The Speech Act of Complaint on Social Media: 
A Case of #Epidemic in Shanghai

MA Wen
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

This article addresses the speech act set of online complaint and the directness on social media in China and takes the topic of the epidemic outbreak in Shanghai as the source of the corpus. 100 online complaints are collected and analyzed from the hashtag #Epidemic in Shanghai on Sina Weibo, a popular social media platform in China akin to Twitter. Several strategies are adopted to form the complaint, combining the speech act of request and insult. The most frequent used speech act set is complaint plus request. The study also finds that the complainer tends to address the complainee in an indirectly way, which is consistent with the face-to-face interaction.

Keywords: online complaint, strategy, directness, Weibo

Introduction

As one of the types of the speech acts, complaint is a statement that speakers make to express their dissatisfaction when their expectations are frustrated. The recipients are often responsible for not successfully preventing the offensive events (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, p. 201). This paper examines the complaint strategies employed by netizens on Sina Weibo to complain about the quarantine life in Shanghai from April to May in year of 2022. The major findings of this study will uncover some useful insights as how people complain online, which may be of practical value.

Social media allows people to express themselves without the restrictions of time, space, or addressees. Thousands of millions of netizens vent emotions, their dissatisfaction, regret, or doubt online. As the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, millions of people in Shanghai have no way but stay at home. During the quarantine, people find their way to complain about unpleasant experience on the Internet. This study focuses on the complaint strategy set on Weibo, which is a popular social media platform in China akin to Twitter.

The speech act of complaints has attracted many researchers in recent years. The speech acts of complaints belong to the expressives (Searle, 1969), which also includes apology, compliments, or thanks. Speaker damages the positive face of the hearer through making adverse remarks or criticizing; therefore, complaining is inevitably a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The realization of complaints in verbal communication has been mainly studied in monolingual and cross-linguistic contexts (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Laforest, 2002; Nakabachi, 1996, Kurtyka, 2019); some also have studied complaints as interlanguage and the way language learners perform a complaint (Trosborg, 1995). In most studies discourse completion test (DCT) is adopted. Different categories of complaining strategy have been included (Olshtain & Weinbach,
1993; Laforest, 2002; Trosborg, 1995; Eslamirasekh, 2012). As the network develops, some researchers turn to study complaints through computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Márquez Reiter, Othaber, & Kádár, 2015; Vásquez, 2014; Vladimirou, House, & Kádár, 2021). As the COVID-19 becomes the focus of the world, a lot of people are put in quarantine, especially China, a country which takes strict quarantine measures. During the quarantine, people maximize their use of the Internet to perform speech acts so as to vent emotions, share ideas, and achieve goals. However, few studies pay attention to the speech act of complaints of normal social issue. This current study fills the gap by examining the strategies adopted to make complaints. This study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) To what extent are online complaints accompanied by other speech acts? (2) Do online complaints tend to be more direct (address the responsible) or more indirect (address a third party)?

The format of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 will provide an overview of the studies on speech acts of complaints. Section 3 is an introduction to methodology including the data collection and analysis. Section 4 is the findings. Section 5 concludes the study.

Research Background

The speech act of complaints has been researched from various perspectives. One part of the studies has focused the complaining strategies and responding strategies in one specific language, more specifically, one culture. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) claimed the precondition of complaining. Laforest (2002) studied the speech act of complaints in a family conversation and concludes six complaining strategies, also called speech act set, including: (a) allusion to an offensive act; (b) justification of discontent; (c) request that the complainee justify his/her offensive act; (d) mentioning the offensive act; (e) requesting a change in behaviour; and (f) adverse criticism of the hearer. Geluykens and Kraft (2007) studied the impact of social and gender factors to complaining in English context, in addition to English, other language such as Chinese (Du, 1995), German (Geluykens & Kraft, 2003). In most of these studies, discourse completion test (DCT) is adopted. Moreover, complaint formulations from interlanguage perspective, in which complaints of language learners are often compared to native speakers, are studied. House and Kasper (1981) claim that Germans complain more directly without any mitigation markers, which is connected to their culture. Nakabachi (1996) examined the extent to which English learners’ speech acts of complaint are impacted by their mother tongue, Japanese. In recent years, the structure and modification of online complaints have drawn much attention. Most of them have focused on customers’ complaint. Vásquez (2011) found that online complaints tend to be accompanied with positive appraisal and occur as a speech act set. Giannani (2014) compared the forms of customer complaints between British and Italian. Moreover, very few researchers start to extend the research area more broadly, which contains online complaints related to specific social issues. Vladimirou et al. (2021) investigated an online protest against the waste management policy in London. Therefore, this study also selects an online complaint about quarantine management in Shanghai.

Several researchers have given distinct definitions to the speech act of complaining. House and Kasper (1981) stated that expressives which are characterized as “post-event/anti-X” can be defined as complaints. Further, complaining is defined as “the speaker expresses annoyance or dissatisfaction in reaction to present action due to its annoying consequences” (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, p. 203). Edmonson (1981, p. 145) claimed that the social ability of the complainees is potentially challenged by the one who threatens their face. The precondition of complaining is proposed that the speaker expect a favorable performance of the hearer.
while the hearer, who is thought of being responsible for the act, fails to satisfy the speaker and, in contrast, implements “socially unacceptable act” (SUA), which is offensive. As a consequence, the speaker chooses to express negative feelings to vent the censure. Therefore, complaint is considered as an illocutionary act. Brown and Levinson (1987) regarded complaining as a face-threatening act. Both the hearer’s positive face, which requires to be admired or flattered and negative face, which requires to be released from imposition, were impaired respectively by the speaker’s negative or harsh judgement and a complaint with a calling for compensation.

Also, previous studies have found that complaints perform as speech act set, which means a speech act of complaint can also be accomplished by other types of speech acts such as suggestions, requests, or warning. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) had observed five main strategies in speech act set of complaints: (a) below the level of reproach; (b) expression of annoyance or disapproval; (c) explicit complaint; (d) accusation; and (e) warning or immediate threat. Therefore, this study also attempts to find the extent to which complaints are accompanied by other speech acts.

A dichotomous distinction of direct and indirect complaints is also proposed by Boxer (1993), who claims that the complainee in a direct complaint is responsible for the offensive action, and an indirect complaint means the complainee is third party, which means they are not responsible for the complaint. Previous studies which have focused on face-to-face conversation state that the complainee and the third party could be in the same space, which makes the distinction harder to define. Therefore, this study attempts to examine whether online complaints are more direct or more indirect.

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study come from Sina Weibo, a popular social media platform in China akin to Twitter. Users of Weibo can be accumulated to discuss a specific topic by adding hashtags to the content. It owns 229 million active daily users in 2021 (data from http://sohu.com/a/526969184_121255906).

The data are collected from the hashtag #Epidemic in Shanghai#, which draw the whole county’s attention for several months. Therefore, the data are ample for analysis. By searching on Weibo, and limiting the time from April 1st to May 31st in year of 2022, 100 blogs are randomly selected. All the blogs were manually checked to ensure negative comments are included.

The average complaints in the corpus are about 67 Chinese characters. All the bloggers reside in Shanghai, which is shown by their IP addresses. 64 females and 36 males are included. Few bloggers offer age information. Gender and age information are not research variables in that they can be changed freely and some users deliberately fill in wrong information. For ethical issues, all the names of people and the specific place or neighborhood committee are removed.

Data Analysis

Since there is no specific strategy of online complaint in this study, we analyze the online complaints based on the analytical framework established by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) and Laforest (2002) for twice to avoid subjectivity. Each speech act is counted. Speech act that occurs several times in one sample is counted once. To address the two research questions, several rounds of coding are conducted manually. First of all, all the complaints collected are read through. Then, we put the complaint applying the same strategy into the same
category. Therefore, the examples in the following section can be cut out from one complaint. The ratio of each strategy is calculated. Both quantitative and qualitative are applied in this study.

**Results**

After manual coding of the data, 136 complaints in total are classified into three categories shown in Table 1: pure complaint ($N = 45$), complaint plus request ($N = 80$), and complaint plus insult ($N = 11$). The strategy complaint plus request is divided into two kinds: request for explanation ($N = 54$) and request for a change of action ($N = 26$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaint plus insult</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaint plus request</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for an explanation</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for an action</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To address the first question, over a half (79/136) of online complaint are observed to be accompanied with the speech act of request. Of 80 data, a large proportion of the complaint ($N = 54$) are request for an explanation. The content of complaint shows that the netizens request for the neighbourhood committees to explain their offensive acts, as shown in Example 1 and question why the city is so lame to control the epidemic even when citizens are put in quarantine for almost one or two months, as shown in Example 2. Other factors are also observed in corpus such as the exceeding times of nucleic acid testing as shown in Example 3.

1. 关了一个月了，没发一块肉，真的把我们xx居民当兔子养吗？？作为居委会工作人员，这就是你们的工作态度吗？？#上海疫情#

   Having been in quarantine for a month, I did not even receive one piece of meat. Are you really treat our residents in xx (neighborhood committee’s name) like rabbits? Is this your service attitude as the stuff of the committee? #Epidemic in Shanghai

2. 封了一个多月，小区还有阳性，问题到底出在哪儿？我在等做最后几轮核酸。#上海疫情#

   Having been in quarantine for over a month, we still have positive patients in our community. What is the problem? I am waiting for the last few rounds of nucleic acid testing. #Epidemic in Shanghai

3. 有奖竞猜：请问被困在上海的我们从明天开始一天三次抗原检测，意义何在？！#上海疫情#

   Price-giving quiz: we trapped in Shanghai will have antigen tests for three times one day, what is the point? #Epidemic in Shanghai

The other category of complaint plus request is request for an action or a change of action ($N = 25$). This strategy is realized by two aspects including request for the speaker to take an action and request the complainee to change their behavior. The contents of these requests vary from request to go home to request the express delivery to be normal as shown in the following examples.

4. 我想回家！xx(地名)学生想回家！能不能顶一下！能不能放我们回家！#上海疫情#

   I want to come back to hometown. Students from xx (name of place) want to go home. Can this post be supported? Can we be allowed to go home! #Epidemic in Shanghai
5. 今天吃完了最后一个鸡蛋，最后一个红薯。我要蚊香，可是团不了。我要豆腐，我要牛奶。都没有。不解封，物流恢复正常吧。这日子没法过了。 #上海疫情

Today the last egg and the last sweet potato have been eaten up. I need a mosquito-repellent incense but the group purchase of it is not possible. I need Doufu and milk, none. If the lockdown is not going to lift, then the express delivery should return to normal work, or my life cannot go on anymore. #Epidemic in Shanghai

There are only less than one-tenth of complaint plus insult \((N = 11)\), which is also a face-threatening act. It expresses the complainer’s maximum outrage and maximizes the cost for complainee (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). Humiliating words and curses are represented in these complaints as shown in Example 6 and Example 7.

6. 这马路上都不会堵车，撑死就几个红灯了，特么是有语言障碍才说不清车在哪儿啥时到么？#上海疫情

There are no traffic jams, only a few traffic lights at most. Are you have a fucking speech disorder so you cannot tell where the bus is and when it is going to arrive? #Epidemic in Shanghai

7. 想让上海人安分点，那就请政府不要用屁股来考虑问题！#上海疫情

If the Shanghai government want people to settle down, please stop thinking with your ass! #Epidemic in Shanghai

To address the second research question, more than half (68/100) of online complaints are observed to be indirect, which means they are addressed to the third party, people who are not responsible for the offensive act (Boxer, 1993), also who participate in the topic under the hashtag. 32 complaints represent direct complaining strategy, which stands in sharp contrast to the indirect strategy. This result is different the previous study focusing on the complaints made by the customers (Vásquez, 2014). The direct complaints are realized by the second person pronoun, or the third person pronoun, or both. The third person that mentioned mostly in corpus are the neighborhood committee \((N = 14)\) and the government \((N = 11)\) as shown in Example 8 and Example 9. Other very fewer examples address school or the landlord.

8. #上海疫情#上海居委：我可以容忍你做的不好，但你连做都不做就非常夸张了。

To the neighborhood committee in Shanghai: I may tolerate your lame action, but it is very exaggerating that you did not even take an action. #Epidemic in Shanghai

9. 政府到底知不知道有多少老年人用现金消费的？？？都被关在家里出不去，退休金都没发拿了（老人没手机银行微信等）。#上海疫情

Does the government have any idea how many seniors use cash? They are stay in quarantine and cannot get their pensions (the seniors do not have mobile banking service or WeChat). #Epidemic in Shanghai

As shown in this part, complainer in this study tend to adopt indirect complaining strategy so as to avoid threaten the face of the person who may be responsible for the offensive act. People using direct complaining strategy often adopt the second person pronoun “you”, or the third person pronoun, which refers to a certain group who manage daily affairs.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

To sum up, this study focuses on the features of complaints on Weibo, with a focus on the speech act set and directness. Over a half of online complaint are observed to be accompanied with the speech act of request, in which a large proportion of the complaint request for an explanation and fewer for a change of action. The complaints in this research tend to be accompanied by speech act of request and very few speech act of course and insult. Also, complainers in this case tend to indirectly vent their emotions.
The speech act of complaining has two main goals. According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1993), the complaints are made to represent the complainer’s dissatisfaction towards the offensive act conducted by the addressee and the complainees are asked to compensate for his or her action. This may explain the frequent use of the speech act set complaint plus request. Regarding the directness of complaint, this study finds similar results with a previous study, which indicates online complaints from customers can be characterized as indirect (Vásquez, 2014). However, Vásquez’s study also points out that openness of the Internet makes it harder to define directness, so that the complainee and the third party could be addressed altogether. It is meaning to note the frequent use of third person pronoun, which refers to a certain group rather than a specific person. It may be explained by individualism-collectivism dimension proposed by Hofstede’s (1980). The group-oriented vale may have an impact on complainer’s choice. However, this conclusion requires further comparative study in the future.

The limitation of this study lies in the small corpus with 100 online complaints analyzed due to the tight deadline. Therefore, whether the conclusion could be extended to other online protest issues needs further research. Moreover, the study does not take other factors such as punctuation, emoji into consideration. This may weaken the illocutionary force of complaint.

References


