



**COMPLAINT STRATEGIES ACROSS GENERATIONS: YOUNG VS. OLDER
SPEAKERS IN BOTH CULTURES**

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Abstract. Effective communication relies not only on linguistic knowledge but also on pragmatic competence—the ability to perform speech acts appropriately across contexts and generations. This study examines complaint strategies among young and older speakers in two distinct cultures, exploring how age and cultural background influence the expression and mitigation of complaints. Drawing on cross-generational and cross-cultural pragmatics, the research investigates differences in linguistic forms, politeness strategies, and levels of directness employed by each group. Data were collected through discourse completion tasks, interviews, and authentic conversational analysis to identify patterns of variation in complaint behavior. Findings reveal that younger speakers tend to use more indirect and mitigated strategies influenced by globalized communication norms, while older speakers often favor more direct, culturally traditional expressions of dissatisfaction. The study highlights generational shifts in pragmatic behavior and underscores the need to consider age-related factors in intercultural communication research.

Keywords: complaint strategies, cross-cultural pragmatics, generational differences, politeness, speech acts, intercultural communication

Introduction. In the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, researchers have long recognized that communicative competence extends beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the appropriate use of language in social contexts (Hymes, 1972; Kasper & Rose, 2002). One crucial aspect of this competence is the ability to perform speech acts such as complaints, which serve essential social functions by expressing dissatisfaction, enforcing norms, or maintaining relationships (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). However, the realization

of complaints varies significantly across cultures and generations, as social norms, politeness conventions, and communicative expectations evolve over time (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995).

Generational differences play a particularly important role in shaping complaint behavior. Younger speakers, influenced by globalization and digital communication, often adopt more indirect and mitigated strategies to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation (Placencia, 2004). In contrast, older speakers may rely on more direct or explicit forms that align with traditional cultural expectations of sincerity and authority (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005). These variations reflect broader social and cultural shifts in communication style, politeness, and interpersonal norms.

Recent studies in cross-cultural and intergenerational pragmatics emphasize the importance of examining complaint strategies across age groups to understand how pragmatic norms are transmitted and transformed (Ogiermann, 2009; Chen, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate generational and cross-cultural differences in complaint strategies among young and older speakers. The research aimed to examine how age and cultural background influence the linguistic realization of complaints, the degree of directness, and the use of politeness or mitigation devices. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to capture both the frequency of linguistic features and the nuanced social meanings underlying their use.

The participants included 80 native speakers from two cultural groups: 40 from an English-speaking background (United Kingdom) and 40 from a Russian-speaking background. Each group consisted of 20 younger speakers (ages 18–30) and 20 older speakers (ages 50 and above). Participants were selected using stratified purposive sampling to ensure balanced representation across generations and gender. All participants were native speakers with no history of extended residence abroad to minimize external sociolinguistic influence.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), semi-structured interviews, and natural conversational recordings. The DCTs presented participants with eight complaint-eliciting situations varying in social distance (friend vs. stranger) and power relationship (equal vs. superior). The interviews explored participants' perceptions of politeness, norms of expressing dissatisfaction, and generational changes in communication style. Authentic conversational data, collected from voluntary audio-recorded interactions, provided additional validation and contextual depth.

The study took place over a period of eight weeks. In weeks 1–2, participants completed the DCTs and interviews. Weeks 3–7 were devoted to the transcription, coding, and qualitative interpretation of natural complaint instances. Week 8 focused on cross-generational and cross-cultural comparison. Data were analyzed using quantitative frequency analysis of directness levels (following Trosborg's 1995 classification) and qualitative

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurrent pragmatic strategies, such as request for repair, expression of annoyance, or justification.

Reliability was ensured through inter-rater agreement on 20% of the data, reaching a coefficient of 0.87. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. This methodological design enabled a comprehensive understanding of how age and cultural context shape complaint behavior and provided insight into evolving norms of interpersonal communication across generations.

RESULTS

The data collected for this study consisted of discourse completion task (DCT) responses, transcripts of naturally occurring complaint interactions, and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The results are presented in three sections: (1) generational variation in complaint realization patterns, (2) cross-cultural comparison of complaint strategies between English and Russian speakers, and (3) participants’ perceptions of politeness and generational communication norms.

1. Generational Variation in Complaint Realization

Quantitative analysis of the DCT responses revealed significant generational differences in the directness and mitigation of complaint strategies. Among English speakers, young participants (ages 18–30) favored indirect complaints, using expressions such as “I’m not sure this is quite right” or “Could we maybe fix this?” in 68% of their responses. In contrast, older English speakers (ages 50+) used more direct and explicit forms, such as “This is wrong” or “You should have done it differently,” in 62% of cases. Similar generational patterns were observed in the Russian group: younger participants employed softened strategies (e.g., “Можно было бы сделать по-другому” [It could have been done differently]) more frequently, while older speakers tended toward direct or evaluative complaints (“Это неправильно” [This is wrong]).

Statistical comparison confirmed these trends: the mean directness score for young speakers was 2.3, while older speakers averaged 3.9 on a 5-point directness scale, indicating a clear shift toward greater politeness and mitigation among the younger generation. Thematic analysis of the data suggested that this difference reflects broader sociocultural change—younger participants associate politeness with tact and emotional restraint, whereas older speakers view directness as a sign of sincerity and moral integrity.

2. Cross-Cultural Comparison

Cross-cultural analysis revealed both shared and divergent patterns between English and Russian speakers. English participants overall displayed a stronger preference for indirect, face-saving strategies, often framing complaints as requests or suggestions (e.g., “Would it be possible to...”). Russian speakers, however, were generally more direct, favoring statements that emphasized problem identification over interpersonal harmony. For instance, even younger Russian participants used expressions like “You forgot to send it”

more frequently than their English counterparts, who would typically opt for “I think the file might be missing.”

The distribution of mitigation devices (apologies, softeners, hedges) also varied: English speakers averaged 2.4 mitigation markers per complaint, compared to 1.2 among Russian participants. Nonetheless, both groups showed a similar pattern of age-related change—younger speakers in both cultures employed more hedging and empathy markers, aligning with globalized norms of polite interaction influenced by digital communication and international media exposure.

3. Participants’ Perceptions of Politeness and Complaint Behavior

Interview data provided further insight into participants’ pragmatic awareness and generational attitudes. Younger participants from both cultures reported a heightened concern with maintaining positive social relationships and avoiding confrontation. One English participant commented, “*I try to complain without sounding harsh—it’s about being polite but still clear.*” A young Russian participant similarly noted, “*Now people prefer softer ways to express dissatisfaction; being too direct feels rude.*”

Older participants, on the other hand, often justified their directness as a reflection of honesty or authority. As one English speaker explained, “*There’s no point beating around the bush; if something’s wrong, you say it.*” Russian elders echoed this sentiment, associating indirectness with insincerity or weakness. Such perceptions highlight generational shifts in pragmatic norms, where communicative politeness is increasingly defined by emotional intelligence rather than hierarchical propriety.

Across both cultural groups, participants demonstrated awareness of contextual variation in complaint strategies. Most adjusted their level of directness according to social distance and power relations—using indirect forms with superiors and more explicit ones with equals or subordinates. This suggests that despite cultural and generational variation, participants across groups possess a shared sensitivity to social hierarchy in complaint interactions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal clear generational and cross-cultural differences in the realization of complaint strategies, supporting the view that pragmatic norms are dynamic and shaped by both sociocultural and temporal factors (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995). Quantitative and qualitative analyses jointly indicate that younger speakers, regardless of cultural background, tend to employ more indirect and mitigated strategies, reflecting an emerging global tendency toward politeness and emotional diplomacy. In contrast, older speakers across both English and Russian groups demonstrated more direct, explicit, and evaluative forms of complaint, consistent with traditional communicative norms emphasizing sincerity and authority.

One significant implication of these findings is that generation appears to be a stronger determinant of complaint behavior than culture. While cross-cultural variations persisted—

English speakers generally used more hedging and apology markers than Russian speakers—the generational shift toward indirectness was observed in both groups. This convergence may reflect the influence of globalization, media exposure, and increased intercultural contact, which contribute to a shared awareness of face-saving and interpersonal sensitivity (Placencia, 2004; Chen, 2017). Younger speakers’ adoption of such strategies aligns with the universalizing trends in politeness and pragmatics associated with digitally mediated communication, where tone and subtlety are increasingly valued.

The study also underscores the continuing relevance of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, particularly the balance between positive and negative face needs. Younger participants were more attentive to maintaining the interlocutor’s face, favoring requests for repair and indirect suggestions (“Could we fix this issue?”), while older participants prioritized clarity and moral assertiveness (“This is wrong” or “You should change it”). These contrasting orientations suggest a generational redefinition of politeness—from authority-based sincerity to empathy-based tactfulness.

Moreover, the interview data revealed that attitudes toward complaint behavior are deeply connected to identity and social values. Older participants regarded directness as a marker of honesty and competence, whereas younger speakers viewed indirectness as a sign of respect and professionalism. Such findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural continuity and change interact within speech act realization, confirming that pragmatic behavior evolves alongside broader social transformations.

These results carry important implications for both cross-cultural communication and language education. For intercultural contexts, awareness of generational variation can prevent misunderstandings—what an older speaker perceives as sincerity may be interpreted by a younger interlocutor as rudeness, and vice versa. For language teaching, the findings suggest that pragmatic instruction should include not only cultural but also generational perspectives, preparing learners to navigate the diverse communicative expectations they may encounter globally.

Nevertheless, some limitations must be noted. The sample size, while adequate for qualitative insight, limits the generalizability of results. Furthermore, the study focused on only two cultural groups; including additional linguistic communities could offer a broader comparative perspective. Future research should adopt a longitudinal and multimodal approach, examining how generational norms continue to shift and how globalization influences pragmatic evolution in real-time discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated generational and cross-cultural differences in complaint strategies among English and Russian speakers, focusing on how age and culture interact to shape the expression of dissatisfaction. The results reveal that both factors significantly influence pragmatic behavior, yet generation emerged as the stronger predictor of variation. Younger speakers in both cultures tended to use more indirect, mitigated, and empathetic

complaint strategies, reflecting a growing global trend toward face-saving and emotionally intelligent communication. In contrast, older speakers favored direct and explicit forms, aligning with traditional norms that value honesty, clarity, and authority.

These findings contribute to the broader field of cross-cultural and intergenerational pragmatics, emphasizing that pragmatic norms are not static but evolve alongside social, technological, and cultural change. The convergence of strategies across younger generations suggests a form of global pragmatic alignment, influenced by digital communication and increased intercultural interaction. This evolution underscores the need for pragmatic research to consider age and social change as central variables, rather than focusing solely on national or linguistic boundaries.

The study also holds important implications for intercultural communication and education. Awareness of generational pragmatic differences can help prevent misunderstandings in professional, academic, and social contexts. For educators, incorporating generational variation into language and communication training can enhance learners' ability to navigate diverse communicative expectations.

Future research should expand this inquiry by including additional cultural groups, longitudinal data, and multimodal analyses of real-life interactions to better understand how generational identities continue to reshape politeness and complaint behavior in an increasingly interconnected world.

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