

Analyzing Complaint Letters

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This study is designed to linguistically analyze the complaint letters sent by hotel guests with two intended aspects; by studying authentic correspondence to establish baseline(s) from which students can be expected to improve their ability of writing the appropriate letters of reply to their guests, and by applying a model of pragmatic politeness to written texts for tourism students to use in controlling their own writing in the context of intercultural communication. The purpose of this study is to analyze how complaint is realized in the sequences of speech acts within one written text and attempts to explain how politeness strategies determine both the overall "strength" of the complaint and the sequential order of the individual speech acts. This study has found out that the analysis of a small corpus of complaint letters reveals that three speech acts – complaints, grounders (justifications), and requests – realize the speech acts of complaint, grounder and request that are also the three main elements in the genre of written complaints. There are two main levels involved in articulating a complaint. Firstly, there will be a global speech act which represents the overall purpose and strength of the complaint. Secondly, there will be a sequence of local speech acts that will serve to give expression to the global complaint and determine its elocutionary force.

[grounder/speech act/elocutionary force/근거/화행/화술력]

I. INTRODUCTION

It is stated by Ock-Mo An (2003) that the success of hospitality businesses depends on the ability of managers to properly deal with complaints from guests.

In this sense, the management of guest complaints has been one of the very important parts of manager's responsibilities in the hospitality industry. There are two different types of complaints from dissatisfied guests; verbal and written complaints. The written complaints are usually considered stronger than verbal ones, and sometimes brought to legal actions. In this sense, the study is significant to analyze the guest complaint letters in terms of the sequences of speech acts, to know the strength of the complaints.

The purpose of the study is to authentically analyze the complaint letters from the guests who stayed in one of the five star hotels in Seoul by Brown and Levinson's (1988) model to help students in the hospitality fields to deal with guest complaints in polite way of writing letters. The study is also to find out the global speech acts of complaints to determine the kinds and strength degrees of guest complaints to let students be previously prepared and acquainted with complaints from the guests in the real situations, which is helpful for their future job performances.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A great deal of research on the speech acts of apologies and requests has been studied (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Rose, 2001). Fewer studies, however, have conducted on complaints in written communication. Compared with an important role of written communication in business transactions, particularly in the hospitality fields such as hotel and travelling management, convention management, etc., a very few studies on complaint letters have been researched so far. A simple study on the letters of complaints has been conducted in Svendsen and Krebs (1984). Duk-Young Kim (2008) also emphasized that pragmatic competence in communication is the ability to use language forms in a wide range of environments, and the study of relationships between a speaker and listener in the social and cultural context of the situation.

On the situation of finding out the related reference materials, Brown and Levinson's (1988) model has helped to identify the speech act of the letters of

complaint. The model was extended from the study of "Analyzing Letters" by Lachenich and Culpeper (1989). Brown and Levinson's (1988) study states that letters can be classified into different moves that carry a regular register. On the basis of these two studies, the research is conducted to seek a model of letters of complaints by using a small-scale qualitative study and authentic data from on-site areas of hotels.

The theoretical construct of a global speech act of complaint is developed to account for perceived variations in the sequential structure of written complaints. Notably, in weaker complaints grounders are found to precede complaints, "buffering" them, while in stronger complaints, the grounder follows the complaint.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to analyze how complaint is realized in the sequences of speech acts within one written text and attempts to explain how politeness strategies determine both the overall "strength" of the complaint and the sequential order of the individual speech acts. develop a model of analysis for the investigation of written complaints. The model has been developed as part of an attempt to account for features of written complaints that have seldom been found in previous studies of this speech act. For the study a small-scale qualitative study is conducted to offer the best chances of determining the value of the model in accounting for politeness in written complaints. In order to pursue the study some procedures have been conducted; first, collecting the authentic data of complaint letters given by the guests from five star hotels, second, grouping the selected letters into four moves, third, analyze how the structure of letters of complaints are sequenced. finally, the elocutionary force is determined by the strength of complaints.

Authentic data is gathered from naturally occurring speech in the guest complaint letters. In addition, finding large samples of naturally occurring data can at times be difficult. Despite these difficulties and risks, naturally-occurring speech is the most valuable source of data for the analyst. The crucial question

from a pragmatic point-of-view is the nature of the inter-relationship of speech and context in the production and interpretation of meaning, and we can only hope to answer this using naturally-occurring data.

The sample consists of complaint letters from the hotel guests. Two-hundred-thirty-five specimens from different nationalities over a period of time from March 2005 to March 2007 were randomly obtained. Sixty-seven specimens were selected for investigation since they were written in grammatically-correct styles.

IV. ANALYSIS

1. The Model of Analysis

Speech acts will be examined (by) using Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as extended by Lachenich and Culpeper (1989). Aggravation, however, is interpreted here as any intensification of elocutionary force such as attacking the hearer's face. Both of these possibilities are common in realizations of complaints.

In this study, we posit two separate levels of speech acts, local and global speech acts. Local speech acts are the smallest possible chunks of an utterance compatible with identifying a single speaker intention. In identifying and analyzing local speech acts, we can draw on the tools provided by speech act theory. In order to simplify the identification of patterns in sequences, local speech acts may be grouped into "moves." With some variation(s) there are at three basic speech acts in written complaints: grounders, complaints and requests. Grounders are used to justify complaints or requests. Any move will thus consist of semantically related speech acts, such as typically "complaint and grounder" or "grounder and request."

Global speech acts are theoretical constructs which identify a higher level speaker intention behind an extended chunk of discourse and provide that chunk with coherence. As these texts have already been selected as examples of letters of complaint, we assume that each text exemplifies at least one global speech act

of complaint. Murphy and Neu (1996) also stated that there are four speech act components when people produce complaints such as an explanation of purpose, a complaint, a justification, and a candidate solution: request.

2. Examples and Analysis of Letters

The following examples of three representative letters show how the selected specimens of complaint letters have been analyzed by grouping with four moves. The rest letters of complaints including letter 4, 5, 6, 7, etc. have been also grouped into four moves. Unfortunately, the examples of the rest of the complaint letters can not be shown in this study due to the space limitations.

1) Letter 1: Mr. Banton's Letter Complaining about the Shower Problem

First the example of the complaint letter 1 is introduced as follows:

Dear Mr. A:

My stay at the X Hotel was very bad. After I checked into my room I wanted to take a shower and almost burned myself. I then called the front desk and talked with a Mr. Lee or a Mr. Kim, the managers during the time of my stay. The room was checked by the management staff and I went back to my room. I was still having the same problem. I was told by management that I must adjust to the shower. The management staff offered a bottle of Champagne and took \$25.00 off each night of my stay.

I was not able to sleep the whole night because of construction going on at the time. I want a full refund for the problem I had at the hotel.

Sincerely,

Branton

The example of Branton's complaint letter requesting a full refund for his problem he had during his stay at the hotel can be grouped into four moves as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Complaining about the Shower Problem

Moves	Classifications	Contents
Move 1	Salutation 1	Mr. A
Move 2	Complaint 1	My stay at the XYZ Hotel was very bad.
	Grounder 1	After I checked into my room I wanted to take a shower and almost burned myself.
	Grounder 2	I was still having the same problem.
Move 3	Grounder 3	I must adjust to the shower.
	Complaint 2	I was not able to sleep the whole night because of construction going on at the time
	Grounder 4	I want a full refund for the problem I had at the hotel
Move 4	Request 1	
	Salutation 2	Sincerely
	Signature	Branton

Letter 1 can be analyzed showing the highest force level in complaint 1, which mentioned directly "My stay was very bad", rather than the mitigated indirect complaint.

Salutation and Thanks open with a nominal expression of speaker's indebtedness to hearer. However, the study has shown that the hotel complaint guests rarely starts with the expression of thanks, particularly, for the strongest complaint guests as shown in letter 1. Generally speaking, the complaint guests of hotels express their anger feelings directly and precede the grounder.

Letter 1 begins with a positively aggravated complaint which is given a "concrete dimension" in the subsequent extended grounder. The second complaint is an even more severe version of the first. The letter closes with threatening sanctions and demanding a refund. Together the attack on hearer's positive and negative face gives this global speech act its very severe strength.

2) Letter 2: Mr. Perratt's Letter Complaining about Reusing the Guest Old Folios

Although letter 2 begins with grounder followed by complaint, and it is a strong complaint with positive politeness aggravation by simplifying one problem to the hearer. There are no expressions of thanks and salutations except "sir". There are no request forms, but implies a very strong direction what the hearer must do in response to the speaker's complaint. The second example of complaint letter is shown as follows:

Sir, during my recent stay at the X Hotel Seoul, I was rather alarmed to discover that the hotel reuses old guest folios for notes and memos. While recycling is an excellent idea, the security implications of my or other guests' personal details being treated with no regard for privacy is extremely upsetting. These things should not be happening again.

Regards,

Jonathan Perratt

The example of Mr. Perratt's letter complaining about the hotel reuses of old guest folios for notes and memos is a rather threatening level than complaint, although the letter is written very shortly. He requested not to reuse the old guest folios any more by sarcastically expressing his complaint. The letter 2 is also grouped into four moves as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Complaining about Reusing the Guest Old Folios

Moves	Classifications	Contents
Move 1	Salutation 1	Sir
Move 2	Grounder 1	During my recent stay at the X hotel, I was rather alarmed to discover that the hotel reuses old guest folios for notes and memos.
	Complaint 1	While recycling is an excellent idea, the security implications of my or other guests' personal details being treated with no regard for privacy is extremely upsetting.
Move 3	Salutation Signature	Regards Jonathan Perratt

Although letter 2 begins with grounder followed by complaint, and it is a strong complaint with positive politeness aggravation by simplifying one problem to the hearer. There are no expressions of thanks and salutations except "sir". There are no request forms, but implies a very strong direction what the hearer must do in response to the speaker's complaint.

Buffers involve pairs of speech acts. It seems that most of the complaints make use of a form of deductive reasoning, a syllogism, with the grounder and the complaint as the two premises and the request as the conclusion. In other words, speaker says in letter 2 "Hotel reuses old guest folios" (grounder) and "I was rather alarmed" (complaint), concluding "These things should not be happening again" (request). At the level of move then the (deductive) grounder complaint pattern is seen as a mitigated form. Over the sequence of speech acts in the whole letter, the deductive syllogism pattern is considered the mitigated form.

3) Letter 3: Mr. Michael's Letter Complaining about the Level of the Hotel Service at Several Different Situations

Letter 3 shows criticism that hearer was failing to meet the standard service threatening hearer's positive face. It is a strong complaint with a mixture of positive and negative aggravation strategies. The example of complaint letter 3 is shown as follows:

Dear Mr W,

I am writing to express my utmost disquiet with the recent level of service supplied by your hotel. If you check your records you will see that I have been a frequent occupant of the hotel since 2004; spending probably 150 nights in 2007 when I was part of a joint venture project with Nonghyup.

The last couple of months I have been coming back to Seoul on a number of weekends in preparation for another major project that will commence this summer which will entail me spending up to 4 months of the rest of 2006 and about half of 2007 in Seoul.

However, the recent level of service has made me question why I should continue to use the X Hotel. This was brought to a head a couple of weeks ago when I made a reservation for 4 nights from the 2nd April. As a frequent occupant you will know from your records that I like to have a particular room—1209—which I used as recently as the 21st-23rd February. I once again booked this room and was sent a confirmation showing the room, 1209, reserved a rate of KRW 230,000. There was one further request I made which was that my Korean girlfriend, whose name I provided, would check into the hotel on Friday evening as I was only flying at midnight and would only arrive at 6:00 am. I informed the reservations department that the room was for my account. All this was noted.

However, when I arrived at the hotel on Saturday morning I was told that you thought I was checking in on Saturday afternoon (despite me showing the front desk my confirmation from the hotel booking the room for Friday night) and that as a result 1209 has been given out and I had to settle for 801. This is not with standing the most disgraceful aspect was that my girlfriend informed me that when she checked in you also had no record of this and even though the room was for my account you made her give you all the cash in her purse as a deposit as she didn't have a credit card on her. Can you imagine how embarrassing this was for her to have to hand over KRW 150,000 which didn't even cover the cost of the room for 1 night. What possessed your staff to ask for this, surely if they didn't have a record of her arrival, they should simply have turned her away rather than give her the room; there is no sense to this.

Things went from bad to worse culmination in my departure where I ordered a car for 4:30 pm to take me to the airport and when I had finally finishing checking out at 4:45, I was told my car was not ready, that it was on its way back from the airport. I finally arrived at 5:10 pm, which was 40 minutes late. Fortunately I always allow myself enough time at the airport but what would have happened if I had missed my flight?

I travel extensively on business and in other hotels if this litany of disasters had happened I would have immediately been offered some form of compensation, whether it be a free night of the cost of the hotel or

transportation waived - this is the type of gesture that builds goodwill. But from you - nothing, just an apology as if that makes everything alright. What a shame.

As an aside for some reason I have been quoted KRW 250,000 for 3 nights and KRW 285,000 for Monday. I assume you have a reasonable explanation for why my rate has suddenly increased.

I stay in X Hotels all around the world, it is one of the reasons I am a Diamond member, but your lack of sensitivity and attention to detail will mean that I no longer stay at the X Hotel in Seoul.

I am not expecting a reply (but I would be grateful for an acknowledgement that you have received this letter). I am simply asking you to provide the level of service that I am accustomed to receiving from other X hotels globally.

Yours faithfully,

Michael Stockford
Marketing Director

As shown in the example of letter 3, it is a long letter with several different complaints at each different situations. However, letter 3 shows the same format shown in the strong complaint letter starting with complaint and grounder. The request move escalates over three steps, each an increasingly strong threat to hearer's negative face. The final impression is of a strong negatively aggravated complaint. The letter 3 can be grouped into several different moves since it has several different complaints at different situations showing more numbers of complaints than those of grounders as shown in Table 3.

The complaint in letter 3 gains its strength from the sequence of the speech acts and their propositional content. In the request part, where a threatening, a grounder, a complaint, a warning and then a request for immediate response follow each other, one after the other, the severity and urgency of the global complaint is sharply increased. Note also that the letter opens with a direct

complaint and does not have a formulaic expression at the end, other than the salutation "sincerely." Both strategies serve to aggravate this severe request.

Table 3

Complaining about the Level of the Hotel Service at Several Different Situations

Moves	Classifications	Contents
Move 1	Salutation 1	Mr. W
Move 2	Complaint 1	I am writing to express my utmost disquiet with the recent level of service supplied by your hotel.
	Grounder 1	If you check your records you will see that I have been a frequent occupant of the hotel since 2004.
Move 3	Complaint 2	I am writing to express my utmost disquiet with the recent level of service supplied by your hotel.
	Grounder 2	This was brought to a head a couple of weeks ago when I made a reservation for 4 nights from the 2nd April.
	Request 1	As a frequent occupant you will know from your records that I like to have a particular room 1209.
	Request 2	My Korean girlfriend, whose name I provided, would check into the hotel on Friday evening as I was only flying at midnight and would only arrive at 6.00am
Move 4	Complaint 3	This is notwithstanding the most disgraceful aspect.
	Grounder 3	She checked in you also had no record of this and even though the room was for my account you made her give you all the cash in her purse as a deposit as she didn't have a credit card on her.
	Grounder 4	She checked in you also had no record of this and even though the room was for my account you made her give you all the cash in her purse as a deposit as she didn't have a credit card on her.
	Complaint 4	Can you imagine how embarrassing this was for her to have to hand over KRW150,000 which didn't even cover the cost of the room for 1 night.
	Complaint 5	What possessed your staff to ask for this?
	Complaint 6	If they didn't have a record of her arrival, they should simply have turned her away rather than give her the room; there is no sense to this.
Move 5	Complaint 7	Things went from bad to worse culmination in my departure
	Grounder 5	I was told my car was not ready

	Complaint 8	What would have happened if I had missed my flight?
Move 6	Request 3	I would have immediately been offered some form of compensation
	Complaint 9	Just an apology as if that makes everything alright. What a shame.
Move 7	Grounder 6	I have been quoted KRW250,000 for 3 nights and KRW285,000 for Monday.
	Complaint 10	I assume you have a reasonable explanation for why my rate has suddenly increased.
Move 8	Grounder 7	I stay in X Hotels all around the world, it is one of the reasons I am a Diamond member.
	Complaint 11	Your lack of sensitivity and attention to detail will mean (threat) that I no longer stay at the X Hotel in Seoul.
Move 9	Grounder 8	I am not expecting a reply.
	Requesting 4	I am simply asking you to provide the level of service that I am accustomed to receiving from other X hotels globally.
Move 10	Salutations	Yours faithfully
	Signature	Michael Stockford Marketing Director

3. Patterns of Speech Acts

Another related aspect of sequence is whether the force of the global speech act of complaint rises or falls in intensity over the course of the letter. As we do not have a scale for measuring the intensity of speech acts, any measurement of rising or falling levels of elocutionary force must be considered a rough approximation. Table 4 shows the patterns of speech acts in the four moves exemplified from seven letters. Three letters have been introduced previously in the paper while the rest four letters can't be mentioned due to the space limit. The speech acts are all shown as direct speech acts: S = salutation; T = expression of thanks; G = grounder; C = complaint; R = request; D = demand; W = warning; Th = threat. In addition the speech act(s) judged to have the strongest elocutionary force has been given bold font.

Table 4
Sequences and Elocutionary Force Peaks

	Opening	Complaint		Request				Close					
Letter 1	S	C	G	G	G	C	G	R	S				
Letter 2	S	G		C				S					
Letter 3	S	CG	ThGRRGCGCC	R	Th	G	C	G	W	G	R	S	
			CCGRCGC										
Letter 4	S	T	G	C	G	C	C	Th			R	S	
Letter 5	S	T	G	G	C	G	C	G			C	W	S
Letter 6		C	G	G	C	G	R	C					
Letter 7	S	G	G	C			R				T	S	

V. DISCUSSION

The global speech acts can be analyzed in relation to the four types of sequence found in the data. "Buffer" refers to either a grounder or expression of thanks preceding the complaint; "embedding" refers to buffers in the initial and final positions of the sequence; "syllogism" refers to the premise-conclusion pattern; and "force" to the position of the peak of elocutionary force over the sequence of local speech acts.

The very small set of data in this study cannot yield any definitive results or correlations between aspects of linguistic politeness in letters of complaint. In this section relationships between the strength of global speech acts and sequence have been examined in a highly tentative and exploratory fashion.

There is a rough correlation between the use of buffers and the strength of the global speech act of complaint. Letter 1, 3 and others (not quoted in the study) begin with the complaint before justifying it. Similarly, the embedding of a complaint in routinized expressions of thanks and appreciation, as would be expected, does show some correlation. The syllogism pattern of grounder and complaint leading to a concluding request seems the norm for complaint letters. However, the one counter-example does show the reverse pattern, and this intuitively seems to be another way of marking a complaint as strong.

The letters seem to break down into two categories. First, weaker letters of complaint have the complaint following a grounder, while the other stronger ones begin with the complaint. The expression of thanks comes before the complaint and can be considered a buffer, as a grounder would.

A pattern for a politeness complaint, which could also be written in a more formal register, would approximate the structure of other general complaint letters. It would begin with a salutation and a formal register form of sentence; move 2 would have a buffered complaint, with first grounder and then complaint; move 3 would be a request, if necessary preceded by a grounder; before closing with an expression of thanks and a final salutation.

A pattern for a strong complaint would look something like letter 3. Move 1 would be a simple salutation, perhaps addressing hearer by last name; move 2 would begin with a complaint or even a threatening, followed by a grounder detailing the cause of complaint; move 3 would be a strong request or demand or warning; the final move would be a more formal salutation with signature and organizational title.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis consists of identifying the main speech acts in a given letter and then grouping those speech acts into moves. Each letter has at least four moves: an opening move, consisting of at least a salutation; a complaint move and a request move possibly including a grounder; and a close move with, minimally, a final salutation or signature.

Next, each local speech act, the minimal speech act unit, is analyzed using categories from Brown and Levinson's (1986) extended hierarchy of politeness strategies. The complaint speech act is identified in each letter. If it includes explicit censure of event A or of hearer then it is considered, loosely, a "direct complaint;" if censure is implicit or avoided then it is considered an "indirect complaint."

Finally, the analysis of complaint letters closes with a preliminary description of the strength of the global speech act of complaint. The weaker letters of

complaint have the complaint following a grounder, while the stronger ones begin with the complaint. The expression of thanks comes before the complaint and can be considered a buffer, as a grounder would.

On the basis of the study, the following lessons can be achieved: Firstly, polite complaint letters should begin with a salutation, a formal register form of sentence like grounder-complaint-request, and closing with an expression of thanks and a final salutation. Secondly, strong complaint letters usually begin with a complaint or even a threatening so that its replies should be carefully made in detail with some compensation of the complaints. Thirdly, the study is designed to help students understand how complaints letters are composed in reality with some examples of hotels.

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