The Interlanguage of Moroccan EFL learners: The Case of Complaints

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Abstract

The present study aims to compare complaint realizations of Moroccan learners of English (MLE) with American English speakers (AE) and Moroccan Arabic speakers (MA) through an interlanguage pragmatic analysis. The study is carried out with reference to the degree of directness. The study involves 135 subjects: 108 of them are Moroccan students from Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Ibn Toufail. Kenitra. 45 MLE participants were recruited from the English department as the second group of informants, while the 45 MA group were recruited from the department of History and Geography. The 45 American participants included some volunteers from American Peace Corps Morocco and students from Duke university, North Carolina. A written discourse completion test/ task was administered to the participants both native and EFL learners in order to elicit their complaint speech act productions through five hypothetical complaint situations. Responses of Moroccan EFL learners were reviewed to verify whether they approach native speakers complaint norms or Moroccan Arabic norms in terms of directness. In the analysis of the data, all responses were categorized according to Trosborg's (1995) complaint speech act set. The results show that Learners of English in higher education do not possess the desirable norms of complaint strategies as compared to native speakers of English. Additionally, MLEs exhibit pragmatic transfer from Moroccan Arabic in their use of high complaint strategies. The study ends up with a series of suggestions and recommendations that aim to enhance linguistic and cultural understanding of the target language.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, communicative skills in language teaching and learning have attracted most researches in second and foreign language acquisition. Their common concern has been the inability of language learners, notably learners of English, to behave appropriately and effectively in the target language. Although learners of English may have a good command of syntactic, semantic, and phonological rules of the target language, their communicative moves, researchers have noted, remain basically inappropriate and ineffective transliterations of forms of speech behavior from the source language. Pragmatic, conversational, and discoursal skills are generally agreed as the most difficult skills learners of English have difficulty acquiring. According to Levinson (1987), Pragmatics aims to account for the rules that govern the use of language in context. Research in pragmatics have always raised and investigated the issue of the universality of the rules that govern the use of language in context and whether they are culture bound.

The present study is theoretically grounded in the area of interlanguage pragmatics. It is developed for the purpose of making a contrastive analysis to investigate the relationship and differences between complaint strategies. Further, it attempts to find patterns of complaint speech act between the two cultures. In this regard, two questions are raised:

i. What strategies do MLEs, AEs and MAs prefer to use when complaining?

ii. Do the MLEs exhibit pragmatic transfer from the source language in their use of complaint strategies with regard to the social variables of power and distance.

In accordance with the research questions above, the following hypotheses are put forward in an attempt to assess the appropriateness of MLEs pragmatic knowledge of complaint in English compared to American native speakers.

i. Moroccan EFL Learners do not abide by the native speakers norms when performing the speech act of complaint.

ii. MLEs exhibit negative pragmatic transfer from Moroccan Arabic in their use of complaint strategies in English.

Significance of the Study

While speech acts such as apologizing and requesting have been frequently investigated interlanguage pragmatics , researcher seem to overlook the speech act of complaint at least in Morocco. A contrastive interlanguage study of complaint between American native speakers of English and Moroccan learners of English, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has never been undertaken. It is hoped that this study will be relevant to the EFL teaching and learning situation in Morocco. It is a call to focus on the pragmatic norms of the language instead of the cursory readymade structures in order to avoid any language break down or any sort of miscommunication. Thus, this will help teachers to better understand and develop learners' input in an EFL context.

The Speech act of Complaining

Complaint has been defined as the expression of negative feelings relating to what speakers present as a complainable issue (Traverso, 2008). It often refers to "expression of dissatfaction addressed by an individual A to an individual B concerning behaviour on the part of B that A feels unsatisfactory" (Laforest, 2002, p.1596). Another common definition of complaint is the one proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) who state that:

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

So the speech act of complaining generally refers to an expression of dissatisfaction toward an event or situation that offends the complainer. It is speech event in which a complainer directly or indirectly raises a problem, makes criticisms, requests repairs, and gives moral judgments relating to perceived transgression.

In fact, The current study focusses primarily on this kind of complaint where the complainee is directly perceived as reliable for the violation or offence. Reasons

for this special importance lie in the face- threatening nature of direct complaint speech act which has been seen to be subject to cross-gender (Boxer, 1996) and cross-cultural difference in terms of use and interpretation (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

The speech act of complaining has been classified by some scholars taking into consideration its pragmatic function and effects. According to Austin (1962), complaints can be classified into performatives, which can be explicit, such as I censure; half descriptives such as I blame, or descriptives such as I am disgusted. They all belong to behabitives, a subclass of performatives, which express a speaker's attitude and feelings. On the other hand, Searle (1969) categorizes complaints into two classes: a) assertive, which are complaints in which speakers make assertions about the state of affairs; and b) expressive, which are complaints that express a speaker's psychological state. Leech (1983) labels complaints as a conflictive act because of their illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal (p.105). Furthermore, he stated that complaints are impolite acts by the nature of the conflict. Finally, Brown and Levinson (1987) identified the speech act of complaining as an essentially Face Threatening Act (FTA) because its realization can harm the speaker's and the hearer's positive and negative face.

Research has also shown that there are several social context factors that can influence the production of L2 direct complaints, as briefly introduced earlier: i) social distance, ii) social power, and iii) severity of offense. Findings in past research has indicated that the variables of social distance and severity of offense lead to the most cross-cultural variability in L2 complaint production. The study conducted by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) on the production of the speech act of complaints by intermediary and advanced suggested that both native and non-native speakers were more verbose when the complainee has more social distance (e.g., acquaintances) than with less social distance (e.g., relatives). Moreover, Cultural differences regarding severity of the offense may also affect the speaker's complaining choice. These variables will be discussed in details in the next chapter to explain how they relate to the current study on the speech act of complaining.

Encoding of Complaints

The speech of complaining has not been widely studied compared to other speech acts such as request or apology. This can be explained by its nature as a face-threatening act that requires much prudence and pragmatic awareness. However, some empirical studies can serve as a theoretical framework for our study. This part sheds light on some widely adopted framework of encoding the speech acts realizations.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) explored complaints as realized by native and nonnative speakers of Hebrew. Based on this study, the researchers framed

five categories for complaint realizations: (1) below the level of reproach, "No harm done, let's meet some other time"; (2) disapproval, "It's a shame that we have to work faster now"; (3) direct complaint, "You are always late and now we have less time to do this job"; (4) accusation and warning, "Next time don't expect me to sit here waiting for you"; and (5) threat, "If we don't finish the job today, I'll have to discuss it with the boss" (p. 202).

From an interlanguage perspective, Murthy and Neu (1996) investigated how American native speakers of English and Korean learners of English express complaint about their grades to an American professor. The study yielded some interesting results as to how disappointment is expressed by both groups. While American speakers expressed complaint by hinting at their responsibility for the wrongdoing, Koreans performed the speech act of criticism instead by putting the blame on the professor. What is also noted among the Korean learners is the use of the second pronoun and the modal "should", which leads to a more personalization of the problem. Conversely, the American participants, Murphy and Neu state, tend to transfer the blame from the interlocutor to the problem. In general, the study concludes that the appropriateness of the sociolinguistic forms in complaints is a key player in maintaining or damaging communication.

One of the most frequently cited works on speech acts in general and the speech act of complaining in particular was conducted by Trosborg (1995). The Latter studied direct complaints from a cross-cultural and interlanguage perspective. She investigated complaints realizations by Danish learners of English, Danish native speakers, and English native speakers. Trosborg (1995) concluded that Danish learners of English use fewer strategies that native speakers of English and Danish. Additionally, her study reveals that the strategies used by the native speakers of English when complaining to someone of higher social status are more direct than the one employed by other groups; Danish Native speakers and Danish learners of English.

Trosborg (1995) study ,in fact, presents a more comprehensive theoretical frame work on how the speech act of complaining operates. She devised four components of complaints with eight subcategories. The main components are a) no explicit reproach; b) expression of annoyance or disapproval; c) accusation; and d) blame.

In addition to complaint strategies, internal and external modifications have also been found to come into play in lessening or intensifying the impact of the speech act on the hearer. According to Trosborg (1995), there are two main categories of internal modifications which are composed of downgraders and upgraders.

METHOD

Instrument

Discourse completion tasks (DCT) are one of the most widely agreed upon data collection instrument given its feasibility in providing data. They allow for investigation of the influence of the variables of power, distance, and severity across cultures and situations in a consistent way. Furthermore, written DCTs help the participants get rid of the stress and pressure that might arise from oral productions. The choice of a DCT was also motivated by its reliability to answer the study's research questions regarding the realizations of the speech acts of complaining. Kasper (2002) emphasized the merits of discourse completion tasks when the objective of the study is to "inform about speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented and about their socio-pragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate" (p.329). More importantly, this instrument is used because the study involves a comparison of the realizations of complaint of three groups of informants at both the cross-cultural level and the interlanguage level. In other words, DCTs are used because they are replicable and can allow for the systematic variation of control variables.

Data for this study was collected via an open-ended questionnaire in the form of discourse completion task DCT . This discursive instrument consisted of 5 situational descriptions that specified the university as the setting, in addition to the interlocutors' power and distance relative to each other. Each situation is followed by a blank space in which the participants must provide the appropriate response using the speech act of complaint as though they were engaging in real-life interaction.

The DCT sets involved five situations, each including a typical scenario for a complaint. 8 students including 4 Moroccans and 4 Americans were asked to think about the most common complaining situations in a university setting. Based on the situations described in this questionnaire, five topics were included in the test, which involved discussions between two interlocutors regarding: recommendation letter delay (task 1), pair work (task 2), line cutter (task 3), photocopying delay (task 4), student missed assignment (task 5).

Data Analysis

The Code scheme used in this study regarding the speech act of complaint was adapted from (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Trosborg, 1995; and Laforest 2000). The theoretical coding framework used in the study is made up of three components: complaint strategies, external modifications and internal modifications.

The table contains a combination of complaint strategies proposed by these scholars. The first strategy

represents the least direct category, while the sixth strategy is perceived as the most direct one. The first column describes the broad strategies, while the second column illustrates examples in English (the examples are adapted from Trosborg, 1995, pp. 316-319).

Table 1
Complaint Strategies at Levels of Increasing Directness
(adapted from Trosborg, 1995)

Strategy	Example
No explicit reproach	Never mind, nothing serious happened
Disapproval	What terrible bureaucracy!
Explicit complaint	You are always late1
Expression of accusation and warning	I'll speak to your supervisor
Expression of threat	I'm not moving one inch unless you change my appointment
Request for repair	"Would you mind doing your share of the duties as soon as possible?"

Table 2
The Variables Controlled in the Discourse Completion Task and Closed Role Play Situations for the complainer

Situation	Power	Distance
Reference letter	-P	+D
Classmate contribution	=P	-D
Line cutter	=P	+D
Photocopy ordre	+P	+D
Missing assignement	+P	-D

Results

The first research question was:

What strategies do MLEs, AEs and MAs prefer to adopt when complaining?

To answer our research questions, the researcher calculated the frequency of strategies employed by MLEs, AEs, and MAs based on their responses on the DCT. Their responses are displayed in (Table 3).

Table 3
Frequency of strategies in complaints by MLE, AEs, and Mas

Strategies	MLE N %		AE N %		MAS N%		Total
NoExplicit Reproach	53		67	29.78%	51		171
Disapproval	43		65	28.89%	38		146
Explicit complaint	47		57	25.33%	62		166
ExpressionofAccusation and Warning	20		11	4.89%	24		55
Expression of Threat	16		5	2.22%	12		33
Request for repair	46		20	8.89%	38		104
All strategies combined	225	100%	225	100%	225	100%	675

After that the strategies were classified into three categories of directness see (Table 4)

Table 4
Values of levels of directness by group

	MLE N %		AE N %		MA N %		Total
Indirect complaint/ Low complaint	96	42.67%	132	58.67%	89	39.04%	317
Direct complaint/ Medium complaint	67	29.78%	68	30.22%	86	38.32%	221
Direct complaint/ High complaint	62	27.55%	25	11.11%	50	22.22%	137
All Strategies Combined	225	100%	222	100%	228	100%	675

The MLE group used indirect complaint strategies or low complaints (e.g. *Sir, I've just been informed that the committee for the exchange program has not received any letter from your behalf regarding my application. How is that possible? "*) significantly more (42.67%) than did the MA group (39.04%) and significantly less than did the AE group (56.30%). The MLE participants' use of indirect complaints shows an improving tendency towards AE norms of speech while the presence of the influence of Moroccan Arabic (L1) norms is apparent.

The groups' use of medium complaint strategies (e.g. *"I really need you to do your part of this project. I don't want to get a failing grade, and I cannot do it all by myself."*). Took a different trend compared to that of their use of indirect strategies; the MLE group used medium complaint strategies significantly less (29.78) than did both the MA group (39.09%) and AE group (36.94%). The tendency adopted by the MLE speakers obeys neither the AEs' nor the MA rules. This indicates that pragmatic transfer is not applicable in this case.

As for the MLE group's use of high complaining strategies, the results show a slight deviation from MA norms, but a huge significant deviation from the AE norms. As shown in (Table 4), the results display to some extent a high overall level of directness in the performance of complaints by the MLE and MA participants compared to the AE group.

To confirm these findings, the mean level of directness for each group was compared within the five social categories by calculating the average directness

for each group on a scale from 5 to 10 corresponding to the six complaining strategies, with Request for repair being *the most direct* (10) and No explicit reproach as th*e least direct strategy* (1). Thus, the higher the average number, the more direct the group. Mann-Whitney pair comparisons of the mean rank of directness revealed significant differences in all six social categories (see Table 5).

Table 5
Mann-Whitney Comparisons of Mean Directness Levels by Group in the Five Social Scenarios

Situation	MLE MR	AE MR	MA MR	MLE-AE Z	AS	MLE-MA Z	AS	AE-MA Z	AS
(-P / +D) **Reference letter**	45.10	40.60	49.30	-1.343	.179	-1.130	.258	-2.398*	.016
(=P /-D) **Classmate contribution**	50.39	37.20	47.41	-2.965 *	.003	-1.590	.112	-2.150*	.032 T
(=P/ +D) **line cutter**	42.70	46.55	45.75	-.688	.491	-.303	.762	-.215	.784
(+p/ +D) **Photocopy order**	57.13	33.87	44.45	-4.401*	.000	-.870	.384	-2.535*	.000 T
(-P /- D) **Assignment**	53.59	37.21	44.20	-3.021*	.003	-1.025	.305	-2.432*	.015 T

Note. P = social power, D = social distance. AE =American English speakers, MLE = Moroccan learners of English, MA = Moroccan Arabic Speakers. T indicates the occurrence of negative pragmatic transfer.

*p < 0.05

As shown in Table 5, the MLE group approached the target language as well as their native language (the AE and MA group's) mean directness level in two situations. In situations 1 and 3, the MLE groups' mean directness (*MR* = 45.10 and 42.70, respectively) was neither significantly different from that of the AE group (*MR* = 40.60 and 46, 55, respectively) nor from that of the MA group (*MR* = 49.30 and 45.75, respectively). Interestingly, the mean directness level of both AE and MA in the first situation were significantly different. Yet, this was not enough to prove the existence of pragmatic transfer, or more precisely negative transfer from L1 since no statistically proven difference was spotted between MLE group and MA group. On the other hand, the third situation displayed the criteria of positive transfer as indicated by (Kasper, 1992); the lack of statistically significant differences between among the three groups. The third situation is the only variance that is consistent with these criteria of positive transfer. The mean directness levels of MLE, the AE and MA were 42, 70, 46, 55 and 45, 75 consecutively.

As a matter of fact, in the remaining situations (i.e., situations 2, 4, and 5), negative pragmatic transfer was operational with the presence of statistically significant differences between the MLE and AE groups of informants and between the AE and MA groups of informants and the absence of distinguishable differences between the MLE and MA groups (Table 5).

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the realization of speech act of complaint among Moroccan learners of English, American speakers of English, and Moroccan Arabic speakers. The responses were analyzed in terms of the level of complaint directness with regard to the social variables of power and distance. The findings indicate MLE do not possess the desirable American speakers norms regarding the level of directness when performing the speech act of complaining. Moroccan learners of English displayed a high degree of directness compared to American participants. The study also revealed instances of negative pragmatic transfer from Moroccan Arabic. This pragmatic failure also indicated that social power and social distance were determining and significant factors in many situations.

This study might pave the way for educationalists and textbook designers take developing students communicative and pragmatic competence into consideration in EFL context. Additionally, teachers should adapt the teaching operation to the students' communicative and cultural needs associated with the target culture.. Moreover, by making the learners more exposed to authentic input, they can avoid pragmatic negative transfer which might yield fossilized pragmatic competence. This humble work can contribute to the investigations on the speech act of complaining. However, further studies can deepen the investigation and provide more insights through qualitative examination of complaining strategies in the Moroccan EFL context.

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