

[Research Article]

A Contrastive Study on Chinese and Japanese Degree-Modifying Strategies in Central Complaint Utterances

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Abstract: While both China and Japan are collectivist societies with a primary focus on maintaining social harmony, it remains uncertain whether they respond similarly in adversarial situations. This study examines the complaint speech acts produced by Chinese and Japanese speakers in a role-play scenario, focusing on their degree-modifying strategies when articulating their various intentions within complaints and the consistency of these strategies across different intentions.

The results show that both the Chinese and Japanese speakers generally employed less direct pragmatic strategies and degree-mitigating external modifiers when verbalizing the coercive intentions that threatened the addressee's negative face. However, the Chinese speakers exhibited more directness when the addressees' negative face was less affected. In addition, the Chinese counterparts demonstrated fewer constraints in their external modifiers during less coercive intention verbalizations than the Japanese speakers.

These findings suggest that both Chinese and Japanese speakers are highly attuned to the addressee's face in situations that pose significant threats to their negative face. Nevertheless, the Chinese speakers may display greater flexibility in expressing their complaints, in that they prioritize directness over face concerns when the threat to negative face is ambiguous or minimal, even at the risk of disrupting conversational harmony. In contrast, the Japanese speakers would consistently aim to downplay the severity of the complaints.

This study underscores the complex nature of complaint dynamics and reaffirms the relevance of positive and negative face concepts within both Chinese and Japanese cultures, while also emphasizing the importance of contextual factors in face analysis.

Keywords: complaint; strategy; face; Chinese-Japanese comparison; pragmatics

1 Introduction

Both China and Japan are cultures in which conflict is generally minimized.¹ The Japanese typically exhibit a preference for conflict evasion through linguistic ambiguity, compromise, and silence, aiming to maintain social harmony and preserve relationships, even at the risk of not achieving personal goals.² Similarly, Chinese people demonstrate a tendency toward conflict aversion,³ which is bound by other-centred concerns, power dynamics, and social ties.⁴

In line with these cultural practices, even in dispreferred speech acts,⁵ Chinese and Japanese speakers still shape their tone via mitigation strategies, making the conversation less intimidating.⁶ However, in situations where there is little potential for reconciliation, the conversation may become and remain hostile. In such cases, it is uncertain whether the speakers continue to behave similarly. Blatant language with apparent accusations, or bald-on record linguistic strategies, may arise and outweigh interpersonal concerns, with much fewer redressive actions. However, these are acceptable in situations where the speaker and the hearer "both tacitly agree that the relevance of face demands may be suspended in the interests of urgency and efficiency."⁷

Accordingly, this study focuses on complaints and investigates the degree-modifying strategies employed by Chinese and Japanese complainants. Given the cultural stereotypes of indirect communication and hospitality associated with both cultures, this research compares their approaches to expressing complaints and the two cultures' potential motivations for the approaches. In addition, since a complaint may not always be conveyed through a single utterance and may gradually unfold and develop progressively throughout a conversation, instead of examining a general cluster of complaint utterances, I adopt a developmental perspective herein when analyzing the complaints.

¹ Stefanie Stadler, "Cultural Differences in the Orientation to Disagreement and Conflict," in *China Media Research*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2013): 66–75.

² Ohbuchi Ken-Ichi and Takahashi Yumi, "Cultural Styles of Conflict Management in Japanese and Americans: Passivity, Covertness, and Effectiveness of Strategies," in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 15 (August 1994): 1345–66; Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno, "Aimai: Ambiguity and the Japanese," in *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* (New York: Tuttle Publishing, 2011), 9–16.

³ Wei Xiaohong and Li Qingyuan, "The Confucian Value of Harmony and Its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction," in *Cross-Cultural Communication*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2013): 60–66; Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta, "Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution: Overview and Implications," in *Intercultural Communication Studies*, Vol. 7 (1997–98): 1–16.

⁴ Wu Liu and Ray Friedman, "Managing Conflicts in Chinese Societies," in *Handbook of Chinese Organizational Behavior* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012), 283.

⁵ Anita Pomerantz, "Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments: Some Features of Preferred/Dispreferred Turn Shapes," in *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 57–103.

⁶ Yao Jun, Song Jie, and Sheng Yanan, "Performance of Face-Threatening Speech Acts in Chinese and Japanese BELF Emails," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 178 (June 2021): 287–300.

⁷ Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 69.

2 Literature review

2.1 Politeness and face as linguistic concepts

The present study regards face as an underlying factor that may influence how complaints are strategically articulated. Face was originally defined as "an image of the self which depends on both the rules and values of a particular society and the situation the social interaction is embedded in."⁸ Following this notion, Brown and Levinson assume that all competent and rational adult members of a society have a face and that the face comprises individuals' wants, thus defining the face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself."⁹ Face is further classified into two units: negative face, which is the wants of every "competent adult member" that their actions be unimpeded by others, and positive face, which is every member's want to have their wants be desirable to a few others at the least.¹⁰ Thus, the fulfilment of different types of wants leads to various forms of politeness, including negative politeness, positive politeness, or a combination of both.

There is no communication without face.¹¹ Especially in the tense, emotionally charged, and urgent contexts where antagonistic complaints prevail, complainants often adopt face-threatening acts (FTAs) as a means of emotional release or as a coping mechanism to address their dissatisfaction. FTAs are the speech acts "that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker."¹² These acts have been extensively explored in other contexts, such as refusal and disagreement.¹³ These dispreferred acts typically do not occur spontaneously, in that they require the speaker to formulate a response upon hearing the interlocutor's statement. Consequently, the speaker's initial intent is not necessarily inherently aggressive or unsolicited but, rather, a response to a preceding utterance. These studies often focus on the use of redressive strategies, in which potential face threats are mitigated and a mutually acceptable outcome is achieved, enabling both parties' faces to be preserved. As a result, research focusing on the deliberate and strategic use of face-threatening strategies, with the primary objective of challenging the other party's face, remains relatively scarce. By concentrating on face in antagonistic situations, the current study contributes to this field by utilizing conversational data from Chinese and Japanese contexts.

⁸ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), 596.

⁹ Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 61.

¹⁰ Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 61.

¹¹ Arundale Robert and Ashton Donna, "Is Face Ever Ignored? The Case of Brown and Levinson's 'Bald, on Record' Utterances" (Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Miami, USA, 1992); Marina Terkourafi, "Toward a Unified Theory of Politeness, Impoliteness, and Rudeness," in *Impoliteness in Language* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 45–76.

¹² Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 65.

¹³ William Turnbull and Karen L. Saxton, "Modal Expressions as Facework in Refusals to Comply with Requests: I Think I Should Say 'No' Right Now," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (February 1997): 145–81; Pan Yuling, "Facework in Refusals in Chinese Survey Interviews," in *Journal of Politeness Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (February 2012): 53–74; Pomerantz, "Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments," 57–103; Gene H. Lerner, "Finding 'Face' in the Preference Structures of Talk-in-Interaction," in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (December 1996): 303–21.

2.2 Face in Chinese and Japanese societies

Brown and Levinson's framework has faced criticism from scholars in both China and Japan, who argue that these scholars' conception of face is Westernized and individualistic.¹⁴ In socially-oriented or collectivist societies such as China and Japan, the interactional base centres around the relational concern of group members rather than the concern for the self.¹⁵

Chinese society, though it consists of individuals, is "more than a total sum of its individual constituents."¹⁶ Gu states that certain negative acts that threaten face, as delineated by Brown and Levinson, are not FTAs in Chinese interactions.¹⁷ Through illustrating a Chinese politeness practice wherein an inviter and an invitee engage in a series of invitations and rejections before the invitee's final acceptance, Gu demonstrates the incongruity of negative face considerations within Chinese societal norms. Similarly, Mao posits that Chinese face depends upon and is determined by the participation of others.¹⁸ Indeed, an individual is presumed to seek the respect of the group or the community, and not to satisfy their desire for freedom.¹⁹ Thus, the Chinese notions of face are defined by their communal rather than individualistic attributes, prioritizing the alignment of individual behavior with societal norms and values over the satisfaction of personal desires or preferences, with the actors being judged by the community.²⁰

Similarly, the notion of *amae* (dependency) has been delineated as a prevalent Japanese behavioral trait that is marked by dependency on others, rather than individuality.²¹ Matsumoto diverges from Brown and Levinson's concept of negative face, stating that "the negative face want of preservation of individual territories seems alien to Japanese."²² She highlights the importance of understanding one's social position relative to others and recognizing dependence on the group in Japanese society, where social interactions are marked by the prioritization of acknowledging and maintaining the relative positions of others over individual territory.²³

Echoing Matsumoto's perspective, Ide states that the selection of the formal linguistic form is often dictated by social conventions (e.g., the sociopragmatically obligatory use of honorifics to refer to

¹⁴ Matsumoto Yoshiko, "Reexamination of the Universality of Face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (August 1988): 403–26; Sachiko Ide, "Formal Forms and Discernment: Two Neglected Aspects of Universals of Linguistic Politeness," in *Multilingua*, Vol. 8, No. 2–3 (1989): 223–48; Gu Yueguo, "Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (April 1990): 237–57; Onuigbo G. Nwoye, "Linguistic Politeness and Socio-Cultural Variations of the Notion of Face," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (October 1992): 309–28; LuMing Robert Mao, "Beyond Politeness Theory: 'Face' Revisited and Renewed," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (May 1994): 451–86.

¹⁵ Hofstede Geert, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 214–17; John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey, "Face Concerns in Interpersonal Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Empirical Test of the Face Negotiation Theory," in *Communication Research*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (December 2003): 599–624.

¹⁶ Gu, "Politeness Phenomena," 241.

¹⁷ Gu, "Politeness Phenomena," 241–42.

¹⁸ Mao, "Beyond Politeness Theory," 460.

¹⁹ Mao, "Beyond Politeness Theory," 460.

²⁰ Mao, "Beyond Politeness Theory," 460.

²¹ Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 8–22; Doi Takeo, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. Bester John (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973), 33–39.

²² Matsumoto, "Reexamination of the Universality of Face," 408.

²³ Matsumoto, "Reexamination of the Universality of Face," 405.

individuals of higher status), which she termed "discernment."²⁴ Thus, in a society such as Japan, where group membership is paramount, "the role or status defined in a particular situation rather than face is the basis of interaction,"²⁵ and the sociopragmatic use of honorifics is "independent of the speaker's rational intention."²⁶

Both Chinese and Japanese cultures exhibit a need for distinct politeness that extends beyond the scope of Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. For Chinese speakers, this necessity stems from the need to be integrated into a collective society, while for Japanese speakers, it arises from the need to conform to established social structures. While the universality of face has been challenged, using face as a method for discourse analysis is not always seen as disproven or untenable. While Leech has proposed a new politeness framework that incorporated different component constraints, which is claimed to be universally applicable across diverse languages,²⁷ Ji has endorsed Brown and Levinson's concept of face as a self-image that provides essential motivation for everyone to care about it in the first place, which constitutes an essential part of social interaction.²⁸ Moreover, Ji states that while negative face might be less prominent in Chinese culture and that "the two types of face may play an unbalanced role in a particular culture,"²⁹ no culture has been identified as lacking either positive or negative face.³⁰ Similarly, Pizziconi argues that positive and negative constructs hold inherent cognitive validity, as they rely on the fundamental and unfalsifiable notions of appreciation and territory, rather than the specific linguistic devices in expressing utterances.³¹ O'Driscoll also posits that discernment and concern for face are not necessarily opposing ideas,³² with the discernment being close to the end of a spectrum, which allows for less linguistic choice. This non-strategic use of language, operating at a subconscious level, can still be linked to the consideration of imposition in a specific situation, which is one of Brown and Levinson's social variables in face consideration.³³ Thus, face continues to serve as a fundamental motivator for politeness across cultures, providing a useful framework for categorizing and comparing linguistic realizations in verbal interactions.

2.3 Complaints in Chinese and Japanese societies

Based on Austin's typology, complaint includes the notion of reaction and expressions to other people's behavior or (past) conduct.³⁴ Olshtain and Weinbach define "complaint" as a speaker's (S's) expression of

²⁴ Ide, "Formal Forms and Discernment," 230.

²⁵ Ide, "Formal Forms and Discernment," 241.

²⁶ Ide, "Formal Forms and Discernment," 242.

²⁷ Geoffrey Leech, "Politeness: Is There an East-West Divide?," in *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (January 2007): 180–88.

²⁸ Ji Shaojun, "'Face' and Polite Verbal Behaviors in Chinese Culture," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 32, no. 7 (June 2000): 1060.

²⁹ Ji, "'Face' and Polite Verbal Behaviors," 1061.

³⁰ Ji, "'Face' and Polite Verbal Behaviors," 1061.

³¹ Barbara Pizziconi, "Re-Examining Politeness, Face and the Japanese Language," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 35, No. 10–11 (October 2003): 1497.

³² Jim O'Driscoll, "About Face: A Defence and Elaboration of Universal Dualism," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (January 1996): 1–32.

³³ O'Driscoll, "About Face," 17.

³⁴ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: University Press, 1962), 159.

“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.”³⁵ The locus of the present study is, according to Boxer, a direct complaint in which the addressee is “held responsible,” instead of an indirect complaint where the target of the complaint is not present.³⁶

A prevailing consensus within the field posits that the act of complaint is intrinsically an FTA,³⁷ with the face-threatening effect possibly being aimed at both the speaker and the hearer.³⁸ The hearer does not meet the speaker’s expectations and may receive directives from the speaker, while the speaker might be perceived as emoting without restraint, leading to deterioration of their social image.

Although the act of complaint is classified as a type of expressive speech act, equating it with a single form requires careful consideration, as complaints are complex behaviors that may manifest in various ways, including expressions of disapproval, criticism, uncontrolled negative emotions, or even insults.³⁹ We can further break down a complaint into several specific speech acts, such as request and justification, which collectively constitute a complete complaint speech act.⁴⁰ As a complaint is not introduced with an early indication of its intended scope, thereby preventing recipients from anticipating its endpoint,⁴¹ we can assert that the act of complaint is often unpredictable due to its unscripted forms. Therefore, a bottom-up analysis of a complaint may be necessary to elucidate its internal features.

Various authors’ research highlights the nuanced ways in which Chinese speakers navigate complaint strategies, often prioritizing face concerns and social harmony. For example, Du’s study reveals that Chinese speakers tend to avoid explicit complaints, favoring constructive strategies in the forms of suggest and hope.⁴² This aligns with other findings, which emphasize a preference for negative politeness strategies, such as being conventionally indirect and impersonal, as well as introducing an undesirable fact that is potentially linked to the complainant.⁴³ An’s observations further support these findings, noting the frequent use of indirect strategies that are influenced by situational factors that resonate with the collectivist nature

³⁵ Elite Olshtain and Liora Weinbach, "Interlanguage Features of the Speech Act of Complaining," in *Interlanguage Pragmatics* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 108–22.

³⁶ Diana Boxer, "Complaints as Positive Strategies: What the Learner Needs to Know," in *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1993): 280.

³⁷ Olshtain and Weinbach, "Interlanguage Features," 108–22; Beth Murphy and Joyce Neu, "My Grade's Too Low: The Speech Act Set of Complaining," in *Speech Acts Across Cultures* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 191–216; Melanie Sauer, "Complaints: A Cross-Cultural Study of Pragmatic Strategies and Linguistic Forms" (AAAL Conference, Vancouver, Canada, 2000).

³⁸ Sara Orthaber and Rosina Márquez-Reiter, "'Talk to the Hand': Complaints to a Public Transport Company," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 43, No. 15 (December 2011): 3862–63.

³⁹ Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, "'Talk to the Hand,'" 4.

⁴⁰ Murphy and Neu, "My Grade's Too Low," 199–203.

⁴¹ Véronique Traverso, "The Dilemmas of Third-Party Complaints in Conversation between Friends," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 41, No. 12 (December 2009): 2388.

⁴² Du Jinwen S., "Performance of Face-Threatening Acts in Chinese: Complaining, Giving Bad News, and Disagreeing," in *Pragmatics of Chinese as Native and Target Language* (Manoa: Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, Univ. of Hawaii, 1995), 165–206.

⁴³ Xu Zhiqing, *Politeness Strategies for the Speech Act of Complaint in Chinese* (MA diss., Changchun, Northeast Normal University, 2007); Yuan Zhoumin 袁周敏, "On Direct Complaints in Chinese 论汉语直接抱怨语," in *Applied Linguistics 语言文字应用*, No. 1 (February 2009): 48–59.

of Chinese culture.⁴⁴ This contrasts with the individualistic ethos prevalent in American society. Similarly, in a comparative study of complaint strategies in Chinese and Western contexts, Chen et al. highlight the compassion and hierarchical structure of Chinese society and the more egalitarian approach in American culture, suggesting that cultural context significantly affects how complaints are recognized and articulated.⁴⁵

However, Zhang's findings introduce a divergence and suggest that there are contexts in which direct expressions of discontent are prevalent.⁴⁶ In this regard, other studies have also identified that the Chinese have a preference for using degree-strengthening words in complaints or using a mixture of degree-strengthening and mitigating words.⁴⁷

Research on Japanese complaint strategies reveals notable cultural differences, particularly through comparative studies. For instance, Hajikano et al. have found that native Japanese speakers tend to favor direct complaint strategies—such as requesting solutions and asking for explanations—and a combination of these strategies, while non-native speakers often opt for indirect approaches.⁴⁸ This indicates a clear preference for straightforwardness among native speakers. However, Fujimori's subsequent study finds that in reparable situations, Japanese speakers often refer to social norms to indirectly prompt behavioral changes, ultimately concluding that Japanese speakers frame issues more objectively, whereas English speakers express personal dissatisfaction.⁴⁹ Other research shows that Japanese speakers use more indirect methods such as hints or insinuations as compared to English and Korean speakers.⁵⁰ Therefore, the cultural context may have a significant influence on how complaints are expressed, which is also evidenced by Shimada's research that indicates that native Japanese speakers in Japan use a broader variety of complaint strategies more frequently than those living abroad.⁵¹

⁴⁴ An Na 安娜, "A Comparative Study of Complaint Strategies in Chinese and English 论英汉抱怨策略," in *Journal of North University of China (Social Science Edition)* 中北大学学报(社会科学版), Vol. 23 (December 2007): 80–85.

⁴⁵ Chen Yuan-shan, Chun-yin Doris Chen, and Miao-Hsia Chang, "American and Chinese Complaints: Strategy Use from a Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Intercultural Pragmatics*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (May 2011), 269–71.

⁴⁶ Zhang Jingxin, *A Pragmatic Study of the Speech Act of Complaining in Chinese* (MA diss., Changchun, Northeast Normal University, 2008).

⁴⁷ Zhu Xiaoshu 朱晓姝, "An Investigation of Differences of Complaint Verbal Behaviours Between American and Chinese Students 中美学生抱怨言语行为的差异探究," in *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University* 西安外国语大学学报, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 2008): 51–55; Gu Xiaoli 顾小丽, *A Study of Chinese Complaining Act* 汉语抱怨言语行为研究 (MA diss., Shanghai, Shanghai International Studies University, 2011).

⁴⁸ Hajikano Are 初鹿野阿れ, Kumatoridani Tetsuo 熊取谷哲夫, and Fujimori Hiroko 藤森弘子, "Fuman Hyōmē Sutoratejī No Shiyōkēkō: Nihongo Bogowasha To Nihongo Gakushūsha No Hikaku 不満表明ストラテジーの使用傾向—日本語母語話者と日本語学習者の比較—," in *Journal of Japanese Language Education* 日本語教育, Vol. 88 (March 1996): 128–39.

⁴⁹ Fujimori Hiroko 藤森弘子, "Fuman Hyōmē Sutoratejī No Nichiē Hihaku: Danwa Kansē Tesutohō No Chōsa Kekka Omotoni 不満表明ストラテジーの日英比較—談話完成テスト法の調査結果をもとに—," in *Gengo To Bunka No Taiwa* 言語と文化の対話 (Tōkyō 東京: Ehōsha 英宝社, 1997), 243–57.

⁵⁰ Tamanaha Masako, *Interlanguage Speech Act Realization of Apologies and Complaints: The Performances of Japanese L2 Speakers in Comparison with Japanese L1 and English L1 Speakers* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2003); Lee Sun-hee 李善姬, "Complaints Expressed by Japanese and Korean Native Speakers: A Comparison between Japanese and Korean Students 日韓の「不満表明」に関する一考察—日本人学生と韓国人学生の比較を通して—," in *The Japanese Journal of Language in Society* 社会言語科学, Vol. 8, No. 2 (March 2006): 53–64.

⁵¹ Shimada Sayata, *Complaining Strategies of Japanese and American College Students: A Cross-Cultural Study* (MA diss., PA, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2005).

While Japanese speakers might seem indirect compared to Americans, they also exhibit different tendencies. For example, Somchanakit finds that while Japanese and Thai speakers employ different forms of verbalizations, both groups favor direct strategies when expressing complaints.⁵² These studies illustrate that Japanese complaint strategies are complex and context-dependent, thus balancing directness with cultural norms of harmony.

It appears that there is no consensus in the research on complaint strategies in Chinese and Japanese regarding which language adopts more indirect or redressive approaches. Cui, for example, concludes that Chinese complainants prioritize clearer and more direct complaint expression and maintain their stance even in the face of the complainees' responses, whereas Japanese complainants adjust their approach based on the complainees' responses.⁵³ On the contrary, Cheng finds that the Japanese use blatant verbalizations more frequently than the Chinese, who instead tend to preserve the addressee's self-image in the situations of similar social power or high severity.⁵⁴

Additional research has revealed the distinct nationalistic idiosyncrasies in terms of their perceptions of the act of complaining. For example, Wu's study that compares Japanese and Taiwanese students' improvement request strategies reveals similarities in the use of single strategies and strategy collocations, but the varying places in which the core intention is clarified in utterances indicates a focus on goal attainment in Taiwanese and an emphasis on relationship maintenance in Japanese.⁵⁵ In terms of face and politeness, the Taiwanese students prioritize the positive face through thanking (if there was an improvement), while the Japanese students primarily employ apologies before requests, demonstrating their respect for the hearer's negative face.

With a similar focus, Li's comparative study of making demands in complaints, through the analysis of various sentential segments and linguistic devices, reveals that the Japanese speakers tend to adopt an "egocentric" and subjective construal, while the Chinese speakers prioritize an objective construal of the ongoing event per se, such as their effort to articulate objective reasons to avoid person-to-person confrontations.⁵⁶

⁵² Kunaj Somchanakit, *Nichitai ryōgengo niokeru fumanhyōmē nikansuru kenkyū: fuman no tēdo no sa niyuru kōsatu* 日タイ両言語における「不満表明」に関する研究: 不満の程度の差による考察 (PhD diss., Ōsaka 大阪, Ōsaka Daigaku 大阪大学, 2013).

⁵³ Cui Donghua 崔東花, "Expressing Dissatisfaction and Its Responses: A Comparison of Japanese Native Speakers with Chinese Native Speakers 不満表明とそれに対する応答—中国語母語話者と日本語母語話者を比較して—," in *Tabunka Sesshoku Bamen No Gengo Kōdō To Gengo Kanri* 多文化接触場面の言語行動と言語管理 (Chiba 千葉: Chiba Daigaku Daigakuin Jinbun Shakai Kagaku Kenkyūka 千葉大学大学院人文社会科学研究科, 2009), 43–63.

⁵⁴ Cheng Duo 程鐸, *Fuman hyōgen sutorateji niokeru Nichū taishō kenkyū* 不満表現ストラテジーにおける日中対照研究 (MA diss., Sendai 仙台, Tōhoku Daigaku 東北大学, 2012).

⁵⁵ Wu Yueh-Hua 吳岳樺, "Use of Improvement Request Strategy in Discontent Expression between Japanese and Taiwanese Students 不満表明における改善要求ストラテジーの日台比較," in *Taiwan Nihongo Bungakuhō* 台灣日本語文學報, No. 24 (December 2008): 231–51.

⁵⁶ Li Guoling 李国玲, "A Contrastive Study of Japanese and Chinese 'Making Demands': The Viewpoint of Cognitive Linguistics 「改善要求発話」の構成要素に関する日中対照—認知言語学アプローチから—," in *Journal of International and Advanced Japanese Studies* 国際日本研究, Vol. 7 (March 2015): 79–96.

In both Chinese and Japanese, complaint strategies are not fixed or universal but are, rather, highly contingent upon situational factors. These factors, according to Brown and Levinson's framework, include social distance (D), social power (P), and the degree of imposition involved (R). Furthermore, the level of imposition can be influenced by additional factors such as the severity of the complaint, the possibility of repair, and cultural-specific interpretations of the situation. Ultimately, these situational factors shape the speaker's linguistic output, including the pragmatic types of sentences employed and the choice of lexicon.

Chen et al. argue that Brown and Levinson's D, P, and R are dynamic, the values of which can change according to the variations that often occur in a speech event.⁵⁷ While the level of imposition may differ across cultures, even within the same speech act, such as giving advice, it may also vary based on the specific topic category within that act.⁵⁸ This can also be applied to the speech act of complaint, in that a single complaint may encompass multiple subdivided speech acts,⁵⁹ reflecting the speaker's evolving intentions as the complaint unfolds. These sub-acts, representing specific subtopics within the broader complaint, can carry varying levels of imposition, even within the same culture, leading to distinct complaint strategies. For instance, a complainant may directly specify an undesired act, inquire about the reasons behind it, or request a change in behavior. While Cui's study indicates a preference for more direct expressions of discontent among Chinese speakers,⁶⁰ Du's study observes a tendency toward indirect conveyance of dissatisfaction through suggestions for behavioral change.⁶¹ These findings may appear contradictory, which may be due to the different complaint situations. However, even in a single complaint situation, this kind of difference may still arise as a result of different subtopics derived from the complainant's different psychological states. Therefore, I contend that even within a single complaint discourse where the social status and power remain constant, varying intentions may give rise to different subtopics, each with its specific level of imposition, ultimately leading to diverse complaint strategies.

Past research has primarily focused on analyzing the final verbalizations of complaints, while overlooking a more comprehensive investigation of the underlying subtopics that emerge within the broader complaint discourse. Comparing the face-threatening implications of two subtopic utterances can be challenging due to the influence of various linguistic strategies on complaint statements within these subtopics. For instance, articulating an undesired behavior may be perceived as less polite than asking for reasons for the behavior. However, indirectly articulating an undesired behavior, such as expressing its impact on the speaker from the speaker's viewpoint, might convey a better sense of politeness compared to a direct interrogation that includes the use of "why." I contend that in order to gain a holistic understanding of a particular group's characteristics in complaint behavior, it is necessary to analyze final verbalizations in relation to the distinct

⁵⁷ Chen Rong, He Lin, and Hu Chunmei, "Chinese Requests: In Comparison to American and Japanese Requests and with Reference to the 'East-West Divide,'" in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 55 (September 2013): 145–46.

⁵⁸ Chen, He, and Hu, "Chinese Requests," 146.

⁵⁹ Murphy and Neu, "My Grade's Too Low," 199–203.

⁶⁰ Cui, "Expressing Dissatisfaction and Its Responses," 43–63.

⁶¹ Du, "Performance of Face-Threatening Acts in Chinese," 165–206.

subtopics that arise within the complaint discourse. If complainants behave similarly or consistently across all of the subtopics of the same complaint discourse in terms of adopting a similar level of directness in their verbalization strategies, then the postulation regarding their behavioral tendency in the speech act of complaint becomes more compelling.

2.4 The Key Issues

The current study identifies two significant issues. The first pertains to the concept of face. While the strategic deployment of FTAs has received limited attention in collectivist societies such as China and Japan, this aspect should not be overlooked, as complaints naturally exist in both cultures. One objective of this study is to examine how the concern for face—encompassing both face-protecting and face-threatening aspects—relates to the linguistic characteristics of complaints in both languages.

Another issue is about the methodology. Differing from a majority of the prior research, this study emphasizes the progressive nature of complaints and investigates how complainants' behavior is exhibited across various subdivided intents within a complaint. The (in)consistency of complaint expressions is subsequently linked to the concept of face, serving as one underlying interpretation of such behavior.

3 Methodology

3.1 The classification of the degree-modifying strategies of complaint

Within the context and the development of complaint discourse, various subtopics may emerge, wherein speakers may employ verbalization strategies of varying levels of directness. Drawing from the conversational data analyzed, I have identified the following three frequently used subtopics for the purpose of comparison:

- 1: Stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by the complaine;e;
- 2: Asking for a reason that has triggered the undesired situation or asking about the ins and outs of the undesired situation; and
- 3: Identifying a bad result caused by the complaine;e's undesired act.

Subtopics are sometimes also viewed as complaint strategies,⁶² and they are verbalized by the speaker's different intentions in the process of a complaint and all carry a potentially negative connotation. Conversely, modifying strategies are the volitional manipulations of the confrontational degree of a complaint utterance that verbalizes that subtopic. The degree can be adjusted by the "directness level" or "illocutionary transparency" of the verbalization of the speaker's intention in a subtopic,⁶³ or by supplementary modifications.

⁶² Hajikano, Kumatoridani, and Fujimori, "Fuman hyōmē sutorateji no shiyōkēkō," 130–31; An, "A Comparative Study of Complaint Strategies," 82–83; Cheng, "Fuman Hyōgen Sutorateji," 52–61; Somchanakit, "Nichitai Ryōgengo Niokeru," 29–30.

⁶³ Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper, "Politeness Markers in English and German," in *Rasmus Rask Studies in Pragmatic Linguistics, Volume 2, Conversational Routine* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1981), 159; Shoshana Blum-Kulka, "Indirectness and Politeness in Requests: Same or Different?," in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April 1987): 133.

I categorize the modifying strategies into pragmatic strategies at a macro level and microunit strategies at a micro and semiotic level, which function within different segments of a complaint utterance. To illustrate this, I adhere to the conceptual scheme proposed by Wood and Kroger in conjunction with additional types of speech act categorizations in order to classify the modifying strategies in my analysis.⁶⁴ Wood and Kroger's taxonomy identifies three units that are crucial for the linguistic realization of a comprehensive social action: auxiliary speech act (ASA), central speech act (CSA) and microunits.⁶⁵ CSAs are central to achieving a social act.⁶⁶ ASAs are antecedent or subsequent to CSAs, and they contribute to the achievement of a social act (which may be unrelated or related to CSAs).⁶⁷ Lastly, microunits are the "incomplete utterances that modify other utterances or parts of utterances."⁶⁸ Microunits comprise three subunits: upgraders, which increase the effect of what they modify; downgraders, which decrease the effect of what they modify; and face markers, which provide direct implications for face, rather than simply modifying the effect of other units.⁶⁹

Thus, CSAs and ASAs are defined based on their functional properties in relation to a specific speech act, and they are actualized in different pragmatic strategies that indicate what the speaker is using the strategies for. Conversely, the subunits in microunits are the linguistic devices that are embedded in utterances of a single speech act. The presence of microunit is usually not essential for the utterance to be understood as a specific speech act that is being carried out.

The categorizing scheme can also be extended to the speech act of complaint. Pragmatic strategies in CSAs indicate whether the central or core information of a specific complaint subtopic is overtly expressed, while the pragmatic strategies in ASAs furnish additional details to externally refine the utterance in CSAs. At the micro level, microunits, consisting of upgraders and downgraders, are the focus of this study, while the face markers are excluded, as they do not serve the function of modifying the effects of CSAs.⁷⁰ According to previous studies' definitions, the "syntactic upgrades/downgraders" are intertwined with the grammatical structure of utterances, such as interrogative or conditional structures.⁷¹ However, since syntactic microunits influence the pragmatic structure of an utterance and thereby modify the intensity of the utterance that adopts a specific CSA pragmatic strategy, I have defined microunit strategies as only the lexical or phrasal microunits that are embedded in a sentence that do not alter the pragmatic structure of

⁶⁴ Linda A. Wood and Rolf O. Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse: Review and Proposal," in *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 1994): 248–77; Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House, and Gabriele Kasper, "Investigating Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: An Introductory Overview," in *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies* (Norwood N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1989), 1–34; Claus Faerch and Gabriele Kasper, "Internal and External Modification in Interlanguage Request Realization," in *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies* (Norwood N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1989), 221–47; House and Kasper, "Politeness Markers," 157–86.

⁶⁵ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 258–59.

⁶⁶ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 258.

⁶⁷ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 258.

⁶⁸ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 259.

⁶⁹ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 259.

⁷⁰ Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 259.

⁷¹ Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, "Investigating Cross-Cultural Pragmatics," 19; Faerch and Kasper, "Internal and External Modification," 224.

a complaint utterance. The structural outline of a possible complete complaint utterance is provided in the following figure.

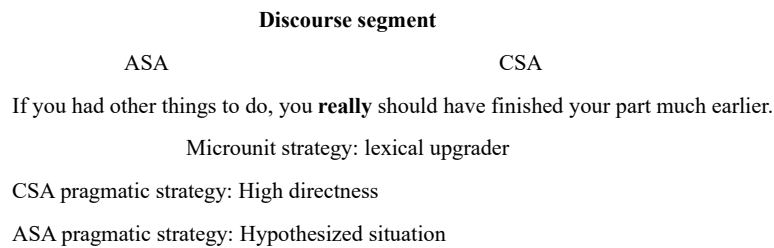


Figure 1. Three types of degree-modifying strategies in a complaint utterance.

Most existing studies on Chinese and Japanese complaints have primarily examined the final verbalizations of complaints, often overlooking the variations in the verbalizations that are characterized by differing levels of illocutionary transparency or directness within and across complaint subtopics. For a comprehensive understanding of the behavioral traits of speakers within a particular group regarding complaints, it is imperative to investigate the consistency of how subtopics are verbalized across diverse subtopics. However, due to space limitations, only the CSA pragmatic strategies are analyzed herein. Thus, the study focuses on the strategies in the central complaint utterances that are influenced by their CSA pragmatic strategies.

3.1.1 CSA pragmatic strategies

CSAs are essential to the accomplishment of the complaint. Since the subtopic is determined, what the speaker wants to convey from the CSA is also established. However, discrepancies may appear in terms of the CSA's directness level or the degree of illocutionary transparency,⁷² depending on how a subtopic is displayed. I divide CSA pragmatic strategies into three types of strategies with different levels of directness: high directness, medium directness, and low directness.

CSA pragmatic strategies with high directness articulate a particular intention in a specific complaint subtopic overtly, representing the highest level of complaint intensity. The propositional content of an utterance that employs this strategy aligns directly with the content of its subtopic. For example, in the subtopic "stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by the complaine," the verbalization "at least you should have told me why you didn't finish your work" uses a CSA pragmatic strategy with high directness, as the proposition of this utterance is direct and corresponds directly to its subtopic.

Utterances that employ CSA pragmatic strategies with medium directness usually take a similar sentential structure, focus, or narrative perspective compared to utterances of CSA strategies with high directness. However, the propositional content of the utterance is modified and refers to another related matter that does not have as strong an illocutionary effect as the strategies with high directness. This strategy

⁷² House and Kasper, "Politeness Markers," 159; Blum-Kulka, "Indirectness and Politeness in Requests," 133.

usually takes a form similar to a statement of "reminding" the complainee of their possible misconduct. In the subtopic "stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by the complainee," both the utterances with high and medium directness share a similar sentential structure: "You DO something." However, the propositional contents differ.

High directness: "You should have told me why you didn't finish your work."

Medium directness: "You can also tell me why you didn't finish your work."

Both verbalizations indicate that the focus is "there is something better you didn't do," they share the similar sentential structure of "you DO something," and they steer the narrative perspective to the addressee: "You..." The utterance with medium directness relates to the addressee with a suggestion instead of a coercive request, conveying a less compulsory effect. The addressee thus needs to infer that the speaker is asking them to engage in an unfulfilled act.

The CSA pragmatic strategies with low directness usually possess diversified forms in order to circumvent the direct expression of any affirmative postulation or specification of the unfavored matter. These include the shift of narrative perspective to a subjective stance (e.g., from "You..." to "I...") or the shift of sentential structure or focus. The propositional content usually appears to not have a clear relationship with its subtopic and does not have an immediate effect on the complaint. Thus, the complainee needs more inferential effort to comprehend the complainant's inner state. For example, "I hope that you could have contacted me about your work" is expressed with low directness, in contrast to its highly direct counterpart "You should have told me why you didn't finish your work."

3.1.2 Microunit strategies

Microunit strategies are those that employ micro-level linguistic devices in an utterance that is below the sentence level and have their own external contributions to the utterance's overall face-threatening degree. In the present study, only the lexical or phrasal microunits embedded in the CSA are analyzed. Since their use belongs to the external modification, the pragmatic force of an utterance will remain, even if the microunits are removed.⁷³ According to the previous classification and the microunits in the localized context,⁷⁴ I have summarized the different types of microunits to be analyzed as follows:

- a. Intensifier (upgrader): Adverbial modifiers that are adopted to overrepresent reality or intensify certain elements of the proposition. This includes, for example, 太 (very) and かなり (very) in Japanese that emphasize the excessiveness of a negatively evaluated act.
- b. Committer [plus] (upgrader): Lexical or phrasal modifiers through which a complainant indicates their heightened degree of commitment vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition. This includes, for example, 实在 (really) in Chinese and 本当に (really) in Japa-

⁷³ Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, "Investigating Cross-Cultural Pragmatics," 19.

⁷⁴ Faerch and Kasper, "Internal and External Modification," 231-32; House and Kasper, "Politeness Markers," 166-70; Wood and Kroger, "The Analysis of Face Work in Discourse," 259.

nese.

- c. Sentence-final particle [minus] (downgrader): Particles that are attached at the end of an utterance that do not contribute to the semantic or grammatical formation of the proposition in which they are embedded. They are the indicators of a complainant's attitude or mood in the production of the utterance, serving as a means to lessen the degree of the complaints. For example, 嘛 is used to soften requests or create a sense of intimacy in declarative sentences, downgrading the tone of the statement.⁷⁵ 啊 / 呀 also functions to reduce the forcefulness of the sentence and indicates friendliness.⁷⁶ ね in Japanese may display a certain degree of confirmation seeking, thereby mitigating the degree of its host utterance.⁷⁷ This also includes 吧 in Chinese and かな or なあ in Japanese, all of which indicate a consultative or self-interrogating tone.
- d. Understater (downgrader): Adverbial modifiers through which a complainant underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition or modulates the impact that their utterance is likely to have on the complaine. They are usually used to reduce the preciseness or scale of an utterance from a semantic or propositional perspective. For example, 可能 (probably) in Chinese, たぶん (probably) in Japanese, 至少 (at least) in Chinese, and でも (at least) in Japanese all convey a composing tone and indicate a reduced level of factuality or the minimum standard for fulfilling an expected action.
- e. Hedge (downgrader): Adverbials through which a complainant avoids an assertive propositional specification, thus circumventing the potential provocation that this type of specification might entail. They are usually used to reduce the assertiveness of propositional content (i.e., a speaker's commitment or certainty of the assertion) in an articulation from a subjective perspective. This includes, for example, 有点 (a little bit) in Chinese and ちょっと (a little bit) in Japanese, both of which reduce the speaker's commitment in an utterance. It should be noted that although the two words may also be considered understaters when they semantically diminish a specific "amount," they are categorized as hedges when they convey a lesser degree of the assertion. Additionally, the use of けど (but...) at the end of a sentence in Japanese is a typical hedge that has the pragmatic effect of reducing that sentence's assertion.
- f. Hesitator (downgrader): Vocabulary that does not convey any specific semantic meaning but

⁷⁵ Yang Qihui 杨启慧, "Yuqici 'ma' de yuyong gongneng yanjiu 语气词“嘛”的语用功能研究," in *Xiandai jiaoji* 现代交际, No. 10 (2017): 69–70.

⁷⁶ Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 313–17; Hongmei Fang and Kees Hengeveld, "Sentence-Final Particles in Mandarin," in *Studia Linguistica*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (December 2022): 894–97.

⁷⁷ Chen Changhao 陈常好, "Shūjoshi: hanashite to kikite no ninshiki no gyappu oumeru tame no bunsetuji 終助詞 話し手と聞き手の認識のギャップをうめるための文接辞," in *Nihongogaku* 日本語学, Vol. 6, No. 10 (October 1987): 93–109; Mayumi まゆみ Usami 宇佐美, "'Ne' no komyunikēshon kinō to disukōsu poraitonesu 「ね」のコミュニケーション機能とディスコース・ポライトネス," in *Josē no kotoba: Shokubahen* 女性のことば・職場編 (Tōkyō 東京: Hitsuji Shobō ひつじ書房, 1997), 252–53.

implies that the complainant has qualms about performing an ensuing act. This includes, for example, 呃 (err) in Chinese and えっと (hmm) or まあ (umm) in Japanese.

- g. Committer [minus] (downgrader): Phrasal modifiers that are used to lower the degree to which a complainant commits themselves to the state of affairs being referred to in the proposition. As a result, the complainant explicitly characterizes their utterance as their own personal opinion. This includes, for example, 我觉得 (I think) in Chinese and と思う (I think) in Japanese.
- h. Option-giving marker (downgrader): Possible selections provided by a complainant to a complaine in order to avoid the strong imposition of a complainant's claim. This includes, for example, 或者 (or) in Chinese and か or それとも (or) in Japanese.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Role-play

The present study adopts role-play as the data elicitation method. Role-play usually has issues regarding the observer's paradox, in that "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systemic observation."⁷⁸ Collecting discursive complaint data in conflict situations poses ethical challenges. Naturalistic data are most favorable, but it is difficult to control variables and establish the exact causes for specific speech acts.⁷⁹ It is even more difficult for a comparative study to obtain naturalistic conflict data where two cultures share the same cause. Discourse completion tests (DCTs) are capable of collecting conversational data in controlled environments, but they may not accurately represent actual speech. By contrast, as Tamanaha's study demonstrates, role-play is an efficient way of probing communicative competence (i.e., linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic competence).⁸⁰

Although role-play may not fully capture naturalistic conversations, it is a suitable method for analyzing complaint speech acts for several reasons. Firstly, role-play can predetermine the discourse context and causes of a particular speech act, which is beneficial for comparative studies. Secondly, even if the conversational patterns are adjusted as a result of the consideration of the researcher's presence, they still reflect authentic sociocultural orientations and concepts. Given the challenges of the observer's paradox, the ethical constraints and the authenticity of the data, role-play was chosen as a compromise in terms of the data elicitation method for this study.

⁷⁸ William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1972), 209.

⁷⁹ Gusztav Demeter, "Symposium Article: Role-Plays as a Data Collection Method for Research on Apology Speech Acts," in *Simulation & Gaming*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 2007): 85.

⁸⁰ Tamanaha, "Interlanguage Speech Act Realization of Apologies and Complaints," 304; Michael Canale, "From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language," in *Language and Communication* (London, New York: Longman, 1983), 2–29.

3.2.2 Role-play scenario and participant information

The role-play took the form of two students, A and B, preparing a class presentation and having agreed to rehearse in advance. They decided that B would send their presentation materials to A one day before class in order for A to create the presentation file. However, B was unable to complete their part due to an extracurricular activity the day before the class and sent the file to A the next morning, leaving A feeling frustrated the following day.

Before the role-play, the participants acting as A or B received detailed information, including the specifics relevant to each character. They were tasked with developing the conversation from their initial meeting to its conclusion, with no strict requirements on how to start, progress, or end the conversation. They could also introduce new information as long as it was not in conflict with the provided texts. The role-play was conducted during late 2020 and early 2021 via Zoom. The participants were required to have their cameras on to simulate a real face-to-face interaction, while I kept my camera off to minimize any influence during the role-play interaction.

A total of sixty-four participants took part in the role-play: Thirty-two were native Chinese speakers and thirty-two were native Japanese speakers. These participants were grouped into pairs of the same gender, resulting in sixteen pairs of Chinese participants and sixteen pairs of Japanese participants. The average interaction length for the Chinese pairs was 3 minutes and 3 seconds, while for Japanese pairs, it was 2 minutes and 34 seconds. Overall, the average interaction time for all of the participants was 2 minutes and 49 seconds. All of the participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students aged nineteen to twenty-one, except for one Chinese student with three years of work experience and one Japanese student with six months of work experience, both after completing their bachelor's degrees. None had lived in the other country for a long period, nor did they possess knowledge of the other language at the time of the role-play.

4 Data analysis

4.1 Subtopic 1: *Stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by the complainee*

In this subtopic, the complainant acts as an educator who proposes a better option that the complainee could have chosen, thus implicitly conveying the complainant's negative evaluation of the misconduct exercised by the complainee. Usually, although this option-providing is conducive to improving the efficiency of future cooperation, it is a de facto highly negative FTA, since the complaint still unfalteringly requests an action that the hearer has failed to do, even though the incident has already occurred. As a result, the addressee is also, to some extent, under implicit blame since they do not live up to the speaker's expectation, thus also undermining their positive face. The strategies characterized by high directness typically involve phrases such as "should" or "need to." Conversely, medium-level strategies often entail framing requests

as hypotheses or personal advice. In contrast, low directness strategies adopt more unpredictable forms, shifting the speaking perspective to that of the complainant.

4.1.1 High directness

4.1.1.1 Request specification

Chinese Pair 9: 我觉得，如果你真的是学生会 有 事的话你应该至少通知我一声你为什么不做吧，为什么没有提早完成吧，或者说你应该让我把PPT发给你然后你来合并一下，因为我可能睡得比较早，你也知道的。

(I think, if you really had things to do in the student union, you should at least tell me why you didn't make the PPT [PowerPoint Presentation], why you didn't finish that in advance, or you should have told me to send my PPT to you and then combined them, because I went to sleep relatively early. You also know that.)

The strong retrospective request was intensified by the repeated use of 应该 (should), leaving little room for the hearer to make independent choices for improvement. This compelled the hearer to accept the complainant's "compulsory" suggestions and acknowledge their failure to meet these obligations, thereby significantly threatening the addressee's negative face. However, additional microunits extenuated the degree of the request, including the use of 我觉得 (I think), which framed the request as a personal opinion; 至少 (at least), which indicated a minimum standard; the sentence-final particles that softened the assertiveness; and 或者说 (or), which diminished the force of the proposition.

Japanese Pair 6: ちょっと待ってっていう言葉以外にも言うべきだったかなと思いますね。

(Probably, I think you should also say something more than "wait a little bit.")

Likewise, a request was also identified in the Japanese role-play, with the use of べき (should), which has a strong compulsory and negative face-threatening effect. Other degree-softening microunits were identified, including the sentence-final particles かな (probably), ね (a confirmation device that is used to convey a sense of claiming a common ground), and the committer [minus] 思います (I think). In addition, the meaning of the request is also reflected in the form of てもらおう (to have someone do something for me), such as:

Japanese Pair 6: 早くやって、まっ、最低一日前に渡して、まあまとめてもらおうっていう感じだから...

(I feel that you should do it earlier, and send it to me at least one day before, umm, and then combine them for me...)

4.1.2 Medium directness

4.1.2.1 Action hypothesizing

Chinese Pair 6: 如果你提前做的话，就不会有后面这种事情堆在一起的这种窘境了呀。

(If you had done that in advance, there shouldn't have been things piled up afterward, like this kind of awkward situation.)

This strategy linked the expected action to a hypothesis, retroactively suggesting a better alternative without an intense sense of demand. It implied that the outcome could have been improved by this alternative, thereby protecting the addressee's negative face. As a result, the addressee would have felt less guilt regarding the obligations implied by the "should" statements. The sentence-final particle [minus], 呀, also functioned as a degree-softening microunit.

Japanese Pair 7: もうちょっとできれば早くこのPPTファイルを送ってくれるとこっちも調整できたかなって思ってた。

(If you were kind of able to do it, if you could have sent the PPT file to me earlier, perhaps I could have also made the adjustment, I think.)

Similarly, the complainant in Pair 7 hypothesized a situation of a preferred action being taken, blaming the other for the misconduct indirectly. This was also framed under the presupposition of the complainees' full capability, thus showing attentiveness to their situation. The microunits include the sentence-final particle [minus] かな and the committer [minus] 思ってた (I think).

4.1.2.2 Alternative advice - you

Chinese Pair 4: 如果你真的当时有这么紧急情况的话，其实可以早点跟我讲，或者把一些事情让我做，这样的话就不至于我们昨天没有沟通，然后就傻等到半夜，然后两个人都浪费时间。

(If you really had such an urgent situation at that time, actually you could have told me earlier, or let me do some of your work. In this way, it wouldn't have led to the situation yesterday where we didn't contact each other, and I kept waiting like a fool, and we both wasted time.)

The verbalization in this pattern included 可以 (can) or 最好 (it was better), by which the complainant suggested an action instead of pinpointing the complainees' behavior, with this suggestion being made directly toward the hearer. This strategy was less intense than the "should" pattern because it adopted a consultative tone and allowed for a broader range of acceptable behaviors. However, this pattern limited the potential options to a single choice. Thus, while the complainees' negative face was still threatened, this strategy provided the complainees with several choices. In this case, the complainees were given more options of actions from which to choose due to the use of 或者 (or).

4.1.2.3 Consultative suggestion

Chinese Pair 3: 你昨天晚上弄得比较晚。你可以做完就发给我吗?

(You did the work a little bit late last night. Could you send it to me after you have done your part?)

The first part reiterates what the complainees had previously stated, while the latter part involves the complainant making an indirect request to the listener by using "Could you..." Although the request was presented as a suggestion with a consultative tone, giving the hearer the apparent choice to respond with "yes" or "no," the request's direct communication with the listener was still evident. In this context, where the listener had less power to speak, the complainees had little option but to comply with the request.

4.1.3 Low directness

4.1.3.1 Alternative advice - we

Chinese Pair 3: 你要是比较忙的话咱们就可以比如说，定一个稍微往后一点儿的时间。

(If you were relatively busy, we could have, for example, set a later date.)

The selected utterance suggested an alternative approach that would have been better to adopt, though it was not adopted in reality. However, the complainant did not attribute the action to the hearer directly. Instead, the term 咱们 (we) was used, thereby including both the complainant and complainees as the targets. This significantly reduced the direct impact of the complaint, partially preserving the negative face.

4.1.3.2 Action subjectivizing

Japanese Pair 5: 一応その連絡がそもそもちょっと待つてという連絡しかないので、その前もつてその何かの連絡が欲しかったですけど。

(I only got the message "wait a little bit," so I was hoping to hear something from you in advance.)

The strategy of action subjectivizing was used to frame the complainant's retrospective request into the speaker's subjective expectation through the use of ほしかった (I was hoping). The assertiveness of this personal expectation was also further extenuated by the use of the hedge けど (but...).

4.1.3.3 Paragon illustration

Japanese Pair 10: 俺もね時々はそう、先延ばしにはしちゃうけど、結構重要な時はね、なるべく早めに早くようにしてるんだよね。

(I will also procrastinate sometimes, but when they are really important, I will do them as early as possible.)

The strategy of paragon illustration entails opting out of mentioning any request to the addressee, but instead stating the speaker's own good behavior that is regarded as a model for the addressee. Herein, the request was implicitly realized, since the complainant hoped that the addressee would have behaved similarly. The utterance was also modified by the two sentence-final particles [minus] of ね and よね (right?). The

first *ね* calls the addressee's attention in a polite way, if not used too much.⁸¹ The second *よね* (right?) is claimed to convey a sense of confirming with the addressee when the speaker is unconfident in his/her own utterance, thereby reducing the condescending tone of the utterance.⁸²

Table 1 shows the identified strategies to modify the degree of central complaint utterances in Subtopic 1. The pairs that used at least one CSA pragmatic strategy were categorized by their directness: high, medium, or low. Each CSA pragmatic strategy identified in a pair is highlighted in grey. Additionally, the microunit strategies are listed within the CSA strategy frame. The number in brackets that follows a microunit indicates the quantity of that specific type of microunit that was identified within that central complaint utterance.

4.2 Subtopic 2: Asking for a reason that has triggered the undesired action or asking about the details of the undesired situation

In articulating why the complaineer engaged in an undesirable act (i.e., being late in sending the file), three pragmatic strategies of CSA were identified. The first strategy involves asking for a reason that triggers the situation directly. This is typically candid, as it conveys the complainant's subjective judgment of the undesired situation by highlighting the act with the most direct causal link to the situation or combining this act with the adverb "late." As the inferential process regarding the undesirable act is the shortest, the level of directness increases, thereby reducing the level of politeness.⁸³ Accompanied by "why," this strategy compels an explanation, resulting in the highest degree of complaint. The second strategy comprises asking the complaineer to explain a minor act that does not cause the issue directly, typically involving the use of "why" or "what." This differs from the first strategy, as it does not target the actions linked directly to the problem but, rather, to the possible "minor" actions that seem to not have a directly causal relationship with the bad result, resulting in a lower degree of complaint, which is categorized as medium directness. The third strategy involves proposing a possible situation that the complaineer might have faced from the addressee's perspective that may have led indirectly to the issue and asking for confirmation. This empathetic approach entails using "yes/no" questions and has the lowest degree of complaint explicitness.

However, only the utterances that were articulated spontaneously were considered, as these intentions were originated from the speaker's internal state rather than being elicited by external variants, such as prior statements made by the complaineer. If a question was prompted by a preceding statement, it would have been characterized as a response rather than a strategy.

⁸¹ Usami, "'Ne' no komyunikēshon kinō," 250–51.

⁸² Takubo Yukinori 田窪行則 and Kinsui Satoshi 金水敏, "Fukusū no shinteki ryōiki niyoru danwa kanri 複数の心的領域による談話管理," in *Cognitive Studies 認知科学*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 1996): 72.

⁸³ Blum-Kulka, "Indirectness and Politeness in Requests," 133.

[Chinese] Pair No. / Directness level	2	3	4	6	9	10	11	15
High (Request Specification)	Sentence-final particle [minus] (1) Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)		Option-giving marker (1) Hedge (1)	Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)	Committer [minus] (1); Sentence-final particle [minus] (2), understater (1) Option-giving marker (1)	Option-giving marker (1)	Committer [minus] (1); hesitator (1); sentence-final particle [minus] (1)	Committer [minus] (1); hedge (1)
Medium (Action Hypothesising)								
Medium (Alternative Advice - You)	Sentence-final particle [minus] (1) Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)		Option-giving marker (1) Hedge (1)					
Medium (Consultative Suggestion)								
Low (Alternative Advice - We)								
[Japanese] Pair No. / Directness level	5	6	7	9	10	11	12	13
High (Request Enforcement)	Sentence-final particle [minus] (2); committer [minus] (1) Committer [minus] (1); hesitator (1)					Committer [minus] (1); hedge (1)		Hesitator (2); committer [minus] (1); sentence-final particle [minus] (1)
Medium (Action Hypothesising)			Sentence-final particle [minus] (1); committer [minus] (1)	Hedge (1)	Hedge (1) Hedge (2); hesitator (1)	Understater (2); hesitator (2)	Understater (1); hedge (1) Understater (1); sentence-final particle [minus] (1); committer (1)	
Low (Action Subjectivising)	Hedge (1) Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)				Understater (1); hedge (1); sentence-final particle (2); committer [plus] (1)			
Low (Paragon Illustration)					Sentence-final particle [minus] (2)			

Table 1. Summary of degree-modifying strategies in Subtopic 1.

4.2.1 High directness

4.2.1.1 Reason-demanding interrogation of the addressee's late submission

Chinese Pair 1: 你为什么那么晚才把PPT发过来啊?

(Why did you send the PPT to me so late?)

The subtopic was verbalized with a strong and explicit evaluative interrogation, as it contained a subjective assessment and associated this negative personal assessment with the addressee and their act directly. Meanwhile, the interrogation unequivocally demanded a detailed answer from the complaine, thus threatening both of the complaine's positive and negative faces. Aside from the intensifier of 那么 (so), the adverb, 才 (only just) reflected the attribute of "lateness" of the subsequent verb phrase and presented the speaker's subjective sentiment toward the time. Hence, 才 served as an intensifier of the addressee's late submission. However, the sentence-final particle [minus], 啊, stated with a lower tone, downplayed the entire interrogative effect of the utterance.

Japanese Pair 5: えっと、なんでおくえっとデータ送れるのが遅くなっちゃったんですか。

(Hmm, why hmm did you send the data late?)

The complainant in Pair 5 displayed the same structure of the interrogation by explicitly stating that the behavior of the complaine was late, thereby threatening the complaine's positive face (i.e., the accusation of the late submission) and negative face (i.e., requiring the addressee to explain the reason). The interrogation was modified by the two downgraders えっと (hmm), which show the speaker's hesitation.

4.2.1.2 Reason-demanding interrogation of the addressee's misconduct

Chinese Pair 1: 你那个材料是怎么回事啊? 怎么才给我呀?

(What happened to that material of yours? Why did you only just send it to me?)

Instead of mentioning the addressee's delayed submission, the complainant directly postulated two consecutive interrogations, with the clear intention to demand a specific explanation of the addressee's misconduct. The propositions within the two interrogations, including 材料 (material) and 给我 (send me), were related to the addressee directly and stated blatantly with the interrogative marker 怎么 (why). The repeated use of the interrogation further intensified the accusation contained within the utterances. The microunits included the upgrader 才 (only just), which signified the lateness of the behavior, and the downgraders 啊 and 呀.

Japanese Pair 12: サボってたっていうかその、そうされてた理由ってあのう、ありましたか?

(You had skipped, or I mean, umm, the reason that you had done this, umm, did you have the reason?)

After pointing out the addressee's misconduct with サボってた (you had skipped), the Japanese complainant immediately stopped and used the hedge ていうか (or I mean) to imply the inadequacy of the

preceding expression.⁸⁴ The question emerged after the complainant somewhat diminished his confidence in it by using the hedge. As the question still addressed the addressee's major misconduct (i.e., failing to provide the presentation file on time), it remained a highly direct complaint. However, the question was also interspersed with the two hesitators of *その* (umm) and *あのう* (umm).

4.2.2 Medium directness

4.2.2.1 Reason-demanding interrogation of a minor act

Japanese Pair 1: なんであの時ちょっと待ってしか言ってくれなかったの。

(Why did you just say "Wait a little bit" at that time?)

Unlike the explicit statement of the complaine's late submission, the Japanese speaker attempted to confirm a more specific occurrence within the entire flow of the undesired event. The interrogation focused more on the details, thus conveying a sense of attentiveness (although it was somewhat explicitly stated), leading to the degree of the complaint being reduced. However, this was still accompanied by an upgrader, *しかない* (only), indicating the complaine's insufficient actions.

4.2.2.2 Information-demanding interrogation of a minor act

Japanese Pair 8:

Complainant: あのう、準備して学校行ったりっていう時間で結局パワーポイントをまとめれてないんだよね、まだ。

Complaine: あ。

Complainant: ん、そうそうそうそう。え、あのう、何してたの、何、結構難しかった？

(Complainant: Umm, because I spent time preparing for going to school, I haven't integrated the PowerPoint yet.

Complaine: Ahh.

Complainant: Uh, right. Umm, what had you been doing? What, (was it) very difficult?)

Instead of asking for a reason for the minor act, the complainant queried what the addressee did that might have led to the late submission. The interrogation, accompanied by a hesitator in this instance, solely demanded the addressee's explanation of what they did (i.e., new information about another "minor" act that might have been related to the lateness). The causal attribution of the addressee's behavior to the bad result was obscured, and the interrogation was not explicit in expressing the complaint.

⁸⁴ Ritva Laury and Shigeko Okamoto, "Teyuuka and I Mean as Pragmatic Parentheticals in Japanese and English," in *Subordination in Conversation: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), 233.

4.2.3 Low directness

4.2.3.1 Empathetic interrogation of a proposed situation

Chinese Pair 6: 呃，你是熬夜做的吗？

(Err, were you staying up late to do that?)

In this instance, accompanied by a hesitator, the complainant sought to understand why the complainee sent the file late without asking for an explanation directly. The complainant suggested a possible reason or her own judgement, making it easier for the complainee to respond, as it appeared as though the complainant was empathizing and helping them to articulate their reasoning. This display of attentiveness to the complainee was, to some extent, beneficial to the complainee's positive face. A similar structure was also pervasive in the Japanese conversations.

Japanese Pair 3: なんか十二に、昨日の夜の十二時に確か、ちょっと待ってって来たと思うんだけど、あの時にはまだできてなかったのかな。

(Umm, I think it is true that I received "wait a little bit" at 00:00 last night. I wonder if the file was not finished at that time?)

All the degree-modifying strategies identified in Subtopic 2 are summarized in Table 2.

4.3 Subtopic 3: Identifying a bad result caused by the complainee's undesired act

As the complainant is unable to receive the file on time due to the complainee's late submission, a subsequent issue arises where the complainant could not combine the files, which is a direct consequence of the complainee's misconduct. This creates an urgent situation, leaving little time for the students to prepare adequately for the rehearsal before class. The expressions of this negative sentiment are identified at two levels of directness. The highest level is stated directly, and it entails verbalizing the urgency of not being able to rehearse in time, while the lowest level involves utterances that depict the situation from a more subjective perspective.

4.3.1 High directness

4.3.1.1 "There is no time" specification

Chinese Pair 7: 既然我们现在没有时间……

(Since we don't have time now...)

Chinese Pair 2: 也没太大[多]时间了现在。实在是有点来不及了。我都没有整合PPT因为就，实在是来不及了。

(We don't have much time now. Really, it's a little bit late for that, because I didn't integrate the PPT. So, really, it is late.)

[Chinese] Pair No. / Directness level	1	4	6	15	16					
High (Reason-Demanding Interrogation of the Addressee's Late Submission)	Intensifier (2); Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)									
High (Reason-Demanding Interrogation of the Addressee's Misconduct)					Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)					
Low (Empathetic Interrogation of a Proposed Situation)			Hesitator (1)	Hesitator (1); option-giving marker (1)	Intensifier (1); sentence-final particle [minus] (1)					
[Japanese] Pair No. / Directness level	1	3	4	5	8	12	13	15	16	
High (Reason-Demanding Interrogation of the Addressee's Late Submission)				Hesitator (2)						
High (Reason-Demanding Interrogation of the Addressee's Misconduct)									Hedge (1); hesitator (2)	
Medium (Reason-Demanding Interrogation of a Minor Act)	Intensifier (1)									
Medium (Information-Demanding Interrogation of a Minor Act)									Hesitator (1)	Hesitator (1)
Low (Empathetic Interrogation of a Proposed Situation)										Understater (1)
										Sentence-final particle [minus] (1)

Table 2. Summary of degree-modifying strategies in Subtopic 2.

Pair 7's utterance represented the most straightforward expression, while it was repeated three times in Pair 2. Notably, in Pair 2, the verbalizations featured various types of microunits, some of which had conflicting effects on degree modification, including the committer [plus], 实在 (really), and the hedge, 有点 (a little bit). A similar structure was also found in the Japanese conversations, as demonstrated below.

Japanese Pair 2: 今から急いでやると、練習する時間がなくなっちゃうかもしれないんだけど。

(If we rush to integrate the files, we may not have time to practice.)

Although the phrase "there is no time" was stated explicitly, the complainant employed several downgraders, including the understater かもしれない (possibly) and the hedge だけど (but...). The complaint statement was introduced with a hypothesized scenario, making it seem less grounded in reality and more based on subjective assumption, which diminished the overall and direct impact of the complaint.

4.3.1.2 Rhetoric interrogation

Chinese Pair 9: 我今天早上根本没有时间合并。我们哪儿来的时间去排练?

(I didn't have any time to combine the files. Where do we have the time to rehearse?)

A rhetoric interrogation has the illocutionary force of a strong assertion of the opposite intention to what is apparently asked or the surface question.⁸⁵ Although the Chinese complainant appeared uncertain about how to gain additional time, the context of the urgent situation suggested clearly that there was insufficient time for both interlocutors to rehearse. Consequently, even though "no time" was not explicitly stated, the speaker's intention remained highly direct.

4.3.2 Low directness

4.3.2.1 Additional situational specifications

Chinese Pair 1: 那PPT都没有做好，下午马上就要展示了。

(Then the PPT has not been done yet, and we need to present it soon, in the afternoon.)

The instance highlighted the urgent nature of the situation by aligning it directly with another event and including the intensifier 马上 (soon). Although the phrase "there is no time" was not uttered, this implication was perceptible since it foreshadowed the subsequent event that could have led to a potential disaster if both parties were not able to address the current issue promptly.

4.3.2.2 Involuntary action

Japanese Pair 4: 合わせて整える、なんかちょっとできてないので、今からパパパってやんなきゃいけあいなっていうところなんですけど。

⁸⁵ Jerrold M. Sadock, *Queclaratives* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1971), 223–32; Jerrold M. Sadock, *Toward a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 111–39.

(I have not combined the files even a little bit, so now I may have no other way but to do it fast.)

The speaker initially justified that the files had not been combined. The subsequent underlying motivation—i.e., a lack of time—was, however, largely obscured in its complaint utterance. First, the complaint articulated the speaker's subjective situation, indicating a sense of being compelled to proceed with the file integration, as evidenced by the phrase やんなきゃいけない (have no other way but to). Second, this complaint suggested that the speaker needed to complete the file integration rapidly by the use of the mimetic word, パパパ, which indicated indirectly the limited time available to both the complainant and the complaine. This statement was uttered with reluctance, which was further softened by the sentence-final particle [minus] かな, along with the hedge けど (but...).

4.3.2.3 "There is time" specification

Japanese Pair 10: 今九時ちょっと過ぎだから、えっともう、三時間ちょっとしかないかなっていう感じだから、急いでちょっと練習をしましょうか。

(Now it's a little past nine, hmm, already, I have the feeling that we only have a little time—just three hours, so let's hurry up and do the rehearsal a little bit.)

Rather than specifying a negative description that both parties did not have time, the complainant was identified to express "no time" by describing "what they have," after he confirmed the time as the justification. The intensifier ちょっとしかない (only a little) limited the amount of time available to them and emphasized the urgency, but the direct negation of the current situation and the speaker's pessimism about the situation were averted and substituted by an affirmative sentence structure with a relatively optimistic motivation to reverse the current state, followed by a proposal to solve the issue. This complaint statement was predominantly modified by degree mitigators such as the hesitator えっと (hmm), the sentence-final particle [minus] かな, and the committer [minus] ていう感じ (I feel).

Table 3 lists all the degree-modifying CSA pragmatic strategies and microunit strategies observed in Subtopic 3.

4.4 Discussion on CSA pragmatic strategies

Given that complaints are inherently FTAs, the central verbalizations of the CSA pragmatic strategies convey a sense of aggressiveness. Among the three subtopics, Subtopic 1 not only poses an inherent threat to the positive face, but it also has the potential to infringe upon the addressees' negative face, as it takes the form of a retrospective request directed at the hearer. Similarly, Subtopic 2 entails questioning the complaine's actions, thereby threatening their positive face, while also encroaching indirectly on their negative face, as the addressee is compelled to respond to the inquiry. However, the negative face-threatening aspect of Subtopic 2 may have been less pronounced than that of Subtopic 1, since Subtopic 1 explicitly requests the addressee to take action, whereas Subtopic 2 consists solely of verbalization. In contrast, Subtopic 3

[Chinese] Pair No. / Directness level	1	2	7	9	11	13	15	16
High ("There Is No Time" Specification)	Intensifier (1)	Committer [plus] (1); hedge (1) Committer [plus] (1)			Committer [minus] (1); intensifier (1)	Understater (1)	Committer [minus] (1); hesitator (2); understator (1)	
High (Rhetoric Interrogation)								
Low (Additional Situational Specifications)	Intensifier (1)							Intensifier (1)
[Japanese] Pair No. / Directness level	2	4	10	16				
High ("There Is No Time" Specification)	Understater (1); hedge (1)							Hesitator (1)
Low (Involuntary Action)		Sentence-final particle [minus] (1); hedge (1)						
Low ("There Is Time" Specification)					Hesitator (1); intensifier (1); sentence-final particle [minus] (1); committer [minus] (1)			

Table 3. Summary of degree-modifying strategies in Subtopic 3.

primarily threatens the addressees' positive face, as it articulates the complainant's volitional assessments of the situation involving the interlocutors.

The usage rates of the specific directness levels among the Chinese and Japanese complainants are summarized in the following table. To focus on the overall tendency for each directness level, I have excluded the strategy descriptions. To minimize individual influences on the overall tendency of that language group, if a speaker used multiple strategies at the same directness level, it was counted as one and marked by a black circle, indicating the presence of a CSA pragmatic strategy or strategies at that directness level. The usage rates for each level are shown in Table 4.

Across all of the subtopics, Subtopic 1 was the most frequently expressed type in both Chinese and Japanese, with at least half of the participants making retrospective requests to the complainees based on a previous situation. Subtopic 2 was favored by the Japanese speakers, as nine out of the sixteen Japanese complainants requested more details about the complainees' situations. In contrast, Subtopic 3 was more popular among the Chinese participants, with half of them (eight out of sixteen) addressing the current urgent situation of neither the complainant nor the complainees having enough time to resolve the issue.

In all of the subtopics, the Chinese complainants demonstrated a stronger tendency to articulate the complaint with high directness. The strategies with high directness were usually typified by the candid expression of the speakers' inner mental states or the core information of that subtopic. This transparency resulted in recipients needing minimal inferential effort to deduce the speakers' antagonistic intents.

Both Subtopic 1 and Subtopic 2 exhibit a degree of coerciveness, thereby posing a threat to negative face. Subtopic 1 directly entails the complainants requesting that the complainees complete an unfulfilled action, while Subtopic 2 comprises the complainants seeking to uncover the reasons behind the complainees' misconduct, compelling them to respond. Notably, both the Chinese and Japanese complainants tended to avoid stating their intentions directly, opting instead for medium- or low-level CSA strategies (40% of highly direct strategies for the Chinese complainants and 30% for the Japanese in Subtopic 1; 40% for the Chinese complainants and 18.2% for the Japanese in Subtopic 2).

In Subtopic 1, the negative face-threatening nature of the complaints is evident in their literal meanings. The differences in the pragmatic strategies employed by the Chinese and Japanese complainants were less pronounced than in the other subtopics. Both the Chinese and Japanese complainants found direct requests for behavioral change to be too harsh and forceful, despite having the conversational authority to do so. This indicates that while some of the complainants—both Chinese and Japanese—may have prioritized factors such as communication efficiency, thereby enabling the addressees to promptly recognize their misconduct, the majority refrained from overtly instructing the addressee from a position of superiority or behaving condescendingly. Instead, the majority of the employed strategies were neither highly aggressive nor coercive. Among those strategies, medium-level CSA pragmatic strategies were predominant. The Chinese

		Subtopic 1 (Chinese)														Subtopic 1 (Japanese)													
Pair No.		2	3	4	6	9	10	11	15	Rate	5	6	7	9	10	11	12	13	14	Rate									
Directness level																													
High						●	●	●	●	40%		●				●			●	30%									
Medium		●	●	●	●		●			50%			●	●	●		●			50%									
Low			●							10%	●				●					20%									
		Subtopic 2 (Chinese)														Subtopic 2 (Japanese)													
Pair No.		1	4	6	15	16	Rate	1	3	4	5	8	12	13	15	16	Rate												
Directness level																													
High		●				●	40%				●						182%												
Medium											●						364%												
Low			●	●	●		60%	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	455%												
		Subtopic 3 (Chinese)														Subtopic 3 (Japanese)													
Pair No.		1	2	7	9	11	13	15	16	Rate	2	4	10	16	Rate														
Directness level																													
High		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	80%	●				50%														
Low		●								20%		●	●		50%														

Table 4. Rates of use of the CSA pragmatic strategies per subtopic.

complainants often used advisory forms, suggesting solutions in a way that conveyed goodwill, while the Japanese complainants tended to imply positive outcomes if the desired action was taken by the complainees. However, both strategies clearly identified the complainees as the target, prompting them to recognize their failures. The low-level direct strategies that almost disregard the listeners' presences were infrequently used by both the Chinese and Japanese speakers, although the Japanese speakers employed them slightly more often. This strategy reflected the speakers' perspectives, with the Japanese speakers typically expressing their wishes and expecting action from the other party, while the sole Chinese example indicated that both the speaker and listener could have taken action to address the situation.

Subtopic 2 involves seeking an explanation for the undesired situation. When the speaker asks for clarification, the listener has to articulate the reasons for their behavior that leads to their failure to submit the file, which may have included both direct and indirect causes. This inquiry poses a threat to their positive face, as it highlights the causal relationship with the complainees' failures. Additionally, it threatens the complainees' negative face by obliging them to provide a relevant response. In this context, both the Chinese (60%) and Japanese (81.8%) complainants favored non-highly direct pragmatic strategies. However, the Chinese complainants showed a greater inclination toward highly explicit strategies (40% for Chinese vs. 18.2% for Japanese). Among the five Chinese complaint utterances in this subtopic, two highly direct strategies entailed explicitly asking for responses regarding the complainees' ultimate failures of the late submissions. In contrast, the Japanese speakers used only two highly explicit strategies among the eleven utterances, often opting instead for medium-level strategies that inquired about the reasons for the minor acts that led to delays or low-level strategies that pre-emptively proposed possible reasons for the complainees' benefit. These medium and low-level strategies reflect a willingness and attentiveness to understand the complainees' situations rather than simply demanding answers to fulfil the complainants' emotional needs, thereby addressing positive face. In this regard, the Japanese complainants showed a significantly greater preference for mitigating the impact of the complaint in this subtopic compared to the Chinese complainants (60% for Chinese vs. 81.8% for Japanese). On the other hand, the low-level strategies also protect the addressees' negative face. By employing "yes/no" questions rather than "why" or "what" inquiries, these strategies enable the complainees to respond without feeling pressured to provide elaborate explanations. In this context, the Chinese complainants were more inclined to utilize low-level strategies, thereby preserving their addressees' negative face (60% for Chinese vs. 45.5% for Japanese).

Subtopic 3 addresses the negative outcome resulting from the complainees' misconduct, specifically the insufficient time available to both the complainants and the complainees to rehearse and prepare for the upcoming group presentation. In this context, the threat to the addressees' negative face is not particularly pronounced, as the complaints do not necessitate immediate action from the addressees or require responses. The pragmatic strategies employed in the complaints exhibited notable differences, in that approximately 80% of the Chinese complainants' utterances were characterized by high directness, explicitly stating the

urgency of the situation, while only half of the Japanese complainants' utterances reflected this level of directness. Interestingly, all eight of the Chinese complainants utilized highly direct strategies, with two also incorporating a low directness strategy (i.e., additional situational specification) to convey that their class would commence soon, thereby implying a lack of time for preparation. Conversely, the low-level pragmatic strategies used by the Japanese complainants carried equal weight to the high directness strategies. Among the four complaint utterances identified in this subtopic, one low directness strategy indicated what the complainant should have done in response to the complainees' misconduct, while another reframed the issue by stating how much time remained. Thus, unlike their Chinese counterparts, the Japanese speakers appeared more restrained in addressing the negative consequences of the addressees' actions directly, thereby alleviating the complainees' potential anxiety and regret. In addition, no strategies with medium directness were utilized in this subtopic. This absence may have stemmed from the nature of the subtopic, which involves conveying urgency, such as "there is no time for us to prepare the presentation." Unlike the other subtopics, where the complainants could have used similar sentential structures of high directness strategies to express their intentions with medium directness, it is challenging for them to formulate an alternative negated event (i.e., "there is no X") to indicate "there is no time."

4.5 Discussion on microunit strategies

To provide a clear comparison of microunit usage, the data is summarized in Table 5. In the columns for the upgraders or downgraders used by the complainants, "No." indicates the total identified microunits, "Rate" shows their percentage in each language group, and "Per U." reflects the average number of that particular type of microunit that was used per central complaint utterance.

In terms of the Japanese complainants, there was a pronounced tendency to utilize downgraders across the various subtopics. Specifically, only one upgrader was identified in Subtopic 1 (out of thirty-six microunits), one in Subtopic 2 (out of twelve), and one in Subtopic 3 (out of nine). No upgraders were found within the strategies characterized by high directness, which could have potentially undermined the addressees' face. Instead, downgraders were predominantly employed across all of the subtopics, irrespective of the directness level of the central complaint utterance. Notably, the average number of downgraders used per central complaint utterance was more than one in both Subtopic 1 (2.06) and Subtopic 3 (2).

The Chinese complainants exhibited a comparable pattern in Subtopic 1, where no upgraders were found in the strategies of all directness levels, averaging 1.14 downgraders per central complaint utterance. In Subtopic 2, the Chinese respondents also showed a similar tendency, predominantly employing downgraders (66.7%). However, in the utterances with high directness strategies in Subtopic 2, the number of upgrades was equal to the number of downgraders, with each instance of high directness central complaint incorporating one upgrader and one downgrader. While Subtopic 2 also presents a negative face-threatening effect—since the addressees are required to provide immediate answers regarding their private

	Directness level (No. of utterances identified)	Chinese Upgraders			Japanese Upgraders			Chinese Downgraders			Japanese Downgraders		
		No.	Rate	Per U.	No.	Rate	Per U.	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	Per U.	
Subtopic 1	High (Chi: 5; Jap: 4)	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	11	100%	11	100%	2.75	
	Medium (Chi: 8; Jap: 7)	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	5	100%	16	100%	2.29	
	Low (Chi: 1; Jap: 6)	0	0%	0	1	11.1%	0.17	0	0%	8	88.9%	1.33	
	Total (Chi: 14; Jap: 17)	0	0%	0	1	2.8%	0.06	16	100%	35	97.2%	2.06	
Subtopic 2	High (Chi: 3; Jap: 2)	3	50%	1	0	0%	0	3	50%	5	100%	2.5	
	Medium (Chi: 0; Jap: 4)	0	0%	0	1	33.3%	0.25	0	0%	2	66.7%	0.5	
	Low (Chi: 3; Jap: 6)	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	3	100%	4	100%	0.67	
	Total (Chi: 6; Jap: 12)	3	33.3%	0.5	1	8.3%	0.08	6	66.7%	11	91.7%	0.92	
Subtopic 3	High (Chi: 10; Jap: 2)	4	36.4%	0.4	0	0%	0	7	63.6%	3	100%	1.5	
	Low (Chi: 2; Jap: 2)	2	100%	1	1	16.7%	0.5	0	0%	5	83.3%	2.5	
	Total (Chi: 12; Jap: 4)	6	46.2%	0.5	1	11.1%	0.25	7	53.8%	8	88.9%	2	

Table 5. Number of microunits and their usage rate and frequency per utterance.

information—the use of upgraders and downgraders differed slightly from Subtopic 1, as their preference for one type of microunit was not as distinctly varied. For the Chinese complainants that used upgraders in high directness CSA pragmatic strategies in Subtopic 2, the focus on describing the addressees' final failures accurately to obtain pertinent information in order to resolve the current issue appeared to be of equal concern to the preservation of the addressees' negative or positive faces. Therefore, in Subtopic 2, where there is a less strong requestive effect, the Chinese speakers faced fewer constraints in using specific types of degree-modifying microunit strategies in their high directness complaint utterances.

In Subtopic 3, where the unfavorable situations are articulated, the Chinese speakers demonstrated a greater reliance on downgraders compared to upgraders in general, despite the prevalence of high directness complaint utterances. Indeed, 36.4% of the microunits were downgraders in high directness central complaint utterances, and 46.2% were upgraders in the entire Subtopic 3. This suggests a conflict in their communication approach: On one hand, they sought to express their dissatisfaction openly, while on the other, they aimed to mitigate the face-threatening implications through additional embedded microunit strategies. The conflicting application of the degree-modifying strategies indicates that the Chinese speakers were acutely aware of the potentially adversarial nature of the conversation at a microunit level. Nevertheless, they chose to adopt a direct method to convey their underlying emotions. Conversely, only one upgrader (11.1% of the microunits) was observed in one Japanese low directness central complaint utterance and no upgraders were observed in their high directness central complaint utterances. This suggests that the Japanese speakers were significantly more restrained in their use of upgraders compared to their Chinese counterparts, despite both groups being cognizant of the militancy inherent in the complaint. Furthermore, upgraders were present solely in the Chinese complainants' low directness utterances. This observation suggests that the Chinese speakers may have perceived a degree of leeway in expressing their true intentions on the grounds that their verbalizations were indirect and less face-threatening.

There are three Chinese instances in Subtopic 3 where neither upgraders nor downgraders were utilized in high directness complaints, while the Japanese complainants may have only opted out of microunit usage in non-high-directness complaint utterances, which further indicates that the Chinese speakers had fewer constraints in situations with less negative face threatening effect.

Thus, it can be inferred that the Chinese complainants felt less constrained in directly articulating their complaint intentions compared to their Japanese counterparts, particularly in Subtopic 3, where almost no obvious compulsory effect exists (whereas Subtopic 2 still has some), although both groups prioritized the use of downgraders in general across the three subtopics. The Japanese upgraders identified in the three subtopics were all prefaced by specific conditions. The sole intensifiers identified in Subtopics 2 and 3 conveyed a sense of limited quantity or time through the expressions *しかない* (only) and *ちょっとしかない* (only a little), respectively; however, the former did not directly pertain to the explanation of the addressee's misconduct (i.e., their late submission) in Subtopic 2, nor did the latter directly reflect the

pessimistic negation of the current situation presented in Subtopic 3. In Subtopic 1, where coerciveness is present, the only Japanese upgrader, 本当 (really), appeared in a low-level strategy: ちょっともうちょいね、本当早く送ってほしかったなあっていうのはある... (A little, just a little bit, I really hoped that you could have sent it to me earlier...). Here, the intensification applied to the speaker's own wish rather than speaking to the addressee directly, resulting in a lack of immediate direct coerciveness.

4.6 Face reconsidered

4.6.1 Negative face

The cautiousness exhibited by both the Chinese and Japanese complainants is evident in their limited use of highly direct requestive utterances and upgraders in Subtopic 1, as well as their restrained approach to direct interrogations regarding an ultimate failure in Subtopic 2. In Subtopic 2, most of the Chinese and Japanese CSA pragmatic strategies were characterized by a lower level of directness and were framed in a considerate manner, making it easier for the complainees to respond without addressing their failures directly. In contrast, the high directness strategies, which were less utilized in Subtopic 2, carried an accusatory tone, in that an immediate explanation was demanded from the addressee regarding their misconduct, thus exerting a significant negative face-threatening effect. This behavior indicates a prioritization of the addressees' negative face among both groups. Although both the Chinese and Japanese cultures emphasize interdependence, making the protection of negative face less compatible within these societies, their complaint discourse, despite its aggressive elements, reflects a notable tendency to avoid coerciveness. This illustrates that an analysis of negative face must consider the contextual dynamics of interactions, whether they align with harmonious social norms or are characterized by face-threatening hostility. When the impact of negative face threats is deemed significant, the safeguarding of the addressees' negative face becomes markedly evident in both the Chinese and Japanese contexts. This contrasts with the limited space for negative face in these societies, which is a phenomenon that has been affirmed by many studies. Therefore, varied contextual information may give rise to different levels of impositions of verbalizations, and these situational factors can exert a stronger influence on facework behaviors.⁸⁶

Moreover, the Japanese complainants displayed a heightened sensitivity to the addressees' negative face, as evidenced by a higher ratio of non-high-directness complaint utterances (CSA pragmatic strategies) compared to their Chinese counterparts in both Subtopics 1 and 2. This was particularly pronounced in Subtopic 2, where the proportion of non-high-directness CSA pragmatic strategies employed by the Japanese speakers was more than double that of the Chinese speakers. Additionally, the number of upgraders equally matched the number of downgraders in the high directness CSA pragmatic strategies employed by the Chinese speakers in Subtopic 2, which, to some extent, increased the intensity of the interrogation and may

⁸⁶ Sachiko Kiyama, Katsuo Tamaoka, and Masato Takiura, "Applicability of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory to a Non-Western Culture: Evidence From Japanese Facework Behaviors," in *SAGE Open*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 2012): 9–11.

have compelled the addressees to respond more forcefully. In contrast, no upgraders were found in the high directness CSA pragmatic strategies employed by the Japanese speakers in Subtopic 2. This indicates that the Chinese complainants were not consistent in their inquiries about the reasons behind the complainees' unexpected actions at a microunit level, with some having fewer constraints in using additional upgraders to intensify the tone. In contrast, the Japanese speakers performed consistently in redressing the addressees' negative face in all of the requestive situations.

4.6.2 Positive face

Both the Chinese and Japanese speakers perceived complaints made with requestive moods as potentially threatening to negative face, as demonstrated by their limited use of high directness complaint utterances in both Subtopics 1 and 2. By doing so, the coerciveness of the complaint utterances was diminished, leading to a reduction in the directness of the accusations. This, in turn, further alleviated the threat to the addressees' positive face. When the nature of the interrogation did not explicitly convey a request but, instead, aimed to elicit responses related to a negative outcome, the Chinese speakers seemed to feel constrained when the interrogation was closely tied to a significant failure, but the sense of restriction of using upgraders was less noticeable for the Chinese speakers than that for the Japanese speakers. This is evidenced by their increased use of upgraders in Subtopic 2, where high directness central complaint utterances showed a 50% usage of upgraders, even though upgraders comprised less than half (33.3%) of the total in this subtopic.

In the contexts devoid of coercive effects, such as Subtopic 3, where an adverse situation is articulated, the Chinese complainants exhibited a more salient tendency to threaten the addressees' positive face by predominantly using high directness complaint utterances. In contrast, the Japanese speakers' high directness complaints did not dominate in this subtopic. The majority of the microunits employed by the Chinese speakers consisted of downgraders, indicating an effort to mitigate the utterances' impact when the conversational context was unfavorable for the addressee. This effort was much more salient in Japanese verbalizations, as the usage rate of Japanese downgraders far exceeded that of their Chinese counterparts. In fact, the Japanese complainants relied on downgraders predominantly across all of the subtopics (Subtopic 1: 97.2%; Subtopic 2: 91.7%; Subtopic 3: 88.9%), with downgraders consistently outnumbering upgraders at every level of directness. Additionally, certain high directness central complaint utterances were blatantly verbalized by the Chinese complainants during Subtopic 3 without the use of microunits or with upgraders. This suggests that some of the Chinese complainants experienced a degree of freedom in expressing their true intentions without modifications, which was not seen in the Japanese discourse. In Subtopic 3, upgraders were exclusively identified in Chinese low directness complaint utterances. This indicates that permitting external intensification or additional positive face threats may, at times, be acceptable for Chinese speakers, provided that the verbalization is framed in a non-intimidating and non-positive face-threatening manner.

The Chinese speakers paid considerable attention to the addressee's positive and negative face in requestive situations. However, in other contexts, their direct expression of their intentions predominated, which, at times, led to consideration of the addressees' positive face being neglected. They may have occasionally employed lexical or phrasal strategies to mitigate the confrontational degree of their utterances. In these situations, the concern for others' positive face may have been counteracted by the straightforward articulation of real intentions, thereby providing a cost-effective means of addressing the current issue. In contrast, the Japanese speakers consistently refrained from conveying their true intentions directly across all topics, not only through the pragmatic structure of their utterances but also through the use of additional embedded words or phrases. As the candidness may have also, in turn, enhanced the complainants' positive face due to heightened authority, this finding aligns with prior research indicating that Chinese individuals tend to focus on their self-face and expect the other party to uphold their self-face, while Japanese individuals demonstrate a noticeable degree of other-face concern.⁸⁷

5 Conclusion

This study highlights the complex nature of the speech act of complaint, characterized by negative evaluations and face-threatening implications. It emphasizes the importance of the speaker's intention in categorizing complaints by analyzing how speakers actualize these intentions across different contexts. The complexity of the complaints makes them composites of multiple speech acts rather than simple units. Consequently, a speaker's method of handling an addressee's face and the selection of verbal strategies may vary within the subdivided context of a complaint, which is influenced by their specific intentions.

Instead of adopting a top-down approach to pre-emptively allocate a specific attribute to a subtopic (or intention) in categorizing degree-modifying complaint strategies, this study does not overlook the pragmatic variations inherent in a specific subtopic. Therefore, it may be premature to determine which intention or subtopic is more aggressive, as different subtopics within a complaint may exhibit varying levels of directness.

These findings indicate that speakers may exhibit different tendencies in articulating a specific intention based on the face attributes involved. For subtopics that threaten both an addressee's positive and negative faces, both the Chinese and Japanese complainants tend to utilize non-direct utterances and downgraders to mitigate complaints. However, when the negative face threat is absent, the Chinese complainants are more likely to express their intentions directly. This approach directly jeopardizes the addressees' positive face, thereby facilitating a straightforward clarification of their aims to expedite the resolution of the current issue. In contrast, the Japanese complainants would consistently prioritize preserving both faces, using

⁸⁷ Beth-Ann K. Cocroft and Stella Ting-Toomey, "Facework in Japan and the United States," in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (September 1994): 469–506; John Oetzel et al., "Face and Facework in Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of China, Germany, Japan, and the United States," in *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (September 2001): 235–58; Nana Okura Gagné, "Re-examining the Notion of Negative Face in the Japanese Socio Linguistic Politeness of Request," in *Language & Communication*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April 2010): 123–38.

non-high-directness utterances more frequently across all of the subtopics. This behavior demonstrates a significant concern for preserving interpersonal relationships, even in inherently antagonistic situations.

In addition, the Chinese complainants showed fewer constraints in their microunit strategies, although they demonstrated a preference to use downgraders across the three subtopics in general. Specifically, in less demanding contexts (Subtopic 2), microunits were applied inconsistently, in that upgraders and downgraders seemed to be competing in high directness inquiries, although non-high-directness CSA pragmatic strategies took predominance. In addition, only upgraders were identified in the low directness Chinese complaint utterances in Subtopic 3. Conversely, the Japanese complainants maintained a consistent approach to safeguarding both faces through their microunit strategies. This indicates that while Chinese speakers are generally cognizant of negative and positive face-threatening effects and typically employ relatively indirect pragmatic strategies, there is no clear consistency in their use of microunits within high directness pragmatic strategies in some contexts. The findings in Subtopic 3 also suggest that some of the Chinese speakers may experienced a degree of psychological leeway to express their inner states through the use of upgraders in less direct pragmatic strategies. In contrast, the Japanese speakers are expected to be consistently constrained in their use of microunit when articulating their feelings of anxiety and hostility.

This study suggests that considering face attributes is crucial for classifying speech acts and understanding the interpersonal motivations behind them, which further underscores the significance of the bilateral application of positive face and negative face. Consequently, the analysis of negative face, often regarded as idiosyncratic in China and Japan, must take context fully into account, as speakers may express different concerns depending on whether the situation is hospitable or confrontational. This perspective may clarify fluctuating tendencies in speakers' choices of verbal strategies, which may result from face attributes rather than context alone. It may also link specific groups' tendencies to use direct or indirect verbal strategies to their culturally specific emphasis on a particular type of face.

Finally, while role-play proved effective for eliciting naturalistic conversational data, it yielded fewer instances of complaint utterances than other methods, such as DCTs. This limitation means that conversational tendencies within specific subtopics may have been overgeneralized. Furthermore, the study does not consider other ASA pragmatic strategies that might also mitigate the intensity of complaints, nor does it address paralinguistic features (e.g., tone) or sociocultural factors (e.g., gender). This highlights the necessity for a more comprehensive research approach, which could involve utilizing a broader conversational corpus and a more integrated analytical methodology or incorporating role-play alongside other methods to facilitate a deeper examination of complaints and other speech acts.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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