

## Complaining as a face-threatening act: A look into AI complaints

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** ChatGPT, complaining, face-threatening, politeness, speech act

This paper aims to conduct an analysis of the complaints as provided by an AI tool, ChatGPT. First, an overview of complaining speech act as a face-threatening act is provided regarding the multiple ways how it is defined and classified, as well as its relation to directness levels. Second, the complaining-realizing strategies with a wide range of modification devices have been summarized and applied as frameworks for scrutinizing AI complaints. Third, the perusal of the complaints gathered from ChatGPT indicates its general adherence to the three-part structure of complaining set, Buffer, Complaint, and Negotiation. The analysis also recorded the implementation of modification tools to show concerns for the interlocutors' faces.

### Introduction to complaining

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, “complain” is “to say that you are annoyed, unhappy or not satisfied about somebody/something” (Oxford University Press, n.d.), whereas the Cambridge Dictionary determines “complain” as “to say that something is wrong or not satisfactory” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-a), and “complaining” as “the act of saying that something is wrong or not satisfactory” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-b). It can be seen from the definitions that “complain” is to express one’s disapproval towards someone or something that does not meet one’s expectations or leads to damaging consequences. In general, “complaining” can be expounded as a speech act in which the speaker voices their dissatisfaction towards unsatisfactory or erroneous states of affairs.

Definitions of complaining normally revolve around the notion of “expectation” as suggested in the work by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987, p. 195). They characterize a complaint as a product when an interlocutor (complainant) anticipates a positive outcome to take place or a negative outcome to be avoided, and those expectations are somehow not met, the hearer (the complaine) is typically the one who should be held accountable for having “enabled or failed to prevent the offensive event”. In a later work, (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993), complaining is specified as the speech act that occurs when

the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance-censure-as a reaction to a past or ongoing action, the consequences of which are perceived by S as affecting her unfavorably. This complaint is usually addressed to the hearer (H) whom the S holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action. (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993, p. 108)

As complaining is a response to a “socially undesirable behavior”, which is a prerequisite to the complaint, its feature of justifiability is also highlighted (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). According to Trosborg (1995, p. 311), complaining is backward-looking as in this speech act, “a speaker passes a moral judgment on something which (he/she believes) the complainees has already done or failed to do, or is in the process of doing”. She continues to clarify that complaining is an illocution in which the displeasure and negative emotions, and so on are displayed by the complainant (the speaker) in the direction of the complainable, and for which the complainees (the hearer) assumes the responsibility in a direct or indirect manner. Similarly, complaining is viewed as “an expression of dissatisfaction addressed by an individual A to an individual B concerning behavior on the part of B that A feels is unsatisfactory” (Laforest, 2002, p. 1596). More concretely, person B, who is accountable for the unsatisfactory behavior, is regarded as the issue’s root cause. As elaborated by Laforest (2002, p. 1596), unsatisfactory behavior is the conduct that deviates from social norms and does not live up to the complainer’s expectations for his or her engagement with the complainees, and “failure to meet expectations is a precondition for the implementation of the act of complaining”.

Heinemann and Traverso (2009, p. 2383) state that “almost any turn-at-talk that reports something with even the slightest negative valence can be taken by a recipient as being complaint implicative”. Nevertheless, as Edwards (2005) clarifies the speakers may counter to the belief that they are making complaints, “rather than simply reporting some observations” (2005, p. 7). He continues to explain that as a complaint entails some form of “grievance,” anything that a speaker would attempt to downplay – such as any form of prompted or attitudinal foundation for what they are claiming – becomes readily significant. (Edwards, 2005, p. 7). In the same vein, Sacks (1995, p. 359) justifies that a complaint is normally comprised of “a piece of praise plus ‘but’ plus something else”, where it is frequently not immediately clear that a complaint has been made. In other words, if it were on its own, it would not be a complaint. Wierzbicka (2003, p. 181) characterizes complaining as “verbal”, “fully intentional” and indicating “something bad” happening to the speaker. However, for this characterization, the connection between the complainees and the activity that is being complained about is still left unclear.

It can be acknowledged that complaining is an indication of dissatisfaction. However, dissatisfaction does not necessarily imply that the speaker is dissatisfied; it can be “a strategy employed to achieve some desired goal” (Kowalski, 2003, p. 28). In fact, complaining can be deemed an expression of discontent, whether or not it is subjectively felt, performed to discharge sentiments, or attain goals, interpersonally or intrapsychically, or both. (ibid.)

Olshtain and Cohen (1981) observe that speech acts are not normally produced alone; instead, they are incorporated into “speech act sets” or speech act formulas. This idea of a “speech act set” relates to the fact that each speech act can be created by having two or more discourse

strategies integrated, some of which may represent different types of speech acts. To illustrate, a complaint can be “*The food in the restaurant was dreadful* [complaining]”; nevertheless, it can also take the form of a bigger “speech act set,” as displayed in this instance “*The restaurant’s food was really terrible. Stay away and find another place to eat.* [Complaining and Suggesting]. (Vásquez, 2011, p. 1708). Likewise, Murphy and Neu (1996) provide further explanations as follows:

A speech act set is a combination of speech acts that, taken together, make up a complete speech act. That is, it is often the case that one utterance alone does not perform a speech act. Some examples are apologies and invitations where several utterances are necessary for the intended illocutionary act to be accomplished. (1996, p. 214)

### *Complaining categorization*

As stated by Decock and Depraetere (2018, p. 34), regarding the investigation of complaints’ directness, the terms “directness” and “indirectness” are employed in most complaint research to indicate linguistic variations (i.e., how is the complaint worded?) and the politeness impact.

Boxer (2010) provides a distinction between “direct complaint” (DC) and “indirect complaint” (IC). Specifically, a DC can be considered a complaint filed towards the interlocutor who is either thought to be at fault for the transgression or who is in a position to fix it. When it is expected or regarded as appropriate given the setting, one is heard to exclaim DC (Boxer, 2010, p. 164). Phrased another way, DCs are viewed as unfavorable conclusions made about the complainee responsible for the complainable (e.g., complaining regarding the poor quality of service to customer care) (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). On the other hand, IC is addressed towards a person who is neither accountable for the offense nor in charge of fixing it. It is sometimes possible for ICs to be considered similar to “griping”, “grumbling”, or even “bitching” or “bellyaching”, which are colloquial expressions and groups with similar semantic content. (Boxer, 2010, p. 165). In other words, IC, or trouble sharing, entails passing judgment negatively on an unfavorable event to an outsider who is not held accountable for it (e.g., complaining made to a classmate about their teacher) (Boxer, 1993). In contrast to DCs, which are typically made to face an issue with the goal of having it resolved (Brown & Levinson, 1987), ICs are frequently made to express frustration and secure agreement (Boxer, 1993).

Thus, the distinction made by Boxer (Boxer, 2010, pp. 164–165) pertains to variations in the complaint scenario concerning the “participation framework”, revolving around who is present at the time of a complaint. However, this differentiation has been questioned by some researchers. For instance, although the complaint’s direct recipient is another person or “third party,” as Heinemann (2009) noted, in some ICs, it is possible for the party responsible for the behavior to be available in person during the interaction. As the research has mostly focused on complaints in spoken conversations, Vásquez (2011, p. 1709) raises doubts about the cases of online complaints. Cases of complaints made online via various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) where participants are frequently not co-available, that is, occupying an identical physical location, should be taken into account. Phrased another way, it is doubtful whether internet complaints typically take a direct or indirect approach.

Marian et al. (2023, p. 127) demonstrate that “the distinction between direct and indirect complaints is not always clear at the onset, but, rather, it is negotiated *in situ* by the participants.” [original italics emphasis]. They also propose another category of complaints, which is that of “hybrid complaints”. In their study, hybrid complaints are the cases when clients complain about problems that are not directly connected to the service but for which there is some doubt as to who is to blame for the problems. In contrast to direct complaints where the complainant accuses the recipient directly, this sequence concerns inclinations toward the likelihood of assigning fault and accountability. Hybrid complaints are viewed as “the kind of interactional work participants do in order not to end up in direct complaints, or to transform potentially direct ones into indirect ones” (2023, p. 136).

Another way of viewing directness and indirectness is suggested by Decock and Depraetere (2018) as when they reassess the two notions, they “are not referring to Boxer’s distinction, but to work on complaints which uses these terms to describe linguistic features of complaints” (p. 34). They claim that the clarification of the “directness” and “indirectness” concepts is conducted with the interactional approach taken into account to categorize and taxonomize them in a clear and useful manner. This entails being precise about the aspects the labels cover and outlining how they relate to politeness. The ultimate goal is to create a practical tool that enables comprehensive analysis of various speech acts across languages from the angles of “directness” and “indirectness” (ibid., p. 34).

### *The face threat of complaining*

According to Henry and Ho (2010, p. 841) complaining belongs to the kind of acts that “exhibit, consciously and unconsciously, the psychological state of the aggrieved party”. Therefore, one of the major characteristics of complaining is that it is an act that can threaten the interlocutor’s face (Chen et al., 2011, p. 255). In fact, the speaker’s unfavorable perception regarding the recipient and ethical assessment endangers the hearer’s “positive face” with the desire to be respected or valued. Additionally, when a complaint is coupled with a demand for compensation, it often presents a risk to the addressee’s “negative face” with the urge to be “free from imposition” (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Because a direct complaint entails an outright incongruence by indicating the complainer’s unhappiness and discontentment with the addressee’s unwanted behavior, it can harm his/her “positive face” as seen from the standpoint of Anglo-Saxon culture (Minh & Thuy, 2021, p. 44). An IC, on the one hand, is made in an effort to find common ground and may therefore really contribute to fostering unity and fortifying social ties (Boxer, 1993). However, ICs can also threaten the speaker’s “positive face”. The complainant runs the danger of coming across as unkind or devoid of empathy by providing unfavorable judgments. (Kozlova, 2004). Besides, Kozlova (2004, pp. 86–87) also suggests that ICs can ruin the recipient’s “negative face” as they can be characterized as the acts in which the speakers “predicate some future act A of H [the hearers], and in so doing put some pressure on H to do (or refrain from doing) the act A” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). To fulfill the recipient’s wish “not to be impinged on” (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the speaker can demonstrate his/her concern for the hearer’s desires by employing negative politeness strategies.

Leech (1983, p. 104) categorizes the speech events according to four groups, including “competitive”, “convivial”, “collaborative”, and “conflictive” regarding the relationship between the illocutionary goal and the social goal of preserving respect and equilibrium between the speaker and the hearer. Complaining is a member of the “conflictive” group, where the illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal. He elaborates that while the first two types concern politeness, the other two do not. Therefore, as regards the conflictive functions, “politeness is out of the question” and “to threaten or curse someone in a polite manner is virtually a contradiction in terms” (Leech, 1983, p. 105). As a result, discussing mitigating factors concerning the act of filing a complaint seems to be somewhat paradoxical. Nevertheless, the need for such tactics to prevent interpersonal communication disputes is evident. (Trosborg, 1995, p. 312).

### *Complaining and directness levels*

As suggested by Chen et al. (2011, p. 255), “complaint can be addressed at different directness levels”. They provide a further explanation that based on the three factors – social distance (D), relative power (P), and ranking of imposition (R), a sensible complainant will determine the severity of such a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). On that basis, the complainant relies on this assessment to decide upon choosing not to complain, complain “bald-on-record”, or complain with “redressive actions” (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). Indeed, the choices are made by adopting a specific course for making decisions (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 60). Regarding complaining, the set of decisions is actually made in a series of considerations for payoffs. To be more concrete, if the complainant decides to take remedial action, his or her choices can be either positive or negative in terms of politeness. A speaker who chooses a positive politeness orientation would presumably still choose to explicitly address both the socially unacceptable behavior and the hearer while also expressing some shared concern and empathy, which reduces the offense. On the other hand, the approach to carrying out complaining may manifest as a toned-down statement if the decision is negative politeness-focused. These mitigated tactics might be implemented as a typical request for repairs, if necessary, or as a remark that refers to the socially unacceptable behavior but does not address the hearer specifically. Even when the complaint is made directly, it appears that in the negative politeness orientation, mitigation may reduce the peril and diminish the impact on the compensation. (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993, pp. 109–110).

Similarly, Trosborg (1995, pp. 312–313) claims that although filing a complaint is inherently an impolite act, there are mitigating devices that a complainant might employ to alleviate the impacts of the complaint on the complaine. She goes on to explain that there are various options available if the complainer wants to avoid the complaine’s face-to-face confrontation.

According to Decock & Depraetere (2018, p. 34), the dichotomy between “direct” and “indirect” strategies and/or the separation between various levels of “directness” is a common foundation for taxonomies of speech act realization techniques. Without drawing a clear differentiation between “direct” and “indirect” techniques, complaint realization tactics have traditionally been characterized using a directness scale. Two notable measures of directness in the study of complaints are the one created by House and Kasper (1981) in their work on complaining and requesting in English and German, and the other by Trosborg (1995) in her

study on complaining, requesting, and apologizing in English by native and non-native speakers. In detail, House and Kasper (1981) suggest an eight-level scale of indirectness-directness on which eight strategies of complaining are placed, ranging from the complainer's implying of the offense to his/her explicit assertion of the complainable and the complaine'e's wrongdoing. Similarly, Trosborg (1995) summarizes four major complaint strategies, encompassing "no explicit reproach", "expression of annoyance or disapproval", "accusation" and "blame".

### *Semantic formulae of complaining*

Another way of examining the complaining speech act is by analyzing its constituents, which are incorporated in creating a complaint. Phrased another way, these elements can also be considered the complaining realizing strategies.

It is testified by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) that speech acts are normally not formed independently; instead, they are established as a component of "speech act sets" or speech act formulas/ semantic formulae. A "speech act set" is the potential of creating an individual speech act through the combination of several speech acts, some of which may be associated with multiple kinds of speech acts. In a similar fashion, Murphy and Neu (1996) provide more support for the speech act set phenomenon when they observe that "it is often the case that one utterance alone does not perform a speech act" (1996, p. 214).

Schaefer (1982) offers nine categories based on the semantic formulae of complaints. These categories include "opener", "orientation", "act statement", "justification of the speaker" "justification of the addressee", "remedy", "threat", "closing" and "valuation" (1982, pp. 14–15)

In their investigation into the speech acts of complaining as performed by Korean learners of English and native American English speakers, Murphy and Neu (1996) bring to light four kinds of complaining formulae, namely "an explanation of purpose", "a complaint", "a justification" and "a candidate solution: request".

For the purpose of categorizing complaint realizations in business letters of complaint delivered by Korean and American executives, Park et al. (1998) adopt the framework of semantic formulae which embrace the components, including "identification of the problem", "discussion of relevant information", "request for action", "topic shift", and "buffer".

More recently, Zhang (2011) states that a complaint is made up of six semantic portions: an opener, an orientation, a justification, a remedy, an act statement, a closing, and an opener. Both the "act statement" and "remedy" components out of the six are seen to be highly significant. There are three possibilities to incorporate the two crucial elements of a complaint: (1) merging the act statement and remedy; (2) employing the act statement solely; and (3) adopting the remedy independently.

To be more concise, Rhurakvit (2011) segments complaints into three primary tactics: buffer [B], complaint [C], and negotiation [N]. These three strategies are subsequently further split into fourteen sub-strategies. The strategies and sub-strategies of complaining are illustrated in Table 1.



**Table 1.**

Semantic formulae of complaining (Rhurakvit, 2011, pp. 67–68)

<b>Speech act set of Complaining</b>	
<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Sub-strategies</b>
<b>(1) Buffer [B]</b>	B1. Apologizing as a Negative Politeness Device B2. Complimenting B3. Greeting B4. Thanking B5. Forgiving B6. Provision of Context
<b>(2) Complaint [C]</b>	C1. Expression of Disappointment C2. Direct Complaint C3. Negative Assessment C4. Using Irony C5. Challenging C6. Warning or Threat
<b>(3) Negotiation [N]</b>	N1. Suggestion N2. Request for Repair

It can be seen that the taxonomy as proposed by Rhurakvit (2011) clearly characterizes the three common components of a complaint act, with the complaint being the head, surrounded by the buffers and negotiations. These bordering elements can function as “supportive moves” supplementing backup for the head act of complaint. These are also considered “external modifications” (Kraft & Geluykens, 2002; Tamanaha, 2003; Sato, 2010; Meisl, 2010) serving to supplement backup for the complaining act to be effectively carried out. Furthermore, according to Meisl (2010), wielding these external modification devices displays the speaker’s “concern for the hearer’s face” (2010, pp. 16–17).

#### *Internal modification for complaining*

House and Kasper (1981) assert that the quantity and type of “modality markers” found in an utterance can have a significant impact on the perceived “politeness” of that utterance (1981, p. 166). Consistent with this perspective, Trosborg (1995) maintains that “one and the same directness level of a complaint may involve disparate face-threats dependent on the inclusion of modifiers in terms of modality markers” (1995, p. 327) These modality markers can be classified as “downgraders” and “upgraders”. While “downgraders” assist in alleviating the conditions that led to the offense taking place and, as a result, lessen the amount of responsibility that can be placed on the complainant, whereas “upgraders” exacerbate the offense and consequently amplify the possible adverse effects of the complaint on the complaine. (1995, p. 327). Alternatively stated, while the presence of downgraders can soothe or lessen the impact of a complaint, the insertion of upgraders could escalate or reinforce it.

The modality markers employed can function as internal modifiers to soften or aggravate the effect of the complaining act, which in turn creates disparate politeness effects in exchanges. It should be noted that, as for the speech act set of complaining, the internal modifiers can occur not only in the complaint [C] but also in the supportive moves of buffer [B] and negotiation [N]. A detailed demonstration of internal modification devices can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

Modality markers as internal modifiers (DeCapua, 1989; House & Kasper, 1981; Trosborg, 1995; Yang, 2016)

Modality markers (Internal modifiers)		Functions	Examples
<b>Downgraders [D]</b>	D1. Politeness markers (usually words)	to display respectfulness to the Hearer (H) or to invite H's cooperation	<i>please, help, for me</i>
	D2. Play-downs (syntactical devices)	to minimize the perlocutionary impact a statement is anticipated to exert on the H	<u>past tense</u> <i>I wondered if...</i> <u>durative aspect marker</u> <i>I was wondering if</i> <u>negation</u> <i>Mightn't it be a good idea...</i> <u>interrogative sentence</u> <i>Mightn't it be a good idea?</i> <u>modal</u> <i>Mightn't</i>
	D3. Consultative devices	to engage H and solicit H's cooperation.	<i>Would you mind if ...?, Do you know...?, I wonder if..., Could I...?, Can I...?, Can we...?</i>
	D4. Hedges (adverbials)	to refrain from detailed specifications	<i>kind of, sort of, somehow, and so on, and what have you, more or less, rather, some, a while, look, suggest, seem</i>
	D5. Downtoners (sentence modifiers)	to diminish the influence of the utterance	<i>just, simply, possibly, perhaps, rather, maybe, possibility, may</i>
	D6. Minus committers (sentence modifiers)	to indicate that the speech is the S's individual point of view.	<i>I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion, I'm afraid</i>
	D7. Agent avoiders (syntactic devices)	to avoid a confrontation by leaving out the S or H	passive, (imperative) impersonal constructions applying neutral agents, such as <i>people, they, one, you</i>
	D8. Cajolers	to enhance, construct, or preserve consensus between S and H	<i>you know, you see, I mean</i>
	D9. Appealers	to call upon the H's understanding, induce an indication from the H	<i>okay, right, don't you think?</i>
	D10. Understaters (adverbial modifiers)	to understate the present situation of affairs	<i>a little bit, a second, not very much, just a trifle</i>
	D11. Hesitators	to signify irresolution	<i>erm, er, uh,</i>
	D12. Scope-staters	to represent S's personal perception regarding the current state of circumstances.	<i>I'm afraid you're in my seat; I'm a bit disappointed that you...; I'm not happy about the fact</i>



Modality markers (Internal modifiers)	Functions	Examples	
		<i>that you...</i>	
D13. Forewarners (disarmament devices)	to notify H to forestall H's unwanted responses.	<i>far be it from me to belittle your efforts, <b>but</b>..., you're a nice guy, Jim, <b>but</b>..., this may be a bit boring to you, <b>but</b> ...</i>	
Upgraders [U]	U1. Exclamations	to display S' intense emotions	<i>Oh no, Oh my god</i>
	U2. Overstaters (adverbial modifiers)	to overstate the actuality indicated in the remark	<i>absolutely, purely, terribly, frightfully, horribly, always</i>
	U3. Intensifiers (adverbial modifiers)	to intensify particular components of the utterance	<i>very, so, such, quite, really, just, indeed,</i>
	U4. Plus committers (sentence modifiers)	to convey S's profound commitment to the state of affairs.	<i>I'm sure, I'm certain, I'm positive, it's obvious, surely, certainly, positively, obviously, unfortunately</i>
	U5. Lexical intensifier (semantic words)	to mark the S's strongly negative attitude	<u>swear words</u> <i>bloody, stupid, damn, idiot, fuck, ass, the hell</i>
	U6. Aggressive interrogatives	to overtly include the H, and increase the effect of the S's speech on H.	<i>Why haven't you informed me in advance?, Why, Are you kidding?, Are you serious?, What happened?</i>
	U7. Rhetorical appeals	to deter H from refusing to endorse the current situation.	<i>You must understand that..., anyone can see that..., it's common knowledge...</i>

### *An analysis of AI complaints*

AI in English language education settings has been found to cut both ways, which has been claimed by Sienes & Sarsale (2024) to not only bring about enormous offerings to educational advancement, but also trigger “professional and ethical threats to the students, the teachers, and the teaching-learning process” (2024, p. 37). There have been quite a lot of studies on the applicability of AI tools in general and ChatGPT in particular in the language teaching and learning processes, ranging from those centering on the teachers' evaluations concerning employing the tools in language assessment and teaching (Chi, 2024; Yen et al., 2024), coupling with those focusing on utilizing the tools in test design (Thao, 2023), in teaching language skills (Hien, 2024), in relating to a specific teaching approach (Tuyen et al., 2024) or in generally sharpening learners' digital capacity (Nghì & Phuc, 2023). However, research on the employment of AI tools in studying linguistics has remained an under-researched matter.

This part is devoted to presenting our scrutinization of complaints as filed by AI regarding the two aspects, (1) the semantic formulae and (2) the internal modification as depicted in **Table 1** and Table 2. The purpose is to examine whether the complaints made by AI adhere to the frameworks as drawn upon from the literature review.

The AI tool employed is ChatGPT-4o mini (<https://chatgpt.com>) which was required to carefully read and supply what it normally says to make a verbal complaint for the ten situations. The ten complaint-triggered scenarios in the field of hospitality and the

correspondent complaints are demonstrated in Table 3, with the situations being marked from S1 to S10, and the complaints being coded from CR1 to CR10.

**Table 3.**

Complaints by ChatGPT in each situation

Scenarios	Complaints by ChatGPT
S1. The bed is unmade and the bathroom is messy	CR1. "Hello, I just checked into my room, and I noticed that the bed is unmade and the bathroom is quite messy. Could you please arrange for housekeeping to take care of this as soon as possible?"
S2. The dish served is not the one ordered	CR2. "Excuse me, I received a dish that I didn't order. I had asked for [name of the dish you ordered]. Could you please check on this and bring me the correct order?"
S3. The electric water heater is not working	CR3. "Hi, I'm having trouble with the electric water heater in my room; it doesn't seem to be working. Can you send someone to check and fix it, please?"
S4. There is a mistake in the restaurant bill	CR4. "Hello, I noticed a mistake on my restaurant bill. It includes charges for items I didn't order. Could you please review and correct the bill?"
S5. Your watch in the room is now missing	CR5. "Hi, I've just realized that my watch is missing from my room. I'm quite sure I left it here. Can you please check if it's been found or if someone might have seen it?"
S6. The dish served has turned stone-cold	CR6. "Excuse me, my dish has turned cold. It was served a while ago and is no longer at the right temperature. Could I please get a fresh, hot plate of this dish?"
S7. Your car parked in the hotel is damaged	CR7. "Hello, I noticed that my car, which was parked in the hotel parking lot, has been damaged. Can you please assist me with this issue and let me know how we can resolve it?"
S8. The room does not have the view as reserved	CR8. "Hi, I reserved a room with [describe the view you expected], but my room has a different view. Could you please check if there's another room available that matches my reservation?"
S9. There are extra fees when checking out	CR9. "Hello, I noticed some extra fees on my bill at checkout that I wasn't expecting. Can you please explain these charges and adjust them if they're incorrect?"
S10. The food has not been served to your room after an hour of order	CR10. "Hi, I placed a room service order over an hour ago, but my food still hasn't arrived. Could you please check on the status of my order and let me know when I can expect it?"

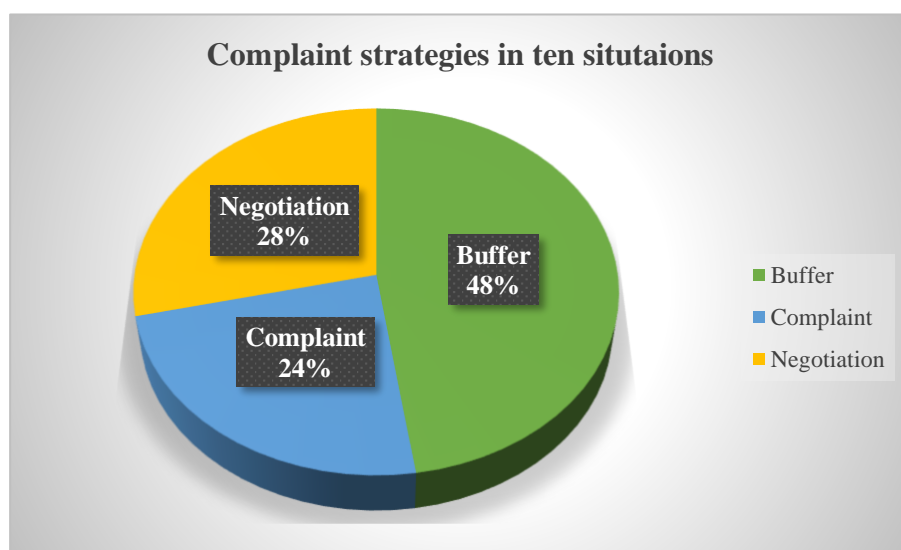
Figure 1 provides an illustration of complaint strategies across ten situations. As discussed in the section on complaining formulae, the complaint-realizing strategies are divided into three categories, Buffer [B], Complaint [C], and Negotiation [N]. The Buffer strategies occupy the largest portion of the pie chart, constituting nearly half of the total number of strategies employed. Besides, Negotiation [N] strategies represent nearly one-third of the strategies,

making them the second most frequently used tactics, whereas Complaint [C] strategies account for the smallest portion, at just under a quarter of the strategies applied.

As can be observed from Table 4, regarding the Buffer sub-strategies, B6 – Provision of context was most frequently spotted. This serves to give justification for the complaint. Typical examples were formulated by using “I noticed ...” or “I’ve realized...” as in [CR1], [CR4], [CR5], [CR7], and [CR9]. It is recognizable from the complaints, that “Excuse me” [B1] “Hi”, or “Hello” [B3] were regularly pinpointed as a device for initiating the complaints. With respect to the head act of Complaint [C], almost all of the complaints used fall into the group of C2 – Direct complaints. It is common for the complainers to explicitly mention the offenses so that the complainees can be aware of those before transitioning to the Negotiation phase of having the issues fixed. In terms of negotiation [N], both N1 – Suggestion and N2 – Request for repair were identified, with N1 being preferable to N2. The use of N1 is capable of supplying the communicating partners with more options to solve the problem and display the speaker’s concern for the hearer’s “negative face” (free from imposition) (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

### Figure 1.

Complaint strategies in ten situations



Regarding the complaint patterns of the complaint act, the strategies can be used solely as “separate patterns” with only one strategy wielded or can be merged into what can termed as “integrated patterns” which involve the combination of more than one strategy. Considering the ten complaints gathered, all of them follow the integrated pattern. For instance,

*[CR4] “Hello [B3], I noticed a mistake on my restaurant bill [C2]. It includes charges for items I didn’t order [B6]. Could you please review [N1] and correct the bill?[N2]”*

*[CR6] “Excuse me [B1], my dish has turned cold [C2]. It was served a while ago and is no longer at the right temperature [B6]. Could I please get a fresh, hot plate of this dish? [N2]”*

*[CR7] “Hello [B3], I noticed that my car, which was parked in the hotel parking lot*

[B6], has been damaged [C2]. Can you please assist me with this issue and let me know how we can resolve it? [N1]”

[CR9] “Hello, [B3] I noticed some extra fees on my bill at checkout [B6] that I wasn’t expecting [C1]. Can you please explain these charges [N1] and adjust them if they’re incorrect? [N2]”

It can be noted that in [CR4], [CR6], [CR7], and [CR9] all three strategies were detected, with their sub-strategies clarified. Additionally, the orders of the strategies could be reversed. To illustrate, Buffer sub-strategies can follow those of Complaint as in [CR4] and [CR6]. Furthermore, the combination did not only occur regarding the strategies, but also among the sub-strategies, such as the common integration of B3 and B6 or, B1 and B6 in a complaining speech act set. The same case can be found in the integration of N1 and N2 as in [CR9].

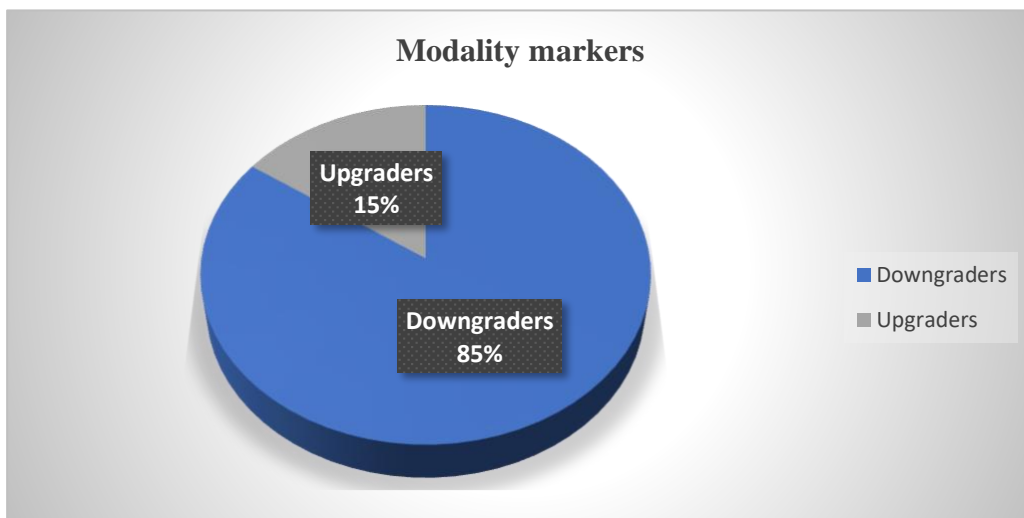
**Table 4.**

Distribution of sub-strategies of complaining

<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Sub-strategies</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>[B]</b>	B1. Apologizing as a Negative Politeness Device	2	10,0%
	B2. Complimenting	0	0,0%
	B3. Greeting	8	40,0%
	B4. Thanking	0	0,0%
	B5. Forgiving	0	0,0%
	B6. Provision of Context	10	50,0%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>[C]</b>	C1. Expression of Disappointment	1	10,0%
	C2. Direct Complaint	9	90,0%
	C3. Negative Assessment	0	0,0%
	C4. Using Irony	0	0,0%
	C5. Challenging	0	0,0%
	C6. Warning or Threat	0	0,0%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>[N]</b>	N1. Suggestion	7	58,3%
	N2. Request for Repair	5	41,7%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>

However, one problem is that the employment of types of strategies and sub-strategies was not as diverse as repetitious. For example, all of the complaints surveyed mostly followed the same pattern of integrated pattern of Buffer coming first, then the Complaint, and finally the Negotiation. Additionally, only one or two sub-strategies for each category of strategy were detected, and they were realized by a limited number of similar expressions. For example, “Hi”, and “Hello” (sub-strategy B3) occurred in almost all of the complaint utterances gathered.

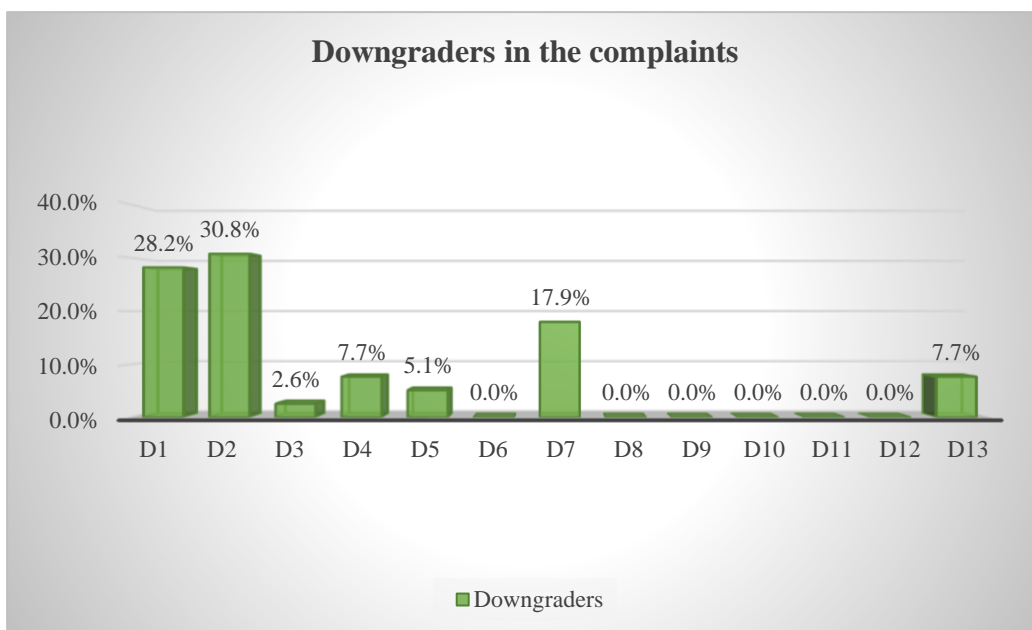
**Figure 2.**  
Modality markers as internal modifiers



The

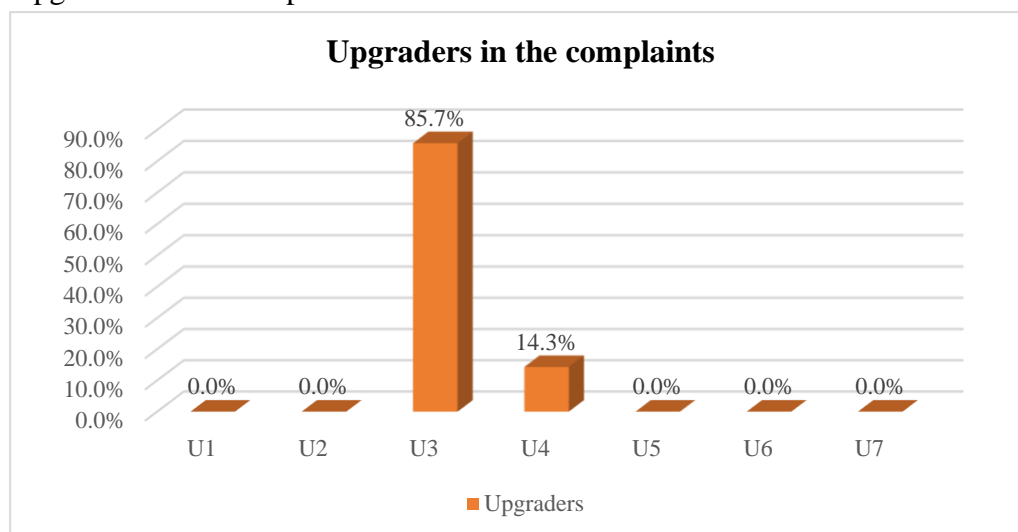
complaining act can be lessened or exacerbated with the inclusion of modality markers as internal modification devices. The distribution of two kinds of modality markers, namely upgraders and downgraders is depicted in **Figure 2**, **Figure 3**, and **Figure 4**. From the analysis, downgraders (84,8%) were more dominant than the upgraders (15,2%).

**Figure 3.**  
Downgraders in complaints



**Figure 4.**

Upgraders in the complaints



Sample analyses of internal modifiers in complaints are provided as follows,

[CR1] “Hello, I just [D5] checked into my room, and [D13] I noticed that the bed is unmade and the bathroom is quite [U3] messy. Could you [D2] please [D1] arrange for housekeeping to take care of this as soon as possible [U3]?”

[CR5] “Hi, I’ve just [D5] realized that my watch is missing from my room [D7]. I’m quite [U3] sure [U4] I left it here. Can you [D2] please [D1] check if it’s been found or if someone might [D2] have seen it?”

[CR10] “Hi, I placed a room service order over [U3] an hour ago, but [D13] my food still [U3] hasn’t arrived [D7]. Could you [D2] please [D1] check on the status of my order and let me know when I can [D2] expect it?”

According to **Figure 3**, D1 – Politeness markers and D2 – Play-downs were the most frequently used downgraders in the situations examined. To illustrate, D1 – politeness markers were realized as “please” in all of the cases where D1 devices were identified as in [CR1], [CR5], and [CR10]. Besides, the strategies of D2 – play-downs were mostly fulfilled by employing the structures “Could you...?” ([CR1], [CR10]) or “Can you...” ([CR5]). These appeared in the Negotiation element of the Complaining speech act set in order to lessen the effect of the speech on the hearers. Another noticeable feature is that for the sub-strategy C2 – Direct complaints, the downgrader D7 – Agent avoiders were regularly identified, which aims to refrain from mentioning the speakers and the hearers, thus minimizing the face-threat to the interlocutors.

Regarding the upgraders, **Figure 4** displays the prevalence of U3 – Intensifiers among the groups of Upgraders employed. These intensifiers were concretized by “quite”, and “over” as in the examples ([CR1], [CR5], [CR10]), which does not serve to multiply the face-threat degree but rather escalate the urgency of the issue so that it can be solved without delay. In addition, the combined usage of upgraders and downgraders also contributes to balancing the impact of the speech on the complainers as well as rendering the communicative aims fulfilled.

## Discussion

Through the scrutinization of the complaints made by ChatGPT in this study, a discernible pattern ([B], [C], [N]) of complaints and breakdown of multiple complaint-realizing strategies are found, indicating an orderly approach and apparent preferences among ChatGPT's responses. The primary finding of this study is the prevalence of buffer strategies [B], which implicates that the creation of a context for complaints is of paramount importance for interlocutors, potentially to guarantee that the recipient is aware of the complaint's justification prior to the complaint itself being delivered. The sub-strategy B6, which pertains to providing context, has been identified as the most frequently implemented buffer technique. This underscores the significance of providing a rationale for complaints in order to promote more fluid exchanges.

Complaint strategies [C], on the other hand, which concern the straightforward expression of complaints, are the least used, accounting for slightly under a quarter of all strategies. The preponderance of the sub-strategy C2-Direct complaints indicates a desire for straightforward issue sharing, which makes it possible to identify the issue before moving on to the negotiation stage. This forthright approach is in line with the requirement for precise communication and clarity when handling problems.

A distinct propensity is also evident in negotiation strategies [N], which account for over one-third of the total number of tactics. N1-Suggestion is preferred to N2-Request for repair, which results in the deliberate attempt to provide a variety of options and simultaneously acknowledge the recipient's individuality, minimizing the imposition on the hearers. The speakers making this choice display their awareness of the "negative face" of the recipients and a willingness to keep the conversation pleasant and collaborative.

Additionally, there is a likelihood that complaint methods follow an integrated pattern, with the arranged combination of buffer, complaint, and negotiation being the most pervasive order. This repeated pattern highlights the necessity for an organized approach to navigating complaints, indicating that an arranged grievance resolution process could be deemed more efficient or socially appropriate. Nonetheless, the low variety of responses and the limited diversity of strategies and sub-strategies deployed reveals that there may not have been much innovation or flexibility in complaint delivery as recommended by ChatGPT. This finding can be supported by the study of Sandler et al. (2024) who found "greater variability and authenticity in human dialogue" (2024, p. 1) as they conducted a comparison between human and ChatGPT-generated language. It should also be noted that uniformity of complaint tactics, which stem from the prevalence of a particular pattern and the employment of merely one or two sub-strategies per category, could have a bearing on the strategies' flexibility under various circumstances.

Modality markers have proved to make a noteworthy contribution as internal modification mechanisms. Play-downs (D2) and politeness signals (D1) are commonly used as downgraders, which assist in creating a less combative tone. This is consistent with the general tendency of upholding politeness and averting possible confrontations. In contrast, intensifiers (U3) are among the preferred upgraders, indicating that speakers frequently try to highlight the



importance or extremity of their complaints – possibly in an attempt to make sure the recipient comprehends the extent to which the matter is.

## Conclusion

The paper has provided an overview of the speech act of complaining regarding multiple ways of defining and categorizing it, its relation to directness levels, and the face-threat angle of this kind of speech act. Besides, the foci of the paper also lie in considering the components in the complaining speech act set, and various sub-types of modality markers wielded to soften or heighten the impact of the speech act on the recipients. Anatomy was carried out regarding the ten responses of ChatGPT in its reaction to the ten complaint-stimulated scenarios. The results of the analysis suggest that the complaints of ChatGPT generally abide by the framework of complaint strategies and that of modality markers as internal modifiers. As a result, the complaints provided by ChatGPT, on the whole, can serve their functions of disclosing the issues encountered, having the problems resolved, and simultaneously keeping the face-threat degree to a minimum. However, the operation of these strategies or devices is deemed rather restricted and repetitive concerning what sub-strategies to be adopted and how they are arranged in a complaining set. Despite the limitations, it can be acknowledged that ChatGPT is a noteworthy source of sample responses of complaining act in particular and other speech acts in general.

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