



2024 WESTERN CONFERENCE ON LINGUISTICS

# A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF COMPLAINTS

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# INTRODUCTION

**Speech acts** = minimal linguistic units; language acts / speech units.

## General **speech act theory**:

- all utterances in addition to their meaning, also perform specific acts via a specific communicative force of that utterance.
- **Complaints** = speech act that expresses speaker's disapproval of the hearer's behaviour.

# COMPLAINTS

- The speaker expresses displeasure/annoyance as a reaction to a past or ongoing action that affects the speaker unfavourably;
- “an illocutionary act in which the speaker expresses disapproval or negative feelings toward the state of affairs described in the proposition and for which the hearer is held responsible either directly or indirectly” (Trosborg, 1995).
- multiple speech acts (Clyne, Ball and Neil, 1991) that usually spread over several turns (Murphy and Neu, 1996).

# COMPLAINTS

- behabitives (Austin, 1962) – show speaker's behaviour;
- expressive acts (Searle, 1969) – express speaker's feelings/attitude;
- conflictive acts (Leech, 1983) – threat/accusation/cursing etc.
- face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987);
- retrospective acts (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995) – used as a reactions to an action that affected the speaker unfavourably;

# METHODOLOGY

## ☐ Instrument:

- Open-ended discourse completion task (DCT).

## ☐ Participants:

University students currently enrolled in a university. (USA respondents from San Diego, California & MK respondents from Shtip, North Macedonia)

## ☐ Quantitative method

- Conveyed by an SPSS system (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

## ☐ Qualitative method

- Used to correlate the statistical data with the sociocultural features.

# DCT

Speech act	Scenario	Social distance	Social status	Degree of imposition
COMPLAINT	A stranger cut in line in front of you.	distant	neutral	low
	Your friend is being late.	close	equal	medium
	The professor announces that he/she has lost your exam paper.	medium	unequal	high

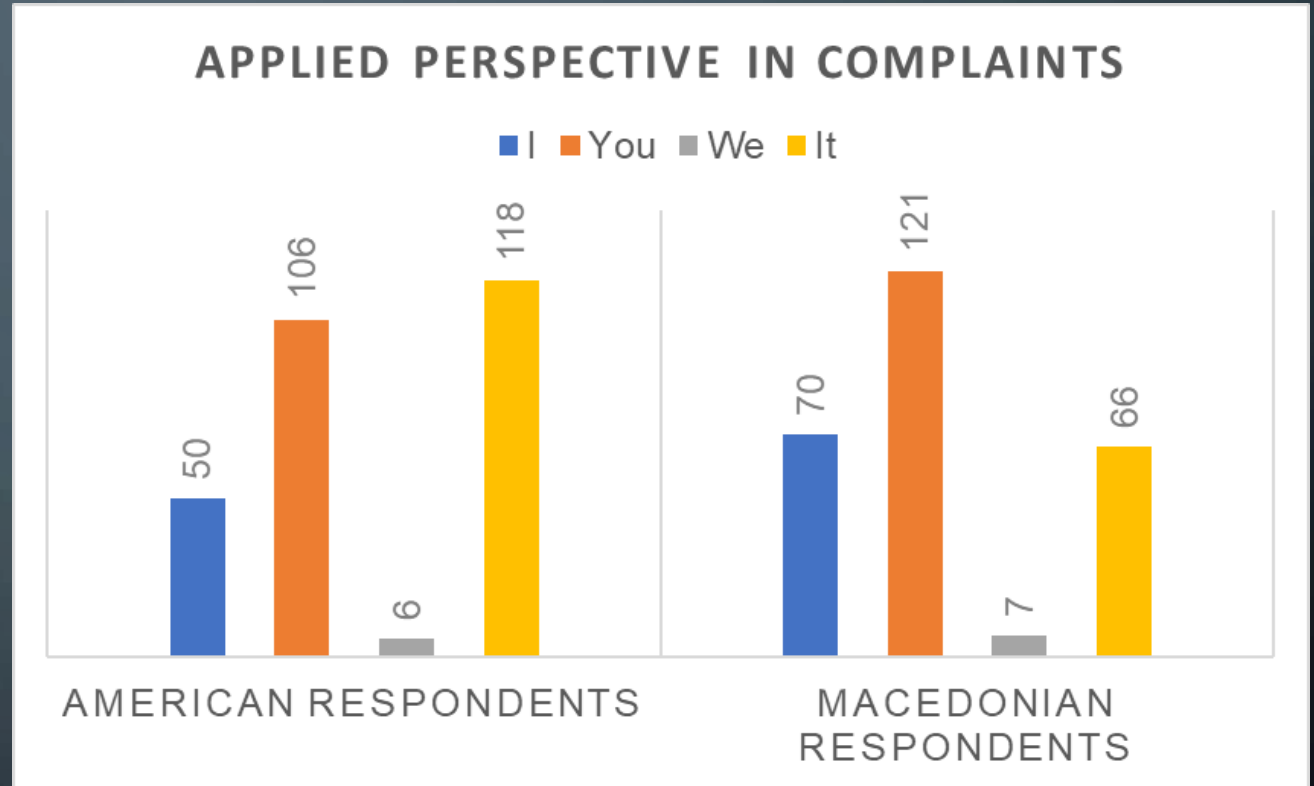
## Classification of:

- **strategies** in accordance to the typology of Olshtain and Weinbach (1987).
- **perspectives** were classified in accordance Haverkate (1984).
- **modifiers** were categorized through a mixed typology.

# ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Type of a perspective in complaints	focalising speaker perspective
	focalising hearer perspective
	defocalising speaker perspective
	defocalising hearer perspective

- **focalising** = the intent is to emphasize the role of the referent in the situation; a specific reference.
- **defocalising** = the intent is to minimise the role of the referent in the situation or completely exclude the referent.



# ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Internal modifiers	Upgraders		1	Openers		
			2	Intensifiers		
			3	Commitment upgraders		
			4	Expletives		
			5	Overstaters		
	Downgraders		Softeners		6	Downtoners
					7	Understaters
					8	Hedge
			Fillers		9	Appealers
					10	Cajole
					11	Subjectiviers
External modifiers				12	Alerters	
				13	Preparators	
				14	Grounders	
				15	Disarmers	
				16	Sweeteners	

## MODIFIERS

■ downgraders 
 ■ upgraders 
 ■ disarmers  
■ alerters 
 ■ grounders





# ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Category	No.	Strategy
No explicit reproach	1	Hints
Expression of disapproval	2	Annoyance
	3	Ill consequences
Accusation	4	Indirect accusations
	5	Direct accusation
Blame	6	Modified blame
	7	Explicit blame (behaviour)
	8	Explicit blame (person)

- The vase wasn't broken.

Hint

- Shh, I'm trying to watch a movie.

Annoyance

- How should I take the test with no pen?

Ill consequences

- You forgot, didn't you?

Indirect accusation

- You have stolen the recipe.

Direct accusation

- You are late!

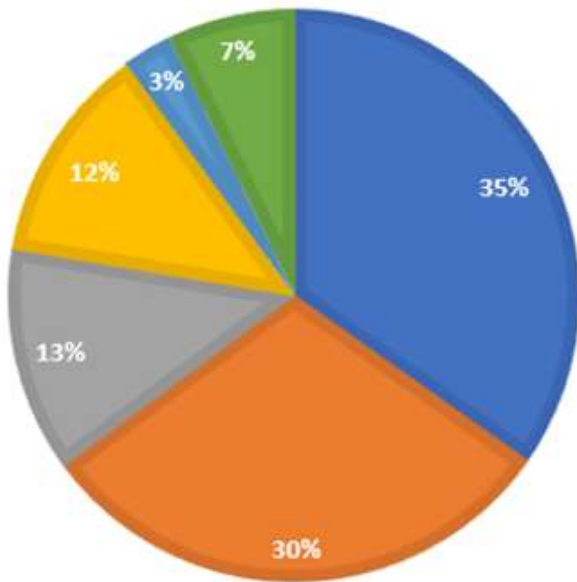
Blame-behaviour

- You are such a fool!

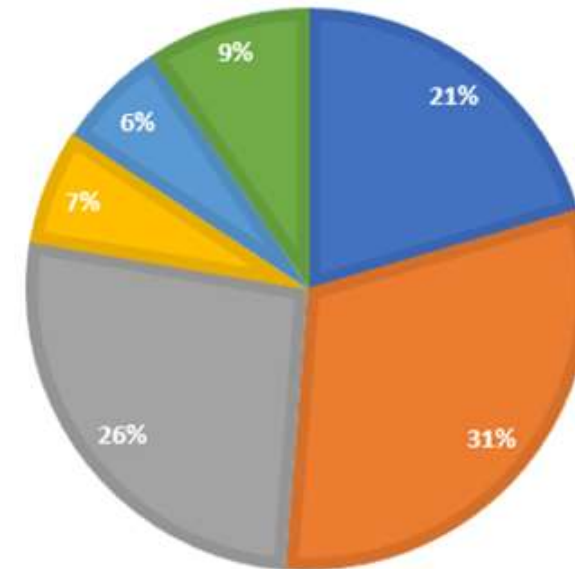
Blame-person

# ANALYSIS & RESULTS

AMERICAN RESPONDENTS



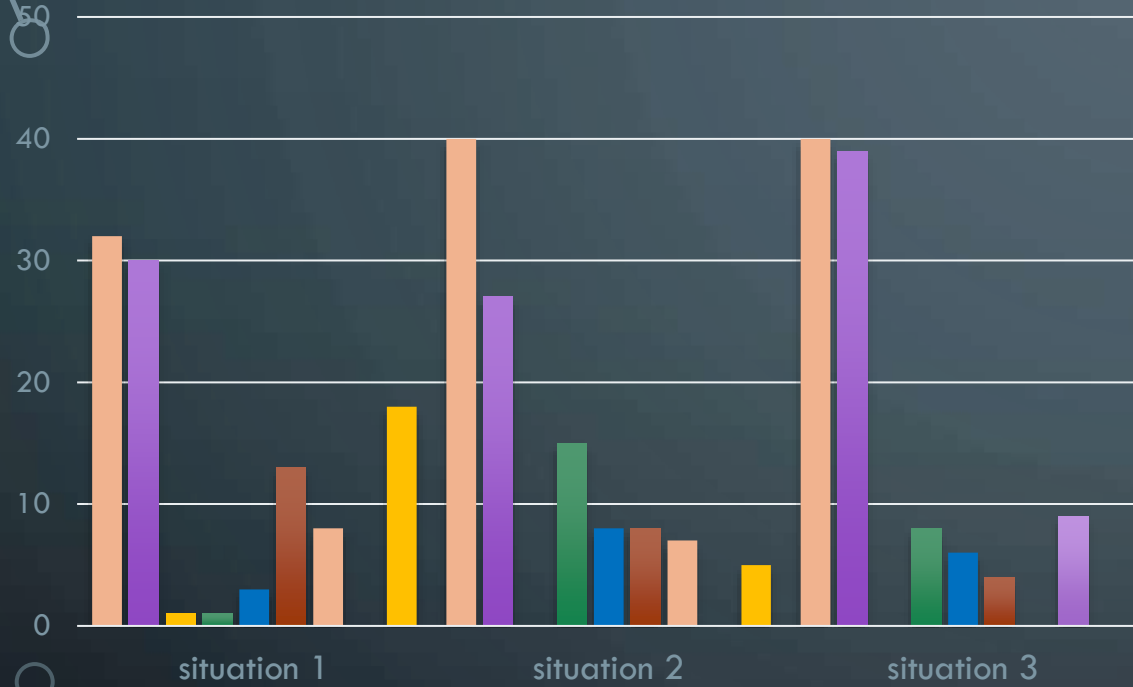
MACEDONIAN RESPONDENTS



- no explicit approach
- expression of disapproval
- accusation
- blame
- directive acts
- opting out

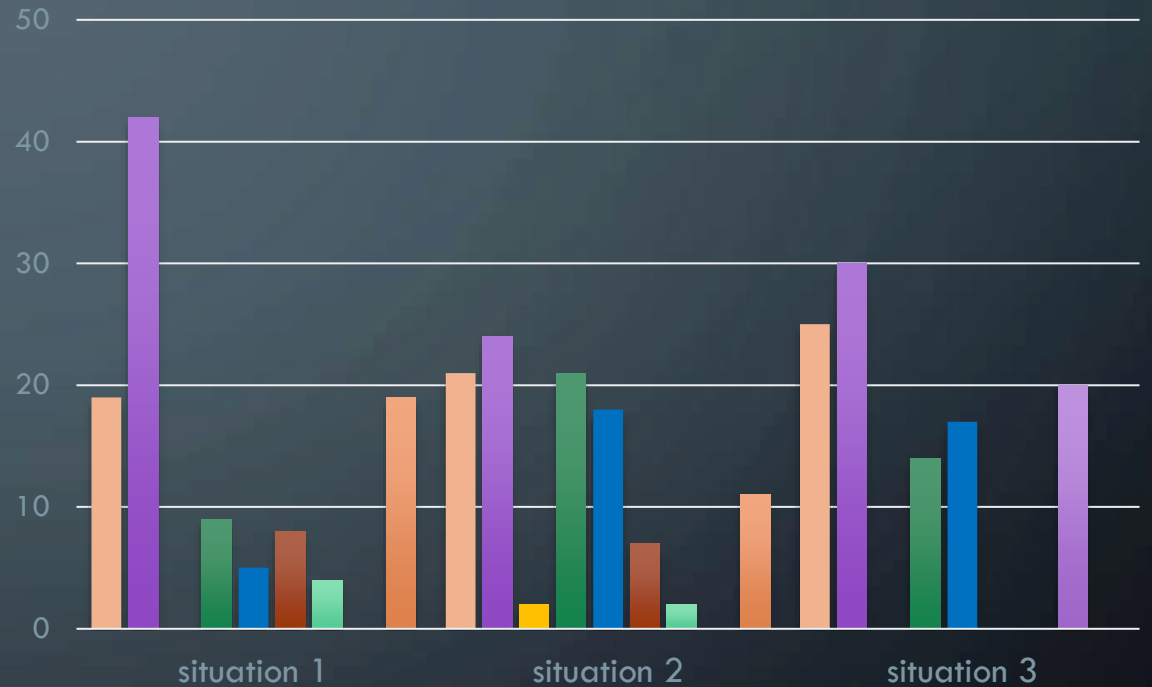
# COMPLAINING STRATEGIES

## USA respondents



- hints
- annoyance
- ill consequences
- indirect accusation
- direct accusation

## MK respondents



- hints
- annoyance
- ill consequences
- indirect accusation
- direct accusation

# THE MOST FREQUENT FORM OF A COMPLAINT

## AMERICAN ENGLISH

- Aimed toward the interlocutor with **specific or nonspecific reference** depending on the social relations between the interlocutors.
- conveyed through an inexplicit form of expressing **disapproval or annoyance**.
- The interlocutor is **alerted** for the forthcoming complaint.

## MACEDONIAN

- An act with a **specific reference** toward the interlocutor.
- Conveyed through forms expressing **disapproval, annoyance or an accusation**.
- The interlocutor is notified for the forthcoming complaint through an **explanation or justification**.

# COMPLAINTS – SIMILARITIES:

- use of a **hearer-oriented perspective**;
- the use of a **specific reference** toward the hearer;
- the use of a **nonspecific reference** toward the hearer, when he/she has an unequal social status with the interlocutor and involves a high severity imposition;
- use of **pre-acts** used to notify the hearer;
- use of strategies of **disapproval or annoyance**;

## COMPLAINTS – SIMILARITIES:

- **mutual choice** of respondents **to refrain from a comment** in the situation with the lowest severity of imposition.
- the **use of** additional act (specifically **a request for repair**) as part of the speech act, which is present solely in the context in which the interlocutors had unequal social status.
- **shared higher preference for expressing an accusation** when the interlocutors have a close social distance.

# COMPLAINTS - DIFFERENCES

- USA complaints are **more externally modified** (they are more prone to alert the hearer when complaining);
- in USA complaints the external modification correlates with the social status parameter (it grows proportionally);
- MK responses have a **frequent use of the strategy of accusation** that does not correspond with the USA responses;
- the use of **grounders by MK** respondents, or the tendency to provide **explanation or justification** for the complaint that lacks in **USA** responses.

## CONCLUSION

- ❖ There are differences in the language structure of the speech act of complaining that result from the variable influence of the social parameters over the utterances of the two sample groups; however they **do not show significant statistical difference.**
- ❖ **Similarities outnumber the differences in the act of complaining in American English & Macedonian.**