

Complaining in Catalan, complaining in English: A comparative Study of native and EFL Speakers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out how EFL Catalan speakers transfer pragmatic knowledge from their native language into English when performing the speech act of complaining. The study identifies the semantic discourse components used by Catalan speakers and how they resemble and differ from American speakers. It also provides data on when these language groups remain silent. The data was collected by means of a Discourse Completion questionnaire administered to native and EFL participants in Barcelona and New York City.

The analysis of the data revealed that, although both groups of native speakers made use of similar semantic formulas, learners still showed instances of pragmatic transfer. Differences between languages were more noticeable in those cases in which the participants chose to joke, preach, or curse as means of lodging a complaint, and in those cases in which they opted out or used conventional non-verbal sounds. Inter- and intra-cultural gender differences in verbal behavior and the absence of certain linguistic behaviors in the interlanguage data indicate the need to conduct further research on complaint strategies, on learners' perceptions of pragmatic choices and of the research procedures, as well on the influence of training in language learning.

Introduction

After two decades of empirical and ethnographic speech act research, speech acts have been observed to be semantically formulaic. Recurrent formulas have been found, for instance in invitations (Wolfson and Judd, 1983), compliments (Wolfson and Manes, 1981) and apologies (Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Fraser, 1981). However, although the complaint may well be one of the most face-threatening speech acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978), there seems to be far less research on its semantic formulas than on those of other speech acts. Leaving aside the related phenomenon of indirect complaining (Boxer, 1989, 1991, 1993; Katriel, 1985) the present study focuses on oral direct complaints, thus also departing from studies on written complaints (Rader, 1977). The study has as its point of departure Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) definition of what a direct complaint is:

In the speech act of complaining the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to a past or on-going action, the consequences of which affect the S unfavorably. This

complaint is addressed to the hearer (H), whom the speaker holds responsible for the offensive action (1).

It is a confrontative act that may yield a response from the hearer such as an apology, although the present study, in line with most of the literature, is limited to the complainer's utterances.

The literature available on the speech act of complaining extends to various languages and has focused on such a variety of issues that comparisons of results are not always possible despite the similarity of the research instruments. In Olshtain and Weinbach's study (1987) Hebrew native speakers were compared to non-native speakers of Hebrew in a complaint situation by gathering data through DCTs. One of the main goals was to assess the severity of complaints lodged by learners and native speakers: *the former preferred the softer end of the scale, whereas, the latter chose to be more severe.*

Likewise, DeCapua (1989) gathered data from native speakers of German and American English, and EFL German speakers. The goal here was to compare how native speakers of German and American English would complain in certain service situations and to find out whether pragmatic transfer would occur. The major finding was related in this case to the directness of the complaints and she concluded that Germans are usually more direct than Americans when speaking German and English, which could cause pragmatic failure.

Among the first to study oral direct complaints was a group of researchers from the University of California in Los Angeles who conducted parallel studies of three different languages and, therefore, actually provided the basis for a cross-cultural study on this speech act. The questions under study and the methodology guiding data collection and analysis were the same in the three studies, though Giddens (1981) focused on complaints as performed by native speakers of Mexican Spanish, Inoue (1982) by native speakers of Japanese, and Schaefer (1982) by native speakers of American English. This group of researchers intended to find out what the syntactic and semantic formulae for oral complaints were in those three languages and how the sex of the complainer and that of the complaint addressee influenced those formulae. Similarly to DeCapua and Olshtain and Weinbach, they opted for a controlled method of data collection, though they decided on a modified form of role play in which the participants were asked to respond orally to hypothetical situations which the researchers assumed would call for a complaint. These three studies provide a useful taxonomy of semantic formulae which were found in complaints across the three languages and whose frequency and order was apparently influenced by situational variables. The sex variable in both complainer and complaint addressee produced significant differences for some of the semantic formulae. That taxonomy has been used in the present study, although, as will be seen below, it did not seem to account for all the semantic formulae. Although oral role play is a useful instrument for data collection, these studies did not allow for the option of opting out of the response, that is, give the participant the opportunity to say whether that hypothetical situation would actually make him say anything at all to the person causing the supposed annoyance. However, opting out has already been assessed

as a pragmatic strategic choice, specially when the speaker is in a face-threatening situation (Bonikowska, 1988), that is, the offended avoids, in turn, to cause offense to the initial offender.

So far, not only have there been few studies done on complaints in English (Rader, 1977; Giddens, 1981; Schaefer, 1982; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987), but also the range of languages covered by studies on oral direct complaints has focused on a few largely-spoken languages (English, German, Japanese, Spanish). The aim of the present study is to compare the speech act of complaining as performed by native speakers of American English and Catalan. The study is preliminary and intends to provide a basis for further speech act research on this Romance language, which, as for the speech act of complaining, is practically inexistent¹.

In line with DeCapua and Olshtain and Weinbach, my intention is to conduct a descriptive cross-cultural comparison. Catalan speakers are compelled to learn English as a foreign language since early years in primary school and many Catalan professionals need to use it as a means of communication within the European Union and with interlocutors from the United States. Having in mind these EFL learners, I included in the study a look at the performance by native Catalan English language learners with the intention of bringing in other linguistic perspectives for the new language curriculum that is to be implemented after the undergoing educational reform is completed.

Consequently, the present study was guided by the following questions:

1) What semantic formulae do native American and Catalan speakers use in complaint situations?; 2) in what situations would native American and Catalan speakers remain silent?; and 3) is there evidence of possible pragmatic transfer in the verbal behavior of EFL Catalan speakers?

A variable of social distance was included to find out whether speakers would change their linguistic performance according to the degree of intimacy between both interlocutors: namely, whether they were talking to an intimate, an acquaintance or a stranger. The study did not intend to focus on the variable of sex and the research instrument, consequently, had not been designed to include dependent variables for the sex of both the offender and the complainer, as Giddens, Schaefer and Inoue had actually done. However, the study yielded some significant differences in the way that men and women behaved and those results are also reported.

Methodology

Data Collection

Participants

Sixty-seven people participated in this study: 20 Americans speaking English (10 men/10 women); 20 Catalans speaking Catalan (10 men/10 women); and 27 Catalan EFL students (10 men/17 women). The mean age of each group was: 26 (American women), 29 (American men), 28 (Catalan women), 35 (Catalan men), and 23 (EFL men), and 25 (EFL women). The data from the EFL group was further subdivided between advanced and low-intermediate students

according to their classroom placement, yielding a total of 14 advanced EFL students (5 men/9 women) and 13 intermediate EFL students (5 men/8 women) whose mean ages were 25 (advanced EFL women), 21 (advanced EFL men), 25 (intermediate EFL women) and 25 (intermediate EFL men).

The Catalan EFL participants were mostly students at the same large American language school in Barcelona, Spain. A few others had studied English in various language schools in the city. The Catalan control group consisted of men and women professionals. The American group was comprised of graduate students who lived in New York City and were enrolled in different academic disciplines other than linguistics or language teaching. They were sampled accidentally in the university area. Since one of the concerns was to have a group which would have a similar educational background, all of the participants had completed high school or its equivalent in Catalunya.

Instrument and Procedures

A major concern of the study was to decide on the most appropriate and feasible way to collect the data. Ethnographic methods, which are aimed at data collection in natural conditions, have proven useful when studying the way people actually use language (Saville-Troike, 1982) and when analyzing the relevance of contextual factors in linguistic performance (Labov, 1972). On the one hand, ethnographic methods, such as participant observation (Spindler, 1982) and the collection of spontaneous conversation (Boxer, 1991), are advisable when analyzing how a language group behaves linguistically. On the other hand, such controlled elicitation methods as written questionnaires (De Capua, 1989; CCSARP studies²) and oral role-plays (Giddens, 1981; Inoue, 1982; Schaeffer, 1982) facilitate the collection of responses towards the same situation from different language groups, which would be methodologically difficult to attain in a real context. One advantage of controlled procedures is that they provide stereotyped responses. In written questionnaires, the respondent is providing *the prototype of the variants occurring in the individual's actual speech* (Hill et al., 1986) and does not respond to a single situation with its contextual factors. Using a questionnaire is also a way to prevent a mismatch between native language data and EFL data usually collected in classroom situations. Besides, the emotions usually stirred in direct complaint situations may lead the respondents to immerse themselves in a situation close to real life and, consequently, provide more natural responses; this phenomenon has already been noted by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) with regard to apologies.

Because of the above stated reasons, I designed a questionnaire with twelve situations in which it was thought that a complaint would appear. (See Appendixes A and B). The same research instrument translated into Portuguese was used to collect data on how native Portuguese and EFL Portuguese speakers perform the speech act of complaining (Korsko and Trenchs, 1992; 1993). As the instrument of a broader four-language study, the questionnaire included hypothetical situations in which it was thought that EFL students from the Iberian Peninsula were likely to show negative pragmatic transfer. These assumptions were based not only on the researchers' own recollections of cross-cultural linguistic problems in their experiences as

foreigners, foreign language learners and EFL teachers, but also on the instrument used in previous sets of comparative studies (Giddens; Inoue; Schaeffer).

Since one goal of the research was to see how the degree of acquaintance affected linguistic performance, similar situations were designed while differing in the degree of intimacy among the people involved: whether they were intimates, acquaintances and strangers. Hence, the questionnaire included three situations involving problems with food and three situations involving problems with noise. For the present study, I focus on these three latter situations since when analyzing the data I realized that the variables in the three food situations were not consistent enough.

As Bonikowska has pointed out (1988), one of the main shortcomings in controlled elicitation procedures is that, implicitly, they are forcing speakers to provide an utterance whereas in real life they might choose to remain silent. We cannot forget that complaint situations are actually face-threatening and confrontative by nature and speakers might want to avoid a confrontation with the offender; they might also consider that a specific situation does not bother them at all and that it does not call for a complaint. Consequently, the questionnaire instructions indicated that the participant should write 'SILENCE' in those situations in which they felt they would not speak.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the participants' responses, the starting point was the methods of data analysis utilized by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), and DeCapua (1989), since both studies had previously focused on the study of oral direct complaints. However, those categories did not fit all the data and had to be reconsidered.

First of all, I did not want to define the categories according to such formal linguistic features as *future tense 1st person(s) reference* (Olshtain and Weinbach, p. 11) or *present tense; reference to either S or H or both* (Olshtain and Weinbach, p. 12). Rather, I was more interested in the different linguistic functions of the language, or what DeCapua calls *semantic formulas* (p. 88), since, as Austin remarked (1962), the same linguistic structure (e. g. an affirmative statement) can be used in discourse with different goals in the mind of the speaker. Second, I did not develop a *scale for the evaluation of the 'severity of the complaint'* either, as Olshtain and Weinbach (9) and House and Kasper did (1981), since the same linguistic feature can convey different degrees of severity depending on other elements in the language such as vocabulary choice, concatenation of different formulae or the use of *downgraders* and *upgraders* (House and Kasper, 1981). In addition, one of the goals of the study was to find those areas in which Catalan EFL learners would theoretically show pragmatic transfer. While using Giddens, Schaefer and Inoue's taxonomy, the final analytical categories were developed on the basis of the two languages involved in the study, since taking as a starting point English would make me lose some nuances of the other language.

Formality seems also to be expressed by different structural means by the two languages and those structures cannot be formally compared. For instance, Catalan expresses formality by using the *Vostè* or *Vos* forms, while this phenomenon does not occur in English³³. Attention-getters have also different connotations across languages, such as *Escolta maca* or *Escolta, nena*, which cannot be translated literally as 'Listen, cutie' or 'Listen, girl' since the words *maca* and *nena* are commonly used in Catalan as a way of calling on a woman, usually young, with less sexist connotations than in English. Such differences seemed to be overlooked by Blum-Kulka and House (1989).

The preliminary categories taken from the semantic formulae in Giddens's, Inoue's and Schaeffer's work are the following ones (See Appendix C for a table of all the categories used for the analysis, their definitions and examples taken from the data): *Opener*, *Act Statement*, *Justification* subdivided into *Justification of the Speaker* and *Justification of the Addressee*, *Remedy* and its subdivision *Threat*, *Closing* with the three types *Expression of appreciation*, *Expression of apology* and *Good-bye*, and *Valuation*. However, in the data I found utterances which did not fit within this framework. Taking the new patterns into consideration, I finally complemented the above-mentioned semantic formulae with the following categories for analysis: *Preaching*, *Cursing*, *Formulaic Adjuncts*, *Non-Linguistic Sounds* and *Silence*, and the Openers were subdivided into *Names*, *Formulaic Adjuncts*, *Salutations*, *Attention-Getters*, *Addressings* and *Combinations* of two or more of these. By making the analysis recursive, these categories became both the tools and the results of the analysis of the semantic formulae across the two languages.

Results and Discussion

Situation: The Noisy Sister

You have a bad headache. Your sister is in the next room practicing her guitar.

According to the data, American men and women were constant in the choice of semantic formulae when speaking to intimates by following the pattern consisting of an opener, a remedy and a justification of the speaker with occasional expressions of gratitude that gave a polite tone to the utterances. For instance, a man said: *Jenn, would you mind not practicing, I have a headache*; and a woman said, *Do you think you could find another place to place to play? I have a bad headache and I really would appreciate a little quiet... Thanks a lot*. The Catalan men used a similar patterning. Only two Catalan men elaborated their complaints with long semantic formulae in the way that the Americans and Catalan women did. In terms of pragmatic transfer, Catalan men, I conjectured, would have problems since their more concise pattern included commands with an adjunct and/or an attention getting device unlike the American men that used a lengthier pattern having at its core a formulaic unit. Catalan men would also need to state the problem more often to be closer to the American male norm.

I hypothesized that Catalan women would not have any trouble in English since their pattern was almost identical to the American women with the exceptions that they did not begin the

complaint with openers including *Excuse me* or the person's name, and that they added valuations absent in all other native groups. Silence was a pragmatic choice for both male groups, but non-existent in the American and Catalan female data. This difference between men and women may be an example of what Deborah Tannen (1986) sees as different conversational styles between men and women.

Because the Catalan women used the same patterns as the Americans did when lodging a complaint to an intimate, I expected to find examples of positive transfer in the data with only a possible negative transfer of their higher frequency of expressions of their feelings. Surprisingly, no valuations appeared when the Catalan women were asked to respond in English and half of the advanced female learners departed from the control group norm by giving more commands (e. g., *Stop playing it!*) instead of the expected formulaic units that appeared in the American remedies. One reason for this could be that these Catalan women perceive that Americans in this situation would be more direct, while another reason might be the unrealistic situation of speaking English to their sister. In this case, the intermediate female learners stayed closer to their native norm and, consequently, to the American one. Obviously, they showed less variations than Americans because of their low command of the language: they all seemed to adhere to set expressions probably learned in class. The advanced female learners seemed to be converging toward a perceived target norm which was actually not appropriate. The influence of classroom teaching can also be seen in the fact that EFL men and women behaved verbally in a very similar way and in that there was not a single instance of silence, though it had been present in both native Catalan and American male data and, therefore, could have been an easy and appropriate option. These EFL learners might have felt more compelled to provide a verbal answer when confronting a questionnaire that might remind them of a classroom exercise or a test. The data showed that students learning English in a formal situation learn what Ellis (1985) refers to as *scripts ... which the learner can memorize because they are more or less fixed and predictable* (p. 167), a patterning concept which seemed to exist in the mother tongue as well.

Situation: The Noisy Neighbor

It is a Friday night at 12 o'clock midnight. You have been trying to fall asleep for 2 hours; but, you can't because of a party going on next door. This is not the first time that there has been loud music and noise from the man next door.

Of all situations in the survey this particular one involving a noisy neighbor elicited more non-linguistic responses than any other situation. Specifically, the data showed twenty-six percent of the Catalans deciding to take the choice of opting-out (Bonikowska, 1988) and fifty-three percent of the Americans not lodging a direct verbal complaint to the offending person. An interesting gender distinction surfaced which accounted for the high percentage found in the American data: all the American men surveyed lodged a verbal complaint directly to the neighbor concerning the noise at the time of the offense, yet only one American woman verbally confronted the neighbor. The other nine women explained that they would either talk to the neighbor the next day, call the man on the telephone to complain (however, what might have

been said over the telephone was not included in the explanation), bang on the wall, or call the police or a security guard to lodge the complaint for them. In short, what we may have here are two completely different and conflicting strategies for handling a complaint situation regarding late-night noise. The American women avoided a late-night face-to-face confrontation with the offending male neighbor as opposed to the American men who opted to express their complaint directly and verbally to the man.

The semantic pattern that Americans adhered to was some combination of an opening, a remedy (more frequent in men) usually consisting of a formulaic unit, the adjunct *please*, a justification of speaker and an act statement only present in the female responses. The gender difference noticed amongst the American participants was not significant in the Catalan group. The Catalan male and female participants used a formulaic unit in conjunction with the adjunct *please*. In addition, in this situation and contrary to the situation with the noisy sister, the Catalans extended their utterances by giving more than one act statement resulting in sentences of up to four statements of the problem. Valuations appeared in the male data and, though both language groups chose to remain silent on occasions, there were more silent options among the females. Although the overall Catalan semantic pattern was similar to the American one, Catalan men departed from their American counterparts: they introduced justifications of the speaker and used non-linguistic sounds as a means to lodge the complaint. Curiously, these sounds disappeared in the EFL data.

In situations dealing with acquaintances, Catalans and Americans did not restrict themselves to rigid formulas in the way they did with intimates and strangers, a phenomenon in agreement with the sociolinguistic claim (Wolfson, 1988) that one's speech behavior with acquaintances is different from intimates and strangers. Nevertheless, the data seems to refute Wolfson's claim that middle-class Americans are more direct when speaking to intimates and strangers than to acquaintances.

Two other semantic formulae appeared in the EFL data departing from their native groups: preaching in the group with higher language skills, and threats in the lower-proficiency group. Whereas preaching could be accepted or tolerated by an American complaint addressee, threats to call the police may come across as too strong and build up tension between the speakers. However, American men also behaved in a more face-threatening way. While American men used formulaic units when calling for an action to rectify the wrong, they added words and phrases that act to sharpen and present as rude what would initially be considered quite indirect or even polite (Wierzbicka, 1985): *friggin, freaking, kill the noise* and *you've gone too far* could be examples of such 'upgraders'. Supporting the above observation, Blum-Kulka and House (1989) found evidence in their data collected through discourse completion questionnaires of English-speaking Australian men who, by introducing a swear word into their highly routinized formulaic speech, would change the polite tone of a request into one considered impolite.

Like those Australian speakers, the American men in the present study used highly routinized and formulaic complaint behavior. Yet this does not mean that they were polite: *...the choice of conventional indirectness can very well be combined with frequent use of swear words*

(Wierzbicka, 1985), *suggesting that ... this level of indirectness does not necessarily entail politeness* (p. 134). The category of 'conventional indirectness' defined by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) does not necessarily correlate with politeness; therefore, one needs to go beyond the sentence structure to get at the full meaning of an utterance in order to decide whether it is polite or not. Precisely, I found instances where the use of the imperative was softened to such an extent that it was on a par with the formulaic unit, if not more polite or less face threatening. The following is an example of 'downgraders', words being used, in this context, to soften the sharpness of a command: *Si de cas, baixeu una mica el volum de la música, val?* [At least, turn down the volume of the music a little, O. K.?]. A place for further analysis of the data would be to look at how downgraders and upgraders deeply affect the meaning of the utterance which might contradict the categories of impositive (direct), conventionally indirect (indirect), and hints or unconventionally indirect (indirect) delineated by the Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) and House and Kasper's studies (1981).

Continuing with consistencies between male native groups, cursing was found in both male native groups: a Catalan man began to lodge his complaint with the word *Collons* which translates into English as 'Balls'. This cursing element disappeared in the EFL group. The reason for the absence of cursing in the interlanguage data may be that it might not have been learned in class yet, or might be perceived as inappropriate at an encounter with an English-speaking acquaintance; it may be also partly due to the research instrument, a discourse completion test, and the research setting, the language classroom. This is to suggest that naturally collected complaint data—or, at least, data not collected in a classroom environment—might shed light on the social function of cursing within a given culture. Cursing, in other words, in some cultures—dependent on the given situation, social class, region, or generation—may not necessarily show aggressivity, but, instead, demonstrate solidarity or intimacy between the interlocutors. Consequently, further research, using a variety of research methods, would be needed to substantiate these intuitive claims.

An interesting feature of the Catalan data, surfacing also in the interlanguage data and, therefore, given to cause misunderstandings with English interlocutors, is an aspect of joking or teasing the person responsible for the unpleasant situation. A Catalan man, for example, said, *Good evening. Can I come in?*; likewise, a Catalan woman said *Hello neighbor. I'm joining your party*. Hence, the attitude conveyed by these so-called complaints is one of resigning oneself to an unpleasant situation which cannot be changed in the way one would like. This joking-complaint co-occurrence, requiring that the offender be able to work out the implication, tends to be a way of lodging a direct complaint by Catalans. Interestingly, Boxer (1991) also found this element of joking in her naturally collected data regarding indirect complaining (i.e., commiserating or griping) between native speakers of American English. She claims that joking and light banter act to show good will and/or to smooth the sharpness of a complaint among strangers and acquaintances.

Situation: The Noisy Movie-Goer

You are at the movies. The woman behind you is talking and you can't hear the movie clearly.

Although two participants said that they would move places or give the woman a nasty look, most of the participants in the written survey opted to say something to the offending person; that is, this particular situation elicited more verbal behavior from the respondents across all male language groups in contrast to the situation of the noisy neighbor in which people, especially women, opted to remain silent. Far less justifications of the speaker can be found regarding this situation in both native groups. When speaking to strangers, Catalan men tended to be briefer than the Catalan women or the Americans. Like in the encounter between intimates, valuations were used again only by native Catalan women and American men gave the longest responses (e. g. *Excuse me miss, I can't hear the movie while you are talking. Could you be a little more quiet please*) by combining several semantic formulae with adjuncts while American women remained silent more often.

EFL learners included either a) formulaic units with opening attention-getters or the adjunct *please*, or b) commands (i. e., imperatives) plus the adjunct *please* or an act statement. Probably, in an attempt to insure politeness, the advanced and intermediate Catalan students all used *Please*; and still further, the Catalan EFL women used expressions of gratitude at the end of the remedy with a similar pragmatic function. The majority of the American women used *Excuse me* instead of *Please*. Using *please* instead of *excuse me* might be an example of transfer of training (Selinker, 1972); textbooks and classroom materials may use *please* much more frequently than *excuse me*, or the language of the classroom may not provide adequate input (Krashen, 1985) for proper acquisition of this latter phrase. On the whole, once a student learns that there is a formulaic unit or unit of expression, which is usually within the first 30 hours of a course, he or she continues to develop it by relying on the native language while incorporating the target until it becomes a feature in their interlanguage (Schachter and Kimmwell, 1983). For example, the intermediate students used either a command plus *please* or attempted incorrectly to construct a formula, whereas the advanced students used a pattern closer to that of the American standard, that is, a formula with an adjunct plus an act statement.

The situation involving a stranger making noise at the movies elicited more preaching than the other two situations, but none in the American group. Catalan learners transferred this pragmatic strategy to lodge a complaint into the foreign language; thus, a male Catalan English learner issuing assertions and commands said, *You are not at your home; you are at the cinema; respect the other people and be quiet please* and a female Catalan EFL learner, using a more sarcastic or joking tone added *What are you talking about? Do you think I could get through your conversation?*

The L1 data of the Catalans showed the use of non-linguistic sounds, such as *Xist*, *Psst* and *Shhh*, as a strategy to complain about the bothersome public talking. Even though Americans may use a non-linguistic sound when asking someone to be quiet at the movies (e. g., *Shh!*), both the Catalan men and women might be perceived as rude by Americans if they chose to use *Psst*

instead of *Shh* when signaling someone to be silent in an English-speaking environment. Both sounds can be used in Catalan to ask for silence, whereas Americans only use *Shh* and usually consider *Psst* rude. Catalan women would behave even less adequately since American women do not use this strategy at all. Catalan men also used it in a higher percentage than American males. In five out of seven cases, the Catalan men used silence or a non-linguistic sound, such as, *Psst* or *Xist*. Because the data showed only one instance of an EFL Catalan woman using *Psst*, I concluded that this behavior is dropped by learners thus indicating a sound which is considered language-specific by the two language groups and not universal. Another reason for the absence of these non-linguistic sounds might be that the non-native English speakers could have learned through classroom instruction that these particular sounds are not transferable from their respective languages into English; as seen above, learners also dropped preaching and valuations as strategies for lodging complaints. Formulaic units as a way to pose a remedy are similar to Americans, though the lower group showed less variation of use. Silence was present but less than in the native groups EFL women included expressions of gratitude, not present in the American data.

Although the use of commands was found in both groups of native language data with regard to noise at the movies, evidence of negative pragmatic transfer did show up in the choice of vocabulary used to lodge the complaint. Instead of choosing *Be quiet!*—the overwhelming choice among both American men and women—the Catalan EFL learners preferred *Shut up*. Here Catalan learners may think that *Shut up* has a one-to-one correspondence to the Catalan *Silenci* ['Silence!']. Here is a situation where the phrase *shut up* is grammatically not wrong, but reflects an item from the native language that would not be the correct pragmatic choice in English.

Conclusion

In this study I attempted to find out what kind of pragmatic transfer is produced by EFL Catalan speakers when complaining, and to identify the semantic formulas used by native Catalan speakers and how they resembled and differed from American speakers. I found out that, although the two groups of native speakers remained silent in some situations and made use of similar semantic formulas, EFL speakers still showed negative pragmatic transfer.

Evidence of such transfer showed up in the choice of vocabulary and in the choice of certain semantic formulae. Given the specific complaint situations under study, I found that all gender groups made more use of silence in the acquaintance situation than in the encounters with a stranger and with an intimate, and that there was a gender distinction in the way American participants opted for being silent at the time of the offense. Such gender difference was not so significant in the other language groups and, consequently, we can speculate that it might yield negative pragmatic transfer in real-life settings. The gender differences which surfaced in the study suggest the need for investigating the phenomenon and for its being introduced in the classroom. The appearance of silence as an optional behavior in all language groups points at the need to teach the appropriateness to speak and to remain silent in a foreign language. It also proves the usefulness of the DCT in documenting this pragmatic choice.

Unlike the American English data, the Catalan data revealed the use of jokes as a downgrader or a portrayal of resignation. Preaching was used by Catalan participants, specially females, as a complaint strategy. Its absence in the English data raises doubts about whether such a strategy would be tolerated by native speakers of English. The study in real-life settings of more face-threatening behaviors would shed light on the use of cursing as a means to properly threaten interlocutors or to build solidarity. Cursing was absent in the Catalan interlanguage data and, besides a possible failure in the learning process, its absence could point at limitations in the research instrument, the DCT, and the research setting, the language classroom. Naturally collected data is needed to substantiate further claims on cursing as a complaint strategy.

As for the use of non-linguistic sounds, the L1 data of Catalan differed slightly from the sounds represented by the American participants. Catalan learners dropped this pragmatic strategy when responding in English, which may either indicate that those sounds are perceived as culturally-specific by learners, or that the DCT is a limited research tool. Such occurrence across languages shows that there should be a place in the language classroom for the teaching of routinized non-linguistic sounds and their correct use and written representation. The results in this study also suggest a need for more research on the native and non-native perceptions of sounds of this kind.

EFL learners dropped linguistic behaviors from their mother tongue which, had they been transferred into English, would have yielded positive pragmatic transfer, a phenomenon which requires further investigation. It raises issues about the learner's perception of native pragmatic choices, about the influence of training in the frequency of use of semantic formulae, and about the participant's perceptions of research questionnaires.

The present study could be expanded by, obviously, adding data from the remaining nine items in the questionnaire and by triangulating the data with interviews with the participants and with natural data of the various complaint situations; a wider population for all language groups could also be surveyed. The findings suggested further research questions, such as the order and frequency of various items in the data—namely, upgraders and downgraders, grammatical structures, and semantic patterns. Data on various proficiency levels of English could be used to study developmental stages in the interlanguage data. Finally, a look at Americans learning Catalan in ESL and EFL settings, would create a more complete picture of pragmatic transfer across the two languages under study.

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Notas

1. This study is part of an undergoing research which involves speakers of American English, Castilian Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese.

2. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project was an effort initiated in 1982 by an international group of researchers, in a first attempt to analyze speech acts across a variety of languages other than English and find whether speech acts included universal pragmatic principles (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).
3. *Vostè* and *Vos* are Catalan formal forms equivalent to the English subject pronoun *You*.
4. The examples are taken from the actual samples of the data collected in this study.

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Appendix A

English Twelve-Item Discourse Completion Questionnaire

DIRECTIONS: Please read the following 12 situations. After each situation, write the exact words that you would say. If you feel that you would not say anything, please indicate that by writing "SILENCE".

1. You have a bad headache. Your sister is in the next room practicing her guitar.
2. You have been waiting alone for your brother at a café for more than one hour. When he arrives, what do you say?
3. You are at the movies. The woman behind you is talking and you can't hear the movie clearly.
4. You have sat down with friends at a nice restaurant and have just ordered a plate of mussels (or any other dish to your liking) from the male waiter. When the food arrives, you see that it has not been prepared in the way you had anticipated, that is, it is not the standard way this particular food is prepared; therefore, it is not what you expected.
5. You are eating lunch at the local snack bar; the one that you eat at everyday. You look down at the plate which the waitress has just brought and you see a hair that is not yours.
6. It is a Friday night at 12 o'clock midnight. You have been trying to fall asleep for 2 hours; but you can't because of a party next door. This is not the first time that there has been loud music and noise from the man next door.
7. Your colleague, Mary, has invited you to a dinner party. When you try the food, you notice that she has overcooked the beefsteak.
8. You are walking down a busy narrow street in a rush, in a hurry. Two men in front of you are walking really slowly and you can't pass them.
9. It's Christmas. Your mother has cooked the meal for everybody but you feel that something is wrong with the meat.
10. You are at home because you have the flu. Your father starts smoking right next to you.
11. Your shoes are at the usual shoe repairman. It's the third time that you have been there to pick them up. He tells you once again that they are not ready, but you need for that night.
12. You are on a transatlantic flight, and the air hostess has just served you the meal. The chicken is raw and too disgusting to eat and the portion is too small.

Appendix B

Catalan Twelve-Item Discourse Completion Questionnaire

INSTRUCCIONS: Llegeixi les 12 situacions següents. Després de cada situació, escrigui les paraules que vostè diria exactament. Si creu que no diria res en aquella situació determinada, escrigui "SILENCI".

1. Vostè té mal de cap i la seva germana és a l'habitació del costat tocant la guitarra.
2. Vostè ha estat esperant tot sol al seu germà en una cafeteria durant més d'una hora. Quan ell arriba, què li diu vostè?
3. Vostè és al cinema. La senyora que té al darrera està parlant i vostè no pot sentir bé la pel·lícula.
4. Vostè és a un restaurant amb uns amics i acaba de demanar al cambrer un plat de musclos (o qualsevol altre plat que a vostè li agradi). Quan li porten el menjar, veu que no l'han preparat com vostè s'esperava. És a dir, no l'han preparat de la manera habitual.
5. Vostè està dinant al bar del barri on vostè menja cada dia. Es mira el plat que li ha dut la cambrera i hi veu un cabell que no és seu.
6. És divendres a les dotze de la nit. Vostè ha estat intentant dormir durant dues hores però no pot perquè hi ha una festa a la casa del costat. No és la primera vegada que hi ha soroll i música ben alta a la casa del veí.
7. La seva companya de feina Maria l'ha convidat a un sopar a casa seva. Quan vostè tasta el menjar, se n'adona de què el bistec és massa cuit.
8. Vostè està caminant amb pressa per un carrer estret i ple de gent. Al seu davant hi ha dos homes que caminen molt a poc a poc i vostè no pot avançar-los.
9. És el Dia de Nadal. La seva mare ha preparat el dinar per a tothom però vostè creu que la carn està feta malbé.
10. Vostè és a casa perquè té la grip. El seu pare es posa a fumar al seu costat.
11. Vostè té les sabates al sabater de costum. És la tercera vegada que les ha anades a buscar però el sabater li diu un altre cop que no estan llestes. Vostè les necessita aquella mateixa nit.
12. Vostè és en un vol transatlàntic, i l'hostessa li acaba de servir el dinar. El pollastre és cru i l'hi fa tant de fàstic que no se'l pot menjar. A més, hi ha molt poc menjar.

APPENDIX C

Categories of Semantic Formulae

Opener

"An utterance made by the complainer which initiates the speech act set and does not provide information about what has gone wrong, why the wrong merits a complaint or how to remediate the wrong" (Giddens, 1981, p. 17):

Name

Teresa,...⁴

Formulaic adjunct

Please,... Excuse me,...

Salutation

Hello...

Attention-getter

Well... Hei... Listen...

Addressing

Miss,...

Combination of two or more of the above

Excuse me, miss...

Act Statement

“An utterance which states the problem” (Giddens, p. 17)

You keep reaching the wrong number.

Justification

Justifications constitute moves supportive of the central act of complaining. Two types of justifications were found.

Justification of the Speaker

“An utterance made by the complainer that explains why he personally is making the complaint” (Giddens, p. 17):

I have a real bad allergy.

Expression of Apology: May introduce the justification

I'm sorry to bother you but...

Justification of the Addressee

“An utterance made by the complainer that gives a reason for the addressee's having committed the wrong” (Giddens, p. 17)

És que amb aquestes parets se sent tot. [Tr.: Through these walls, everything can be heard]

Remedy

“An utterance that calls for an action to rectify the wrong” (Giddens, p. 18)

Command

Be quiet.

Formulaic unit

Do you mind playing a little quieter?

Threat

“A type of remedy in which the complainer states an action he will execute contingent upon an action made by the addressee” (Giddens, p. 18)

Or else you are gonna be in big trouble.

Closing

“An utterance made by the complainer at the end of the speech event which concludes his turn at speaking. It does not give information about what has gone wrong, why it has gone wrong, or how to remediate it” (Giddens, p. 18)

Expression of appreciation or gratitude

Thanks

Expression of apology

Sorry

Goodbyes

Good-bye

Valuation

“An utterance made by the complainer which expresses her feelings about either the addressee or the wrong that has been committed” (Giddens, p. 18)

This time you've gone too far.

This is getting to be quite frustrating.

Preaching

An utterance that reflects a rule of what the speaker considers to be “proper” behavior in that situation. It may take the form of scolding or of moralizing.

...you have to be attention at the time, you don't live alone in this building. (EFL respondent)

Cursing

Fraser's (1981) pragmatic formatives. It may appear alone or as part of the above mentioned semantic formulas.

...freaking....

Formulaic Adjunct

A word or phrase which is used in the data as a marker of courtesy. It may appear alone or as part of the semantic formulas mentioned above, such as openers.

Please,... Excuse me,...

Non-Linguistic Sound

Conventionalized sound conveying a specific message

Sssh!

Silence

Those cases in which the hearer chooses not to address any verbal complaint.