available literature, there seems to be little research out there — at least to our knowledge — which specifically examines the generic structure of Arabic and English response letters to complaints. The majority of work has focused on the marketing aspect of responses in terms of the relationship between the management and the customer (eg. [1–3]). The attention to actual linguistic realization in this strand of research is limited. These studies mainly focus on the types of organizational responses as well as on the most effective response types in terms of customer outcomes, such as satisfaction with complaint handling, and their boundary conditions (e.g., employee empathy has a more positive impact when a low versus high compensation amount is offered to the customer, [4]), but less so on the importance of language use in complaint responses and on potential implications of genre-specific conventions.

We would like to address these gaps by paying attention to the conventional letter-writing setting and by performing a genre/move analysis [5: 6] to look into rhetorical and linguistic patterns of the Arabic and English response letters to complaints. Comparing between two languages would enable us to provide new insights into this genre. Furthermore, it will help in formulating more specific teaching recommendations on complaint handling via letters in terms of (discourse) structure.

Literature Review

Only a few studies have focused on responses to complaints. For instance, M. Frescura [7] compared how four participants responded to complaints. Participants were grouped into native speakers of Standard Italian living in Italy,

native speakers of Canadian English living in Toronto, speakers of Italian as a Community Language residing in Toronto, and Italian as a Second Language. Roleplay was used to elicit data that was later on recorded and analyzed. The overall results revealed seven semantic formulas for reactions to complaints performed by the native speakers of Italian and English, namely: denial, apology, explanation, appeal, acknowledgment of responsibility, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance.

Response to Written Complaint

Only two studies have focused on the generic structure of written complaint responses. Y. Zhang and C. Vásquez [8] investigated the generic structure of hotel responses to customer complaints posted on the popular travel website TripAdvisor. The researchers analyzed 80 hotel replies posted in response to online consumer complaints. Results revealed that replies tend to be highly formulaic and conventionalized. The researchers identified the following moves (58:60): 1) Express gratitude: this move serves to thank consumers for various actions related to their hotel experience; 2) Apologize for sources of trouble; 3) Invitation for a second visit; 3) Opening pleasantries (addressing the customer): dear guest/customer; 4) Proof of action: it serves as a reassurance for consumers that actions have been taken regarding the content in the reviews; 5) Acknowledge complaints/feedback: this move acknowledges and makes some reference to the customers' message; 6) Refer to customer reviews; 7) Closing pleasantries (yours sincerely); 8) Avoidance of reoccurring problems; 9) Solicit response.

The study concluded that hotel personnel tended to emphasize a corporate, rather than personal, identity when constructing responses to complaints in the set of responses. A. Thumvichit and C. Gampper [9] conducted a similar study but more profound in their analysis. They started by organizing the moves into three categories based on the recurring elements: obligatory, conventional, and optional moves. Furthermore, they postulated that each move encompasses several steps as in (5:10): 1) Salutation; 2) Acknowledging feedback (Expressing gratitude, valuing feedback, Expressing regret/concern/apology); 3) Brand positioning (Stating hotel's commitment, Confirming hotel's standard); 4) Dealing with complaints (Explaining causes of the incident, reporting action taken, Admitting mistakes; 5) Concluding remarks (Expressing gratitude, expressing regret/concern/apology, asking for a return visit, soliciting direct contact, promising to improve service; 6) Closing (Sign off, Signature, Job title, Contact information, Affiliation).

More recently, R. Van Herck et al. [4] analyzed the discourse structure of organizational email responses to customer complaints in a business-to-consumer context. They focused on rhetorical and linguistic patterns of this genre and compared it to related customer service genres. Data comprised 150 authentic English email responses to customer complaints from companies active in the UK. Results identified 6 moves and 19 sub-moves categorized into typical (*Greeting, Gratitude, Conclusion, and Sign-off/Signature*) and conventional sub-

moves (*Apology* and *Explanation*). This genre sets itself apart from others as it consists of a unique blend of interpersonal and transactional strategies as a response to negative feedback to avoid standardized, vague, and impersonal realizations of interpersonal moves.

Even though most studies are concerned with online complaints, they provided a detailed framework for the generic structure of written complaint responses. In fact, as part of their recommendations, all the researchers proposed that such a framework is applicable for other genres such as traditional letters, as is the case with our research [8. P. 63—62; 9. P. 16].

Notice that the studies reviewed have indicated that the available works focus primarily on spoken modes of responses. The bulk of work conducted on written responses, however, was dedicated to explore strategies and generic structure of responses through online channels like emails, blogs and websites. We notice also that no study has investigated such genre in the Arab context, hence, our study aims to bridge such gap by comparing the response letters among Arabic and English users. To this extent, the present study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the generic structure of response letters to complaints in Arabic and English? 2) What are the similarities and differences between Arabic and English in responding to complaint letters?

Methodology

Sample of the Study. The sample consisted of 120 participants divided equally into three groups: Arabic users, EFL learners and native English speakers. All participants were undergraduate university students (19—25 years old) majoring in different fields. They were selected randomly regardless of their social class and gender.

Data Collection and analysis. The researcher proposed three hypothetical situations where the variable of social distance was manipulated (ranging from high to low). Participants were required to choose only one situation and write a complaint about it. The data collected was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Using Swales' [6] and Bhatia's [5] approach of genre analysis, the researcher investigated the construction of complaint letters with special attention to the moves and strategies used in each genre.

Theoretical framework. Genre analysis is a specific form of discourse analysis and focuses on "the study of specialized writing in academic, professional and institutional contexts" [10. P. 210]. There are different approaches to genre analysis, but for our purposes, we restrict ourselves to the English for Specific Purposes approach (for an overview, see [10]. Swales [6. P. 58] defines genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes." He elaborates: "Exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience" [6. P. 58]. This rationale can be demonstrated by conducting a move analysis. A move

is “a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse” [6. P. 228].

Each move, i.e., each communicative function or intention, can be realized by the combination of one or more elements, called rhetorical strategies by Bhatia [5], steps by Swales [6], or sub-moves by others. In addition to the identification of specific moves, the typical linguistic features of each discourse unit are described as well, such as grammatical features (tense, voice, and aspect), phrase types, and word choice of each (sub)move. Hence, following Swales' [6] and Bhatia's [5] approach of genre analysis, we investigated the construction of responses letters to complaints with special attention to the linguistic signals used in each move.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis has revealed that responses to complaints as a genre also reflect a specific sequence of information, organizational pattern, or moves in Bhatia's terms, particularly seven moves including 18 steps. This, however, does not entail that each letter corresponds rigidly to this organizational model. Table 1 highlights the frequency rate of moves as used by each group.

Contact information, namely the name or job title of the sender and the receiver:

- (1) مدير الخطوط الجوية الجزائرية
..... الى السيد: (Arabic users) / *mudyr al khutot al jawia al jza'eryh ila asayed:*
..... / (Director of Algerian Airlines To Mr.)
- (2) Rafik S., To Mr (EFL learners)
- (3) Abraham J., G.M of the Twin Towers Hotel (Natives)

Most responses comprised contact information, particularly the sender's first or last name (or both). When responding to a customer, respondents add the addressee's names to show solidarity, especially among the Algerian sample. On the other hand, when addressing the neighbor, most participants opted out of this step move or settled with their names to introduce themselves. Arabic users integrated such a step move relatively more with (12) instances compared to (11) and (8) instances for EFL learners and natives.

Address comprises the place where the response was issued, like:

- (4)/ / الجزائر في (Arabic users) / *al jza'er fy/ (/Algiers in .../...../...../)*
- (5) Mascara, Algeria (EFL learners)
- (6) Lewes Road Brighton, BN4 4AT (Natives)

The majority of addresses provided only the province where the response was produced. Such a step was used significantly more when the writer responded to a customer than to a neighbor to give it a sense of formality. We noticed a similarity in the addresses structure among the Algerian sample. As such, both Arabic users and EFL learners tend to include the date besides the address, as shown in examples (4) and (5) above. Only natives provided a more detailed address (see example 6) when responding to a customer. The highest frequency was found among Arabic users with (9) instances, followed by natives (7) and EFL learners (5) instances.

Table 1. Component moves of Arabic and English response letters

Moves	Step-moves	Group		
		ALG	EFL	Native
1. Heading	a. Contact information	12	11	8
	b. Address	9	5	7
	c. Date	14	7	4
	d. Phone/e-mail	5	6	3
2. Subject	a. Introducing the topic	22	17	14
3. Salutation	a. Greeting	33	40	38
4. Acknowledging feedback	a. Expressing gratitude	3	9	11
	b. Valuing feedback	4	7	12
	c. Expressing regret/concern/apology	14	21	11
5. Dealing with complaint	a. Explaining causes of the incident	24	23	20
	b. Reporting action taken	11	7	16
	c. Admitting mistakes	9	12	10
	d. Challenging the claim	0	0	5
6. Concluding remarks	a. Expressing gratitude	4	5	8
	b. Expressing regret/concern/apology	9	11	12
	c. Offering compensation	14	16	11
	d. Soliciting direct contact	16	13	12
	e. Promise to improve service	7	9	10
7. Closing	a. Signing off	14	16	12
	b. Signature	3	2	1
	c. Affiliation	4	7	5

Source: compiled by N. Derki.

Date which refers to when the letter was issued, as in:

- (7) 12/06/2020 (*EFL learners and Arabic users*)
- (8) Date: июль 2, 2026 (*Natives*)

The only variance at the level of this step was seen in the way a date was written. Algerians preferred using digits, while natives delivered the date using letters. Arabic users outperformed the rest of the groups with (14) instances compared to (7) for EFL learners and (4) for natives.

Heading. Like the complaint letter, respondents usually start their response with a heading containing at least one of the following steps:

Phone and/email which are used to make sure communication is maintained, for instance,

- (9) رقم هاتف: (*Arabic users*) /hatif rakm/ (Phone number)
- (10) Tel/Fax 2235 2449 (*Both EFL learners and natives*)

Such a step move was also prominent when the addressee is a customer to maintain direct contact with him/her. However, respondents tend to provide their phone numbers inside the letter when addressing their neighbors, highlighted in the subsequent moves (soliciting direct contact). This was the least used step move, with EFL learners having the highest rate of (6) instances followed by Arabic users (5) and natives (3).

Subject. This component move is simple in structure as it comprises two to four words describing the goal behind writing the letter. We can distinguish between three forms of subject moves, namely:

Extended subject where the respondents use more words to accomplish this move like:

- (11) اعتذار: موضوع: (*Arabic users*) /mawduʕ: iʕtidar/ (Subject: apology)
- (12) Subject: Apology (*Both EFL learners and natives*)

Simple subject where the minimal words are used to convey the same meaning, for instance:

- (13) الرد (*Arabic users*) /arrad/ (Response)
- (14) Response (*Both EFL learners and natives*)

The simple or reduced subject typically occurred when responding to a neighbor, while the extended subject was reserved for responding to a customer. Such preference reflects the influence of the addressee's social rank on the structure of a given move. This move was used significantly more among the Algerian sample, with Arabic users having the highest rate (22) instances followed by EFL learners (17) and natives (14).

Salutation. The third move is to establish the relationship between the complaine and the complainer. Like the complaint letter, it comprises endearment terms like 'dear' and the name or the receiver's title or the Arabic equivalent 'azizi

...' (my dear ...). Other times, the salutation is expressed directly with no endearment terms like:

- (15) السلام عليكم ورحمة الله تعالى وبركاته (*Arabic users*) / *asalamu ṣalaykum warahmatu alali ḥala wabarakatuh*/ (Peace be upon you, and may God's mercy and blessings be upon you)
- (16) Good morning Mr. ... (*EFL learners*)
- (17) To whom it may concern (*Natives*)

As highlighted in the complaint letters, some cultural aspects, namely religion, often influence how Algerians (Arabic users) construct their salutation component move. As highlighted in example 15, the expression '*asalamo ṣalaykom*' (peace be upon you) is used to start the letter. Such expression is widely used during everyday interaction since it indicates respect, and Algerian Arabic users often integrate it in their writings.

When addressing an individual whose credentials are missing, natives and non-natives use contrasting strategies. For instance, Arabic users adopt politeness markers like '*akhi lkarim*' (my dear brother) as a tool for salutations to give a sense of solidarity to their response. On the other hand, natives use the expression (to whom it may concern), which is relatively neutral. Such move was used at a high-frequency rate where EFL learners were found to use it in all their letters with (40) instances compared to (38) for natives and (34) for Arabic users.

Acknowledging feedback. In this component move, the responder signals that the customer's comments are acknowledged. Such a move is crucial to stay engaged with clients and let them know that their feedback is well taken care of. This can be done via a variety of steps, mainly:

Expressing gratitude: It is which used to acknowledge the feedback reflected in the complaint letter, as in;

- (18) نود أن نشكرك على رسالتك بخصوص المشكلة التي واجهتك مؤخرا مع شركتنا (*Arabic users*) /*nawadu an nashkurak ṣela risalatik bikhusos almushkila alty wajahtka muekhran mṣa shrikatina*/ (We would like to thank you for your message regarding the problem you recently had with our company)
- (19) **Thank you** for letting us know about your experience with Tassili Airlines. (*EFL learners*)
- (20) **I would like to thank you** for your lovely letter, and I would like to sincerely apologize for what happened. (*Natives*)

All participants used this step move similarly with slight differences in frequency where natives used such step in (11) instances followed by EFL learners (9) and Arabic users (3).

Valuing feedback: It is used to acknowledge customers' feedback and reassure the complainer that his/her complaint is essential and it will be taken seriously, like:

- (21) ان ملاحظاتكم وتقييمكم المستمر ذو أهمية قصوى بالنسبة لنا لأنها تساعدنا على تحسين خدماتنا (*Arabic users*) /*ina mulahadatikum wataqyimakum almustamir du ahamyiha quswa binisba*

lanan lianhan tsaʃiduna ʃala tahsyn khadmatina / (Your feedback and continuous evaluation are of the utmost importance to us as they help us improve our services)

- (22) We believe **it is your right** to demand for better service (*EFL learners*)
 (23) Our organization strives to be the best in the business and it is **thanks to remarks like yours** that we will reach our goals. (*Natives*)

Valuing feedback generally takes the form of thanking the complainer for remarks and claiming that such remarks would benefit the complaine. Much of this step move was found when responding to customers (hotel and airline companies), but it has a lower frequency when addressing a neighbor. Natives used such steps significantly more with (12) instances, followed by EFL learners (7) and Arabic users (4).

Expressing regret/remorse: The writer uses expressions of regret, concern, or apology to assure the reviewer that the complaint concern the respondent:

- (24) *يوسفنا جداً أن نسمع عن تجربتك غير السارة مع شركتنا* (*Arabic users*) /*yu'esifuna jidan an nasmaʃa ʃen tajribatika ghyar asarah mʃa shrikatina* / (We are very sorry to hear about your unpleasant experience with our company)
 (25) **We are sorry** to hear that your stay at our establishment did not meet your expectations. (*Both EFL learners and natives*)

All participants showed remorse by apologizing (sorry) to make the addressee aware that what happened was not intentional. Such a step can be considered among the significant moves in responses to complaints considering its high rate of occurrence. EFL learners used this step significantly more with (21) instances compared to (14) for Arabic users and (11) for natives.

Dealing with the complaint. The fifth move is dealing with complaints which constitutes the crucial part of this genre [9. P. 7]. This move is employed to handle customers' complaints by using a variety of steps like explaining causes of the incident, admitting mistakes, and reporting action taken:

Explaining causes of the incident can be seen when the writer brings up information and/or pieces of evidence to elucidate the incident. This can be as simple as stating what happened. The writer may also depict another side of the story to inform the customer that there is a reason behind the incident, for instance:

- (26) *نحن الآن تحت إصلاحات تخص الفندق بأكمله، هذا ما سبب نقص في خدماتكم* (*Arabic users*) /*Naḥnu al-āna taḥta iʃlāḥāt takḥṣṣu al-funduq bi-akmilih, hādḥā mā sabba naqṣ fī khidamātikum.* / (We are currently under renovations concerning the entire hotel, which is what caused the shortage in your services)
 (27) **The reason why** he [the employee] was always leaving his station was to verify with other employees the arrival time of the plane. Please accept our sincere apologies. (*EFL learners*)
 (28) **I have** run a quick investigation to find out the reasons that led to this error and I came to the conclusion that it's due to a system malfunction. (*Natives*)

This step represents the response's core, where the respondent tries to explain how and why the problem occurred. Results showed that a high rate was found among Arabic users (24) and natives (23) instances compared to (20) for EFL

learners. Most participants, especially Algerians maintained the human error as the primary source of the problem. Assuming responsibility generates a feeling of professionalism and helps gain the customer back. Other participants, especially natives claimed their systems to be the source of the problem to avoid threatening their reputation.

Reporting actions taken: It is used to report what the respondent has done to address the incident, for example:

- (29) ونحيطك بأنه تم اتخاذ الإجراءات لإصلاح الخدمة ونعدكم انه لن يتكرر ما حدث مجدداً (Arabic users) /w nuhytuka bianhu tama itikhadu alejra'at leslah alkhidmah w naʕedkum anahu lan yatakrr ma hadth mujddan / (We inform you that measures have been taken to repair the service and we promise that this will not happen again)
- (30) **We have** temporarily suspended him [the employee] until we get to the bottom of the story (EFL learners)
- (31) Make sure that **we will** punish those who were responsible [for your inconvenience]. (Natives)

Reporting the action taken would help soothe the complainer. Such a step was used remarkably more by natives with (16) instances compared to Arabic users (11) and EFL learners (7). We noticed that most occurrences were found in the first and second situations. However, when addressing a neighbor, a different step move was used (promise a good behavior), which will be discussed below.

Admitting mistakes: where the respondents acknowledge that they are the source of the problem and then apologize for it:

- (32) نود أن نعتذر عن المشكلة التي سببناها لك (Arabic users) /nawadu an naʕeatdir ʕen almushklh alty sbbnaha lak/ (We would like to apologize for the trouble we caused you)
- (33) Let us first express our **sincere apologies** about the misunderstanding that occurred. (EFL learners)
- (34) **We are sorry** to hear that your stay at our establishment did not meet your expectations. (Natives)

All participants approached this step move similarly where an apology is used to acknowledge their mistakes. EFL learners used such step in (12) instances in contrast to (10) for natives and (9) for Arabic users.

Challenging the claim: The writer provides counter-arguments as highlighted in the below examples:

- (35) **Why don't you come face me** like a man and stop writing me like some high school teenagers do. (Natives)
- (36) I just want to tell you that **this was not me** I actually borrowed my apartment to my friends because I was out of town. (Natives)
- (37) **I am on my property** and I can do whatever I want. (Natives)

In such a step, the writer challenges the complaint by either ignoring the issue or counterarguing. Most instances were found when responding to a neighbor, as highlighted in examples (35–37) above. We noticed that participants used a

confronting tone in most cases, making this step move, often impolite. Only natives used this step move with (5) instances **compared to the other two groups**.

Concluding remarks. Concluding remark is the sixth move in responses to complaints where the responder finalizes his/her message. Often, the message concludes using expressions that leave the reader with a positive impression and aims to promote service recovery and image protection. This move includes several sub-moves, particularly:

Expressing gratitude: Before closing the message, the writer may express his/her second gratitude to create the last positive impression, as in:

- (38) وفي الأخير نشكركم على ملاحظاتكم وتقييمكم المستمر (Arabic users) /wafy al akhyr nshkurukum ʕela mluahzatikum wa taqyymikum almustamir/ (And finally, we thank you for your comments and continuous evaluation)
- (39) Again, we **thank you** for your kind remarks. (EFL learners)
- (40) Once again, I just want to **thank you** for reminding me (Natives)

All participants used such step similarly, with natives having a relatively high rate (8) followed by EFL learners (5) and Arabic users (4).

Expressing regret/concern/apology: similar to the previous step-move discussed earlier, the writer seeks to leave a good impression, like:

- (41) وفي الأخير تقبلوا منا أخلص عبارات الاعتذار (Arabic users) /wafî alakhyri taqbalu mina akhlasa ʕebarat al iʕetidar/ (Finally, accept our sincerest apologies)
- (42) Once again, **we are incredibly sorry** about what happened (EFL learners)
- (43) **I apologize** again for the inconvenience. (Natives)

Like the step found in the component move dealing with the complaint, the writer aims to confirm his/her regret, which may reassure the complainer that the problem will be solved. Natives used such a step slightly more with (12) instances compared to EFL learners (11) and Arabic users (9).

While expressing regret refers to the feeling of sadness about something that an individual did or did not do, admitting mistakes explicitly links the respondent to the problem. Both step moves, however, encompass an apology aimed to repair the relationship.

Offering a compensation: The writer suggests a variety of options to fix the problem as in

- (44) كتعويض سيكون لك الحق في الحصول على إقامة من الدرجة الأولى إذا سافرت معنا مرة أخرى (Arabic users) /kataʕwyd sayakun laka alhqu fy alhusuli ʕela iqamah min adarjah al ula eda safarta mʕena marah ukhra/ (As compensation you will be entitled to first class accommodation if you travel with us again)
- (45) **You will get** a 20 per cent off on your next ticket (EFL learners)
- (46) **We will refund** the entire amount of your stay, and credit your credit your card (100 USD), as a compensation for the disappointment you experienced. (Natives)

This step was used exclusively when addressing a customer. The compensations proposed ranged from simple discount to full refund. Arabic users and EFL learners were reasonable in their offers providing gift cards, discounts and

refund of the original sum. Natives, however, were more generous in the sense that occasionally they provided extra offers in addition to the complete refund. Conversely, participants offered invitations to a particular event (party or coffee shop) as a good gesture when responding to a neighbor as in:

- (47) (Arabic users) /urydu minka hudur walymah saghyrh *ʕela sharifi almusalaha bayny wa baynaka*/ (I want you to attend a small feast in honor of the reconciliation between you and me.)
 (48) **I would love to invite** you on a cup of coffee as an apology token (EFL learners)
 (49) Listen, **you are invited** to this weekend's party, maybe you can chill and have some fun (Natives)

EFL learners used this step more with (16) instances, followed by Arabic users (14) and natives (11).

Soliciting direct contact: It realized in the conclusion part of the message. This step firmly serves two primary communicative purposes. It offers a private channel of communication and a way to recover the relationship between the respondent and complainer. The writer simply asks the customer to contact him/her directly through telephone or email, and thus a phone number and/or an email address are provided, as in:

- (50) (Arabic users) /arju minkum *ʕedm ataradud fy atawasul mʕe khidmat al ʕumla' eda kana ʕendkm ay istifsarat*/ (Please do not hesitate to contact customer service if you have any questions)
 (51) **Please contact** our customer services for further information. (EFL learners)
 (52) Here is my phone number 555-14-214, please **call me**. (Natives)

Such step was used slightly more by Arabic users (16) followed by EFL learners (13) and natives (12).

Promising to improve: It occurs right before closing the message, where the writer promises to improve the area of service that the customer complains about. For the last time, the writer reassures that the unpleasant experience will not occur again, as in:

- (53) (Arabic users) *سيتم تعويضكم عن كل الأضرار مع ضمان تصحيح كل الأخطاء التي قد تتجم من جديد* /sayatimu *ʕewydukum ʕen kuli al adrar mʕe daman tasehyh kul al akhta' alty qad tanjum mn jdyd*/ (You will be compensated for all damages while ensuring that all errors that may arise will be corrected again)
 (54) I would also like to inform you that **we will take extra measures** to make sure that such errors **don't happen again** in the future. (EFL learners)
 (55) **We will make sure** that such incident **does not occur again** (Natives)

This step was used mainly when responding to customers, especially EFL learners and natives. When responding to their neighbor, however, the writer would promise not to commit the mistake again and improve his/her behavior as highlighted below:

- (56) *من اليوم فصاعدا لا يوجد حفلات وموسيقى وصخب /mina alyawmi fasaʕedan la yujad haflat w musyqa wa sakhab/* (From today onwards there will be no parties, music and hustle)
- (57) **I promise** you that **I will be** as respectful as I can be
- (58) **I promise** you that **from now forward** I will mind my manners.

Such a step was used almost equally with a slight advantage for natives (10) instances compared to (9) for EFL learners and (7) for Arabic users

Closing. The last move which appeared in our corpus is that of closing. It is used to signal the end of the letter. It is expressed through a variety of steps, particularly:

Signing off as in

- (59) *تقبلو احر التحيات (Arabic users) /taqabalu aahar atahyat/* (Accept our best regards)
- (60) Best regards *(Both EFL learners and natives)*

Such a step was commonly used by almost all participants, especially EFL learners with (16) instances, followed by Arabic users (14) and natives (12). However, most of the occurrences were found in responses addressed to a customer. Since the response aims to recover the excellent image of the institution (hotel or company), signing off was added to maintain the formal aspect of the letter. On the other hand, most letters addressed to a neighbor lacked such a step simply because the respondents did not consider it essential.

Signature, which adds a bit of formality to the response, for instance:

- (61) *الامضاء (Arabic users) /al imda'/* (signature)

This step was the least used, especially among natives (1) instance, while Arabic users had EFL learners slightly higher rate of (3) and (2) instances, respectively.

- (62) Signature *(Both EFL learners and natives)*

Affiliation where the writer may include his/her corporate affiliation in the closing part, like:

- (63) *..... السيد مدير فرع (Arabic users) /asayrd mudyr farʕe /* (Branch manager)
- (64) General manager + signature *(Natives)*

This step was used exclusively for responses addressed to the customer to give them a sense of professionalism. EFL learners outperformed the rest of the participants with (7) instances, followed by natives (5) and Arabic users (4) instances. Table 2 below summarizes the moves and step moves used by each group throughout the three situations.

Table 2 above highlights some similarities and differences between the three groups. Some component moves like: salutation and dealing complaints were used significantly more than other moves by all participants. As far as the first situation is concerned, all three groups show a high tendency to include the salutation and dealing with complaint moves. Similarly, moves like concluding remarks were less strongly used, with EFL learners slightly outperforming the rest of the participants.

The only difference was at the level of heading and subject where natives were found to use them relatively less than the Algerian sample.

Table 2. Frequency of moves and step moves in response letters

Category	Heading	Subject	Salutation	Acknowledging feedback	Dealing with complaint	Concluding remarks	Closing
Situation 1							
ARB%	65	60	100	60	100	60	60
EFL %	70	50	100	45	100	65	70
NS %	55	40	100	80	100	80	70
Situation 2							
ARB%	70	45	100	45	100	50	40
EFL %	40	60	100	40	100	70	50
NS %	35	50	100	60	100	60	50
Situation 3							
ARB%	40	20	100	40	100	30	15
EFL %	30	30	100	10	100	40	10
NS %	25	10	80	20	100	40	10

Source: compiled by N. Derki

In the second situation, we notice the frequency starts to decline, especially at the heading level, acknowledging feedback and closing. Despite the relative balance use of most moves among the participants, only headings were significantly less used by natives. In the third situation, we notice a significant decline in the frequency of moves, especially at the heading, subject, acknowledging feedback, concluding remarks, and closing. To this extent, we can assume that the addressee’s social rank plays an essential role in structuring the response as the number of moves used starts to decrease, and fewer component moves are used.

Responses to complaints in Arabic and English were found to follow a specific generic structure encompassing seven moves: heading, subject, salutation, acknowledging feedback, dealing with the complaint, concluding remarks and closing. Extending A. Thumvichit and C. Gampper’s [9] framework, the heading and subject were recognized as new moves in addition to the step move challenging the claim which was exclusively used by natives when responding to their neighbor’s complaints.

Table 2 highlights the overall frequency of each move across the three groups, and using A. Thumvichit and C. Gampper’s [9] typicality scale, we conclude the following:

Obligatory. Using Thumvichit and Gampper’s (2019) definition (a cut-off point of 90%), only two moves can be regarded as obligatory: salutation and dealing

with complaints since they appear in every complaint letter with a (100%) frequency rate.

Conventional. Since the cut-off point for conventional moves was set at 70% based on Thumvichit and Gampper's (2019) framework, we notice that no move qualify for such term since all the remaining moves were used less than (70%).

Optional. Based on the results, five moves qualify for this term: heading, subject, acknowledging feedback, concluding remarks and closing. Algerians outperformed the natives in terms of headings and subject with an average of (58%) for Arabic users compared to (46%) for EFL learners and natives (38%). Similarly, Arabic users outperform the rest in terms of subject move with (41%) compared to EFL learners (40%) and natives (30%). Natives, on the other hand, tended to use only acknowledging feedback more than the others with (53%) compared to (48%) for Arabic users and (31%) for EFL learners. As far as the closing component move, there was a slight difference for EFL learners and natives (43%) compared to (38%) for Arabic users.

To sum up, our analysis revealed that responses to complaints in Arabic and English have similar generic structure. Our results showed that moves in response letters are categorized into obligatory (salutation and dealing with a complaint) and optional (heading, subject, acknowledging feedback, and closing). Although concluding remarks were used on a slight high frequency, we cannot consider it as conventional since it does not fully meet the requirement. Our analysis also highlights some new moves not found in previous research, mainly the heading and subject and the step move (challenging the claim). This step was used mainly by natives when responding to their neighbor's complaints.

Equivalently, there were some similarities and differences at the level of response letters. Starting with the linguistic signals corresponding to each step move highlighted in Table 3 below, the subsequent section delves discusses the main insights

Similar to complaints, the Algerian participants relied on introductory terms while structuring the heading and subject component moves. Unlike complaints, a new element was recorded which that of (name of organization). Such term is used exclusively when the writer is responding on behalf of an establishment (airline company or hotel). We notice that natives outperformed Algerians at this level. To compensate this, we noticed that the first personal (we) was used relatively more among EFL learners than among natives.

At the level of contact information, we noticed how natives provided email information which was totally absent among EFL learners. This can be explained if we reflect on the influence of society. In Algeria for instance, most institutions favor direct contact through mobile rather than emails. Such preference, naturally, influenced the participants' choice of what communication channel to add in the heading.

Table 3. Linguistic signs of response letters

Moves and step moves	Word combination		Frequency		
	English	Arabic	ARB	EFL	NA
Heading					
Contact information	From (name + surname)	من السيد	8	3	1
	Name + surname	صفة عمل المرسل	4	6	3
	Name of an organization			2	4
Address	Building number	رقم البناية + الشارع	2	1	5
	Province	اسم المقاطعة	7	4	2
Date and place	State or province	اسم المقاطعة في	4	4	3
	Day/month/year	يوم/شهر/سنة	10	3	1
Phone/e-mail	Mobile	هاتف	3	6	1
	Fax	فاكس	1	0	0
	E-mail	اميل	1	0	2
Subject					
Introducing the topic	Subject: apology	الرد	6	3	0
		موضوع: اعتذار	11		
	Response letter	الموضوع: رد على شكوى	3	7	6
	Response	الموضوع: طلب اعتذار	2	5	8
Salutation					
Greeting	Dear,	تحية طيبة أما بعد،	24	30	17
	Dear + name	السلام عليكم،	9	6	13
Acknowledging feedback					
Expressing gratitude	Thank you for	نود أن نشكر	1	4	7
	Taking the time to	أشكركم على هذه الرسالة	1	1	2
	We appreciate your	شكرا على وقتك	1	3	2
Valuing feedback	Your feedback helps us	ذو أهمية قصوى	3	3	8
	Thanks to your feedback	مهم	1	4	4
Expressing regret/apology	Sorry to hear	يؤسفنا جدًا أن نسمع	8	11	1
	Sorry for your trouble	ارجوا أن تقبل أسفنا	5	1	3
	Please accept our apologies	ونريد اننا نعرب عن اعتذارنا	1	10	7
Dealing with complaint					
Explaining causes of the incident	The thing is	حيث ان	12	2	8
	We had	عندما تحققنا وجدنا	2	10	7
	It was not	نحنيطكم علما	10	9	5
Reporting action taken	In order to	وناكد انه	7	2	8
	We have	لقد تم	1	5	3
	For this, we	لقد باشرنا	3	0	4
Admitting mistakes	Please accept our apology	نعتذر عن المشكلة التي سببناها لك	4	4	1
	I am sorry	اعترف بالأخطاء البادرة منا	2	5	4
	Sorry, that	اعترف بأنني مخطئ	3	3	5
Challenging the claim	I do not believe	ملكنتي الخاصة	1	0	4
	I am within my right	لا دخل لأي أحد في شؤوني	1	0	1

End of Table 3

Moves and step moves	Word combination		Frequency		
	English	Arabic	ARB	EFL	NA
Concluding remarks					
Expressing gratitude	Thank you	نشكرك	4	3	5
	Once again, thank you			2	3
Expressing regret/concern/apology	Once again, we are incredibly sorry	تقبلوا منا أخلص عبارات الاعتذار	9	10	9
	I apologize again			1	2
Offering compensation	It will be credited to your	كتعويض	3	1	3
	As a compensation	سوف يتم تعويضكم	7	8	2
	Please accept this	مستعدين للتعويض عنك	4	9	4
Soliciting direct contact	Please contact us	يرجى عدم التردد في الاتصال بنا	8	4	1
	Please call me	ارقامنا تحت تصرفكم وقتما شئتم.	5	2	1
	Contact our customer service	الرجاء الاتصال بنا	3	6	9
Promise to improve service	Becoming better	تصحيح كل الأخطاء	2	5	3
	I'll make it a better place	من اليوم فصاعدا لا يوجد	2	0	2
	improve our service further	وأعدك ألا يتكرر	3	4	5
Closing					
Signing off	Best regards	تقبلوا أحر التحيات	4	11	4
	Sincerely	تحيات	9	1	3
	Yours sincerely	شكرا	2	4	5

Source: compiled by N. Derki.

Once again, we notice how Arabic users have the tendency to borrow expressions from their culture ‘assalamo alaykom’ to fulfill the communicative purpose of certain step like the salutation.

Another important remark was at the level of challenging the claim. We already highlighted that natives were more willing to challenge the complaint than the Algerians. There was a difference in the way each group expressed such step. While Arabic users were somehow polite, 3 instances out of 4 were extremely impolite among the natives as they introduced profane expressions (curses).

We noticed that the two-words subject had the highest rate. That is because participants wanted to highlight the goal of the letter in a precise and concise manner. We noticed that such step move was used mainly by natives as they thanked the writer directly unlike Arabic users. Such an attitude can be traced back to the natives’ high pragmatic awareness. Sometime the language influences the way certain step moves are structured. For examples when soliciting direct contact, the same meaning which is expressed in 8 words can be said in 4 words. this is mainly because compared to Arabic, English is more concise.

Similar to complaints, the responses were found to be influenced by various factors particularly culture and social distance. Such an influence appears in how certain moves are constructed. For instance, Algerian Arabic users often integrate some religious expressions in moves like the opening and explaining. The social distance between the sender and the receiver was also found to influence the overall appearance of the response. Such claim was verified when considering the responses addressed to a customer compared to those addressed to a neighbor. Since a happy customer means good business, all responses (from the Airline company and the hotel) were formal and filled with politeness markers. However, impoliteness was recorded in the third situation as some of the natives challenged the claims in the complaints and used profane language in the process. The subsequent section will delve deeper into how our participants used mitigation to save their face while responding.

Conclusions

The present research was the first attempt, according to the researcher's knowledge, to explore the generic structure of Arabic response letters to complaints. By comparing the Algerian Arabic users and English natives, our analysis revealed that responses to complaint letters written in Arabic and English generally adhere to the same generic principles. Our results have identified the heading and subject as two new component moves. Our results have also shown that moves within responses to complaint letters can be obligatory or optional. Similarities in structuring a particular move were traced back to the conventionality of letter writing. Differences, however, were related to cultural beliefs, sociological and psychological factors.

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