

# Complaints and Linguistic (In)Directness in BELF Emails

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## Abstract

In line with the argument that linguistic (in)directness must be differentiated from perceived face-threat (Decock & Depraetere 2018), this paper explores linguistic (in)directness of complaints in 200 BELF emails which have been coded in terms of the presence of four constitutive complaint components: the complainable, the negative evaluation of the complainable, the person/company responsible for the complainable, and a wish for compensation. Positioned within both discursive and diachronic pragmatics, this article probes into formal realizations of each component and deploys the concept ‘diachronicity’ to capture the dynamics of escalatory explicitness (or linguistic (in)directness) in authentic business emails. Data analysis reveals that the complaint speech act in BELF emails is explicit (or linguistically direct) not only in terms of the overall number of constitutive components that are realized but also by virtue of the preferred component combinations in which three or four components are often (para)-linguistically expressed. Based on the above investigations, the significant pattern can be described as that the complainer goes to the point that what is not up to his expectation, then explicitly addresses the complainee to take actions for remedy, and often also vents his negative emotions, suggesting the fact that BELF emails can be both goal-oriented and emotion-loaded. The findings shed some light on speech acts research in both CMC, emails more specifically, and BELF contexts.

**Key Words:** Complaints, linguistic (in)directness, BELF emails, pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Complaining is not uncommon in daily, institutional, and business communications (Liu & Liu, 2021). Studies of CMC complaints are burgeoning and mainly analyze the genre of negative online customer reviews on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TripAdvisor, or eBay (Depraetere et al., 2021; Hassouneh & Zibin, 2021; Meinl, 2010; Vásquez, 2011). Among various forms of CMC, the use of email for organizational communication has become a daily practice that is inevitable, especially when organizations establish partnerships with international bodies or institutions (AlAfnan, 2014). In global email communications, among many other languages, English has increasingly become the most recognized common language, functioning as a default means of communication among people who do not share a common language and culture (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013). The role of English as an international business lingua franca (BELF) is now beyond dispute (Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009), realized mainly by email (Li, 2016).

Complaints are viewed as instinctively face-threatening that jeopardize the interlocutors’ both positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson 1987), in which the speaker can express his dissatisfaction and annoyance towards the past or ongoing state of affairs either directly or indirectly (Trosborg 1995). Performing different types of FTAs (e.g., disagreement, refusal, or complaint) in BELF emails is of vital significance to the success of the international business since it can affect corporate reputation, client base, competitive advantage, growth, profit, and other critical factors (Brandt, 2005). Although there is an absence of a single standard version of BELF discourse due to its very nature of variation, hybridity, dynamism, context-dependency, and individual idiosyncrasies (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013), successful BELF communication enjoys four discourse strategies: clarity, brevity, directness, and politeness (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010) and the goal of the use of English is to “simply work”—to get the job done (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

Therefore, scholars are concerned with the realization of different speech acts in BELF contexts relating to (im)politeness and (in)directness aspects, with a particular interest in requests (Ho, 2010; Park et al., 2021; Richard & McFadden, 2016; Zhu, 2012). Taxonomies of speech acts are often based on the binary distinction between direct and indirect strategies, represented by the large project of cross-cultural speech-act realization patterns (CCSARP) (Blum-kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989). These levels of indirectness are often divided into three broad categories: direct, conventionally indirect, and very indirect (hints). However, the notions of directness and indirectness applied to requests in this project were re-examined, and the results showed that perceptions of directness of their given request patterns did not always confirm the psycholinguistic validity of the postulated scale across different languages (Ogiermann, 2009; Yu, 2011; Tawalbeh & Al-oqaily, 2012).

Through critical evaluation of previous conceptualizations and applications of (in)directness, Decock & Depraetere

(2018) propose a new taxonomy of complaints that allows for systematic cross-linguistic analysis of (in)directness in different speech acts, further proven valid in Depraetere et al., (2021). They conceptualize linguistic (in)directness in terms of the number of constitutive components of a complaint situation that are (para-)linguistically realized. A complaint situation consists of four constitutive components which can be made explicit, derived from House and Kasper's (1981) and Trosborg's (1995) work on complaints:

- Component A refers to the situation or event about which the customer is complaining ("complainable").
- Component B is the expression by the complaining customer (henceforth the "complainer") of some degree of dissatisfaction.
- Component C refers to the person or institution that is considered by the complainer to be responsible for the complainable.
- Component D concerns the complainer's wish for the complainable to be

While there is a substantial collection of literature on the realization of complaint speech act in (intercultural and interlanguage) pragmatics based on elicited data (e.g., Chen et al., 2011; Kreishan, 2018), there is still a paucity of studies that work with natural data, especially in professional communication. Recent investigations of linguistic (in)directness in complaints resorting to this new taxonomy only target such social media contexts as Twitter (Depraetere et al., 2021) and ELF contexts (Min, 2021). However, in fact, until now, studies on this new strand of research of complaints in BELF emails are virtually non-existent. This is quite surprising given that international trade can never be a smooth process, during which undesirable outcomes affecting either exporters or importers always emerge. B2B written complaints are both a relatively common and a highly sensitive genre that requires a delicate balance between problem-oriented and people-oriented communication by business traders (De Clerck et al., 2019). Since more than capable of conveying rich information, BELF email communication is also expected for reaching interaction goals and building long-term business relationships (Jensen, 2009). Therefore, it is both inevitable and challenging for BELF email communicators to conduct complaints.

Against such background, this present paper hopes to be the leading research to examine (in)directness in BELF email complaints by applying the new and adapted taxonomy of complaints outlined in Depraetere et al., (2021), which is based on the identification of the constitutive components of a complaint situation and the extent to which the four components are explicitly realized, paying heed to the ways in which they are (para-)linguistically expressed. And our data corpus consists of 200 BELF emails collected from a company operating in the auto parts industry in Guangzhou, China.

The asynchronous character (Knaš, 2010) featuring computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides insights into exploring how speech acts unfold and evolve over time. Hence, the present paper's explorations of escalatory explicitness (linguistic directness) as sequences of asynchronous emails also fit into the strand of diachronic pragmatics research. The notion of diachronicity refers to the Heideggerian concept that historically situating a discourse increases its power (Kádár, 2019). In the case of a complaint in business emails, diachronicity operates in the form of claims that the email receiver who is held accountable for the issue that causes the complaint has not made any attempt to remove the complainable (Vladimirov et al., 2021).

Therefore, based on the above rationale, this paper is designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Which and how many constitutive components of complaint situations are realized and what are the preferred component combinations in the 200 BELF emails?
- 2) How are the four constitutive components linguistically realized in the 200 BELF emails?
- 3) How does the escalatory explicitness (or linguistic directness) in complaint chains unfold in BELF emails?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Complaint Speech Act

Complaints in linguistics have been mainly studied through the lens of discourse-pragmatic and conversational-analytic (CA) perspectives, both of which provide illuminating insights into the linguistic realizations of complaints and interactional dynamics of complaint interactions (Trosborg, 1995; Heinemann, 2009; Chen et al., 2011; Depraetere et al., 2021). Running contrary to the agreement maxim (Leech, 1983) regardless of the extent of its indirectness, performing complaints against different cultural backgrounds grabs the attention of both cross-cultural researchers and interlanguage researchers, who analyze and compare how complaints (and other face-threatening speech acts) are performed by speakers in different languages, with comparisons mainly made between native English speakers and non-native speakers or ELF learners (Astia, 2020; Chen et al., 2011; Masjedi & Paramasivam, 2018). The DCT was employed as the principal instrument in Chen et al. (2011), and the quantitative results indicated that the American and the Chinese participants shared similar distributions in overall and combined strategy use, while their choices of linguistic forms and expression of semantic content were different.

Compared to more formulaic speech acts such as requests, greetings, and apologies, a complaint does not easily lend itself to any predetermined form due to its complexity (Chen et al., 2011) thus a complaint is not necessarily expressed in a single sentence while often performed by a set of speech acts (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993), giving chances to different taxonomies of this speech act. The two highly influential taxonomies of complaint strategies by means of a directness scale were developed by House and Kasper (1981) and Trosborg (1995), both of which are not immune from equating a higher degree of directness to a higher degree of face-threat (Depraetere et al., 2021). Trosborg (1995) set up four main categories : (1) no explicit reproach; (2) irritation or disapprobation expression; (3) allegation; (4) blame, then further classified into eight sub-categories known as strategies, varying in the weight of directness from hints and mild disapprovals to severe blame (see in Trosborg, 1995:315). Later, Decock & Depraetere (2018) pave the way for a more accurate and replicable method that serves as a helpful instrument allowing this present paper to analyze (in)directness in BELF email complaints systematically and unambiguously.

In the business setting, complaints always link to another term, “customer complaint behavior” (CCB) which deals with the identification and evaluation of all aspects involved in the customer’s reaction to service failure and consequent dissatisfaction (Singh & Widing, 1991). The compelling need to gain insights into how consumers use this particular speech act and how relevant organizations or corporations respond and handle it cultivates the field of service recovery research (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010; Van Herck et al., 2021; Yang & Liu, 2020), among which the genre of CMC target mainly on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, TripAdvisor, or eBay (Meinl, 2010; Vásquez, 2011; Depraetere et al., 2021; Hassouneh & Zibin, 2021; Vladimirov et al., 2021).

## 2.2 BELF Emails

Piles of literature on BELF emails have been immersed in investigating the structural patterns, linguistic and stylistic features, and discourse strategies of emails through genre, move, or discursive analysis. (e.g., Nickerson, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Kankaanranta, 2006; Incelli, 2013). BELF discourse is acknowledged as a “hybrid” form of communication (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) since it is not only a mixture of different styles and registers but also integrates the features of both interlocutors’ mother tongue practices. The hybrid phenomena are associated with directness versus indirectness talk and politeness-related aspects (Roshid et al., 2018).

By applying speech act theory to determine whether a letter is direct or indirect, Beamer (2003) demonstrated that the overwhelming preference for directness in 19th-century business letters signals strong proximity, especially where power differentials are great. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) found that Finnish BELF users were more direct and straightforward than Swedish BELF users in spoken communication, with directness meaning using fewer words and going immediately to the point of the message and indirectness meaning the opposite. More evidence also is presented in the email performance, revealing that Finnish writers favored more direct requests, whereas Swedish writers used more indirect alternatives. Yao et al., (2021) explored the preferred move structures in the performance of FTAs in Chinese and Japanese BELF emails and emphasized the influence of national culture on English lingua franca communication so as to raise our awareness of certain taken-for-granted patterns in email interactions between two seemingly similar cultures to avoid possible communicative breakdown. Decock & Spiessens (2017), most relevant to this current study, probed into authentic business complaints and disagreements through a discourse analysis of complaint negotiation e-mails written in French- and German-language. The study demonstrated that, in reactions to complaint refusals, the customer’s discourse evolved from more neutral, problem-oriented, routinized formulations to more confrontational, person-oriented, ad-hoc formulations.

To sum up, while there is a substantial collection of literature on the realization of speech acts in (intercultural and interlanguage) pragmatics based on elicited data, there is still a paucity of studies that work with natural data, especially in business professional communication. In fact, until now, studies on the topic of complaints in the context of actual CMC (computer-mediated communication) in business settings are still few and mainly analyze the genre of negative online customer reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor or eBay. To our knowledge, published research on B2B written complaints in BELF emails is nearly non-existent.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Data Collecting

In terms of data collection, there are three major methods in pragmatic studies: discourse completion tasks (DCT) ((Blum-kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Chen et al., 2011), role-plays (Kreishan, 2018); and ethnographic observation (Graham, 2007). Our data can be considered as naturally occurring discourse with higher observational and reliable insights into investigating complaints’ linguistic realizations within the exchanges of BELF emails. The data, consisting of 200 BELF emails, are selected from 1200 emails provided by a company operating in the auto parts industry in Guangzhou, China. The 200 emails, spanning a period from 2006 to 2018, contain at least one constitutive component of an explicit complaint. As the company provides international products and services, the employees working in sales departments are required to write emails in English, though they are all native Chinese. While the mother tongue of

their business partners cannot be determined, most of them are Non-Native English speakers (NNS) judging from the information in business emails (e.g., the name of email writers and the reference to the writers' countries or cities), which means emails examined in this study belong to BELF interaction. These overseas business customers or trade partners come from Spain, Syria, Nigeria, and many other Middle East and African countries, among whom BELF email communication is the most important way to conduct daily business affairs. All the names of email writers, companies, locations, and sensitive information (e.g., quotations) are pseudonymous. Moreover, all lexical or grammatical errors will not be amended to preserve the authenticity of the data.

### 3.2 Data Coding

This paper adopts the coding scheme outlined in Depraetere et al. (2021). The taxonomy of complaints is distinguished into five subtypes of explicit complaints (Decock & Depraetere 2018). However, an explicit reference to the speech act of complaint is no longer taken as a separate subtype within the category of explicit complaints in Depraetere et al. (2021). So compared to the 2018 paper, the number of categories has been adjusted: there are now four (rather than five) subtypes of explicit complaints (see categories 2,3,4,5).

Examples below are used to flesh out different complaint categories that feature in the taxonomy (Note that component combinations including but not limited to these illustrated below and that the order in which the components occur (e.g., AC or CA) is not relevant to the taxonomy.) This study refers to the constitutive components of a complaint situation by means of A (complainable), B (dissatisfaction), C (person/institution responsible for the complainable), and D (wish for the complainable to be remedied).

Imagine Kris, an employee of a foreign trade company WELL, is bothered by the situation in which he already has sent several emails to ask one of his overseas customers, Devin, to revise the mistakes found in the documents. But Kris still hasn't received the correct one:

- Implicit complaint
  1. None of the constitutive components is explicitly expressed: Next time maybe I'd better ask someone else to fill these documents.
- Explicit complaint:
  2. One constitutive component is explicitly expressed: There are some mistakes in the documents. (A)
  3. Two constitutive components are explicitly expressed: There are some mistakes in the documents, please revise and resend the correct one to me. (A and D)
  4. Three constitutive components are explicitly expressed: I am annoyed because I keep finding mistakes in your documents. (A, B, and C)
  5. Four constitutive components are explicitly expressed: I am annoyed because you still don't correct the mistakes I mentioned, please revise, and take it seriously. (A, B, C, and D)

Decock and Depraetere's (2018) conceptualization of linguistic (in)directness allows for a distinction between implicit and explicit complaints. In this paper, since implicit complaints are extremely rare in our corpus data, the focus is exclusively on explicit complaints. An example of the most direct (four constitutive components are expressed) is given in (1) below.

#### (1) Explicit complaint: four constitutive components (in the email below: ABCD)

Hello Kris,  
 [ABCD]National holidays are something we can hardly do anything about.  
 However, is a national holiday a surprise for WELL? It is about planning.  
 These parts are super late, please accelerate your deliveries.  
 Best regards,  
 [A] These parts are super late  
 [B] However, is a national holiday a surprise for WELL?  
 [C] you; WELL  
 [D] please accelerate your deliveries.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

This thesis adopts a method of qualitative-and-quantitative analysis of complaints in terms of linguistic (in)directness in BELF emails. In a first step, we check if constitutive components A, B, C, and D of a complaint situation are realized in the emails and code them accordingly. Once the components realized in the BELF emails are identified, the researcher examines and calculates the preferred component combinations (see section 4.1) as well as the different formal means used to realize the constitutive components (see section 4.2). In other words, in addition to looking for potential patterns in the use of complaint speech act in business emails, this study also offers a very detailed characterization of how the different components can be formally realized. Therefore, the qualitative analysis, which results in a descriptive overview of possible realizations of complaints, will be complemented with quantitative analysis to identify significant patterns.

#### 4. Linguistic (In)Directness in BELF Emails: Analysis and Discussion

##### 4.1. Explicit Realization of A, B, C, and D

This section will present the number, types, preferred combinations, and formal realizations of the four constitutive components made explicit in these 200 BELF emails.

The 200 BELF emails, in which at least one constitutive component of a complaint situation is explicitly realized, are selected from 1200 emails mainly concerning such business affairs as documents issues, delivery issues, products issues relating to quality, quantity, price, and the way of handling issues, etc. Different from briefer twitter complaints which usually present as one tweet one complainable due to Twitter's technical affordance (Depraetere et al., 2021), an email can convey two or more. Out of the 200 emails, 186 emails contain only one complaint situation, 13 emails are identified to hold two complaint situations and one email even conveys three complaint situations, thus resulting in 215 situations in total. Table 1 presents a snapshot of the overall number of each component made explicit in the 200 emails.

Table 1 Frequency of realization of A, B, C, D (A: complainable, B: dissatisfaction, C: person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D: wish for the complainable to be remedied)

Component	Frequency
A	215
B	106
C	181
D	170
	672

And table 2 reveals the number of the four component combinations realized in the 215 complaint situations.

Table 2 Frequency of one-, two-, three-, and four-component combinations

Component combinations	Frequency	%
One component	7	3%
Two components	33	15%
Three components	101	47%
Four components	74	34%
	215	100%

Table 3 displays the preferred component combinations adopted by BELF email communicators in our data. The top 3 in descending order are ACD, ABCD, and ABC, together making up a whopping 77% of the total. The most two frequently adopted combinations, ACD and ABCD, account for more than half of the total.

Table 3 Frequency of component combinations

Component combinations	Frequency	%
ACD	78	36%
ABCD	74	34%
ABC	16	7%
AC	13	6%
AD	11	5%
AB	9	4%
ABD	7	3%
A	7	3%
	215	100%

The overviews show that the complaint speech act in BELF emails is explicit (or linguistically direct) not only in terms of the overall number of constitutive components that are realized but also in terms of the preferred component combinations, characterized by three or four components (para)linguistically realized. Therefore, such quantified results allow us to look for the typical performance of complaints in our data which can be described as follows: the



complainer goes to the point what affair is not up to his expectation (A), then explicitly addresses the complaine (C) to take actions for remedy(D), and often also vents his satisfaction or disappointment (B). To capture a more detailed description of complaints in business emails, the next section looks closer to the formal realization of each component, where examples will be presented and analyzed.

#### 4.2 Formal Realization of A, B, C, and D

##### 4.2.1 Component A

Component A (the content of the complainable and/or its consequences) is realized most commonly as one of the standard sentence types (declarative, exclamative, imperative, interrogative) with a specific illocutionary force (assertion, expressive, request, rhetorical question) (Depraetere et al., 2021:222). Furthermore, the 215 complaint situations in our data can be summarized in three categories: complaining about non-action(s), complaining about wrong action(s), and complaining about undesirable action(s). From the seller's standing point, choosing to explicitly point out the buyer's non-action is always triggered by the fact that the buyer fails to confirm quoted items, pay the balance, or take delivery of goods in a timely manner. Meanwhile, resulting from the seller's inability to accomplish production, ship goods, and provide information on time has been the statement of non-action as a realization of component A adopted by buyers. And a shared non-action from both sides is a reply delay or no reply. Pointing out errors or problems found with or undesirable action taken by the complaine also frequently leads to the explicit realization of component A, sometimes coupled with a statement of consequence. Requests for information about the complainable range from general questions to specific inquiries into the why, when, how, etc., of the complainable, in which, the complainable is realized as a presupposition.

Note that component A may be realized in different ways within one email (Example 5): for instance, the complainer can use both declarative and interrogative sentences to clarify the complainable. This explains why the sum of the different formal realizations in table 4 is higher than the number of emails in which A is realized (see table 1). Table 4 gives an overview of the frequency of the different types of formal realizations of component A.

Table 4 Formal realizations of component A

Formal realizations	Frequency	%
Assertion-declarative	197	88%
Rhetorical question(why)	12	5%
Rhetorical question(what)	6	3%
Rhetorical question(other)	6	3%
Expressive-exclamative	2	1%
Performative-request	2	1%
<b>Total number of realizations of A</b>	<b>225</b>	

The following examples illustrate typical types of formal realization of component A:

- (1) Assertion-declarative \_ (complaining about wrong action)

Dear Devin:

Please find in the attachment the CI and PL.

The CI is wrong. You must change to EUROS. As in the attachment, please amend the values and send us the agreed price in EURO.

- (2) Expressive-exclamative \_ (complaining about undesirable action)

Dear Kris:

Many thanks for your e-mail.

I don't know how our customers could check your quality just by pictures!

I know sample sending is costly, but I think you should pay some costs to find new customers and new markets.

I'm waiting for your reply.

- (3) Rhetorical question(other) \_ (complaining about undesirable action)

Dear sir:

Have a nice day.

Are you still refuse to give me your sample for this item?

I cannot buy till see your sample.

Waiting for your fast answer

Best regards

Devin

- (4) Rhetorical question-(what) (complaining about undesirable action)

Dear Jhon,

What did happen with our goods you have a delay of 3 months...?

Thank You and Best Wishes

- (5) Assertion-declarative & Rhetorical question(why) \_ (complaining about undesirable action)

Dear Brother Kris,

Thanks very much for the bill of landing and invoice.

Please, we can use this B/L for inspection purposes, but we can not use it to please the goods. Why is it that you can not send us the original?

Kindly do your best to send it this week.

Best regards

- (6) Rhetorical question(why) \_ (complaining about non-action)

Hi Eva

Can you update the QS amount according as discussed before?

Best regards

In all the interrogatives, the complainable is triggered either by the use of a change-of-state proposition (see (6)), wh-word (see (4)(5)), or by the use of the verb *refuse* (see (3)) associated with an existential presupposition.

#### 4.2.2 Component B

There is a large range of different formal realizations of Component B in BELF emails, which can be mainly summarized into seven types in table 5. The dissatisfaction of the complainable (B) can be expressed via negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs, *unfortunately, costly, disturbing*; negative verbs, *failed, delay*; negative evaluative expressions, *what's the problem with you? You made a big problem for me*. Compared to oral complaints, negative emotions can be well manifested in the employment of such para-verbal tools as capitalized letters, and the repetitive and successive use of the question, exclamation, or colon marks. Rhetorical questions, which are interpreted as a mark of annoyance, disliking, disapproval, or disagreement, also serve as available formal realizations of component B.

Table 5 Formal realizations of component B

Formal realizations	Frequency	%
Negative evaluative adj./adv.	25	18%
Negative verb	11	8%
Negative non	11	8%
Negative attitudinal expression	64	47%
Rhetorical question	4	3%
Punctuation	10	7%
Capitalized letters	12	9%
<b>Total number of realizations of B</b>	<b>137</b>	

- (7) Punctuation & Capitalized letters & Negative attitudinal expression

Dear Mrs.

Just reply what we ask ... (WE DON'T WANT TO COMMUNICATE AS YOU ARE DOING. WE ASK SOMETHING AND YOU ASK OTHER THING AND YOU DON'T REPLY WHAT WE ASKED FOR YOU)

We have already sent an email about this subject. Please let me know if you received it.

Thank You and Best Wishes

- (8) Negative attitudinal expression & negative evaluative adjective

Dear Ms. Jack,

You can find the reports regarding the IHC Liners attached.

We are trying to find a solution to use some rejected qty from 9011XXX. There are too many rejected pcs. Most of our shipments are delayed. We are not happy with this situation. We can't make a plan in this way. What would you suggest to us now?

Best Regards

(9) Rhetorical question

Hello Kris,  
National holidays are something we can hardly do anything about.  
However, is a national holiday a surprise for WELL?  
It is about planning. You should have known far in advance that there is a holiday coming so adjust your work according to.  
These parts are super late, please accelerate your deliveries.

In example (7), the complainer expresses disapproval (B) of the complainable (A) both verbally (WE DON'T WANT TO COMMUNICATE AS YOU ARE DOING) and para-verbally, through the repetitive full stops and capitalized letters. Furthermore, the importer vents his dissatisfaction with the goods through the negative evaluative expression (We are not happy with this situation) as well as negative adjectives (rejected) in example (8). The rhetorical question adopted in example (9) can be interpreted as a mark of annoyance triggered by the company's (WELL) inability to arrange goods delivery before the holiday, which thus leads to delivery delay. As in the case of component A, component B can also be realized in different ways within one email. Hence the total number of B-realizations is higher than the number of emails in which B is identified.

4.2.3 Component C

Table 6 presents the overview of formal realizations of component C. The second personal pronoun *you* as a lexical marker that explicitly identifies the receiver as the responsible party for the complainable reaches the top order of frequency. What's worth mentioning is that addressing business partner *brother* is not a lonely case in our data. Nevertheless, such addressivity tends to be used in a few solid relationships, judged from their more than three years of business relationships.

Table 6 Formal realizations of component C

Formal realizations	Examples	Frequency
you	Also, send my letter of Invitation because I am planning to come over there next month, but <u>you</u> are the one delaying me.	139
your	<u>Your sample</u> has been delayed long	50
NP	The receiver's name, company's name, brother, etc.	19
<b>Total number of realizations of C</b>		<b>208</b>

4.2.4 Component D

Component D (wish for the complainable to be remedied) is realized most often through requests in the form of imperative with politeness marker, *please*. While Depraetere et al. (2021)'s categorization of requests is particularly useful to categorize the realizations of D, there are further formal realizations of D in the emails that do not feature in their taxonomy, namely reference to standards that function as correction and the request for remedy by means of a warning (see (10)).

Table 7 Formal realizations of component D

Formal realizations	Frequency	%
Imperative	89	38%
Want Statement	48	20%
Query Preparatory	22	9%
Interrogative	20	8%
Obligation Statement	16	7%
warning/threat	12	5%
Suggestory Formulae	11	5%
correction	10	4%
(Hedged)Performative	9	4%
<b>Total number of realizations of D</b>	<b>237</b>	

(10) Imperatives & Obligation Statement & warning & Correction



Dear Season

Thank you for your e-mail and thanks for sending the information about our balance. Unfortunately, this value cannot be informed in the Invoice. It is forbidden by Brazilian Customs. Otherwise, the bank will not accept for doing your payment and We will not be able to release the goods at the Customs.

You must deduct our balance from the other Invoice items. Please deduct the above GP balance from the values of other Invoice items and the total Invoice should be USD 51, XXX.

Please let me know if still remains any questions about this issue.

This email is chosen as an excellent example to illustrate how component D (wish for the complainable to be remedied) is realized through four different formal realizations within one email, namely imperative, correction (*the total Invoice should be USD 51, XXX*), obligation statement and warning (*Otherwise the bank will not accept for doing your payment and We will not be able to release the goods at the Customs*), which likewise increases the degree of linguistic directness (Depraetere et al., 2021).

#### 4.3 Escalation of Linguistic Directness in Complaints

This section will present two authentic complaint chains to display different ways available for email communicators to realize the escalation of linguistic directness. In addition to increasing new types of components (example (11)), the complainer can employ more various formal realizations of the four components (e.g., component B in example (12)), or take both paths simultaneously.

(11a) Component combination: AC

Date: 2015/11/11

Dear Eric

I just received the following e-mail informed that WELL had not paid yet the WELL brand Brazilian registration.

(11b) Component combination: ABCD

Date: 2015/12/18

Dear Eric

I received a phone call today from Mr. Jorge, the owner of ATHXX. They told me that till now your company had not paid the attached Invoice with regard to WELL (C) Brazilian brand registration. (A)

Please let me know what it's happening (D) because it has passed many days since this debt expired without any procedure on your part. We are worried about it. (B)

Thank you in advance & Best Regards.

Compared to example (11a) that contains the component A (WELL had not paid yet the WELL brand Brazilian registration.) and component C (WELL), the performance of complaining is more direct in the second email by virtue of another two components made explicit, which can be reasoned by the fact that the company (WELL), who was held accountable for the issue that caused the complaint, had still not made any attempt to remove the complainable after the appearance of the first complaint more than one month ago.

The following example illustrates the dynamics of escalation through the employment of increasingly various B-realizations in three successive emails during six months. Kris, the complainer, initiated a complaint email as he was annoyed by the situation where Devin not only failed to take the delivery of goods as his promise but also did not fulfill the obligation of payment.

(12a) Date:2007/7/22

Dear Mr. Devin:

How are you? I sent many emails to you. But I didn't receive your reply. What is the problem?

Your piston pins are already one month before. The goods keep in our warehouse long time. But you didn't transfer the balance to us. I don't know why. I want to send goods to you as soon as possible.

Pls, transfer your balance to us soon. Then I can arrange shipment.

Waiting for your urgent reply

Best regard

Kris

(12b) Date:2008/1/16

My Brother Devin:

I don't know why you didn't contact me? I am disappointed.

Your goods are still kept in our warehouse. It stays in our warehouse for more than half a year. Every time you told me you will transfer the balance, but every time we are disappointed.

Brother, you make a big problem for me. I hope you can understand me and pay the balance to us soon.

Our bank account is XXX  
 Waiting for your urgent reply  
 Best regard  
 Kris

(12c) Date:2008/2/23

Devin:  
 How are you?  
What is the problem with you? You disappoint me. I think you tell me too much lie every time. How can I believe you again?  
If you do not need the goods, pls tell me as soon as possible!  
We are not happy about your doing.  
 Kris

Kris employed an aggressive interrogative to explicitly express his disappointment of not receiving a reply after making great efforts to contact Devin, then stated the difficulty of understanding Devin's non-action, thus the negative evaluative expression as a means of B-realization was adopted twice by Kris in the first email (see (12a)). Since there was still no balance transformation from Devin's side, Kris wrote the second email (see (12b)), in which negative evaluative expression was presented four times. Without any conventional salutation, the third email was opened with direct interrogative blaming Devin's inappropriate behavior immediately followed by a negative attitudinal expression towards it. Then, Kris showed again his disappointment about the complainable that Devin kept breaking his promise to transfer balance causing problems to his side. Devin's delay in replying and failure to fulfill the payment obligation completely irritated Kris, which can be traced in the rest of the email. An aggressive interrogative combined with a direct negative attitude still cannot fully vent annoyance and disappointment held by Kris; therefore, he continued to accuse Devin as a compulsive liar who can't be trusted anymore. Moreover, at the end of the email, Kris expressed that he was nursing a grievance against Devin once again. What's more, the escalation of annoyance caused by Devin can also be manifested by a shift in addressivity within the above complaint sequences, ranging from the first official and conventional one calling Devin *Mr.*, to the second one *my brother*; which implies a close relationship in Chinese culture to call for understanding from the side of Devin, and then to the third only addressing his name.

As can be seen in the above three emails, component B can be realized in different ways, and the same type of B-realization can be presented more than once within one email, both of which are subject to a certain sense of escalation. Moreover, time is a critical issue in the business world, which again showcases the importance of diachronicity in e-complaints (Vladimirou et al., 2021). Diachronicity is evoked with the aid of verbal message such as *it has passed many days since this debt expired without any procedure from your part* (11b); *The goods keep in our warehouse long time* (12a); *Your piston pins are already one month before* (12b); *It stays in our warehouse more than half year* (12c), which constitute solid evidence for the failure of the responsible side to act, hence upgrading the complaint. The asynchronous character of emails brings a sense of 'diachronicity' (Kadar, 2019) into the center of language use which accelerates the pragmatic power of complaining (Vladimirou et al., 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

This present paper examines how the speech act of complaint operates in BELF emails with the application of the new and adapted taxonomy that allows for a distinction between implicit and explicit complaints (Depraetere et al., 2021). And our study focuses exclusively on the latter one. Decock and Depraetere (2018) argue that a complaint situation consists of four constitutive components: the complainable (A), the negative evaluation of the complainable (B), the person/company responsible for the complainable (C), and a wish for compensation (D). This study probes into the preferred combinations of the constitutive components and the extent to which these components are explicitly realized in 200 BELF emails, with attention to the ways in which they are (para-)linguistically expressed in 215 complaint situations.

The most common situations triggering complaints in international trade under study are concerned with quality issues, delivery problems, price negotiations, and delayed or wrong actions. Data analysis reveals that the complaint speech act in BELF emails is explicit (or linguistically direct) not only by virtue of the overall number of constitutive components that are realized but also in terms of the preferred component combinations, characterized by three or four components (para)linguistically expressed. The most two frequently employed combinations of complaints are ACD and ABCD, indicating that the typical performance of complaints in our BELF emails can be described as follows: the complainer goes to the point what affair is not up to his expectation (A) and then explicitly addresses the complaine (C) to take actions for remedy (D), and often also vents his negative emotions (B). The results based on the above investigations echo previous research that clear, on-record communication is often asserted to be the norm in business environments in order to accommodate the transactional goals of this type of communication (De Clerck et al., 2019; Meinel, 2010).

The online context influences the ways in which complaint chains unfold and evolve over time (Vladimirou et al., 2021). We have explored the concept of diachronicity by focusing on the asynchronous nature of emails in our corpus. Asynchronicity is a characteristic of many CMC contexts, which often triggers escalatory aggression (Vladimirou et al., 2021). In various emails where diachronicity becomes essential, the email writers deploy such pragmatic devices as unconventional punctuation alongside ellipsis to indicate frustration and anger (see example (4)). Section 4.3 presents two authentic complaint chains to display different ways for email communicators to realize the escalation of linguistic directness. Apart from increasing new types of components (example (10)), the complainer can employ more different formal realizations of the four components or take both paths simultaneously. Just as Kris (see example (12)), the complainer, resorted to negative evaluative expression, aggressive interrogative as well as punctuation (exclamative mark) to vent his annoyance, and at the same time, employed negative evaluative expressions more than once in all the three successive emails. It should be noted that different formal realizations of B within one email were coded separately, but the different instantiations of the same type of B-realization (e.g., two negative evaluative expressions) were counted as one realization of B. So from this perspective, the total number of B-realization is likely to be a bit higher in actual fact (Depraetere et al., 2021). Therefore, we can suggest the fact that BELF emails can be both goal-oriented and emotion-loaded.

This study also shows that the operationalization of linguistic (in) directness of complaints in terms of constitutive components is valid. By investigating complaint speech events in a large corpus of workplace emails, the present study hopes to provide valuable and innovative contributions to the study of speech acts in BELF communication. Moreover, the present study also aims at showing the benefits of combining qualitative analyses with quantification. That is why this paper used a bottom-up approach in the categorization process of the linguistic strategies found in the emails. However, we also made recourse to existing analytical categories of previous research on complaints. They were only included if they fit the data and were complemented by strategies found in the present data corpus. Nevertheless, our data is limited and collected only from a company. Moreover, in line with the argument that linguistic (in)directness must be differentiated from perceived face-threat (Decock & Depraetere 2018), future studies are needed to explore what extent of (in)directness scale in complaints or what formal realization of complaints is perceived as (im)polite or face-threatened by business email communicators, which has not addressed in this paper.

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