

- MENU
- PRINTABLE VERSION
- HELP & FAQs

Variation in Complaint Strategies in Three Regions

Carol Rinnert

Hiroshima City University

Chiaki Iwai

Hiroshima City University

This study investigates cross-regional variation in pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic strategies for making a complaint, one of the most face-threatening speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Questionnaire responses to two fairly serious complaint situations differing in terms of social distance were elicited from university students in three different English speaking regions (Japan, Singapore, and the U.S.). The findings revealed some clear patterns of variation in strategy use among the three groups, most notably in

terms of the choice of response segments (initiators, complaints, or requests); the length of responses; the use of softeners to mitigate the complaints; and the directness of the complaints produced. The findings indicate that a three-way comparison is methodologically superior to a conventional two-way one, particularly from the perspective of teaching English as an international auxiliary language. They also imply the need for teachers to move beyond native speaker norms.

本研究は、語用論上もっとも相手の面子を傷つけやすい発話行為 (Brown & Levinson, 1987) のひとつである「不平」表現に関する言語語用論的方略、および社会語用論的方略の地域差について論じている。二つの不平場面を想定し、日本、シンガポール、米国の3地域の大学生を対象にアンケート調査を行った。得られた回答を比較した結果、3グループ間には、とりわけ発話要素 (発話開始、不平、要求)、発話の長さ、不平柔和表現、それに不平の直接度に顕著な違いが見いだされた。国際補助言語としての英語教育という観点からすると、こうした結果は、三方向比較が伝統的二方向比較よりも方法論的に優れていることと合わせ、母語話者基準を越えた英語ノームを教えることの重要性を示唆している。

Introduction

In our previous studies (Iwai & Rinnert, 2001; 2002), we conducted a cross-regional survey of speech acts and focused on pragmatic strategies for apology and request speech acts. Using the same survey, we directed our attention in this study to complaint speech acts, which are among the most complex and face-threatening speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) examined by pragmaticians (e.g., Boxer, 1993; Murphy & New, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

Furthermore, we chose three regions according to Kachru's (1990) concentric circle model (the U.S., Singapore, and Japan, from inner, outer, and expanding circles, respectively) in order to highlight regional differences as vividly as possible and targeted university students as survey respondents representing these three regions. The U.S. students were all native speakers of English; the Singapore students were speakers of English as an official second language (ESL); and the Japanese students had all learned English as a foreign language (EFL) for at least six years; as such, the three groups clearly differed in terms of their English proficiency levels, ranging from native (U.S.) to fluent, advanced level NNS (Singapore) to non-fluent, mainly lower intermediate level NNS (Japan).

Our goal here is to compare pragmatic, rather than linguistic, competence of these three groups on the basis of the results of the empirical survey. In particular, we attempt to clarify similarities and differences in pragmalinguistic (linguistic representation of pragmatic intentions) and sociopragmatic (choice of pragmatic intentions in social situations) strategies and draw pedagogical implications for both native and non-native speakers of English and methodological implications for researchers.

Method

The data for this study were collected by using an open-ended form of discourse completion test (DCT), one of the most common methods in pragmatic studies. The DCTs were administered during regular language classes (Spanish in the U.S., Japanese in Singapore, and English in Japan) by teachers of those classes. The participants constituted a convenience sample, rather than a random one; however, they presumably shared roughly similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds

because the university selected in each country for this study was a relatively prestigious public one. The total number of respondents in each region was 100 from the U.S. (US), 71 from Singapore (SG), and 100 from Japan (JN). (See Iwai & Rinnert, 2001 for more details of the data collection method.)

Among the 13 situations in the survey, two complaint situations were specified to examine register effects, one involving a friend (F-situation) and the other, a college professor (P-situation). These two situations are briefly as follows:

F-situation: The respondent has been subjected to his/her roommate's loud noise every night despite their prior agreement to be quiet after 11:30 p.m.

P-situation: The respondent was shocked to receive a C in a favorite class after having studied hard and receiving an A on the report written for the class.

The following two research questions are addressed in this study:

1. Do the respondents in the three regions use different strategies to respond to the given DCT situations?
2. What pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic features can be identified in the collected data?

The data were analyzed in terms of speech acts (main response patterns), lexical features (word counts and softeners), and strategic choice (directness of complaints and requests). For the analyses involving subjective judgments (main response patterns and directness), the two authors of the paper established and refined explicit coding criteria until reaching inter-rater agreement of more than .85 on 10% of the data. All the responses were then coded separately and any discrepancies were resolved through

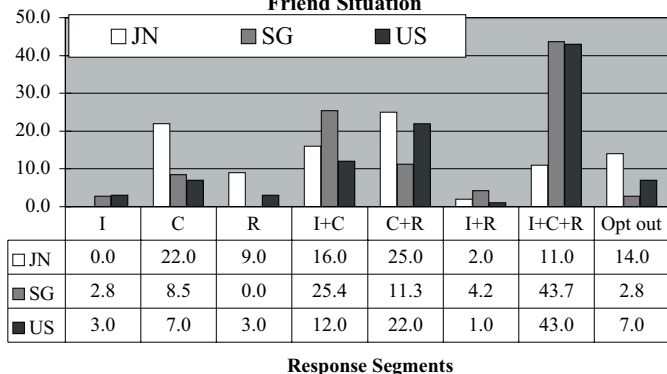
discussion. Statistical tests were conducted to determine whether the length of responses, numbers of softeners, and directness levels were significantly different according to group or gender.¹

Results

Main Response Segments

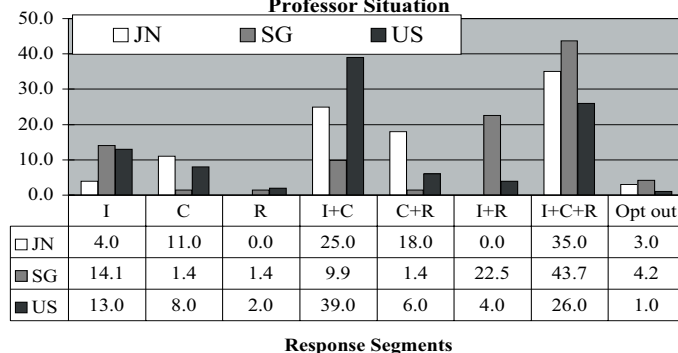
Three main categories of response segments were identified in the data: (1) *initiators* (greetings and other rapport-markers), (2) *complaints* (expressions of negative evaluation, including justification for complaining), and (3) *requests* (appeals for action by the hearer). (In the examples below, initiators will be shown in italics, requests with underline, and complaints in normal type; grammatical and spelling errors, which remain uncorrected in the examples, were ignored in the analysis.) Figures 1 and 2 show the relative frequencies of response patterns by group for each situation.

Figure 1: Complaint Response Patterns - Friend Situation



NB: I=Initiator, C=Complaint (including justification), R=Request

Figure 2: Complaint Response Patterns - Professor Situation



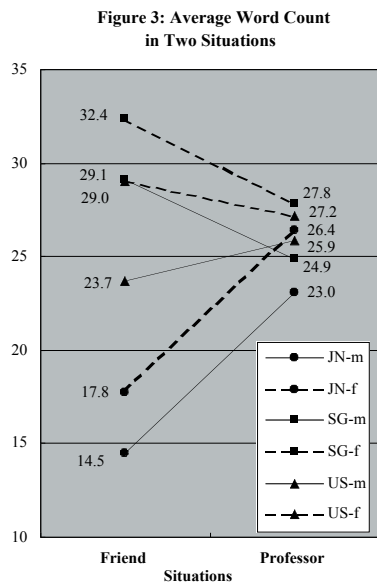
For the F-situation, the JN group tended to express either a complaint (22%) or a complaint and a request (25%), without an initiator (e.g., “Recently, you come home very late and make a lot of noise. I can’t sleep, please be quiet at night.”) In contrast, both the SG (44%) and US groups (43%) tended to use all three response segments (e.g., “*Er*, *R* [name], remember our agreement? The thing is, I need to get up early so is it possible for you to be slighter quieter?” [SG] or “*R* [name], remember when we decided to be quiet after 11:30. I would appreciate it if you kept your part of the agreement.” [US]).

In the P-situation, however, all three groups tended to use initiators. Most JN (53%) used both complaints and requests (e.g., “*Hello*. I can’t understand why you gave me such a low grade. Please tell me.”). A salient pattern among SG group members was to ask the teacher to help them avoid similar problems in the future by explaining what they did wrong (e.g., “*Professor Suzuki*, I’ve get a C for my final grades. Could you

please tell me what my problems were?”). A notable pattern among the US group (39%) was an initiator and a complaint with no request (e.g., “I was wondering if I could discuss my grade with you. I’m really confused as to why it was so low.”).

Word Counts

The mean number of words per response for each group was calculated for each situation. The results of a three-way ANOVA (group x situation x gender) showed significant effects for group ($F = 14.138, p < .01$), gender ($F = 5.872, p < .05$), and the interaction between group and situation ($F = 8.123, p < .01$).²

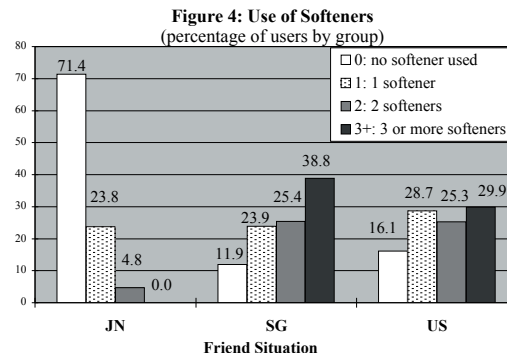


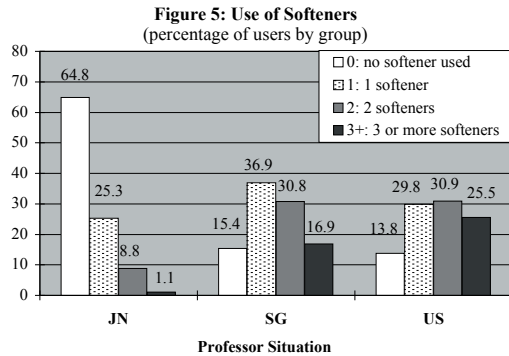
N.B.: m = male, f = female

As shown in the graph, the three groups used similar numbers of words in the P-situation (with averages ranging from 23.0 to 27.8 words), but they differed dramatically in the F-situation (from an average of 14.5 words by Japanese males to an average 32.4 among Singapore females). A further analysis by post hoc Fisher’s LSD tests revealed that the JN group’s responses tended to be significantly shorter than those of the other two groups, particularly in the F-situation.³

Use of Softeners

The data were examined in an attempt to identify all instances of softening or mitigating the force of the response. Following previous studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Kasper, 1989), such softeners included *hesitation markers* (*um, well*), *hedges* (*a little bit*), *apologies/disarmers* (*if you don’t mind*), and use of *past tense* (*wanted*) or *past tense modals* (*could*). The number of softeners in each response was counted, and frequencies were calculated.⁴ Figures 4 and 5 show the percentages of respondents in each group who used zero, one, two, and three or more softeners, respectively.



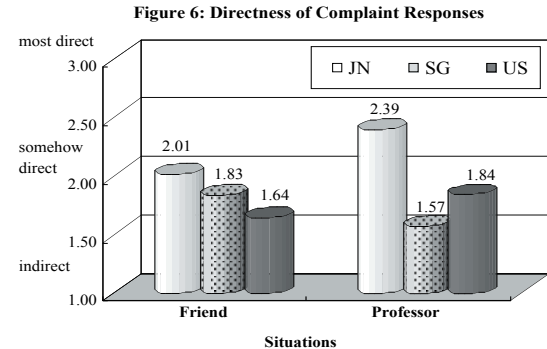


A majority of the JN group (71%) used no softeners in the F-situation, and almost as many (65%) used none in the P-situation, whereas the other two groups used multiple softeners, most notably the SG group in the F-situation (64%). An ANOVA showed that group was a significant variable ($F = 66.177$, $p < .01$). According to the post-hoc test, the JN group used significantly fewer softeners than the other two groups, which did not differ significantly from each other.

Directness of Complaints

A 3-point directness scale was devised to quantify the directness of the complaints. The highest directness score (3.0) was given to explicitly expressed complaints with the hearer (*you*) being named as the agent of the offending action (e.g., “You’re noisy”; “You gave me a C”). A middle score (2.0) was given to explicit complaints with an implied agent (e.g., “It’s noisy”; “I got a C”) and to less serious offending actions with hearer as agent (e.g., “It’s about your partying”). A low score (1.0) was given to all others, i.e., those with a complaint implied, but not explicitly stated, such as “I have to get up early” and “Please be quiet.”

For the calculation, the entire response was coded on the basis of the highest level of directness occurring in a multiple-segment response. Figure 6 shows the mean scores by group for each situation.



As shown in this graph, the JN group tended to express more direct complaints in both situations (average directness scores of 2.01 and 2.39 for JN, as compared to a range of 1.57 to 1.84 for the other two groups). According to an ANOVA and a post hoc test, these results were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Request Formulations

Finally, as in the earlier study (Iwai & Rinnert, 2001), the forms of the request segments were analyzed in terms of the directness of the head act, the focus of the request, and the use of *please*. The findings were similar to those of our previous study, including the JN respondents’ overt preference for direct requests and frequent use of *please*, and the SG and US participants’ strategic use of indirectness.

Discussion

Many cross-regional differences were identified, as shown in the preceding section. Therefore, the answer to the first research question about regional differences is obviously positive.

The answer to the second research question regarding kinds of pragmatic strategies, on the other hand, is more complicated, so the findings have to be interpreted cautiously. First, not much difference in strategy use was observed for the F-situation between the US and the SG groups; however, in the same situation, the JN group used fewer strategies aimed at avoiding offense. For example, their responses in this situation consisted of fewer words, initiators, and softeners. If these EFL learners' infrequent use of these linguistic resources is attributable to their lack of practical knowledge of English, this would be a case of pragmalinguistic deficit.

However, the JN students' responses in the F-situation do not seem to reflect entirely linguistic concerns, since the same respondents showed a remarkable shift in the P-situation, where they used significantly more words, like the other two groups, and many more initiators (though not more softeners or indirect complaints). There seem to be several plausible sociopragmatic reasons underlying their performance in the F-situation, e.g., a) transfer from Japanese, b) little experience in dealing with roommates, and c) acceptance of the stereotype that English speakers should speak directly to the point and not "beat around the bush." The roles of these possible explanations need to be investigated through further empirical research.

For the P-situation, more clear-cut group differences, most of them not adequately accounted for by pragmalinguistic reasons alone, were also observed regarding the respondents' interpretations of the situation. Most notably, most JN students expressed a direct complaint, and, moreover, over half of them

did so within a request for action by the teacher, e.g., "Please tell me why you give me such a low grade." In contrast, for many SG students, this was not a situation to express a complaint, but rather to ask a person in a higher position the favor of giving the student an explanation for the bad grade or suggestions for self-improvement (e.g., "Could you explain to me what I lack in answering the exam questions?"). However, the majority of US students expressed only initiators and complaints, with no request for any action on the part of the teacher (e.g., "Prof. Suzuki, I just got my grade. I am pretty confused on how I got C."), suggesting that many of them preferred to use a less direct (hinting) strategy or expected a teacher to give an explanation as part of the responsibilities of the teacher's role.

These findings are by no means conclusive, but they provide us with valuable pedagogical and methodological implications. First of all, the results help us realize that both NS and NNS equally have to learn how to interact in a cross-regional context. They also indicate that NS norms are not necessarily always correct or appropriate for teaching pragmatic strategies if our purpose for teaching English is to achieve international communication across regions.

At a more practical level, the findings give important suggestions to EFL learners and practitioners. For example, the outcomes from this study warn us against the danger of conveying stereotyped sociopragmatic images to learners (e.g., English native speakers are always direct). The findings also demonstrate the necessity of learning how to use basic resources (e.g., hedges like *a little* or *just* and auxiliary verbs) to express sensitive feelings of politeness as part of a speaker's pragmatic competence. At the same time, they suggest the importance of practicing strategic use of the target language in the classroom in order to make the best efforts possible to increase learners' English knowledge and skills.

Finally, it should be pointed out that many of these findings and implications might not have caught our attention if we had conducted only a two-way comparison between an NS and an NNS group, or between an ESL and an EFL group. For instance, as the above examples in this section show, we might have overlooked the alternative strategy of “complaint avoidance” that was preferred among the SG group students if our comparison had only been between the JN and US groups. A two-way comparison may be effective to discuss which of the two options is more appropriate or to highlight salient contrastive features of one group against the other, but this method seems to restrict our perspective and prevent us from examining pragmatic norms that underlie different contexts of language use equally. Thus, we believe that a three-way comparison as conducted in this study has a potential to be developed as a promising research method in both pragmatic studies and studies for English as an international auxiliary language.

Notes

1. Because of the overlaps among the patterns and small frequencies of occurrences of some segments, no tests of statistical significance were attempted on the response pattern data in the following section.
2. Because gender representation was unbalanced, particularly in the SG group, the factor of gender will be eliminated from further discussion in this study.
3. Due to space restrictions, detailed information on the LSD tests is omitted throughout this study.
4. The politeness marker *please* was excluded from the softener count and counted separately in the request analysis.

References

- Blum-Kulka, S., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Boxer, D. 1993. Complaints as positive strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 277-299.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iwai, C., & Rinnert, C. (2001). Cross-cultural comparison of strategic realization of sociopragmatic competence: Implications for learning world Englishes. *Hiroshima Journal of International Studies*, 7, 155-179.
- Iwai, C., & Rinnert, C. (2002). Strategic solution of sociopragmatic problems in using world Englishes. In M. Swanson, D. McMurray, & K. Lane (Eds.) *The proceedings of the 3rd Pan-Asian Conference at JALT 2001* (pp. 881-887). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching (CD-Rom).
- Kachru, B. (1990). *The alchemy of English: The spread, functions, and models of non-native Englishes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Murphy, B., & New, J. (1996). My grade's too low: The speech act set of complaining. In S. M Gass & J. New (Eds.), *Speech acts across cultures* (pp. 191-216). New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Olshtain, E., & Weinbach, L. (1993). Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics*. (pp. 108-122) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L. (1987). *Discourse across cultures: Strategies in world Englishes*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall.