

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL/CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES ON COMPLAINT STRATEGIES OF PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The present research aims to explore which complaint strategies university students use in different situations and how social and contextual variables affect their use. Trosborg's (1994) taxonomy of complaint strategies was employed as the theoretical framework, and a DCT questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The analysis revealed that Annoyance or Disapproval was the most frequently used strategy among Pakistani university students, particularly in contexts characterized by high power asymmetry and low social distance. No Explicit Reproach was preferred in formal or socially distant interactions, reflecting a tendency toward indirectness driven by politeness concerns. Additionally, an Uncategorized strategy—comprising requests and advice—was introduced to account for culturally specific patterns not captured by Trosborg's (1995) model. Overall, the findings highlight the significant influence of social power, social distance, and cultural norms on the selection of complaint strategies.

Keywords: *social variables, complaint strategies, contextual variables, Pakistani university students, utterance*

Introduction

It is common for people to complain during conversations, yet it is frequently overlooked. In reality, a grumbling disposition is often exposed by unfavourable conditions. People's responses to frustrating occurrences and the expressions of their unhappiness with others depend on a number of contextual variables, including social standing, gender, connection between the interlocutors, and the complexity of the circumstances in which they find themselves. A complaint is the act of expressing dissatisfaction or anger via words (Clyne, 1996, p. 49). Nonetheless, the fundamental purpose of a complaint is to demand action to fix the problem or defect (Brown, 1987). Because of the potentially contentious nature of a complaint, how it is expressed and delivered is of the utmost importance (Silveira, 2004). So, according to the findings of Searle (1976), complaints are expressive because they allow speakers to convey their feelings (Meinl, 2014). While righting wrongs, many whine and refuse to admit they were in the wrong (Baggini, 2010, p. 1). In the speaking act of complaint, the speaker conveys or reflects anger, irritation, or reprimand due to previous or current conduct.

Pragmatics: An Overview

Pragmatism is one of the most fascinating and rapidly developing areas of study in contemporary linguistics and the philosophy of language. Anthropology, sociology, language pathology, computing, and AI are just a few of the domains where it is now trending. Richards and Schmidt (2002), used the term "pragmatics" to describe the study of the

relationship between sentences and the settings in which they are employed in communication.

According to Leech (1983), the field of pragmatics matured into a highly specialised subfield of linguistics in the late 1970s (1986). It delves into the ways in which individuals in different conversations understand and carry out a certain action or speech act. To the greatest extent possible, every utterance or expressive act of genuine transmission fulfils two separate meanings. It is necessary to consider a sentence's literal and figurative meanings (Byram 2000, p. 693). Yule (2010, p. 128) defines pragmatics as "the study of concealed meaning" or "how we interpret what is intended even when it is not expressly expressed or written," highlighting its focus on the speaker's intended meaning rather than the words or phrases themselves (Byram, 2000, p. 693). Hence, it's clear that pragmatics plays a role in trying to make sense of what individuals signify and how their surroundings shape what they say. You need to know where to put your words based on who you're talking to, when you're talking to them, where you are, and what you're talking about. It requires knowing the appropriate word placement in a sentence according to the target audience, context, era, and subject matter. The study of how meaning is communicated from a speaker to a listener is known as pragmatics (Yule, 1996, p. 3). Thinking about how others could interpret what you say is crucial if you want them to get your intended thought or the underlying meaning. The text explores various academic perspectives on body language and verbal communication. The crucial reply also establishes a relationship between time and space. Intimacy of any sort—whether of the physical, social, or intellectual variety—implies the need to explore together. The number of words a speaker uses depends on the proximity of the listener. Because of this, the study of relative distance expression is often referred to as (Ibid.).

Literature Review

The study of speech acts, particularly complaints, has garnered significant attention across various linguistic and cultural contexts. Researchers have consistently explored how different social and contextual variables influence the choice and realization of complaint strategies. This body of work provides a crucial foundation for understanding the complexities of pragmatic competence in diverse settings.

Several studies have specifically delved into the intricacies of complaint strategies. Thongtong and Srioutai (2019), for instance, investigated gender-based variations in how Thai EFL learners use questions to voice complaints. Their role-play study with first-year English major students revealed significant differences: male learners favored "appeal" for problem-solving, while female learners preferred "inquiry" to seek information about issues. This highlights distinct gendered pragmatic approaches to complaints within an EFL setting, emphasizing the influence of social factors on linguistic choices.

Further emphasizing the utility of established frameworks in analyzing complaint strategies, Al-Ebadia et al. (2020) applied analytical models from Trosborg (1995) and Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) to explore the speech act of complaining within Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their study identified various complaint strategies, their frequencies, and their dramatic roles, supporting the hypothesis that diverse complaint strategies are employed with varying frequencies to advance the play's tragic events. The application of Trosborg's framework in this context is particularly pertinent to the present research.

Closer to the Pakistani context and directly relevant to the current study's focus, Ajmal et al. (2022) conducted a corpus-based analysis of complaint strategies among Urdu speakers, challenging stereotypes about gendered linguistic behavior. Using a Discourse Completion Task, their study found that female Urdu speakers more frequently employed Directive Acts of Request (DA/R) in complaint situations than males. This finding

underscores distinct gendered approaches to expressing complaints within the Pakistani linguistic landscape and highlights the need for fostering polite linguistic behavior in real-life contexts.

Beyond specific complaint acts, broader pragmatic analyses in the Pakistani context have also contributed to the understanding of language use. Ramzan et al. (2020) identified a research gap in the Baluchistan context regarding the pragmatic analysis of newspaper headlines using Searle's taxonomy of speech acts. Their study found Searle's taxonomy applicable, revealing headlines to be rich with intended meanings and showing a dominant use of Representatives (assertives) speech acts. Similarly, Asghar et al. (2021) analyzed the pragmatic appropriateness of five speech acts in three English textbooks from the Punjab Text Book Board, finding an uneven distribution across all levels and highlighting the need for material designers and EFL teachers to integrate pragmatic considerations. Batool et al. (2024) further contributed to this regional understanding by investigating speech act use in the maiden speeches of Pakistani Prime Ministers Imran Khan and Shahbaz Sharif, revealing strategic employment of commissive acts and other speech acts to influence public opinion. These studies collectively underscore the growing interest and importance of pragmatic research within Pakistan.

Hence, the present researcher chose to conduct research on The Effect of Social/Contextual Variables on Complaint Strategies of Pakistani University Students using Trosborg's taxonomy 1994 of complaint and DCT questionnaire.

Research Questions

The present study aimed to determine the Pakistani university students' complaint strategies in different situations. Specifically, this paper answered the following questions:

Q 1: What different complaint strategies university students do use in different situations?

Q 2: How social/contextual variables affect the use of complaint strategies?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed methodology design.

Participants

Forty GCUF BS students took part. Twenty male and twenty female students, aged 19 to 23 years old, were selected at random. Faisalabad-born Pakistanis from a variety of disciplines took part (e.g. accounting, engineering, computer science, chemistry, Physics). Everyone who took part in the research voluntarily agreed to do so.

Instrument

This Discourse Completion Task (DCT) is self made by the researchers. Situations were made highly relatable to the study's participants. Each DCT question included a scenario description followed by a blank area where test takers were asked to fill in the proper language expression of thankfulness in the role of the speakers

Analysis

The data was manually tagged and analyzed by the researchers using UAM CorpusTool 2.3.0.

Theoretical Framework

Table 1

Trosborg's (1994) Taxonomy of Complaint Strategies

Category of Complaint	Strategies	Example
a. No explicit reproach – Cat. I	Str. 1. Hints	Do I not see you very often these days?

<p>b. Expression of annoyance or disapproval – Cat. II</p>	<p>Str. 2. Annoyance Str. 3. Consequences</p>	<p>Did you know that I'm sensitive to dust and that's why I don't like it? “I already cleaned the restroom itself for ten minutes, or perhaps a quarter of an hour. (Ibid, 317).</p>
<p>c. Accusations – Cat. III</p>	<p>Str. 4. Indirect accusation Str. 5. Direct accusation</p>	<p>Look at the disarray; have you been cleaning up anything for the past week? You used to tidy up after yourself when you were there; what's wrong with you now, you don't even do that anymore.</p>
<p>d. Blaming – Cat. IV</p>	<p>Str. 6. Modified blame Str. 7. Explicit condemnation of the accused 's action or behaviour Str. 8. Explicit condemnation of the accused as a person</p>	<p>You should clean up after yourself because it's boring to remain here and I detest living in a messy environment. ===== Ah, I understand, but cleaning up after you every time irritates me greatly, particularly after discovering your dirty clothes in my cupboard earlier today. That doesn't seem fair. Really, Mette, one can never (swear-word) trust you with a care.</p>

Table 2

Scenarios and the main variables recognised in the research

NO.	Complaining situations	Relationship of the two parties	The complainer's power in comparison to the complaine	Social distance (Familiarity)
1	The student always kept his or her homework incomplete.	student's parent (H) and teacher (S)	High	High
2	A student bumps into a teacher and scatters all his or her papers.	Student (H) and teacher (S)	High	High
3	A student's friend did not keep the promise to meet	Friend 2 (H) and friend 1 (S)	Equal	Low

	him/her before the exam.			
4	A student did not explain the ways of the cafeteria in a proper manner to a newcomer.	Old student (H) and new student (S)	Equal	High
5	A junior student lost the book borrowed from his or her senior	Junior student (H) and senior student (S)	High	Low
6	The school head discriminated in paying salaries to two teachers working on the same pay scale.	Head of school (H) and teacher (S)	Low	Low
7	A classmate (also roommate in hostel) disturbs another roommate who is chatting on the phone aloud at night.	classmate 2 (H) and classmate 1 (S)	Equal	Low
8	A classmate did not show seriousness about a group assignment.	Classmate 2 (H) and classmate 1 (S)	Equal	Low
9	A student disturbs another student while the teacher is delivering a lecture.	Classmate 2 (H) and classmate 1 (S)	Equal	Low
10	A student's seat is occupied by some other student in library.	Student 2 (H) and student 1 (S)	Equal	High

Discussion:

Strategies wise Analysis

1. No explicit reproach – Cat. I

Upon analysis, it was found that the strategy *No Explicit Reproach* was employed with the highest frequency in Situations 1 and 4, each occurring 22 times. For instance, in Situation 1, a teacher states: *“The lack of homework completion by your child is having an effect on their academic development.”* Similarly, in Situation 4, the utterance *“I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand your joke”* exemplifies the use of this strategy. It is pertinent to examine the contextual and social factors that may have influenced its frequent application in these particular scenarios.

In Situation 1, the speaker is a teacher addressing the parents of a student who consistently fails to complete homework. The formal nature of the teacher–parent interaction

is likely a significant factor contributing to the preference for an indirect complaint. In institutional and formal contexts, speakers generally tend to avoid overt expressions of dissatisfaction. This aligns with the argument by Brown and Levinson (1987), who maintain that in settings characterized by power asymmetry and high formality, speakers are more inclined to adopt negative politeness strategies, including indirectness in complaints. Supporting this view, Astia (2021) observed that international students also favored mitigated and indirect complaint strategies when addressing authority figures in academic environments.

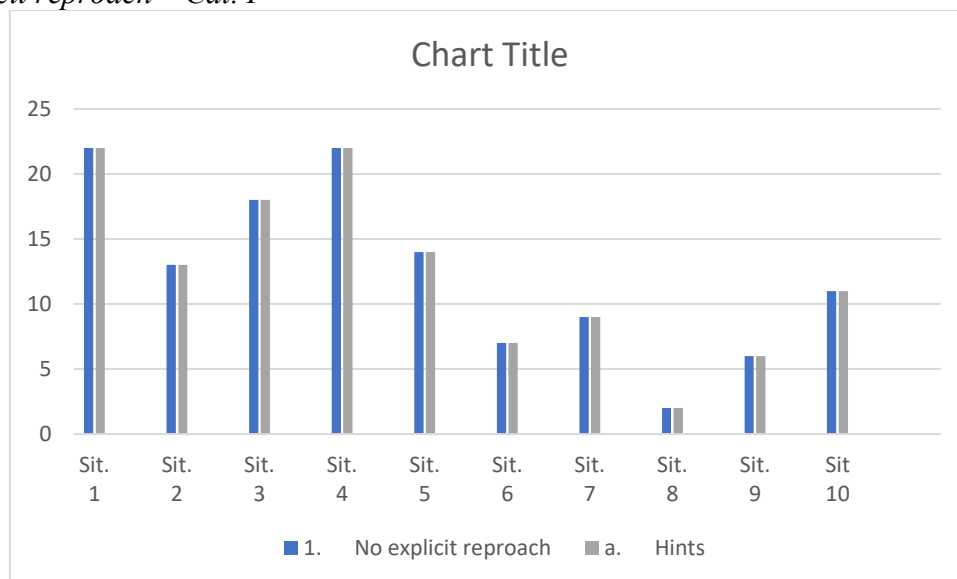
Notably, despite the teacher's position of power, the presence of substantial social distance appears to have overridden the authority dynamic, thereby discouraging direct confrontation. This observation is consistent with Tan and Farashaiyan (2013), who assert that in Malaysian academic email communication, social distance exerts a stronger influence on politeness strategies than hierarchical power. However, contrasting findings are presented by Masjedi and Paramasivam (2018), who report that Iranian EFL learners often opted for more direct complaints in formal contexts when communicative clarity or task-oriented outcomes were prioritized.

Situation 4 presents a distinct interactional dynamic in which the complainer addresses a stranger who responded inappropriately when asked for directions at a university. Here, the social power between interlocutors is equal; however, social distance remains high. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory also supports the findings in this scenario, suggesting that high social distance—even in the absence of power differentials—motivates speakers to adopt indirect strategies to maintain face. Similarly, Nham et al. (2022) found that Thai students writing complaint letters to unfamiliar university staff often employed softened language and indirect forms to mitigate the threat to social harmony. Conversely, Yan (2016) reported that in Chinese cultural contexts, interlocutors at times blended direct and indirect strategies based on social expectations and situational appropriateness, thereby challenging the universality of power-distance influence on politeness behavior.

In contrast, Situation 8 recorded the least use of the *No Explicit Reproach* strategy, with only two instances. This situation involved a peer-to-peer interaction, in which the complainer addressed a classmate. An example includes the request: “*Can we establish some specific objectives and due dates for our project so that we can stay on track and successfully complete it?*” In this context, both social power and social distance are low, which likely contributed to the limited use of indirect strategies. This finding corresponds with Sari (2014), who found that Indonesian EFL learners were more inclined to express dissatisfaction directly when addressing close peers. Thus, when relational proximity exists and power is symmetrical, speakers may perceive less need to mitigate complaints or preserve face through indirectness.

Figure 1

No explicit reproach – Cat. I



2. Annoyance or Disapproval

The data analysis reveals that the complaint strategy Annoyance or Disapproval was employed most frequently in Situation 5, with a total of 31 occurrences. This situation involved a senior student expressing dissatisfaction to a junior peer for misplacing a borrowed book. An illustrative example is: *“It is completely unacceptable that you lost my book.”* This strategy is characteristically direct and emotionally charged. Its frequent use in this context can be attributed to the asymmetrical power relationship—the senior speaker holds higher social power—and the low level of social distance between interlocutors. The combination of these two variables tends to permit a more explicit articulation of grievance. This pattern corresponds with the findings of Kreishan (2017), who reported that Jordanian university students were more inclined to utilize direct complaint strategies when addressing individuals of lower social status. Similarly, Abdolrezapour et al. (2012) observed that Iranian EFL learners employed assertive complaints when interacting with less powerful interlocutors, especially in situations involving a clear sense of entitlement or expectation.

In contrast, the lowest frequency of the Annoyance or Disapproval strategy was observed in Situations 4 and 8, with only nine instances each. In Situation 4, the speaker addresses a stranger who responded rudely to a request for directions (e.g., *“I don't like it when people make fun of me.”*). Despite the equal power status between the participants, the high level of social distance appears to discourage the use of overtly negative or emotionally expressive complaints. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that increased social distance motivates speakers to employ strategies that minimize face-threatening acts. Supporting this, Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) argue that individuals tend to moderate their complaints when addressing interlocutors with whom they lack familiarity, often resorting to more cautious or indirect language.

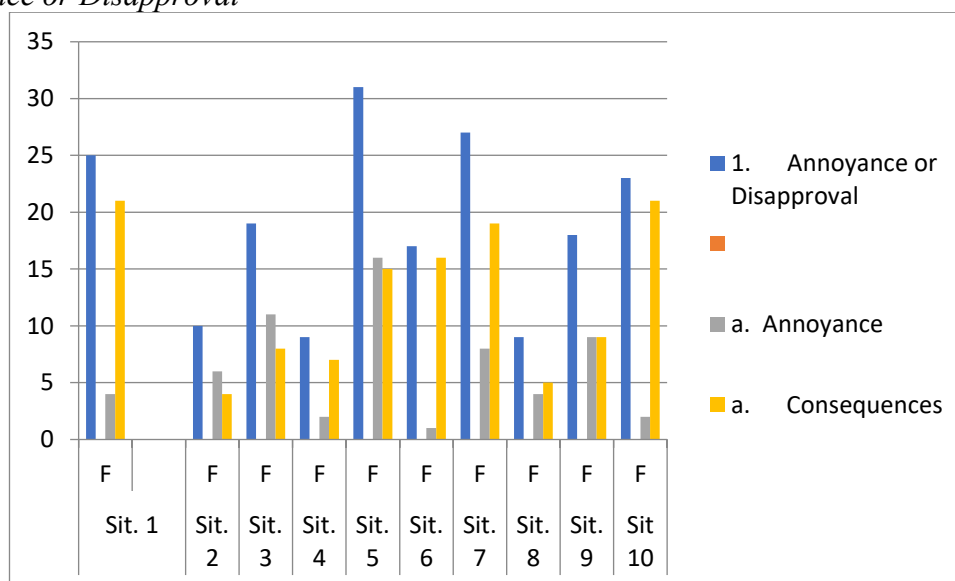
A similar pattern was observed in Situation 8, where the speaker complains to a classmate, as in *“I will blame him hardly.”* In this scenario, both social power and social distance are minimal, which would typically facilitate more direct communication. However, the limited use of the Annoyance or Disapproval strategy suggests that speakers may prioritize interpersonal harmony over bluntness, even in close peer relationships. Wijayanto

et al. (2018) supports this observation, noting that Indonesian EFL learners often avoided overt impoliteness when communicating with peers, instead favoring more socially appropriate complaint forms. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) also highlight that reduced social distance does not necessarily lead to greater directness, as politeness norms may still guide interactional choices, particularly in cultures where maintaining rapport is valued.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social power and distance are critical variables influencing the degree of directness in complaint strategies. High power and low distance tend to promote direct expressions of disapproval, whereas equal or low power combined with high distance—or strong politeness norms—encourages the use of more mitigated complaint forms.

Figure 2

Annoyance or Disapproval



3. Accusations

The most frequent use of the “**Accusations**” complaint strategy occurred in **Situation 5**, with 31 occurrences. In this scenario, a senior student rebukes a junior with the statement: “I lent it to you in good faith, and you have betrayed my trust.” This behavior aligns with Kreishan’s (2017) findings, which showed that Jordanian students in authoritative roles tend to issue overt complaints toward those of lower status, reinforcing the impact of hierarchical power and closeness between speaker and listener.

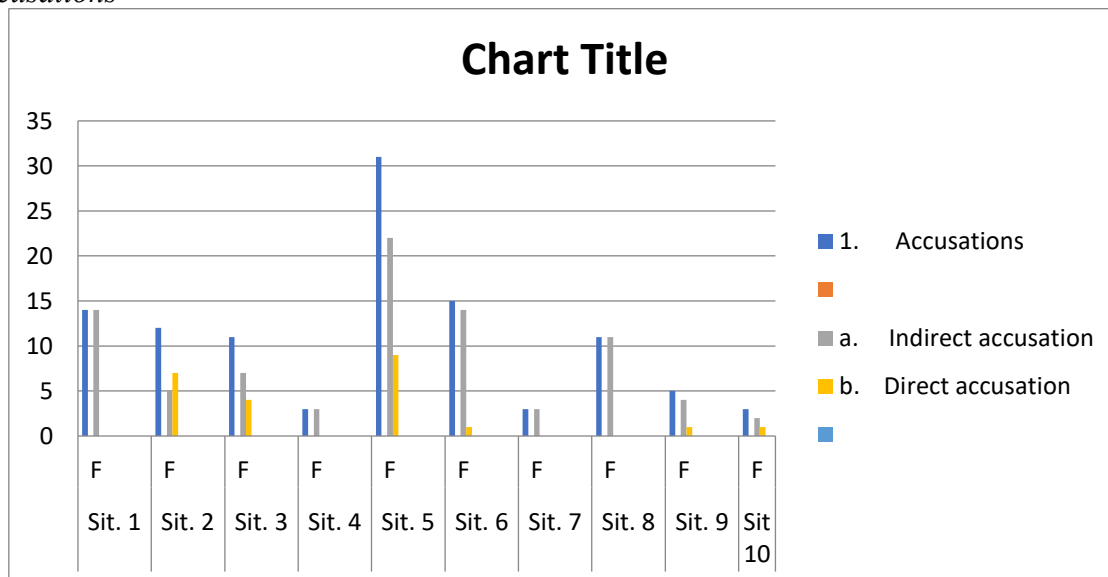
In **Situation 6**, accusations were made despite both social power and social distance being low—due to a financial grievance: “I am entitled to the same salary as my colleague on the same scale.” This mirrors observations by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993), who noted that financial or fairness issues often trigger direct complaint language regardless of relational dynamics.

Conversely, accusations were rare in **Situations 4 and 7**, each with only three instances. In **Situation 4**, the speaker tells a stranger, “I don’t have time for jokes right now.” Brown and Levinson (1987) assert that **high social distance** reduces the likelihood of face-threatening acts, which is consistent with Olshtain and Weinbach’s observation that complaints to unfamiliar interlocutors are typically less confrontational.

In **Situation 7**, directed at a roommate, the speaker uses a mitigated request: “If you don’t mind, could you please lower your voice?” This usage is consistent with findings by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993), who reported that complaints among close peers are often

softened, and further parallels peer-context complaint styles observed in other cultural settings.

Figure 3
Accusations



4. Blaming

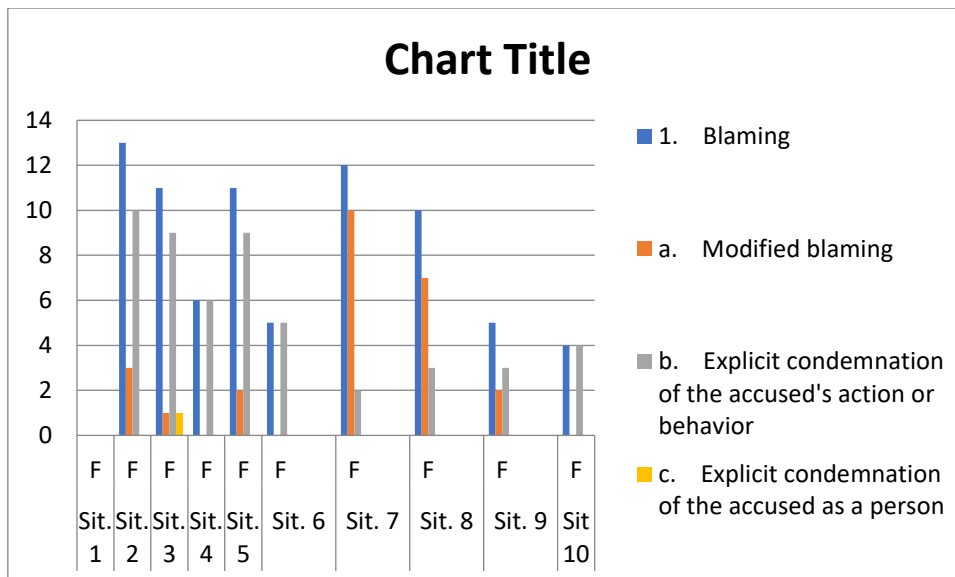
Blaming is considered a harsh complaint strategy. Data analysis revealed that this approach was most frequently employed in Situation 2, with 13 instances. In this scenario, a teacher confronts a student who bumped into them and scattered papers, and one example from the responses is:

“You need to be more conscious of your environment and take responsibility for your actions.”

The teacher’s high social power and high social distance from the student likely encouraged the use of this direct form of complaint. These findings align with Kreishan (2017), who observed that individuals in higher-authority positions frequently resort to overt blame when addressing students. Additionally, Asghar et al. (2021) found that Pakistani EFL learners display less mitigation in face-threatening speech acts when the power differential and social distance are pronounced.

Interestingly, despite the teacher’s high power, this strategy was notably absent in Situation 1—another high-power context. This discrepancy mirrors the observations of Asghar et al. (2021), who note that contextual factors like relational closeness can moderate—even restrain—direct blame strategies in authority figures within Pakistani contexts.

Figure 4
Blaming

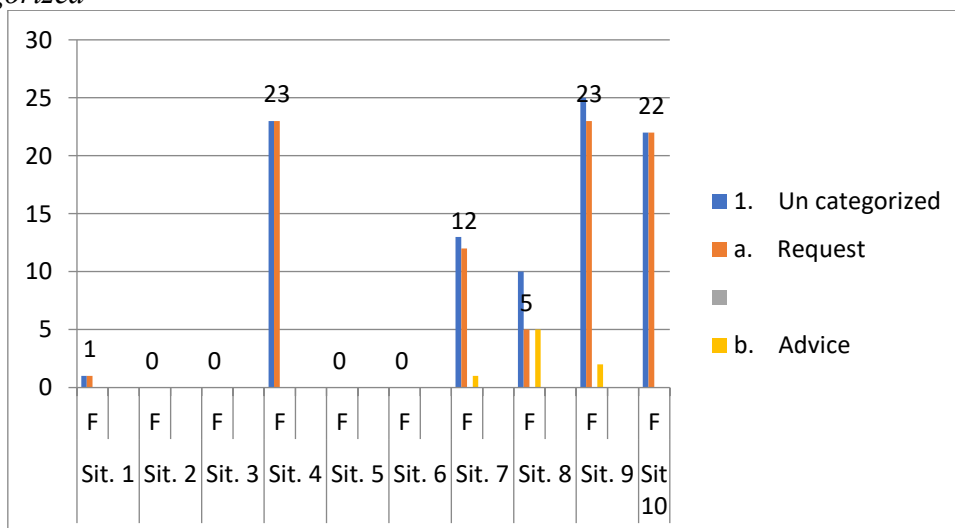


5. Un-categorized

The question here is why we need to add un categorized strategies in our framework? It is because essentials of a framework vary from culture to culture and in Pakistani culture there are some variations in Pakistanis’ mode of discourse as compared to other peoples due to which we have had to add this additional category. And the frequency of this category is also prominent. This category has two sub categories named as request and advice. This category is used most frequently in situation 4 where the scenario is that complainer has to do complaint to a stranger on talking with him improperly. Example from sit.4 ” Could you please tell me the actual location of the cafeteria?” In this situation there is equal social power and high social distance and an interesting point is that only sub category used in this scenario is “request” . It is evident that despite having equal social power complainer used this sub category the most. It can be observed that here high social distance has played a significant role as complainer did not know the complainees so in this way he adopted an amalgam of request and complaint.

Figure 5

Un-categorized



Situation Wise Analysis

Social and environmental factors are used to categorise situations. Three instances are classified as having great social power, six are classified as having equal social power, and one has low social power with fluctuating social distance. There are two cases of high social distance and one case of low social distance for every three cases of high power. Two of the six circumstances with equal power are very isolated, whereas the other four have modest social distance. And in one powerless circumstance, there is a little social distance.

Extreme Strength

The power is greatest in condition 1, followed by situation 2, and then situation 5. We begin with contexts where there is a great gulf between people and their ability to connect with one another socially. With 25 mentions each, irritation and disapproval are the most common emotions expressed by respondents in response to scenario 1's complaint to parents. Twenty-two times there is no direct criticism. Respondents in scenario 2 used "no express criticism" and "blaming" 13 times when complaining to the student in the role of instructor. As a result, it's clear that respondents who identified themselves as teachers also used the blame game. A total of 12 instances of an accusatory stance are also present.

Second, we discuss settings with little interpersonal distance. Five seniors complained to a junior who had misplaced a book they had borrowed, using a total of 31 instances of annoyance, disapproval, and accusations. Evidently, as a senior responder, you both disapproved of the younger and also blamed them.

Equal Influence

Complainant and respondent are on equal footing in cases 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10. The social distance here is greatest in cases 4 and 10, while it is least in cases 3, 7, 8, and 9. Initially, we look at predicaments when there is a lot of separation between people. Responses in Situation 4 included "request technique" 23 times and "no explicit criticism" 22 times when venting frustrations to a former teacher. The student respondents mentioned "annoyance or disapproval" 23 times and "request" 22 times when describing their experience of complaining to a stranger. Some pupils made requests, while others didn't seem to mind too much.

Second, we talk about predicaments when the distance between people is minimal. Respondents in scenario 3 who vented to a friend used the phrases "annoyance or disapproval" 19 times and "no express criticism" 18 times.

Respondents in scenario 7 complaining to a roommate most commonly used "annoyance or disapproval" (27 times), followed by "accusations" (15 times). Respondents employed both the "blaming technique" and the "uncategorized method" ten times in circumstance 8 while complaining to a classmate. The "request approach," a subcategory of "uncategorized," was employed by respondents the most often (23 times) when complaining to a classmate about circumstance 9, followed by the "annoyance or disapproval method" (18 times).

Very Little Strength

The only condition in which both power and social distance are low is 6. The phrases "annoyance or disapproval" (17 times) and "accusations" (15 times) are particularly prevalent in this group's complaints to the school principal. There was a lack of authority in scenario 6, yet respondents still regularly chose the "annoyance or disapproval" and "accusations" categories, making it clear that they were still irritated by the situation even when they were venting their frustrations to the school principal.

Conclusion

The analysis has been conducted on 40 Pakistani University students from which 20 are males and other 20 are females. It is noted that almost all the strategies that are included in Trosborg's model of complaint strategies, are used by Pakistani students. Moreover the researchers also has had to add an additional category of strategy named as "Un categorized" because the responses given by the participants are exceeding from the model given by Trosborg (1995).

By analyzing the data it is observed that the complaint strategy "Annoyance or Disapproval" covers the 32 percent of total complaint strategies used by Pakistani students which is most highest number among all strategies used. The additional category "Un-categorized" covers 16 percent of the whole strategies. In the analysis of the data it is very prominent point that social variables like social power and social distance have significant effects on people's shaping of complaint discourse. And another interesting thing that has come to surface is that the impacts of social variables vary culture to culture. To be concluded it can be said that social context is a considerable element while making a complaint.

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Appendix

The Discourse Completion Test

Dear student, thank you in advance for your participation in this research and for completing this questionnaire. By completing this questionnaire, you agree that I can use your responses for research purposes. All your identifying information will be confidential when the results of this study are presented, written up and/or published. This questionnaire includes 2 parts. In part 1, please write down your age and indicate your gender and write your native language and university major. In part 2, please complete the scenarios.

Part 1

- 1) Age: _____
- 2) Gender: _____
- 3) Native Language: _____
- 4) University major: _____
- 5) Degree: _____

Part 2

There are 10 situations described below. Please read the following descriptions of situations and then write what you would say in each situation.

1. You are attending a parent-teacher meeting as a teacher at a school. Parents of a student who never completes his or her homework are sitting in front of you. How will you complain to his parents?
2. You are a teacher in an academy, rushing to get to a class on time, and a student runs down the corner and bumps into you, scattering all your notes and papers. How will you complain?
3. You arranged to meet a friend before an exam to discuss some points. You waited for an hour, but he or she didn't show up. How will you complain after the exam when you see him or her?
4. You are new in university. You ask a stranger the location of the cafeteria, but he/she answered in an unrelated and ridiculous manner. How will you complain?
5. You lend a book to your junior student to study and return it to you, although you informed him/her about its rarity he/she lost the book. How will you complain?
6. You are paid less salary at school than a colleague on the same pay scale and think it is unfair. How will you complain to your head?
7. You have a classmate (who is also your roommate in the hostel) with whom you have a problem. He/she always spends hours on the phone chatting to his or her family at midnight on weekend and talks very loudly. So, you cannot sleep well and have an early morning class the next day. How will you complain?
8. In one of your classes you are in a pair work assignment with one of your classmate. You have done a great job of preparing your part, but your partner is not showing seriousness. You are worried because you cannot make the assignment very well alone. How will you complain?
9. You always try to pay attention to your professor in class, but there is one problem. One of your classmates sitting next to you talks and asks you questions while the professor is lecturing. Therefore, you cannot concentrate and lose lots of tips and information. How will you complain to him or her?
10. You are busy reading in the university library when suddenly your mobile phone vibrates, and you go out to answer the call. As you come back, you see that a stranger from another department has occupied your seat and put your books on another table. How will you complain?