



# A cross-cultural pragmatic study of the speech act of complaining by native Thai and Chinese speakers

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## Abstract

This cross-cultural study investigated the semantic formulae of complaints employed by native Thai speakers speaking Thai (TTs) and native Chinese speakers speaking Chinese (CCs). A sample of 60 native Thai speakers speaking Thai (TTs) and 60 native Chinese speakers speaking Chinese (CCs) responded to a twelve-scenario Discourse Completion Task questionnaire and ranked the severity of the offence in each situation. The complaining data were coded into 12 semantic formulae based on Murphy and Neu's (1996), Tanck's (2002) and Gallaher's (2011) models. The Mann–Whitney U test was employed to find similarities and differences between TTs and CCs in the semantic formulae and a repeated measures test was employed to examine the effects of social distance and social status. The results showed that CCs complained more explicitly than TTs, since CCs perceived the offence as more serious than TTs. Although both TTs and CCs complained explicitly to a stranger of lower status, TTs complained less directly to an acquaintance of lower status than CCs did. Moreover, TTs complained more explicitly to an acquaintance than to an intimate whereas CCs complained more directly to an intimate than to an acquaintance. These findings may facilitate Thai–Chinese cross-cultural communication and even Thai and Chinese English as lingua franca (ELF) language teaching.

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## Introduction

Growing multilingual and multicultural interaction gives rise to increasing cross-cultural pragmatic studies, that is, how the two closely related peoples perform the speech act in L1, are conducted to predict the *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) communication. Rapidly increasing Thai and Chinese communication makes such cross-cultural pragmatic studies necessary. The speech act of complaining was chosen

in this study for its popularity and difficulty (Nakhle, Naghavi, & Razavi, 2014). Since socially unacceptable acts seem recurrent in interpersonal communication, the offended person may be consoled or even compensated if he/she knows how to perform this speech act properly (Murphy & Neu, 1996). Despite its frequent occurrence in daily life, complaining is difficult to perform because it threatens both the speaker's positive face and the hearer's negative face. The operational definition of complaining in this study refers to an utterance made by the speaker to the hearer in a situation where the hearer's past or ongoing act is unfavourable to the speaker's point of view.

Over the past three decades, interlanguage pragmatic studies of complaining have been conducted between native and non-native speakers (Murphy & Neu, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Tanck, 2002). For example,

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Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) investigated complaints made by native speakers of Hebrew and American learners of Hebrew and found that both native and non-native speakers of Hebrew employed more severe strategies towards hearers of lower or equal status than with those of higher status and modified their complaints more with acquaintances than with strangers or intimates. Replacing a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) with a multiple-choice of seven directness levels of complaining, Yuan (2011) investigated complaints made by native American English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. He discovered that when interlocutors were of equal status, Chinese EFL learners complained most directly to intimates and strangers, and least directly to acquaintances (bulging behavior), whereas native American English speakers complained most directly to intimates, followed by acquaintances and strangers (descending behavior).

Yuan's (2011) findings of the Chinese EFL speakers' bulging complaints conform to Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) bulging complaints by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew to people of different social distance. However, Yuan (2011) native American English speakers' descending complaining behavior from intimates to strangers differs from Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) findings of native American English speakers' bulging complaining behavior. Although Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) acknowledged the importance of social status, Yuan (2011) claimed that social distance outweighs social status in complaining.

In addition, cross-cultural pragmatic studies between two groups of native speakers have been conducted (Rhurakvit, 2012; Wang, 2006). For instance, with complaining samples elicited via a DCT from native American speakers and native Chinese speakers, Wang (2006) noted that both groups complained less directly to hearers of higher status, and that both groups complained in a descending order of directness from intimates to strangers. Here, Wang (2006) observations of native American speakers' descending complaining behavior resemble those from Yuan (2011) of the native American speakers but differ from Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) opinions of the native American speakers' bulging complaining behavior. Besides, Wang's (2006) conclusions of the native Chinese speakers' descending complaining behavior differ from Yuan's (2011) observation of the Chinese EFL speakers' bulging complaining behavior towards acquaintances.

The incongruent findings from previous studies necessitate more empirical studies to substantiate the effects of social distance and social status on the native Chinese speakers' complaining behavior. Nevertheless, the differences might come from either the language differences involved or the method of data elicitation. For example, the languages compared in the three studies were different, and Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) and Wang (2006) employed DCT while Yuan (2011) used multiple-choice. To eliminate ambiguity and enhance comparability, further comparative studies should also employ a DCT.

As for Thai pragmatic studies, using DCT, Rhurakvit (2012) investigated how Thai learners of English in Thailand, Thai learners of English in the UK, native Thai

speakers, and native English speakers complained, and observed that Thai learners of English in Thailand resembled native Thai speakers, while Thai learners of English in the UK resembled native English speakers, and that no matter how advanced Thai learners of English were, they still demonstrated the L1 influence on L2 acquisition. This is also suggested by Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) that EFL learners seem to transfer pragmatic norms from L1 when speaking English. The findings from previous studies seem to suggest that a cross-cultural pragmatic study between native Thai and native Chinese speakers should precede intercultural pragmatic studies between Thai and Chinese learners of English as the baseline.

The present study aimed to investigate the semantic formulae of complaining produced by native Thai and native Chinese speakers in their L1s, with reference to social distance and social status between the interlocutors. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the similarities and differences between the semantic formulae of complaining produced by native Thai and native Chinese speakers in their L1?
- 2) What factors influence the semantic formulae of complaining produced by native Thai and native Chinese speakers in their L1?

## Methods

### Participants

The complaining samples in this study were elicited from two groups of informants: 60 native Thai speakers studying in Thai universities and 60 native Chinese speakers studying in Chinese universities, with 30 males and 30 females in each group. They were mainly graduate students majoring in business management, information management, and tourism, aged from 23 to 53 years. While the majority had never travelled to any English-speaking country, a few had stayed in the UK or US for less than a year for their research work.

### Instruments

Since speakers tend to perform such face-threatening acts as complaining on a private occasion, it is very difficult to elicit sufficient complaining samples with observable social distance and social status without violating research ethics. Besides, different methods in eliciting the complaining samples may result in possible ambiguity in the interpretation of the potential differences. In view of the availability and comparability of the data, the researchers chose the DCT questionnaire as the main instrument for this study.

First, the researchers designed a 12-scenario DCT involving 1) bad service, 2) failed promise, 3) noise-making, 4) time-wasting, 5) lost possession, and 6) social gaffe, since the scenarios available from previous

studies fell into these six types of offences. Then, Thai and Chinese graduate students were interviewed for the authenticity and complainability of the scenarios. The interview revealed that both TTs and CCs might complain to strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, but neither TTs nor CCs complained to hearers of higher status, such as advisors or doctors. Therefore, the 12 scenarios covered the three-value social distance (strangers, acquaintances, strangers) and 2-value social status (speaker higher, equal).

In addition, a multiple-choice question was added after the description of each scenario to help interpret the respondents' perception of the offence on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (not serious at all) to 5 (extremely serious). The DCT questionnaire was written in both Thai and Chinese. Before the main study, the DCT was piloted with Thai and Chinese graduate students to examine the feasibility of data collection and analysis. In the main study, the informants were asked to respond to the DCT questionnaire in their L1.

Apart from the DCT, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Thai and 10 Chinese participants, since Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006, p. 59) suggested through their experiment that basic elements for meta-themes were present in the first six interviews. The interview may reveal the factors that determined their selection of the semantic formulae of complaints. For example, when the participant did not complain explicitly in the situation, the researchers would ask him/her to explain the reason.

### Data Analysis

The Thai and Chinese complaining DCT data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Based on Murphy and Neu's (1996), Tanck's (2002) and Gallaher's (2011) models, the researchers analysed the complaining samples into twelve semantic formulae. After training, two pairs of native Thai and Chinese coders independently analysed the Thai and Chinese complaining samples. Upon completion, they compared their analyses, and discussed the analyses to reach an agreement when disagreements arose. The eventual inter-rater reliability reached 95%. The Mann–Whitney U Test was employed to find the significant difference between TTs and CCs, and a repeated measures test were used to find significant differences caused by social distance and social status between the interlocutors. To present a clear picture, the perception data were merged into “Not serious”

(1–2) and “Serious” (3–5). The interview data were analysed into the themes as they emerged.

## Findings and Discussion

The first research question was answered through the comparison and contrast between the complaining semantic formulae from native Thai speakers speaking Thai (TTs) and native Chinese speakers speaking Chinese (CCs) in each type of offence. The second research question was answered by presenting the social norms related to social distance, social status, and ranking of imposition.

### Semantic Formulae of Complaints Employed by TTs and CCs

#### Complaining About Bad Service

When complaining to an acquaintance of lower status about an unfinished thesis, both TTs and CCs asked for remedy for the offence and provided justification for the offence very frequently. However, TTs mentioned the context the most frequently while CCs explicitly mentioned the offence the most frequently. TTs employed “Remedy” significantly more than CCs did (Table 1).

When complaining to a stranger of lower status about the faded suit, both TTs and CCs mentioned the offence explicitly and asked for the remedy for the offence very frequently, but TTs employed these two semantic formulae significantly more than CCs did. While TTs established the context for the utterance, CCs justified their utterance

#### Complaining About Failed Promise

In complaining to an intimate of equal status about a failed promise, both TTs and CCs employed “Problem” and “Context” very frequently, but TTs used the two semantic formulae significantly more than CCs did. While TTs chose “Remedy” as the third most frequently, CCs criticized the hearer, as shown in the following example.

CCM7. 3 nǐ bàn shì yī diǎn yě bù kě xìn  
(You are not reliable [Criticism])

When an acquaintance of equal status failed to keep a promise, both TTs and CCs mentioned the offence and criticized the hearer very frequently. Interestingly, TTs preferred not to mention the offence. When interviewed about their silence, some TTs said that they did not mind the offence because they had solved the problem, while others felt bored by the irresponsible behavior and secretly

**Table 1**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about bad service

Bad service	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Negligent worker	Speaker higher	Acquaintances	Context (58%)* Remedy (58%)* Justification (40%)	Problem (62%)* Remedy (48%) Justification (37%)
Faded suit	Speaker higher	Strangers	Problem (65%)* Remedy (47%)* Context (30%)*	Problem (57%) Remedy (30%) Justification (23%)*

Note. n = 60; The percentage in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\* Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$

**Table 2**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about a failed promise

Failed promise	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Undelivered paper	Equal	Intimates	Problem (73%)* Context (60%)* Remedy (23%)*	Problem (57%) Context (23%) Criticism (17%)*
Forgetful classmate	Equal	Acquaintances	Problem (55%) Criticism (27%) Opt out (27%)*	Problem (57%) Criticism (38%)* Context (32%)*

Note. n = 60; the percentages in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\*Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$

decided to terminate the friendship. Therefore, TTs' silence may be interpreted as either "nothing serious", or "something too serious to talk about" (Table 2).

#### Complaining About Noise-Making

Both TTs and CCs complained to an intimate or an acquaintance about noise-making in a quite similar way. Interestingly, in complaining to an intimate of equal status about noise-making, TTs usually did not explicitly mention the hearer in their "Problem"; instead, they just mentioned the bad consequences of the offence, namely, inability to sleep, for example.

TTM10.5 kōr tōht ná rao róa wáa naai mee tú-rá láe tam hāi dtōng gláp dēuk dtāe wáa prūng-née dtōn-cháo rao mee rian dtōng dtēun dtāe cháo láew rao gōr non mǎi dāai loie prór chà-nán yàak kōr róng hāi chūay bao sǎng dāai rēu bplào (Sorry, I know you had an errand which caused you to come back late, but tomorrow morning, I have a class and need to get up early. I cannot sleep [Problem], so can I ask you to keep the noise down?) (Table 3).

Differently, CCs mentioned the hearer explicitly in stating the offence, e.g.

CCF4.5 nǐ kě yǐ qīng diǎn ma nǐ zhè yàng yǐ jīng dǎ rǎo dào le wǒ le bì jīng wǒ men shì hé zū méi yǒu yī gè rén lái de suí xīn suǒ yù xiē xī wàng jiàn liàng (Can you be quieter? You disturbed me [Problem] Anyway, we are sharing the room, not the same as living alone. Hope (you) understand.)

When complaining to an acquaintance of equal status about noise-making, CCs employed significantly more "Justification" than TTs to soften the face-threatening, for example,

CCF9.6 nǐ hǎo dǎ rǎo le zuì jìn jīng cháng tīng dào nǐ jiā de diǎn shì shēng wǒ míng tiān yào kǎo shì le mǎ fǎn bǎ yīn diào tiào xiǎo diǎn hǎo ma xiè xiè (How are you? [Address term] Excuse me [Apology] I can hear your TV often lately [Problem] I am going to take an exam tomorrow [Justification] Please turn the volume down, all right? [Remedy] Thank you. [Gratitude])

#### Complaining About Arriving Late

Significantly more TTs kept silent about either an acquaintance or an intimate arriving late, while CCs explicitly mentioned the offence. When complaining to an acquaintance of equal status about late-arriving, both TTs and CCs employed "Problem" and "Remedy" very frequently. However, while CCs justified their complaint, more TTs kept silent about an acquaintance's late arrival (Table 4).

When an intimate of equal status arrived late, both TTs and CCs mentioned the offence explicitly and asked for the remedy for the situation, but while TTs kept silent about the late arrival, CCs chose to warn the hearer not to be late again, for example,

CCF17.8 zēn me cái lái ā dōu dēng nǐ bàn gè duō xiǎo shí le yǐ hòu zài zhè yàng bú hé nǐ yī qǐ chū lái le xià bú wéi lì ā (Why arrived so late? Been waiting for you for more than half an hour [Problem] Do this again, (I) won't come out with you. No more next time [Warning])

#### Complaining About Lost Possession

When complaining to an acquaintance of equal status about lost lecture notes, TTs employed "Remedy" the most frequently, which CCs seldom used. Instead, CCs employed "Problem" significantly more frequently. However, when complaining to a stranger of lower status

**Table 3**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about noise-making

Noise-making	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Noisy roommate	Equal	Intimates	Remedy (82%) Problem (45%) Justification (30%)	Remedy (80%) Problem (43%) Justification (32%)
Noisy neighbour	Equal	Acquaintances	Remedy (88%) Justification (55%) Problem (33%)	Remedy (88%) Justification (70%)* Problem (40%)

Note. n = 60; the percentage in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\* Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$

**Table 4**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about arriving late

Late-arriving	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Late-arriving classmate	Equal	Acquaintances	Problem (38%) Remedy (32%) Opt-out (22%)*	Problem (50%)* Remedy (38%) Justification (27%)*
Late-arriving friend	Equal	Intimates	Problem (38%) Opt-out (28%)* Remedy (20%)*	Problem (60%)* Remedy (33%)* Warning (13%)*

Note. n = 60; the percentage in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\* Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$ 

about a broken mobile phone, both TTs and CCs employed similar semantic formulae, though TTs expected remedial work and justified their utterance significantly more frequently (Table 5).

#### Complaining About Social Gaffe

Surprisingly, when complaining to a stranger of equal status about cutting in line, TTs modified their “Remedy” and “Context” with “Apology”, but CCs did so with “Problem”.

Regarding an annoying ringing phone, both TTs and CCs employed “Remedy” and “Problem” very frequently, but TTs explicitly mentioned the annoying ringing phone more than CCs, while CCs asked for the remedial work more than TTs did. Besides, TTs apologized for the utterance, whereas CCs mentioned the context for the utterance (Table 6).

#### Factors Influencing the Choice of Semantic Formulae

##### Ranking of Imposition

The perception data suggested that CCs invariably perceived the offence in the 12 situations as significantly more serious than TTs. The phenomenon might be explained by either that CCs are really more easily offended than TTs, or that CCs are more extrovert in reporting their

feelings. However, a closer look at the perception data revealed that both TTs and CCs ranked “Lost Possession”, “Failed Promise”, “Bad Service” and “Social Gaffe” as the top four most serious types of offences; therefore, the CCs’ extroversion makes more sense.

Complaining about late-arriving appears to be more face-threatening in Thai culture than that in Chinese culture. Probably, Thai culture is more typical of polychronic-time culture than Chinese culture is. In polychronic-time culture, people value human relationships more than tasks (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2015).

Regarding the annoying ringing phone, the interview data showed that TTs perceived noise in public places as chaos and disorder, while CCs might perceive noise in public places as enthusiasm and devotion as well as chaos and disorder. As a result, CCs seemed to be more tolerant of noises in public places than TTs were. In short, getting used to boisterous groups at such public places, CCs complained less directly than TTs did.

##### Social Status

The findings showed that when the speaker was a stranger of higher status, both TTs and CCs complained about bad service in an explicit way. This accords with

**Table 5**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about a lost/damaged possession

Possession	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Lost lecture notes	Equal	Acquaintances	Remedy (55%)* Problem (20%) Threat/Justification (13%)*	Problem (35%)* Criticism (30%)* Justification (23%)*
Broken mobile phone	Speaker higher	Strangers	Problem (72%) Remedy (72%)* Context (22%)*	Problem (75%) Remedy (57%) Context (12%)

Note. n = 60; the percentage in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\* Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$ **Table 6**

Three most frequently used semantic formulae when complaining about a social gaffe

Social gaffe	Social status	Social distance	TTs	CCs
Cutting in line	Equal	Strangers	Remedy (75%) Context (42%) Apology (20%)*	Remedy (72%) Context (38%) Problem (22%)*
Annoying ringing phone	Equal	Strangers	Remedy (77%) Problem (40%)* Apology (20%)*	Remedy (87%)* Problem (28%) Context (17%)*

Notes: n = 60; the percentage in brackets show the number of respondents in a given group

\* Refers to the significant difference between TTs and CCs, with  $p < .05$



Wannaruk's (2008, p. 328) observation of Thai culture that "In most interpersonal communication in Thai culture, a person of higher status is likely to be assertive and expressive whereas a person of lower status tends to be passive". Both Thailand and China belong to a large power distance culture with "a greater centralization of power, more importance placed on status and rank, a large proportion of supervisory personnel, a rigid value system that determines the worth of each job, and subordinates adhering to a rigid hierarchy" (Gudykunst, 2004, as cited in Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009, p. 147). Therefore, it is implied that in both cultures service-providers are supposed to satisfy their customer by any means. Once they fail to do so, the customer seems entitled to express his/her displeasure. However, when the interlocutor of lower status was an acquaintance, TTs chose to make their complaining implicit, while CCs still complained explicitly. Such differences may disappoint Thai service-providers when their Chinese customer acquaintances still complain explicitly about bad service and mislead Chinese service-providers when their Thai customer acquaintances hint at bad service.

#### Social Distance

In the case of a failed promise, CCs found it more face-threatening to complain to an intimate than TTs did. The interview data showed that in Chinese culture, complaining may terminate a friendship between intimates. But when the hearer was an acquaintance, more TTs restrained from complaining than CCs did.

Regarding noise-making, TTs and CCs established solidarity more with an acquaintance more than with an intimate, which supports Wolfson's (1983) Bulge theory that acquaintances need more solidarity-establishing speech behavior than strangers and intimates do. The reason might be that CCs found complaining to an acquaintance more face-threatening than TTs did.

TTs showed more tolerance toward an intimate arriving late than toward an acquaintance, but CCs confronted their intimate more than their acquaintance. The findings resemble Wang's (2006) observation that Chinese groups complained explicitly to intimates. Different face-wants may explain the phenomena: Thai culture cherishes negative face, or the freedom of action, while Chinese culture values positive face, or intimacy. However, different ways of treating intimates between TTs and CCs may cause intercultural conflicts.

Social gaffe scenarios reflected implicitness of complaining to a stranger. The findings resemble sTamanaha's (2003) observation that the Japanese generally complained more implicitly to out-group members than to in-group interlocutors. It could be said that Asian people, at least from the three cultures of Chinese, Japanese, and Thai, were likely to be indirect when complaining to a stranger.

#### Conclusion and Recommendation

From a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective, this study compared complaints made by native Thai and Chinese speakers in their L1 to six types of offences. The results

showed that TTs complained most explicitly to an acquaintance, followed by an intimate and a stranger, while with CC it was to an intimate, followed by an acquaintance and a stranger. Moreover, both TTs and CCs complained to strangers of lower status more explicitly, but TTs complained less explicitly to acquaintances of lower status, whereas CCs retained the same explicitness. TTs found late-arriving more tolerable than noise-making whereas CCs felt the opposite.

Pedagogically, the findings from this study may inform Thai and Chinese learners of the Thai/Chinese linguistic forms and sociolinguistic rules of complaining. The linguistic differences between native Thai and native Chinese speakers in complaining in L1 should be included in the Thai and Chinese language teaching material to raise awareness and sensitivity of the learners of Thai and Chinese for their own second/foreign language use. Furthermore, differences in dealing with interlocutors of different social distance and social status may inform Thai/Chinese learners of Chinese/Thai of the sociocultural differences between the Thai and Chinese cultures. Such an awareness may help them predict appropriate complaints to a native speaker; thus, misunderstandings may be avoided.

Since the present study used mainly the DCT questionnaire as a research tool, further studies may employ ethnographic methodology to broaden the understanding of naturally occurring complaining behavior. Finally, with the increase of English as a lingua franca, cross-cultural studies between another two closely related countries should be conducted.

#### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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