Research Paper

Indirect Complaint as an Act of Rapport-Inspiring Speech Behavior: The Case of Iranian Students in the University Context

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ABSTRACT

Indirect complaints (ICs) most often serve as rapport-inspiring speech behavior, whose affiliation by the recipient of the complaint preserves solidarity among peers. The purpose of the present paper was to investigate the themes and response strategies used by Iranian students as an act of IC in the university context. Drawing on a mixed methods research design, the results of a thorough thematic analysis of the collected conversational data revealed that the themes Iranian students tend to use as an IC are not independent of their gender. In addition, two new IC response strategies were identified, namely attribution and admonishment. Hence, in order to account for all of the strategies used by Iranian students to respond to ICs, the existing categorizations are to be expanded. It was also discovered that only through explicit or embedded commiseration is there more potential for longer interactions among participants of conversations. The present study sheds some light on the pragmatics of the Persian language.

KEYWORDS: Indirect complaint; IC themes; IC response strategies; Rapport-inspiring speech behavior; Speech act of complaint

1. Introduction

University life can be very stressful, especially for students not ready to survive the major upheaval of transiting to a new educational environment (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Hathaway et al., 2023). The situation can be aggravated if this transition involves moving to big cities where the new lifestyles and cultural norms of the local people might stand in stark contrast to students' own ways of life (Gundogan, 2023). Research conducted in universities exploring students' accounts (in particular those provided by working-class students) of their experiences in higher education has revealed a myriad of educational inequalities (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Ulriksen et al., 2017) that have frustrated students' aspirations to progress to higher education. In this regard, Archer et al. (2003) contend that a great many young people from working-class status are loath to go on to higher education as their aspirations and self-esteem have been inauspiciously affected by various kinds of

discrimination in society, the great source of which is probably the practices of universities themselves. Such dissatisfaction with educational services in higher education is, to a great extent, likely to be expressed in the form of 'complaining' to friends and other peers (Jääskä & Aaltonen, 2022). The present study intends to shed some light on this commonplace social skill.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the noun "complaint" as "expression of grief, pain, or dissatisfaction." However, the elusive definition of "a complaint" as an interactional activity is difficult to provide (Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). A more comprehensive definition of the term is to account for the notion of individuals' public self-image or self and the way it relates to the negative stance people tend to take while participating in the activity of complaining. The term "face," as defined by Goffman (1967) refers to "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). This concept covers various aspects of ourselves and is strongly related to our perception of what it means to be embarrassed, respected, appreciated, and accepted or refused to name but a few (House & Kádár, 2023). Since our face is more likely to be threatened by our interlocutors as an act of self-defense if their face is not saved, we often tend to make sure everyone's face is maintained (and even enhanced) in our daily interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For instance, Tseng and Chen (2022), analyzing some sports data, have discovered that individuals whose social duty necessitates reaching communicative concord in certain communicative contexts that entail tension are more likely to utilize mutual face-maintaining acts in order to avoid any conflict. This clearly shows that "everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained" (Brown & Levinson, p. 61).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face" (p. 65). In other words, there are face-threatening acts (FTAs) that by nature, stand in contrast to the 'face wants' of either interactant. Complaining is regarded as one of the main face-threatening acts (some more examples of FTAs include criticism, insult, and expression of disapproval). As Brown and Levinson (1987) argued, complaining shows that the speaker has a negative evaluation of a certain aspect of the hearer's positive face and that he does not care about the addressee's wants. However, such a perspective toward face in politeness theory has been extensively criticized (see, for example, Izadi, 2017; Spencer-Oatey, 2007). For one thing, not all speech acts are face-threatening in need of being mitigated (Arundale, 2006). On the other, in their conceptualization of the face, Brown and Levinson (1987) paid little, if any, attention to the social dimension of the face (Tseng & Chen, 2022).

In the present paper, the speech act of complaint refers to an activity (in the form of an utterance) that communicates displeasure to an action or some target that has unfavorably treated the complainant (Schegloff, 2005). Here, the specific context where complaining occurs is the university context, and the complainants are its students. What is more, in order to account for the social dimension of the face, university students' utterances and response strategies are examined as a set of social skills in light of Goffman's (1967) conceptualization of the face.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The speech act of complaint

Initial research on the use of complaints has centered on the identifiable sequences of complaints, in which the beginning and end are readily recognizable (e.g., Drew, 1998). Espousing complaints' identifiability through explicit devices such as "idiomatic expressions" (Drew & Holt, 1988), "negative observations" (Schegloff, 1988), and "extreme case formulations" (Pomerantz, 1986), more recent studies have dealt with issues such as the way the activity of complaint develops (Decock & Depraetere, 2018; Traverso, 2009) and whether and how the recipients of complaints affiliate or disaffiliate with an instance of complaint (Drew & Walker, 2009; Rodriguez, 2022).

The speech act of complaint has also been explored in the fields of interlanguage as well as cross-cultural pragmatics (refer to Fogal et al. (2018) for a summary of recent advances in the field of speech acts). For instance, Tatsuki (2000) compared and contrasted the use of complaints by Japanese students in both Japanese and English. Her findings, which were the result of a psychological test, revealed that Japanese students used different types of aggression in English and Japanese when responding to frustration or stress. This, she further argued, might result in more severe instances of complaints in English than in Japanese. Finally, she suggested that attempts should be made to make Japanese learners of English more aware of different levels of politeness in English.

In order to perform an appropriate complaint, which is typically associated with an FTA, one needs to be aware of the different components of this speech act. This is crucial, especially for non-native speakers of any particular language (Boxer & Pickering, 1995), for it seems so easy to fall into the trap of mistaking criticism for complaint. As an example, Murphy and Neu (1996) investigated the appropriacy of complaint speech act set by Korean non-native speakers of English through the perception of American native speakers of English. Accordingly, they conducted a two-part study exploring the production of complaint by both native and non-native speakers, and further analyzed native speakers' judgments of non-native speakers' productions. As a result, their analysis of the collected data uncovered a significant deviation from appropriate codes of complaints by Korean non-native speakers of English, most of whom had produced, in native speakers' perception, a criticism, instead of a complaint.

2.2. Direct complaint versus indirect complaint

Previous studies suggest two types in the categorization of complaints: direct (Dersley & Wootton, 2000, among others) and indirect (see, for example, Boxer, 1996; Drew, 1998). Indirect complaints (ICs) are different from direct complaints (DCs) in that the addressee per se is neither considered responsible for an instance of the offense nor unfavorably evaluated (Boxer, 1996). Rather, IC will be defined here as "the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about oneself or someone/something that is not present" (Boxer, p. 219). Even though a number of studies have been carried out on the speech act of complaint in different contexts and cultures (e.g., English, Japanese, French, and Italian), there are relatively few studies that have focused on complaints in the Iranian context. What is more, most studies related to the speech act of complaint have either focused on DCs or the complaints themselves rather than on ICs and IC response strategies (Boxer, 1993a). The present study aims at exploring the use of the speech act of complaint by Iranian students in the university context. Its main concern, however, has to do with ICs, as opposed to DCs.

DCs are the result of dissatisfaction with a certain aspect of the complainee that is likely to spawn an argument. In order to avoid an argument, both interactants need to make use of certain strategies to restrict the impact of the complaint. Laforest (2002) investigated the complaint/complaint-response sequence in everyday conversations between four French-speaking Montréal families, consisting of 50 hours of family conversations. The result of this study indicated that entry into an argument is usually the consequence of questioning the value of the complainee's response. Furthermore, it was suggested that complaining is a useful means of controlling another person's behavior. Therefore, expression of dissatisfaction is appreciated as long as it does not lead the interaction to a verbal confrontation.

As mentioned earlier, ICs differ from DCs in that the present addressee is not considered responsible for a certain instance of complaint (Boxer, 1996). Generally speaking, it is safe to say that ICs are not designed to threaten the addressee's face. Instead, ICs often serve as rapport-inspiring speech behavior, intended to preserve peer solidarity (Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Rodriguez, 2022).

2.3. Indirect complaint, gender, and building up rapport

Literature concerning the analysis of social interaction indicates that expressing dissatisfaction about an absent party or the very situation in which the complaining occurs serves as a highly potent device through which a closer relationship is forged (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Rodriguez, 2022). Nevertheless, once the complainant confides in their friends about their discontent or grievance against an absent party, i.e., when an instance of IC occurs, the complainant is at their most vulnerable. This is because the complaint recipient may simply not be interested in further engagement in the activity, as a result of which the complainant's hope of being paid attention to might be disappointed. Meanwhile, results from several studies pertinent to the function of ICs suggest that ICs in the sequences of troubles-telling in everyday conversation (Jefferson, 1988) tend to encourage affiliation with the complainant more frequently (Boxer, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Kozlova, 2004).

From a socio-pragmatic angle, gender differences have been considered as an effective variation in politeness literature (e.g., Holmes, 1990, 1995, 2006; Mills 2003), especially in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. As Leech (2014) highlighted studies on gender specification and social parameters can expand our awareness of the two counterparts' social status.

In the context of Iran, Allami (2006) analyzed different replies to gripping (IC) by Iranian students. His findings indicate that in the Iranian context, ICs are primarily used for commiseration rather than other purposes. In addition, he found that Iranian students feel obliged to commiserate with the complaining speaker in furtherance of keeping solidarity with one another. With regard to gender differences, the remainder of his findings did not support Boxer's. While Boxer argued that women generally tend to commiserate more with the complaining speaker and that men are mostly inclined to give advice or contradict, Allami challenged this finding contending that both male and female groups pay equal attention to commiseration. This non-face-threatening act, he argued, becomes manifest not only among friends but also among strangers.

As far as politeness and appropriateness of directness are concerned, Iranian culture turns out to be associated with its distinct Islamic values. One key factor that distinguishes Iranian culture from western culture is probably the level of *individualism*. In this regard, Iran, with a score of 41, is believed to be a collectivist society (Hofstede et al., 2010). Drawing on this consideration, one can better justify the reason why, in Persian, ICs and even some direct speech acts underscore loyalty, solidarity and in-group membership (see for instance Eslamirasekh, 1993). After all, in collectivist societies, an instance of offense (and therefore complaining about it) will probably lead to embarrassment and loss of face (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The present study aims to determine the themes and response strategies used by Iranian students as an act of IC in the university context. Besides, this study aims at exploring the relationship, as well as the strength of the association, between Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an IC. In doing so, the research attempts to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What themes do Iranian students tend to use in the university context as an indirect complaint?

2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an indirect complaint?

3. What strategies do Iranian students prefer to use in university context as an indirect complaint response?

3. Method

3.1. Corpus

The data consists of 239 IC exchanges in Persian, recorded at Allameh Tabataba'I University, one of the universities of Iran, located in northwestern Tehran. After data collection and an initial rough transcription of the Ics, it turned out that of more than 15500 students in this university, 68 (34 male and 34 female) were recorded while casually conversing with peers in Persian. The students in this study were either undergraduates or postgraduates majoring in Persian literature and foreign languages. These were individuals with whom the researchers had different levels of friendship.

3.2. Procedure

Conversational data from students were collected from spontaneous speech that was either audio-recorded using Audio Recorder Apps, available on various smartphones, or recorded in the form of field notes, immediately after leaving the site (this is indicated in the accompanying examples provided in *Results and discussion* section). Once the data were gathered and an initial rough transcription was prepared, they were transcribed verbatim and annotated using QSR Nvivo software. An important point should be made here. A statement varying in length from a single phrase to a whole paragraph was counted as an IC if a 'pronounced negative stance' (Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009) embedded in any form of 'troubles-telling narrative' (Jefferson, 1988) was adopted toward any possible 'complainable' (Schegloff, 2005), except those directed at the recipient of the complaint (i.e., DCs were not counted). Throughout data collection, the students were audio-recorded or recorded in the form of field notes on various sites within the main university area, some of which include the campus, the classrooms, the self-service area, and the library site.

Almost 80% of the data was audio-recorded. A majority of audio-recording was done with prior consent directly from the participants. Only for a small number of cases (less than 10%), permission was obtained after it was revealed to the students that a recording had been made. The data gathered in the form of field notes were mostly overheard by the researchers without any participation in the conversations taking place. The data were collected over a period of approximately nine months in 2022 and 2023. The total number of hours transcribed equals 27 hours, more or less; however, only the relevant excerpts from the whole corpus with regard to the purpose of the present study were analyzed. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the data consists of audio recordings and filed notes of 239 IC exchanges. These instances were uttered by a vast number of university students (n=68), so the researchers looked into a student population rather than the mere idiosyncrasies of a handful of people.

3.3. Data analysis

Using a mixed methods research design and drawing on the categorizations proposed by (Boxer, 1993b), qualitative data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common methods of analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), through which it is possible to pinpoint and report recurrent patterns (themes) within the data set. This means the researchers started the analysis first by acquainting themselves with the data in order to identify common patterns among the Ics. This led to certain initial codes based upon bodies of language, such as single phrases and whole paragraphs, that indicated discontent with oneself, the situation, or an absent party, after which relevant themes were identified. Next, the identified themes were reviewed, refined, and named, and finally, a report of the analysis was produced. These themes were regarded as IC-initiating moves. The same method was followed in order to obtain and categorize IC response strategies.

In order to determine the relationship between Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an IC, the relevant data were processed statistically with IBM SPSS Statistics 24. First, the data were tabulated through Crosstab Tables. Then, a Chi-square test of independence was carried out to determine whether the identified themes significantly differed between male and female students. In addition, Cramer's V test was performed to test the strength of the association.

Two significant notes are to be made here. First, as for the identification of the themes and the strategies, there was an inevitability concerning treating the data based on the literature and the researchers' own understanding of how IC initiating moves and their corresponding response strategies were realized in complaint occurrences in the university context among students. Nonetheless, an 'open category' was used, i.e., deliberate attempts were made to allow new patterns to emerge from the qualitative data. Doing so would obliterate the influence of the researchers' prejudgment about the data.

Second, as far as the reliability of the results was concerned, the data were analyzed by the researchers based on the definitions provided in *subsection 2.2.,* and Silverman's (2009) five approaches of refutational analysis, constant data comparison, comprehensive data use, inclusive of the deviant case and use of tables were employed to ensure the reliability of the results. They were then given to an experienced researcher in the field for analysis. In order to ensure maximum consistency between the researchers' analyses, Cohen's Kappa Coefficient was applied, the result of which indicated the degrees of agreement of 90.2% and 88.6% for the identified themes (IC initiating moves) and strategies (IC responses), respectively. All of the estimates were significant ($p <0.01$). Finally, the results of the analyses were put in juxtaposition, and the end result was reached by virtue of painstaking negotiations.

4. Results

4.1. Research question 1

The first research question was posed to identify the themes of Ics commonly used by Iranian students in the university context. As a result of analyzing the 239 IC exchanges of the data, 281 IC initiating moves were identified, which were categorized in light of three distinct themes, namely (1) *self*; (2) *other*; and (3) *situation*. Among these themes, *self*-Ics turned out to be the least frequent, making up only 9.6% of the total. *Other* Ics constituted 24.2% of the corpus, and *situation* Ics (Type A and Type B) were the most frequent, comprising as much as 66.2% of the total. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of each IC theme, as used by both male and female students, as well as their corresponding percentages:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the use of IC themes (IC initiating moves) by Iranian students (male and female) in the university context.

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
IC Themes	Self	Count (n)	9	18	27
		% within theme	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
		% of Total	3.2%	6.4%	9.6%
	Other	Count (n)	33	35	68
		% within theme	48.5%	51.5%	100.0%
		% of Total	11.7%	12.5%	24.2%
	Situation A	Count (n)	69	46	115
		% within theme	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	24.6%	16.4%	40.9%
	Situation B	Count (n)	54	17	71
		% within theme	76.1%	23.9%	100.0%
		% of Total	19.2%	6.0%	25.3%
	Total	Count (n)	165	116	281
		% within theme	58.7%	41.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	58.7%	41.3%	100.0%

Ics that are used as an act of self-denigration are termed *self*-Ics. In comparison to other types of Ics, *self*-Ics were the least frequent, accounting for slightly less than $^1/_{10}$ of the total corpus. In such Ics, both male and female students expressed negative evaluations about themselves; however, female students used twice as many *self* Ics as male students did. This clearly shows that these Iranian female students are more concerned about their appearance, personality, and physical and cognitive abilities than their male counterparts are. They are obviously not bashful about discussing their feelings about their own behavior, actions, and ability with their peers. As a matter of fact, they rejoice in *self*-Ics in which they denigrate themselves, for such Ics can be utilized to lessen social-relation discomfort degrees and, in turn, allow for commiseration and compliment. This is in contrast to the negative perspective of the face delineated by Brown and Levinson (1987). Interestingly enough, in this study, the most frequent type of strategy used by the students to respond to *self*-Ics (as will be discussed in the same section) was agreement or commiseration. However, it seems that the complaining speakers favored contradiction the most. All of this highlights the complex nature of the face and that it should be studied from different perspectives (Spencer-Oatey, 2007). An example of a *self*-IC follows:

(a) *Self* IC. Two female students on the campus. (audio-recorded)

<div dir="rtl">الف: نمیدونم چرا ایقدر زود عصبانی میشم.</div>

A: "*Ne-mi-dun-am   čerâ   inqadr   zud   asabâni   mi-š-am.*"

NEG-PRS-know-1SG   why   so   easily   angry   PRS-get-1SG

(I don't know why I get angry so easily.)

<div dir="rtl">ب: به نظر من که خیلی هم آرومی.</div>

B: "*Be   nazar-e   man   ke   xeyli   ham   ârum-i.*"

    to opinion-ART   I   that   very   too   calm-be.PRS.2SG

   (In my opinion, you are very calm.)

In the above example, the speaker complained about her irritability. This IC was not left unanswered. Rather, her addressee tactfully contradicted her statement and built up a good rapport with the complaining speaker. In point of fact, only those instances of contradiction (the discussion of which will be provided later in the same section) that were provoked by *self*-Ics were appreciated by the speakers. Nevertheless, this was not far from the researchers' expectation since *self*-Ics generally focus on self-denigration and contradicting them functions as rapport-inspiring speech behavior.

The focus of *other* Ics is on other person/persons, especially on their personal or private affairs. This is synonymous with what is commonly known as 'gossip.' *Other* Ics made up slightly less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total corpus. *Other* Ics are highly commonplace among students as they inspire rapport and confidence among conversationalists. As for this theme, the results, strangely enough, did not indicate any major difference between male and female students (Table 1). This struck the researchers, in particular, as odd that female students' *other* Ics (n=35) were not greater in number (at least not to a great extent) than those of their male counterparts (n=33). In fact, this finding might stand in contrast to the common belief that women tend to gossip more about other person/persons than men do, which is still commonplace in Iran.

The third identified theme of IC initiating moves is the *situation*, which is further divided into two subcategories: Type A *situations* and type B *situations*. Among other themes, *situation* Ics were the most frequent, constituting slightly more than 66% of the total corpus. Type A *situation* Ics are of **personal** focus; however, they are different from *self* Ics in that they are related to a specific situation at hand rather than a personal characteristic. On the other hand, the focus of Type B *situation* Ics is **impersonal**. It was only when the data were analyzed for the corresponding frequencies of the identified themes that the researchers began to notice that there was a considerable difference between males and females, whose uses of type B *situation* Ics made up 76.1% and 23.9% within its theme, respectively. One possible implication of this finding is that, when confronted with different options, these Iranian female students are less likely to participate in classroom discussions whose central focus is of global significance, such as political or economic issues. However, more studies are needed in this regard.

4.2. Research question 2

To find out the answer to the second question, the relevant data from Table 1 were analyzed by means of a Chi-square test of independence, which is also known as Pearson's Chi-square test. Table 2 displays the results of a 2×4 Chi-square analysis:

Table 2. Chi-square test of independence for the relationship between Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an IC.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	18.973[a]	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	19.426	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	18.769	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	281		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.15.

As Table 2 illustrates, the relationship between these variables is significant, $\chi^2(3,281) = 18.973$, p < .05. In other words, the themes these Iranian students tend to use as an IC are not independent of their gender. In addition to the significance, it seemed useful to determine the strength of the association. Hence, Cramer's V test was performed as a correlation measure to test the strength of the association and, in turn, to discover how important the findings are. Table 3 presents the results of Cramer's V test:

Table 3. Results of Cramer's V test of association for the relationship between Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an IC.

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.260	.000
	Cramer's V	.260	.000
N of Valid Cases		281	

The results of Cramer's V test (V= .26) show that there is a moderate association between these Iranian students' gender and the themes they tend to use as an IC.

Furthermore, the observed frequencies of these Iranian students' preferred ICs (see Table 1) indicated that, comparatively, whereas female students tend to use *self*-ICs with a higher percentage (66.7%), male students tend to use *situation* ICs more often (66.1%) as opposed to their counterparts. Finally, as far as *other* ICs are concerned, the difference between males' and females' preferences was not very noticeable (48.5% and 51.5% for males and females, respectively).

4.3. Research question 3

The third research question aimed at exploring the major social strategies used by Iranian students to respond to ICs. As a result of a thorough thematic analysis, 321 IC responses with eight distinct types of strategies were identified among Iranian students at the university context while conversing with each other in Persian. It should be noted that two of these strategies emerged as new IC response strategies specific to the present context. The new IC response strategies that emerged in this study were coded as 'attribution' and 'admonishment,' comprising 11.8% and 10% of the corpus, respectively. Other strategies were coded as follows: (1) Ø response or topic switch; (2) questions; (3) contradiction; (4) joke/teasing (5) advice/lecture; and (6) agreement/commiseration. Among these strategies, the least frequent strategy was Ø a response or topic switch, making up 7.2% of the total.

In response to *self*-ICs, there was no Ø response or topic switch, and every IC, as an act of self-denigration, was responded to using one or some of the other IC response strategies. On the other hand, the most frequent strategy was agreement or commiseration, comprising 29% of the total. What is more, as a general trend, almost all of the IC response strategies were elicited by *situation* ICs with a higher percentage, with the only exception of the last category, i.e., 'admonishment,' which was elicited most often by *other* ICs in comparison with the other two types of ICs. Table 4 illustrates the exact percentages of each category:

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the use of IC responses (IC response strategies) as a function of IC themes by Iranian students (male and female) in the university context.

			IC Themes			Total
			Self	Other	Situation	
IC Response Strategies	Ø or topic switch	Count (n)	0	4	19	23
		% within IC Responses	0.0%	17.4%	82.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	0.0%	1.2%	5.9%	7.2%
	Questions	Count (n)	2	10	22	34
		% within IC Responses	5.9%	29.4%	64.7%	100.0%
		% of Total	0.6%	3.1%	6.9%	10.6%
	Contradiction	Count (n)	10	3	18	31
		% within IC Responses	32.3%	9.7%	58.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	3.1%	0.9%	5.6%	9.7%
	Joke/teasing	Count (n)	5	13	24	42
		% within IC Responses	11.9%	31.0%	57.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	1.6%	4.0%	7.5%	13.1%
	Advice/lecture	Count (n)	4	4	20	28
		% within IC Responses	14.3%	14.3%	71.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	1.2%	1.2%	6.2%	8.7%
	Commiseration	Count (n)	11	15	67	93
		% within IC Responses	11.8%	16.1%	72.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	3.4%	4.7%	20.9%	29.0%

Attribution	Count (n)	9	11	18	38
	% within IC Responses	23.7%	28.9%	47.4%	100.0%
	% of Total	2.8%	3.4%	5.6%	11.8%
Admonishment	Count (n)	7	16	9	32
	% within IC Responses	21.9%	50.0%	28.1%	100.0%
	% of Total	2.2%	5.0%	2.8%	10.0%
Total	Count (n)	48	76	197	321
	% within IC Responses	15.0%	23.7%	61.4%	100.0%
	% of Total	15.0%	23.7%	61.4%	100.0%

Among the 321 IC response strategies, the least frequent one was Ø a response or topic switch. This means that the addressee either did not respond to the IC initiating move by the complaining speaker or tried to change the subject of conversation. Interestingly enough, in either case, the complaining speakers tried to talk their addressees into commiserating with them. By and large, it seems that in order to preserve rapport, these Iranian students tend to avoid topics with which they are prone to contradiction unless the complaining speaker brings up a direct follow-up question.

The second identified IC response strategy was questions. Unlike no response or topic switch, the questions strategy tempts the complaining speakers to elaborate on the complaint. Such questions are usually accompanied by nonverbal and verbal interjections such as 'no way,' or 'really.' It should also be noted that questions as an IC response strategy most often are not the ultimate response. Rather, they typically lead to other types of response strategies.

Another type of IC response strategy was coded as a contradiction, in which the addressee does not agree with the complaining speaker. This type of response, which serves as a disapproval strategy, in most cases tends to threaten the speaker's face (except for *self*-ICs). Hence, the use of mitigating devices, such as hedges and indirect speech acts, among others, is not uncommon. Generally, it seems that when complaining about another person or situation, such Iranian students are inclined to maintain their solidarity with one another even if it means hiding their true feelings for the sake of appearances.

Joking or teasing refers to those IC responses that are intended to provoke laughter through funny and witty remarks. While instances of joking were not few in number, according to the observations by the researchers, rarely did they happen when strangers were present. Although this was not the aim of the present study (the relationship between social distance and the type of IC response strategies), it poses an intriguing question for further research.

Advice or lecture was another type of strategy identified in the corpus. It refers to those strategies by which the addressee gives his/her personal opinion or some suggestions about what someone had better do in a certain situation. Advice or lecture on how to behave or what to do in a particular situation by an addressee is highly appreciated by the complaining speaker since this strategy is typically perceived as rapport-inspiring speech behavior among friends. Besides, it shows that the addressee feels concerned about the comfort of the complaining speaker.

The most frequent IC response strategy was agreement or commiseration. In fact, the category of commiseration comprised 29% of the total corpus. Commiseration refers to any short exclamation or even long expression of feelings whose illocutionary force is to reassure the complaining speaker and make them stop worrying about something. One typical example of commiseration is when the recipient of the complaint, in sympathy with the complaining speaker, offers his/her condolences for a certain problem that has affected the complaining speaker. One interesting feature of such a strategy is that it usually serves as a conversational opener (Boxer, 1993b). The idea here is that only through explicit or embedded commiseration there is more potential for longer interactions among participants of conversations. In fact, sharing of common ideas and expressing attitudes based on the unfavorability of an offense is facilitated through such IC responses. Strictly speaking, the face of the participants, in this fashion, is almost never threatened but even enhanced. This happens through building up a good rapport while exchanging ideas. Moreover, the feeling of solidarity is strengthened among the conversationalists as everyone lets their guard down by divulging their actual stance on the occasion. This contrasts sharply with the traditional perspective on the face, particularly the FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In addition to the abovementioned IC response strategies, two new strategies emerged in the present study, namely *attribution* and *admonishment*. Attribution in this study refers to a collection of responses whose common characteristic revolves around attributing the cause of a certain complaint to internal and/or external factors. Attribution also has to do with the philosophy or logic of a certain phenomenon, and they are usually accompanied by expressions such as "basically" and "technically." To clarify the concept of attribution, let us look at an example:

(a) Three male friends in the corridor of the university building. (audio-recorded)

الف: کلاس بعد از نهار خیلی مزخرفه.

A: "*Clâss   ba'd az   nâhâr   xeyli   mozaxrafe-e.*"

class   after   lunch   very   crap-be.PRS.3SG

(After-lunch classes are crap.)

آ: بره آدم خوابش میگیره تو کلاس ...

B: "*Âre   âdam   xâb-eš   mi-gir-e   too   clâss...*"

yeah   human   sleep-his   PRS-get.PRS-3SG   in   class

(Yeah, it makes us drowsy in the classroom.)

ج: اصولا نباید سر ظهر کلاس باشه. بازدهی نداره اصلا.

C: "*Osulan na-bâyad sare zohr clâss bâš-e.   Bâzdehi   na-dâr-e   aslan.*"

basically NEG-should at   noon   class   be.PRS-3SG   efficiency   NEG-have.PRS-3SG   at all

(Basically, there shouldn't be any classes at noon. It's not productive at all.)

In the above example, the speaker complains about the unfavorability of a certain situation. Two addressees respond to this *situation* IC using two different strategies. Whereas speaker B commiserates with the complaining speaker, speaker C attributes the unfavorable effect, 'a boring class,' to the relevant cause, 'time of the day.' Furthermore, he philosophizes about the consequence of this situation that "it's not productive at all." The linguistic realization of this strategy could even be formed using grammatical structures such as past modal. Speaker B, in example **(c)**, responding with "You must have gone to bed late last night yet again." is using the same strategy.

(b) Two female students are chit-chatting on the campus. (audio-recorded)

الف: من دیگه کلاس بعدی رو نمیتونم بیام.

A: "*Man dige   clâss   ba'di   ro   ne-mi-tun-am   b-ia-m.*"

I   anyway   class   next   ART   NEG-PRS-can-1SG   PRS-come-1SG

(I can't make it to the next class.)

خوابم گرفته.

"*Xâb-am   gerefte.*"

sleep-my   get.PTCP

(I feel sleepy.)

ب: حتماً دیر خوا بیدی باز دیشب.

B: "*Hatman   dir   xâb-id-i   bâz   di-šab.*"

definitely   late   sleep-PST-2SG   again   last-night

(You must have gone to bed late last night yet again.)

The other new strategy identified in the present study was coded as admonishment. This IC response strategy is used when the addressee finds the complaint of the complaining speaker insulting or patronizing, either to the self or other people. Admonishment means that the addressee disapproves of the complaining speaker's complaint. Following is an example of this IC response strategy:

(c) Two male students on the campus. (audio-recorded)

<div dir="rtl">

الف: دیدی چجوری راه میرفت؟ خود پنگوئن!

</div>

A: "*Did-i   čejuri   râh   miraft?   Xode   panguan!*"

   see.PST-2SG   how   way   go.PST.3SG   itself   penguin

   (Did you notice the way she walked? Exactly like a penguin!)

<div dir="rtl">

ب: زشته. مسخره نکن.

</div>

B: "*Zešt-e.   Masxare   na-kon.*"

  ugly-be.PRS.3SG   ridicule   NEG-do.IMP.2SG

  (That's bad language. Don't mock people.)

In this example, the complaining speaker gossiped about another person (*another* IC). However, this was neither appreciated nor elaborated by the addressee. Instead, the recipient of the complaint admonished the complaining speaker for mocking people. Admonishment was the only category most frequently elicited by *other* ICs (50% within its total number). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that due to certain ideological backgrounds, part of which has been shaped by the Islamic context of Iran and the special norms of the university, some Iranian students are inclined to admonish 'ICs' in general, and '*other* ICs' in particular. This particular finding is in line with Goffman's (1967) call for due consideration concerning the particulars of the social context in which a given speech act takes place (Kalinina & Gabdreeva, 2020). In fact, this social dimension is to be added to our investigations of face-related speech acts.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study revealed that among the three identified themes, i.e., self, other, and situation, *self*-ICs were the least frequent and that female students used twice as many *self*-ICs as male students did. This indicates that these female students are more concerned about their appearance, personality, and physical and cognitive abilities than their male counterparts are. Moreover, a contradiction to *self* ICs was highly appreciated by the complaining speaker, functioning as rapport-inspiring speech behavior. It was also discovered that, among other IC response strategies, only through explicit or embedded commiseration there is more potential for longer interactions among participants of conversations. This is, in part, related to the fact that commiseration typically serves as a conversational opener that leads to further sharing of ideas. What is more, as far as IC response strategies are concerned, two new response strategies were identified, namely attribution and admonishment. The conclusion to be drawn here is that in order to account for all of the strategies used by Iranian students to respond to ICs, the existing categorizations (see Boxer (1996) for such a categorization) are to be expanded.

The present study sheds some light on the pragmatics of the Persian language. In light of the present research, as well as the existing literature in the fields of speech act theory in general and complaints in particular, we can better understand the underlying mechanisms and components of ICs as used by Iranians in the Persian language, specifically in university contexts. Such findings are valuable since they aid us in understanding how ICs are realized in Iranian students' use of L1, the result of which provides new insights into the areas that Iranian students are more likely to make positive and/or negative transfer while learning a new language such as English. Similarly, such knowledge is vital for learners of Persian, "in that recognition of how native speakers use the speech act as well as knowledge of how to respond appropriately may open opportunities for non-native speakers to make friends" (Boxer & Pickering, 1995, p. 46). The significance of learners' mastery over pragmatic competence has been previously established (Zarei & Mohammadi, 2012). Additionally, this paper stands out among other similar studies,

due to the fact that the relevant data from students were not elicited but collected from spontaneous speech, naturally occurring in the university context. Finally, the major theoretical implication of this research is to support the notion that knowledge of speech acts and how to use them are noticeably culture-bound. As for the present study, the identified themes and strategies among students were, to a great extent, a reflection of the sociocultural norms of the Islamic context of Iran, as well as the special norms and standards of the university context.

This research had certain limitations with regard to sample size, data collection procedure, and instrumentation. The researchers are well aware of the threat that, despite the identified saturation, the results may not be generalizable to the whole university context. This is because the convenience sampling was performed on a small scale (only one university) due to feasibility considerations. Hence, further research could perform the same study on a larger scale. It should also be noted that the major instrument of the present study for data collection was through audio-recording. This procedure, albeit useful, could be triangulated with other instruments and data sources, such as role-plays (see, for example, Malmir & Taji, 2021), discourse completion tests (see, for example, Jalilifar & Hoseini, 2021), or interactions on social media platforms such as Twitter (see for example Depraetere et al., 2021), so as to enhance validity across data sources. Finally, as the present study was restricted to IC themes and IC response strategies, as well as the relationship between Iranian students' gender and their preferred IC themes in university contexts, future studies could investigate the effect of other factors, including social distance, on IC themes or replicate the same study in a different context, such as in the workplace.

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