

**Pragmatic aspects of making and responding to *complaints* in an intercultural
university context**

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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Date

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Signature

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Abstract

The broad topic of this study is the nature and the effects of making and interpreting complaints in intercultural interactions involving international students and South African administrative staff in two Stellenbosch University residences. It appears that during these interactions, the international students are often frustrated by the way their complaints are handled. As a speech act, the effectiveness of a complaint depends on the way it is expressed and understood and also on the social context in which it is performed. In this regard, the study examines the influence of cultural differences on the way complaints are made and responded to in the above-mentioned intercultural interactions. The study aims to analyse intercultural situations involving the making and understanding of complaints that may result in misunderstandings.

The complaints data were collected through a discourse completion task, performed by 24 international students belonging to six cultural groups, namely American, Chinese, Dutch, Gabonese, German and Libyan. All the students were residents in one of two student residences of Stellenbosch University. The social acceptability judgments data were elicited from three Afrikaans-speaking South African staff members of these residences, and from an additional six Afrikaans-speaking South African students who served as informants. All the data were analyzed within the pragmatic framework of the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project), as developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989).

The main findings of the analysis indicate that the six cultural groups differed in the way they made their complaints. Moreover, these differences influenced the manner in which some complaints were understood by the staff members. It was also found that the staff members' responses to the complaints were influenced by their social acceptability judgments of the international students' utterances. These findings lead to three main conclusions: (i) the way in which complaints are made and understood is influenced by factors that relate to cultural differences; (ii) such cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings; and (iii) conscious efforts to create greater awareness of cultural differences will lead to a better understanding of the way in which people of different cultural groups make and respond to complaints.

Abstrak

Hierdie studie handel breedweg oor die aard en effek van klagtes, soos uitgedruk en geïnterpreteer tydens interkulturele interaksies tussen internasionale studente en Suid-Afrikaanse administratiewe personeel in twee koshuise van die Universiteit Stellenbosch. Dit blyk dat die studente dikwels gefrustreerd voel oor die manier waarop hulle klagtes in sulke interaksies gehanteer word. Die effektiwiteit van 'n klagte, as 'n taalhandeling, word bepaal deur die manier waarop dit uitgedruk en verstaan word, asook deur die sosiale konteks waarbinne dit uitgevoer word. Die studie ondersoek in dié verband die invloed van kulturele verskille op die manier waarop klagtes uitgedruk en op gereageer word in die bogenoemde interaksies. Die doel van die studie is om 'n analise te maak van interkulturele situasies waar misverstande kan ontstaan by die uitdruk en interpretasie van klagtes.

Die klagte-data is ingesamel deur die voltooiing van 'n diskoers-taak waarby 24 studente van ses verskillende kultuurgroepe betrek is: Amerikaans, Chinees, Duits, Gabonees, Libies en Nederlands. Al die studente was inwoners van een van twee koshuise van Stellenbosch Universiteit. Die data oor sosiale aanvaarbaarheidsoordele is verkry van drie Afrikaanssprekende Suid-Afrikaanse personeellede, en van 'n verdere ses Afrikaanssprekende Suid-Afrikaanse studente wat opgetree het as informante. Al die data is ontleed binne die pragmatiekraamwerk van die CCSARP ("Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project"), soos ontwikkel deur Blum-Kulka, House en Kasper (1989).

Die hoofbevindings van die analise dui daarop dat die ses kultuurgroepe van mekaar verskil wat betref die manier waarop hulle hul klagtes uitgedruk het, en dat hierdie verskille 'n invloed het op die manier waarop sommige klagtes geïnterpreteer is deur die personeellede. 'n Verdere bevinding is dat die personeellede se reaksies op die klagtes beïnvloed is deur hulle beoordeling van die sosiale aanvaarbaarheid van die internasionale studente se uitings. Drie hoofgevolgtrekkings kan op basis van dié bevindings gemaak word: (i) die manier waarop klagtes uitgedruk en geïnterpreteer word, word beïnvloed deur faktore wat verband hou met kulturele verskille; (ii) sulke kulturele verskille kan lei tot misverstande; en (iii) daadwerklike pogings om 'n groter bewussyn van kulturele verskille te skep, sal lei tot 'n beter begrip van die manier waarop klagtes uitgedruk en op gereageer word deur mense van verskillende kultuurgroepe.

Table of contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Introduction	1
Chapter 2.....	4
Theoretical background	4
2.1 Speech acts	4
2.2 The speech act of complaint.....	13
2.3 Pragmatic aspects of the use of speech acts	16
2.4 The use of speech acts and miscommunication	20
Chapter 3.....	26
Research design and methodological framework	26
3.1 Subjects.....	26
3.2 Instruments.....	27
3.3 Procedure.....	29
3.4 Methods for data analysis.....	29
3.5 Methods of analysing speech act social acceptability judgements	39
Chapter 4.....	40
Analysis and findings.....	40
4.1 Performance of the speech act sequence of complaint: analysis and findings.....	40
4.2 Results of the South African staff's social judgements of complainers' utterances.....	61
4.3 Findings concerning the staff members' replies to the complainers	78
Chapter 5.....	85
Summary and Conclusion	85
Bibliography	89
Appendix	94

List of Tables

Table 1: Distribution of international students used for eliciting data	26
Table 2: The CCSARP types of alerters.	29
Table 3: The CCSARP types of supportive moves	30
Table 4: The CCSARP types of modifiers	35
Table 5: The CCSARP range of strategy types of request	35
Table 6: The CCSARP types of request perspectives	36
Table 7: Frequency of use of individual speech acts.	41
Table 8: Dominant complaint sequences across cultural groups	42
Table 9: Frequency of use of complaint strategy preferences among the six cultural groups.	46
Table 10: Frequency of use of directness and indirectness strategies.	47
Table 11: Internal modifiers used by complainers in their complaints.	49
Table 12: Use of modifiers across the cultural groups.	50
Table 13: Use of softeners and intensifiers across the cultural groups	51
Table 14: Frequency of use of request strategy preferences	53
Table 15: Frequency of use of directness and indirectness strategies.	53
Table 16: Modifiers used to perform the individual speech act of request.	55
Table 17: Use of modifiers to perform the individual speech act of request across the six cultures	56
Table 18: Use of softeners and intensifiers in the performance of the individual speech act of request.	57
Table 19: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 1	58
Table 20: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 2	67
Table 21: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 3	68
Table 22: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 4	69
Table 23: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 5	70
Table 24: Speech acts performed in staff members' replies to complainers	76

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study examines the influence of cultural factors on the way individuals from different cultures interact linguistically. 'Culture' is a complex concept and has been defined in various ways in the literature (cf. e.g. Ting-Toomey 1999; Collier 2003; Guirdham 1999; Thornton 2000). Following Ting-Toomey (1999:10) the concept of 'culture' is understood in this study as a complex frame of reference consisting of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings which are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community. Collier (2003:418) furthermore states that an individual can belong to different types of culture: an individual belongs to the culture(s) she¹ claims to belong to, and which provides the symbols, meanings and norms she uses in her everyday life. In this respect, Collier (2003:418-419) identifies six different types of culture to which individuals can belong, namely national and ethnic cultures; sex and gender; profession; geographic area; organizational culture; and physical ability and disability. The present study focuses on national and ethnic cultures. In these types of culture, according to Collier (2003:418), individuals are united by the same history, heritage, and origin from which derive traditions, rituals, codes of language, and norms.

The intercultural interactions examined in this study involve individuals representing seven different national and ethnic cultures; these individuals are from China, Gabon, Germany, Libya, the Netherlands, and the United States of America, as well as Afrikaans individuals from South Africa. The study provides an analysis of intercultural interactions in which complaints are made

¹ In the present study, we use the convention of referring to the speaker as female and to the hearer, audience or addressee as male.

and responded to, and which may result in misunderstandings and even communication breakdown. In this, the focus will be on interactions involving international students and Afrikaans-speaking South African administrative staff in two Stellenbosch University residences.

Public and business organisations, in general, consider comments and complaints as valuable measures of customers' satisfaction. That is why many of these organisations provide their customers with formal and free complaints services. In some cases, public and business organisations receive complaints from international customers. This is the case in some Stellenbosch University residences where the administrative staff may receive complaints from both local and international students. It appears, however, that, like national students, international students are often not satisfied with the way their complaints are processed.

From a linguistic, and more specifically, a pragmatic perspective, a complaint is analysed as a speech act, that is, an act a speaker performs by saying something. This speech act, in turn, may comprise various "smaller" speech acts (cf. e.g. van Dijk 1981; Murphy and Neu 1996).² Moreover, as a speech act, the effectiveness of a complaint depends not only on the way it is expressed and understood, but also on the social context in which it is performed. In this respect, the study will seek to answer the following three questions:

1. Do cultural differences influence the way that complaints are made and responded to?
2. If so, what are the potentially problematic consequences of such differences?
3. How can these consequences be addressed and remedied?

² The component parts of the general speech act of complaint will be described in Chapter 2.

With regard to these questions, the following hypotheses are suggested:

- A. The way in which complaints are made and responded to is influenced by factors that relate to cultural differences.
- B. Cultural differences in the way that complaints are made and responded to may lead to misunderstandings and even communication breakdown.
- C. Conscious efforts to create greater awareness of cultural differences will lead to a better understanding of the way in which people of different cultural groups (specifically, different national and ethnic groups) make and respond to complaints.

The study will be conducted within a pragmatic framework that is intended to account for (i) the broad/general speech act of complaint and (ii) the expression of and response to this speech act in intercultural communication settings. For this reason, Chapter 2 provides a general description of the concept of 'speech act' and of the speech act of complaint. This chapter also examines the potential problematic consequences (that is, misunderstandings and miscommunication) of the performance of the speech act of complaint. Chapter 3 deals with the subjects from whom the data were elicited, the instruments which were used in collecting the data, and the method used for analysing the data. Chapter 4 is devoted to the analysis of the data and a discussion the findings. Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, contains a summary of, and reflection on, the main findings, and suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2

Theoretical background

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general description of the concept of ‘speech act’, and to provide a more specific account of the speech act of complaint. Given that the study examines the influence of cultural factors on the use of the speech act of complaint by individuals from different cultures, this chapter also examines the potentially problematic consequences (for example, misunderstandings and miscommunication) involved in the performance of this speech act.

2.1 Speech acts

The language philosopher Austin (1962) was the first to introduce the concept of ‘speech act’, and his theory of speech acts was initially further developed by Searle (1969).

Austin (1962:12) points out that, in their ordinary use of language, people do not only produce utterances to merely *say* things about the world; rather, people also produce utterances in order to *do* things. In other words, according to Austin, people also use language in order to perform certain actions. Consider, for instance, the following utterance:

(1) I bet you my watch that the blue team will lose the game.

In uttering (1), the speaker is actually performing the act of betting. Austin (in Graham 1977:88) refers to the acts that language users perform in producing utterances as “illocutionary acts” (or “speech acts”).

Austin distinguished three fundamental dimensions of a speech act which correspond to different acts that a speaker performs (or may perform) in saying something (Graham 1977:87). These dimensions are: locution, illocution and perlocution.

A. The **Locution** dimension concerns, on the one hand, the physiological process of producing speech sounds and, on the other hand, the grammatical structure and literal meaning of the actual sentence uttered. For instance, a speaker who utters the sentence (2),

(2) It is raining.

is not only producing some speech sounds, but also saying something about the weather. When a speaker utters a sentence (that is, when a speaker says something), she performs what Austin calls a “locutionary” act (1962:94).

B. The **Illocution** dimension concerns the speaker’s intention conveyed by the sentence uttered. To put it differently, the illocutionary aspect of an utterance has to do with the force (or the value) the speaker gives to that utterance, that is, the way the utterance is intended to be understood by the hearer (Graham 1977:88). In the case of the utterance in (2), for example, it could be asked whether the speaker is merely describing the weather, or whether she is perhaps warning the hearer against driving too fast. When a speaker utters a sentence in order to do something like warning, ordering, requesting, apologizing, etc., she performs what Austin calls an “illocutionary” act (1962:98).

C. The **Perlocutionary** dimension concerns the effects produced on the hearer by a speaker’s performance of an illocutionary act. For instance, by uttering the sentence (2) the speaker may convince the hearer not to go outside, or to drive carefully, etc. When a speaker

produces certain effects on her hearer by saying something, she performs what Austin calls a “perlocutionary” act (1962:101).

The above three dimensions of a speech act are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, as is clear from the example (2), in performing the locutionary act of saying *It is raining*, a speaker may want to warn (illocutionary act) the hearer against the danger of driving too fast in the rain; and because of the warning, the hearer may decide not to go outside (perlocutionary effect).

Focussing on the illocutionary dimension of speech acts, Austin (1962:8) notes that their performance can fail in their effectiveness when the social and conventional conditions and applicable rules – that is, the felicity conditions – for the performance of a specific act are not satisfied. For instance, the illocutionary act associated with the utterance (3)

(3) I name this ship ...

will only be successful if the speaker is properly authorized to name a ship.

Austin (1962:83) states that illocutionary acts are usually performed in uttering sentences that contain a performative verb (also called illocutionary verb or speech act verb). A speech act verb is a verb which denotes the act performed by the speaker in uttering a sentence, as in the following example:

(4) I deny the charges against me.

The verb *deny* in this example is a speech act verb because it indicates that in uttering the sentence, the speaker is actually performing the act of denying.

Taking into account the various speech acts verbs that are found in English, Austin (1962:153-161) classifies illocutionary acts into the following five categories:

- A. **Verdictives** are illocutionary acts performed in order to give a verdict or an evaluation. These acts are performed in uttering sentences which contain verbs of acquitting, condemning, judging, estimating, assessing, decreeing, etc.
- B. **Exercitives** are illocutionary acts performed in order to exercise power and rights. These acts are performed in uttering sentences which contain verbs of naming, appointing, proclaiming, voting, etc.
- C. **Commissives** are illocutionary acts performed in order to express commitments or undertakings. These acts are performed in uttering sentences which contain verbs of committing, promising, betting, guaranteeing, etc.
- D. **Behabitives** are illocutionary acts related to attitudes and social behaviours. They are performed in uttering sentences which contain verbs of commending, apologizing, complaining, etc.
- E. **Expositives** are illocutionary acts performed in order to expand one's views, to describe or to explain. These acts are performed in uttering sentences which contain verbs of stating, illustrating, denying, describing, arguing, etc.

Developing further Austin's (1962) speech act theory, Searle (1969:16) considers speech acts as the basic or minimal units of all linguistic communication. Searle prefers using the term "speech act" to refer to what Austin calls "illocutionary act". Moreover, according to Searle (1969:24), a speaker's performance of a speech act involves three different acts which make up the complete speech act. These three acts are "utterance act" (uttering words), "propositional act" (referring and predicating) and "illocutionary act" (e.g., stating, commanding, or requesting). Suppose, for example, that a speaker utters the sentence (5) when addressing a hearer under the appropriate circumstances:

(5) The car was open.

According to Searle (1969:23), in uttering this sentence (i.e., in producing the speech sounds in the shape of a string of words that means something in English) the speaker has performed an utterance act. What is more, the fact that in uttering the sentence (5) the speaker refers to something (in this case the car), and that she predicates something about the car (it was open) she has performed a propositional act. Then, since in uttering (5) the speaker is saying something (making a statement or an assertion), she has performed an illocutionary act.

As illustrated by the example (5), in performing an illocutionary act, the speaker is also performing an utterance act and a propositional act (Searle 1969:24). However, Searle makes clear the fact that different utterances may convey the same illocutionary act and the same propositional act, but different utterance acts. Suppose, for instance, that the same speaker as in the example (5) utters the following sentence:

(6) The car was not closed.

If we compare this example with the one in (5), we can see that in uttering the sentence (6) the speaker is performing the same illocutionary act (the same statement or assertion) and the same propositional act (the same reference to the car and the same predication about the car) as in the case of (5). However, the speaker does not perform the same utterance act since she does not use the same words. Similarly, it can also happen that different utterances may convey the same propositional act but different illocutionary acts. Suppose, for instance, that the same speaker as in examples (5) and (6) utters the sentence (7):

(7) Why was the car open?

If we compare this sentence with those in (5) and (6), we can see that in uttering the sentence (7) the speaker is performing the same propositional act (the same reference to the car and the same predication about the car) as in (5) and (6); but she does not perform the same illocutionary act which can be, in this case, either asking a question or blaming. The possibility of two illocutionary acts (asking a question or blaming) being performed in uttering sentence (7), illustrates Searle's (1975:60) claim that illocutionary acts can also be performed indirectly. According to Searle (1975:60), indirect illocutionary acts (or indirect speech acts) are "cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another". In uttering the sentence (7) the speaker is performing the illocutionary act of asking a question. However, if the speaker intends her utterance to be taken as a reproach (the illocutionary force) then she is, through the act of questioning, indirectly performing the illocutionary act of blaming. Searle (1975:62) calls the "secondary" speech act (or illocutionary act) the direct one, that is, the speech act which is literally performed through the sentence uttered (in this case, asking a question) and which is used as a means to perform the indirect one speech act; by contrast, the "primary" speech act is the one which is indirectly performed, in this case blaming, and represents the intended force or value of the utterance.

According to Searle (1969: 25) a speaker's performance of an illocutionary act may have a certain effect or consequence on the hearer. For instance, consider the following utterance produced under the appropriate conditions:

(8) Did you lock the car?

By uttering the sentence (8) the speaker may get the hearer to go and double check the car, or she may warn the hearer of insecurity in the area. Searle (1969:25) uses Austin's term

“perlocutionary act” to refer to the act a speaker may intentionally perform by producing an illocutionary act, and “perlocutionary effect” to refer to the effect on or the response of the hearer.

Searle (1969:22) stresses the idea that talking involves performing speech acts according to constitutive³ rules. In this respect, he (1971:40) defines speech acts in terms of the necessary conditions and the semantic rules that determine their performance. Searle proposes to analyse speech acts along lines that define the necessary conditions and rules for a speech act to be performed successfully. For a successful performance of the speech act of promising, for instance, Searle (1971:48-51) lists the following set of necessary conditions:

Given that a speaker *S* utters a sentence *T* in the presence of a hearer *H*, then, in the utterance of *T*, *S* sincerely (and non-defectively) promises that *p* to *H* if and only if:

1. *S* and *H* are engaged in a serious linguistic communication, and they are both in free and intelligible conditions for speaking and understanding.
2. *S* expresses that *p* in the utterance of *T*.
3. In expressing that *p*, *S* predicates a future act *A* of *S*. This condition and the condition (2) are called the “propositional content conditions”.
4. *H* would prefer that *S* does *A*, and *S* believes that *H* would prefer *S* doing *A*.
5. It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events. This condition and the one in (4) are called the “preparatory conditions”.
6. *S* intends to do *A*. This condition is called the “sincerity condition”.

³ Searle (1969:33) distinguishes two different kinds of rules: regulative rules which regulate independently existing forms of behaviours (for instance rules of inter-personal relationships) and constitutive rules which, apart from regulating, primarily define forms of behaviours (for instance, the rules of football).

7. *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will place her under an obligation to do *A*. This is the “essential condition”.
8. *S* intends that the utterance of *T* will produce in *H* a belief that conditions (6) and (7) obtain by means of the recognition of the intention to produce that belief, and she intends this recognition to be achieved by means of the recognition of the sentence as one conventionally used to produce such beliefs.
9. The semantic rules of the dialect spoken by *S* and *H* are such that *T* is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions (1)-(8) obtain.

From this set of conditions, and as an illustrative example of semantic rules for performing a speech act, Searle (1971:52) derives the following rules for promising:

Rule 1: P is to be uttered only in the context of a sentence (or a discourse) the utterance of which predicates some future Act of S. Searle calls this rule the “propositional-content rule”.

Rule 2: P is to be uttered only if *H* would prefer that *S* does *A*, and *S* believes that *H* would prefer *S* doing *A*.

Rule 3: P is to be uttered only if it is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events. Searle calls the rules 2 and 3 the “preparatory rules”.

Rule 4: P is to be uttered only if *S* intends to do *A*. This is the “sincerity rule”.

Rule 5: the utterance of P counts as the undertaking of an obligation to do *A*. This is the “essential rule”.

According to Searle (1971:52), these five rules are ordered: rules 2-5 can apply only if rule (1) is satisfied, and rule (5) applies only if rules (2) and (3) are satisfied as well. Revising Austin’s

speech acts classification, Searle developed one that is more widely accepted. In his work, Searle (in Flowerdew 1988:71) classifies speech acts into the following five basic types:

A. The **Representative** speech acts describe states or events in the world. These speech acts commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. Representatives are performed when the illocutionary function (that is, the illocutionary force) of an utterance is, for example, to suggest, to swear, to hypothesise.

B. The **Directive** speech acts attempt to get the hearer to do something; the speaker wants the world to change to fit her words. Directives are performed when the illocutionary function of an utterance is, for example, to command, to request, to invite.

C. The **Commissive** speech acts commit the speaker to do something in the future. They involve the intention of the speaker to match the world to her words. Commissives are performed when the illocutionary function of an utterance is, for example, to promise, to threaten, to undertake.

D. The **Expressive** speech acts are those in which the speaker expresses feelings regarding a state of affairs that the expressive refers to, but does not presuppose or assert. Expressives are performed when the illocutionary function of an utterance is, for example, to thank, to congratulate, to welcome.

E. The **Declaration** speech acts are those which attempt to change the world in their performance; for instance, declaring as in (9):

(9) I declare you man and wife.

2.2 The speech act of complaint

The present study is concerned with the speech act of complaint. In her semantic dictionary of English speech acts verbs, Wierzbicka (1987:242) describes the action of complaining as involving a situation in which the speaker (i.e., the complainer) expresses the idea that something bad is happening to her and that she wants the addressee (i.e., the complaine, when there is one) to intervene and to do something in order to improve her situation. In much the same way, Olshtain and Weinbach (1993:108) state that in performing the speech act of complaint, the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance – censure – as a reaction to a past or ongoing socially unacceptable act (SUA), the consequences of which are perceived by S as affecting her unfavourably. This complaint is usually addressed to a hearer (H) whom S holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action. Along with other researchers, Monzoni (2008:1) distinguishes two types of complaints, namely direct and indirect complaints. Similar to Olshtain and Weinbach's (1993) view of the speech act of complaint, direct complaints refer to those in which the complainer directly expresses her grievance to the person she holds (at least partially) responsible for the unacceptable matter. Indirect complaints, in contrast, are those in which the complainer expresses her grievance to an addressee whom she does not hold responsible for the unacceptable matter. Using a different terminology, Traverso (2008:1-2) also distinguishes two types of complaints: “complaints about the recipient”, comparable to Monzoni's direct complaints, and “third-party complaints”, which are defined according to their core features. The first core feature is that in a third-party complaint, the speaker expresses feelings of discontent about what she considers to be a “complainable matter”.⁴ This complainable matter concerns a

⁴ Taverno borrows this term from Drew and Holt (1987).

third-party – in most cases, a person who is not (one of) the addressee(s), although it can also be a fact, an object or a situation. Consider, for example, the following utterance:

(10) I am fed up with this house.

This is an example of a third-party complaint in which the speaker expresses her negative stance (*I am fed up*) on a “complainable matter” (the house). The second core feature of a third-party complaint is that its performance is oriented towards getting the addressee(s)’ affiliation, that is, getting the addressee(s)’ to agree with the speaker.

In situations in which the complainable matter is a person, according to Heinemann (2008:2), the person responsible for the SUA (that is, the complainee or the offender) need not be physically absent when the speaker performs the act of complaining in order for him (the offender) to be the target of a third party complaint. From this perspective of third party complaint, Heinemann (2008) analysed complaints data collected from Danish home care visits. The complaints data were elicited from caregivers and care recipients. The study shows how in a speech event involving a care recipient and two caregivers, the recipient – even though physically present – was excluded from the interactions between the caregivers who together constructed complaints about him. The findings of that study point to the fact that the exclusion of the target of the complaint is accomplished on two levels. On the first level, the exclusion is accomplished by affiliation of several complainers (people who express the complaint) working on and constructing the complaint together as a team. On the second level, the exclusion is accomplished by pointing at a physically present interlocutor as the target of the complaint, and by treating that interlocutor (the target) as if he was physically absent (Heinemann 2008:8).

Studies like Drew and Curl's (2008) show that there are situations in which the speaker makes a complaint on behalf of the victim (a co-participant of the given speech event) of the complainable matter. In doing so, the person who expresses the feeling of discontentment affiliates with the victim about what is seen as a complainable matter. Drew and Curl's study indicates that in situations in which the speaker complains on behalf of a co-participant, the victim can react in two different ways. On the one hand, the victim can, in turn, affiliate with the person introducing the complaint by supporting and approving her claims. On the other hand, the victim could disaffiliate with the person who complains on his behalf. Drew and Curl (2008:1) state that the victim's disaffiliation with the speaker might stem from the victim's feeling that the speaker is "going too far" in the way that she expresses the complaint.

With regard to the performance of the speech act of complaint, Murphy and Neu (1996:193), amongst others, refer to the speech act of complaint as a "speech act set". Murphy and Neu (1996:214) define a speech act set as a combination of different speech acts which, taken together, make up a complete speech act. In their analysis of the speech act set of complaint as performed by American native speakers and by Korean non-native speakers of English, Murphy and Neu (1996:199-201) have found that the American speakers produced a speech act set of complaint made up of the following semantic components: an explanation of purpose; a complaint; a justification; and a candidate solution (in this case a request). In contrast, the Korean speakers of English produced a speech act set made up of an explanation of purpose; a complaint or a criticism; a justification; and a candidate solution (a request or a demand). The main difference between the two cultural groups' speech act sets resides in the component parts of the sets: a criticism component was observed in the Koreans' speech act set, whereas this component was absent in the Americans' set. In short, in spite of being in the same situation,

American native speakers and Korean non-native speakers of English do not perform the same speech act sets. This difference could probably be ascribed to cultural-specific norms that American and Korean students do not share. Indeed, it appears that in American culture students should not criticise their professor because of the difference in academic status between student and professor (Murphy and Neu 1996:200). Thus the appropriate way for American native speakers of English to express disapproval is to perform a complaint speech act set. As far as Korean non-native speakers of English are concerned, it seems to be acceptable in Korean culture for a student to criticise her professor; in this case, criticising is the appropriate way to express disapproval.⁵

In brief, Murphy and Neu's (1996) findings indicate that, when it comes to complaining, cultural differences can be observed from the semantic components of the speech act set used by the complainer in the performance of the speech act set of complaint.

The present study focuses on third-party complaints expressed as speech act sets by international students to South-African hostel staff members, where the third-party, or the complainable matter, is absent from the linguistic interactions.

2.3 Pragmatic aspects of the use of speech acts

Since Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) development of speech acts theory, speech acts are generally defined with reference to the specific conditions under which they are performed. This implies that the successful performance and understanding of speech acts requires from language users a certain competence which guides their choice and their interpretation of linguistic forms.

⁵ We will return to this case study below when we consider the influence of culture on the use of speech acts.

Studies of speech acts (cf. e.g., Thomas 1983; Bechman 1990) refer to the kind of competence that enables language users to successfully perform and recognise speech act, as “pragmatic competence” (sometimes also called “speech act competence”), which in turn forms part of a language user’s communicative competence. Pragmatic competence is defined as a language user’s “ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context” (Thomas 1983:92). Bachman (1990:90-94) describes language users’ pragmatic competence as comprising two components: (i) illocutionary competence, which is a language user’s ability to produce and recognize speech acts, and (ii) sociolinguistic competence, which is a language user’s ability to take into account features of social context in order to perform and interpret speech acts successfully.

While Bachman (1990:90-94) uses the terms “illocutionary competence” and “sociolinguistic competence”, Thomas (1983:101-103) refers to the two components of pragmatic competence as “pragmalinguistic competence” and “sociopragmatic competence”. Pragma-linguistic competence, on the one hand, concerns a language user’s ability to produce and understand an utterance with a specific sense and reference and with a specific pragmatic force (i.e., a specific illocutionary force) in a given context. Sociopragmatic competence, on the other hand, concerns a language user’s ability to make and understand an utterance with a specific sense and reference and with a specific illocutionary force, all this in accordance with the social context rules of language behaviour.

Researchers such as Blum-Kulka (1982) have shown that the use of speech acts (which is an aspect of a language user’s pragmatic competence) is universal to the extent that speech acts exist and are used in all languages, and for the same purposes. In her study of the way in which direct and indirect speech acts are performed by English-speaking learners of Hebrew as a

second language, Blum-Kulka (1982:36) makes the following two general claims: (i) in any language, users have the ability (depending on the situation or the context that they can assess) to choose and to use (employing the same principles) speech acts in a direct or indirect form, and also (ii) to successfully interpret and understand indirect speech acts from the context in which they are performed.

However, researchers have also shown that aspects of pragmatic competence are not universal. Flowerdew (1988) and Blum-Kulka (1982), for example, have shown that language users across languages and cultures do not use the same grammatical forms or structures in order to perform the same speech act. For instance, Blum-Kulka's (1982) study showed that speech acts are performed, in direct or indirect ways, differently according to particular cultures. The way or the choice for a specific way (in terms of grammatical structure and direct or indirect form) of realising a given speech act in a given culture is conventionalized; hence Blum-Kulka (1982:32) states that conventions of usage of speech acts depend on culture and not only on knowledge of language.

Wierzbicka (2003:vi) pointed out that since people interact in cultural contexts which are governed by specific cultural norms and values, speech acts are performed and understood according to these norms and values. In this regard, Béal (in Clyne 1994) investigated the use of the speech act of request between Anglo-Australian and French employees in a French company in Australia. It was found that, when making requests, French speakers prefer using the future tense, imperative forms, and the expression *il faut*, whereas Anglo-Australians prefer using either the expression *would you mind?* or other softeners (Clyne 1994:21). According to Béal (Clyne 1994:21), the different ways of requesting could be ascribed to the belief among French speakers

that people have “strong egos”, in contrast to the belief among Anglo-Australians that all people are “vulnerable”.

Murphy and Neu’s (1996) study which was referred to above, also found that specific cultural values and norms influence the use of speech acts. They investigated the socio-cultural rules of complaining in an academic context in the United States of America. In the study, some students (American native speakers and Korean non-native speakers of English) were placed in a situation where they have to express their disapproval about a bad mark to their professor. The results show that the American speakers expressed a complaint, whereas the Korean non-native speakers of English expressed a criticism. Moreover, each group perceives its speech act (complaint or criticism) as appropriate to the situation. All the students, native and non-native, had the pragmatic competence to perform a speech act in English in order to achieve their goal, that is, to get the professor to reconsider the mark. Still, despite being in the same situation, American native speakers and Korean non-native speakers of English do not perform the same speech act.

From an intercultural communication perspective, Murphy and Neu’s (1996) study has shown that a speech act is performed or interpreted appropriately in a given culture when the way it is performed (or interpreted) is the accepted, usual or common way of realisation in that culture. For communicators to interact successfully during intercultural encounters, as stressed by Ting-Toomey (1999:23), they should behave and exchange messages according to the specific rules of interaction (that is, the language used, the way language is used, participants’ behaviour, etc.) which apply to the social and cultural context of interaction. From a methodological perspective, and in order to ascertain whether a speech act has been performed appropriately in a given socio-cultural context, Murphy and Neu (1996:194) point to the importance of taking into account the

native speaker's acceptability judgment of a non-native speaker's performance in order to determine whether or not a speech act has been performed appropriately or not.

2.4 The use of speech acts and miscommunication

Olshtain and Weinbach (1993:108), amongst others, point out that performing the speech act of complaint is challenging for a speaker because it usually involves a "face-threatening act" directed at the addressee. Watts (2003:274) defines a face-threatening act (FTA) as any act (verbal or non-verbal) which threatens the way in which an individual sees herself or would like to be seen by others. The notion of 'face' is drawn from Goffman's studies and can be defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Watts 2003:124). In a similar way, Ting-Toomey (1999:37-38) states that face is "tied to a claimed sense of social esteem or regard that a person wants others to have for him or her." In the literature the concept of 'face' is usually closely related to the concept of 'politeness', more precisely, to politeness in language usage or "linguistic politeness" (Watts 2003:10). In a social interaction involving speech events, politeness can be defined as the verbal means used to maintain or enhance the other participant(s)' face (Yule 1996:60). Brown and Levinson (in Watts 2003) have developed a widely accepted theory of linguistic politeness. In their conceptualisation of linguistic politeness, the speaker in a speech event is considered as a model person (MP) who has the ability to assess the dangers of threatening the other participant(s)' face and to choose the appropriate linguistic strategy (or strategies) in order to minimize any face threats that might prevent her (the speaker) from achieving specific communicative goals (Watts 2003:85). In order to assess the dangers of threatening the other participant's face, the speaker has to take into account the following three socio-cultural variables of the FTA (Watts 2003:95-96):

- A. The addressee's power over the speaker
- B. The social distance between interlocutors
- C. The degree to which imposition is rated in the given culture.

According to Brown and Levinson (in Watts 2003:86), every person has two types of "face", one of which (or both) is expected to be respected by others during social interaction. The first type is positive face, which is defined as the person's desire that her wants be appreciated and approved of in social interactions. The second type is negative face, which is defined as the person's desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. In social interaction, linguistic politeness can be observed through the use of politeness strategies, defined by Watts (2003:86) as linguistic strategies the speaker uses in order (a) to support or enhance the addressee's positive face (positive politeness) and (b) to avoid transgression of the addressee's independence, freedom of action and freedom from imposition (negative politeness). According to Yule (1996: 65-66) a speaker's use of positive politeness linguistic forms can be viewed as a solidarity strategy. In a solidarity strategy, the speaker tends to emphasise her closeness with the addressee. By contrast, the speaker's use of negative politeness linguistic forms represents a deference strategy. In using a deference strategy, the speaker tends to emphasise the addressee's freedom of action.

Positive politeness and negative politeness are the core politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's theory. However, the theory postulates three other strategies that a speaker can use (Watts 2003:86-87; Yule 1996:62-63), namely:

- A. **Off-record** strategy, in which the speaker uses indirect utterances, i.e., utterances in which the illocutionary force or the speaker's illocutionary intention is implied rather than explicitly stated.

B. **Bald on-record** strategy, in which the speaker uses utterances that express directly and explicitly their illocutionary force and the speaker's illocutionary intention.

C. The speaker can decide not to use FTAs at all.

As mentioned by Yule (1996:63), a speaker following the bald on-record strategy uses utterances which address the addressee directly; hence, this strategy can be considered as a speaker's most direct approach.

Brown and Levinson have been criticized for presenting their concept of 'negative face' as a universal concept. Scholars have shown that 'negative face' is a very relevant phenomenon in individualistic cultures where an individual's freedom of thought and action (amongst other factors) has a high cultural value. In collectivistic cultures, in contrast, high cultural value is placed on group harmony and maintaining other group members' face (Andersen, Hecht, and Smallwood 2003:77). As an illustration of this criticism against Brown and Levinson's concept of 'negative face', Matsumoto (in Watts 2003:102) pointed to the fact that in Japanese culture communication strategies are predetermined by the individual's relative social status in a given communicative context, and by her/his obligation to maintain the social ranking order. Ting-Toomey (1999:38) likewise claims that while in all cultures individuals desire to be treated with at least some measure of respect in the communication process, what constitutes the proper way to show respect and consideration for face varies from one culture to another. In a similar way, Wierzbicka (2003:xv) claims that the way a communicator treats the other communicator's face depends on the former's cultural norms and values. Due to cultural-specific norms of the way of treating face, and of the way of performing speech acts, a speaker may unintentionally behave in a linguistically inappropriate way.

As mentioned earlier, performing the speech act of complaint is challenging for the speaker, because it is potentially a face-threatening act directed at the addressee. According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1993:111), performing the speech act of complaint can involve five different “realization patterns” which vary according to their degree of severity on the addressee’s face. These five patterns are:

- A. **Below the level of reproach** refers to realizations that enable the speaker to avoid explicit mention of the complainable matter or direct focus on the addressee.
- B. **Expression of annoyance or disapproval** refers to realizations which are vague and indirect and do not explicitly mention the complainable matter, but do express general annoyance at the violation.
- C. **Explicit complaint** refers to realizations in which the speaker has made the decision to use an open FTA towards the addressee, but to instigate no sanctions. In such a realization, the speaker explicitly refers to the complainable matter.
- D. **Accusation and warning** is expressed as a complaint when the speaker decides to perform an open FTA and further implies potential sanctions against the addressee.
- E. **Immediate threat** is expressed as a complaint when the speaker chooses to openly attack the addressee.

As in the performance of the speech act of complaint, a speaker’s inappropriate behaviour during an intercultural encounter can lead to miscommunication (or communication breakdown). In intercultural communication encounters, one of the first possible sources of miscommunication is misunderstanding between communicators. A misunderstanding is a “sequence” which occurs during an interaction, and which shows that the communicators do not share the same meaning of the message exchanged (Hinnenkamp 2003:67). As far as pragmatic competence is concerned,

Thomas (1983:91) refers to misunderstandings occurring in intercultural interactions as “pragmatic failure”, a term that she defines as “the inability to understand what is meant by what is said.” But Thomas (1983:94) emphasises that “pragmatic failure” applies

exclusively for misunderstandings which arise, not from any inability on the part of [the hearer] to understand the intended sense/reference of the speaker’s words in the context in which they are uttered, but from an inability to recognize the [illocutionary] force of the speaker’s utterance when the speaker intended that this particular hearer should recognize it.

According to Thomas (1983:94) there is a case of pragmatic failure when, for instance:

- A. a hearer perceives the illocutionary force of the speaker’s utterance as stronger or weaker than the speaker intended he should perceive it;
- B. a hearer perceives as an order an utterance which the speaker intended he should perceive as a request.

From a second language teaching perspective, Thomas (1983:99) distinguishes two types of pragmatic failure:

- A. **Pragmalinguistic failure**, which occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by a speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from the first language (L1) to another language (L2).
- B. **Sociopragmatic failure**, which occurs when, through the strategy used to perform a speech act, a speaker’s assessment of social norms of interaction (in terms of size of imposition,

relative power or social distance, and relative rights and obligations, etc.) is different from that of a native speaker.

Murphy and Neu's (1996) study points out the importance of examining speech acts both from the speaker's and the addressee's perspective. A speaker's perspective would involve examining the speaker's linguistic form preferences or strategy to perform a specific speech act in a given socio-cultural context, whereas an addressee's perspective would involve examining the addressee's social acceptability judgement of the speaker's performance of the speech act. In this respect, and from an intercultural communication perspective, the present study examines, on the one hand, the way the speech act set of complaint is performed by international students (native and non-native speakers of English) at Stellenbosch University, and on the other hand, the South-African staff's social judgment of international students' utterances. In addition, the study also examines the potential consequences arising from misunderstanding or miscommunication that can be ascribed to inappropriateness in the performance of the speech act set of complaint by the international students.

It appears that in most studies the speech act of complaint has been investigated either (i) from a cross-cultural or an inter-language pragmatics perspective (cf. e.g. Murphy and Neu 1996; Tatsuki 2000), or (ii) from a narrow pragmatics perspective (cf. e.g. Heinemann 2008; Drew and Curl 2008). In contrast, the present study examines the speech act of complaint both from a pragmatic and an intercultural communication perspective.

Chapter 3

Research design and methodological framework

The present study investigates the expression of and response to the speech act of complaint in intercultural interactions involving local and international students and administrative staff in two Stellenbosch University residences. This chapter provides information about the subjects from whom the data were elicited; it furthermore explicates the instruments which were used in collecting the data, and the method used for analysing the data.

3.1 Subjects

English is the most common language used in interactions between international students and local South Africans in Stellenbosch. Therefore, this study investigates the use of the speech act of complaint by a culturally diverse proportion of native and non-native speakers of English.

In general, the complaints data used for this study were produced by 24 international students living in two student residences of Stellenbosch University. The composition of this group of students is given in Table 1. Apart from the Gabonese and Libyan students, who have all resided in Stellenbosch for at least three years, the other students were all on exchange programmes and had been in Stellenbosch for at most six months at the time of this investigation.

Nationality	Number of subjects	Occupation
Chinese	4	2 Under-graduate students and 2 lecturers
Gabonese	4	Post-graduate students
German	4	Post-graduate students
Libyan	4	Post-graduate students
Dutch	4	Under-graduate and post-graduate students
(White) American	4	Under-graduate students

Table 1: Distribution of international students used for eliciting data.

The part of the complaints data dealing with social acceptability judgments was elicited from three Afrikaans House Committee members⁶ (also referred to as “head students” or, in this study, as “staff members”), one an under-graduate student, one a post-graduate student, and the third a non-student. An additional six under-graduate white Afrikaans students helped as informants for eliciting the social acceptability judgments of the complaints data.

3.2 Instruments

The complaints data obtained from the international students (also referred to in this study as “residents”) were collected through an oral discourse completion task. This task consisted of a hypothetical role-play situation described as follows on a sheet of paper:

According to the Internal Code of Conduct and House Rules for your residence, residents have to observe certain fixed “silent times”⁷ during which making noise is

⁶ The House Committee is the body which is in charge of organising and regulating the social life in a student residence.

⁷ Silent times are particular times of a day or a week during which no noise is tolerated. Many student residences of Stellenbosch University have set silent times in order not only to maintain a peaceful co-existence amongst residents, but also to ensure silence and no disturbance in residences during test and exam periods.

strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, recently you have been having great difficulty in studying and sleeping during silent times because of all the noise coming from your neighbours. How would you present your complaint in informal spoken language to the head student? (See Instrument A in the Appendix)

The head students' social judgements of the international students' complaints data were collected through a questionnaire composed of five "yes-no" questions and one open-ended question (see Appendix, Instrument B). The first five questions were analysed to measure the South-African staff members' social acceptability judgements of the international student residents' complaints and their perception of the complainers. These five questions were also analysed in order to determine the consequences (perlocutionary effects) of the complainers' speech acts on the addressees' thoughts or beliefs. The last open-ended question requires the staff member to answer the question: "What would you do about the complaint after the student has left?" This question was analysed to measure the South-African staff members' reactions to the international students' complaints. The last question was also analysed in order to determine the consequences (perlocutionary effects) of the complainers' speech act on the actions of the complainees.

At an interactional level between complainer and complaine, and in order to determine the complaine's response to the complaint, the last instrument (see Appendix, Instrument C) was a written discourse completion task which described the following hypothetical role-play situation:

You are in your office or on the phone with a resident student who is complaining to you about the disturbance caused by his/her noisy neighbours. After listening to him/her you say: ...

3.3 Procedure

During the discourse completion task regarding the international students' complaints, the subjects were instructed to read carefully the situation presented on the sheet of paper, and to make a complaint as if they were actually talking to the head student whose role was played by the author of the present study. The subjects were asked to voice their complaints into a voice recorder.

For the social acceptability judgements task of the study, and the discourse completion task regarding the response to complaints, the questionnaire instrument B and the completion task C were distributed to three Afrikaans head students, and they were left alone in order to answer the questions and complete the task.

3.4 Methods for data analysis

3.4.1 The CCSARP

The complainers' speech productions were analysed using the framework of the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) as developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). The CCSARP focuses on analysing the speech acts of request and apology, with the main goals of:

- Investigating cross-cultural variation in the realization pattern of the two speech acts;
- Investigating sociopragmatic variation in the realization pattern of the two speech acts;
- Investigating interlanguage variation in the realization pattern of the two speech acts.

(Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:12-13)

As noted, the CCSARP deals with the performance of requests and apologies; the present study attempts to apply the framework of this project to the analysis of the speech act of complaint. First, however, it is necessary to explicate the relevant methodological aspects of this project; in this, and merely for the sake of convenience, the discussion will deal only with the speech act of request.

3.4.1.1 Segmentation

As regards the segmentation of the speech act of request, the CCSARP considers requests as speech act sequences made up of all the utterance(s) involved in their performance (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:17). Consider, for example, the following utterance:

(11) John, I have an emergency, is it possible to postpone our meeting?

According to the CCSARP, a request sequence such as that illustrated by the example in (11) can include the following elements:

A. An **alerter**, which is an element preceding the request and which is used for getting the attention of the addressee. For instance, the address term *John* in the example (11) is an alerter. Table 2 lists the different types of alerters identified in the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:277).

Alerter	Example
Title/role	<i>Professor, waiter</i>
Surname	<i>Johnson</i>
First name	<i>Judith</i>
Nickname	<i>Judy</i>
Endearment term	<i>Honey</i>
Offensive term	<i>Stupid cow</i>
Pronoun	<i>You</i>
Attention getter	<i>Hey, excuse me, listen</i>

Table 2: The CCSARP types of alerters.

B. A **supportive move**, which is an element external to the request and which can either precede or follow the request. In the example in (12), the part in italics represents a supportive move.

(12) John, *I have an emergency*, is it possible to postpone our meeting?

Supportive moves, moreover, modify the degree of the illocutionary force of the request by either aggravating or mitigating it. Table 3 below presents the types of supportive moves as identified and described by the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:287-289).

Supportive moves	Example
Mitigating supportive moves	
Preparator: the speaker prepares his/her hearer for the ensuing request by announcing that s/he will make a request by asking about the potential availability of the hearer for carrying out the request, or by asking for the hearer's permission to make the request –without however giving away the nature or indeed the content of the request.	<i>I'd like to ask you something... May I ask you a question?</i>
Getting a precommitment: in checking on a potential refusal before making his/her request, a speaker tries to commit his/her hearer before telling him/her what s/he is letting him/herself in for.	<i>Could you do me a favor? (Would you lend me your notes from yesterday's class?)</i>
Grounder: the speaker gives reasons, explanations, or justification for his/her request, which may either precede or follow it.	<i>Judith, I missed class yesterday. Could I borrow your notes?</i>
Promise of reward: to increase the likelihood of the hearer's compliance with the speaker's request, a reward due on fulfillment of the request, is announced.	<i>Could you give me a lift home? I'll pitch in on some gas.</i>
Imposition minimizer: the speaker tries to reduce the imposition placed on the hearer by his/her request.	<i>Would you give me a lift, but only if you're going my way.</i>
Aggravating supportive moves	
Insult: to increase the impositive force of his/her request, a speaker prefaces it with an insult.	<i>You've always been a dirty pig, so clean up!</i>
Threat: to ensure compliance with his/her request, a speaker threatens his/her hearer with potential consequences arising out of noncompliance with the request.	<i>Move that car if you don't want a ticket!</i>
Moralizing: In order to lend additional credence to his/her request, a speaker invokes general moral maxims.	<i>If one shares a flat one should be prepared to pull one's weight in cleaning it, so get on with the washing up!</i>

Table 3: The CCSARP types of supportive moves.

C. A **head act**, which is the part of the sequence which can realize the request on its own (i.e., even if one disregards the alerter(s) and the supportive move(s)). The part in italics in the sentence (13) is an example of a head act.

(13) John, I have an emergency, *is it possible to postpone our meeting?*

In the CCSARP the head act is the minimal unit, the core element of the request sequence. The segmentation of the sequence consists of isolating the head act from the non-essential part for realizing the request, that is, from the alerter and supportive moves (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:275).

The present study examines the speech act of complaint using the model of segmentation provided by the CCSARP. In this respect, the data collected from the international students were identified as complaint sequences made up of all the utterance(s) involved in the performance of that speech act. Furthermore, as used in this study – and apart from the proposals associated with the CCSARP – the concept of ‘speech act sequence’ is taken to involve at least two adjacent individual speech acts which together form a general speech act, in this case that of complaint (cf. section 2.2 above). In others words, a complaint sequence comprises several specific, distinct speech acts which make up the general speech act of complaint. Consider for instance the following example (from the data set):

(14) Hello G., I’m having troubles to sleep, all the neighbours are making too much noise. So
can you do something about that?

The complaint sequence in (14) is made up of different individual speech acts, which are: a greeting (*Hello G...*); a complaint (*I’m having troubles to sleep, all the neighbours are making*

too much noise.); and a request (*So can you do something about that?*). The complaint and the request together constitute the head act.

3.4.2.2 The CCSARP coding categories

A speaker can use several devices and strategies to soften or aggravate the illocutionary force of the speech act that she performs. According to the CCSARP, these devices and strategies can be divided into the coding categories described below.

A. Modifiers

Internal modifiers are non-essential lexical and phrasal elements of the sequence which, if omitted, do not affect the illocutionary force of the utterance. For instance, the parts in square brackets in the example (15) would not, if omitted, affect the hearer's understanding of the utterance as a request.

(15) [John], [I have an emergency], [so] is it possible to postpone our meeting, [please]?

Internal modifiers may function in two different ways: (a) as “indicating devices” which signal the pragmatic force of the sequence, and as “sociopragmatic devices” which are used to affect the potential social impact of the utterance; (b) in their sociopragmatic role, internal modifiers can function either as downgraders or as upgraders (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:19).

- **Downgraders** are elements which are used by a speaker in order to mitigate or to soften her request (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:19). The italicized parts in (16) and (17) are examples of downgraders.

(16) *John*, I wanted to ask you to bring your books.

(17) Bring me some magazines, *if you can*.

- **Upgraders** are elements which are used by a speaker in order to strength or to aggravate her request (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:19). For instance:

(18) I want to see you in my office, *right now!*

(19) Give me back my DVD *if you do not want to get into trouble.*

Apart from internal modifiers, an utterance can also contain syntactic elements that are used as downgraders. The function of such “syntactic downgraders” is linked to their grammatical properties in a given language, as found, for example, with the different types of modal verbs (*can/could, will/would, etc.*) in English (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:19). Table 4 below lists the various types of modifiers as identified and described by the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:281-289).

Modifier	Example
Lexical and phrasal downgraders	
Politeness marker: (a) an optional element added to a request to bid for cooperative behavior. (b) Expressions by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly, bidding for cooperation.	(a) <i>Clean the kitchen, please.</i> (b) <i>Do you think you could present your paper this week?</i>
Hedge: adverbials used by a speaker when s/he wishes to avoid a precise propositional specification in order to avoid the potential provocation of such precision.	<i>It would be better somehow if you did your paper next week.</i>
Subjectivizer: element in which the speaker explicitly express his/her subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of his/her request.	<i>I wonder if you would give me a lift.</i>
Downtoner: sentential or propositional modifiers which are used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his/her request is likely to have on the hearer.	<i>Could you possibly/perhaps lend me your notes?</i>
Cajoler: conventionalized speech items whose semantic content is of little transparent relevance to their discourse meaning. Cajolers commonly do not	<i>You know, I'd really like you to present your paper next week.</i>

enter into syntactic structures, but are interspersed to increase, establish, or restore harmony between the interlocutors, which may be endangered through the request.	
Appealer: elements used by a speaker whenever s/he wishes to appeal to his/her hearer's benevolent understanding. Appealers function to elicit a hearer signal, occur in a syntactically final position, and may signal turn-availability. Tags are a common realization.	<i>Clean up the kitchen, dear, will you? /okay?</i>
Combinations of the above lexical and phrasal downgraders are possible in any one utterance.	
Syntactic downgraders	
Interrogative	<i>Can I borrow your note?</i>
Negation of a preparatory condition (the searlean preparatory condition). The two most common conditions on request compliance are that the addressee can comply, and that s/he is...	<i>You couldn't give me a lift, could you? Shouldn't you perhaps tidy the kitchen?</i>
Subjunctive. Only optional subjunctive forms are coded as downgraders; i.e., indicatives have to be acceptable in the context. The same point holds for the coding subjunctive forms of modal verbs, and for conditionals.	<i>Might be better if you were to leave now.</i>
Conditional. The conditional has to be optional to be coded as downgrading, i.e., it has to be replaceable by an indicative form. The English structure <i>Would you like to do P?</i> should probably be seen as downgrading, although <i>want</i> seems more normative than <i>like</i> in the indicative.	<i>I would suggest you leave now.</i>
Aspect. The durative aspect marker (or other types of aspect) counts as mitigating only if it can be substituted by a simple form.	<i>I'm wondering if I could get a lift home with you.</i>
Tense. Past tense forms are coded as downgrading only if they are used with present time reference, i.e., if they can be substituted by present tense forms without changing the semantic meaning of the utterance.	<i>I wanted to ask you to present your paper a week earlier.</i>
Conditional clause	<i>I was wondering if you could present your paper a week earlier than planned</i>
Combination of the above	<i>I was wondering if I couldn't get a lift home with you.</i>

Upgraders	
Intensifier. Adverbial modifiers used by speakers to intensify certain elements of the proposition of utterance.	<i>The kitchen is in a terrible/frightful mess.</i>
Commitment indicator. Sentence modifiers by means of which a speaker indicates his/her heightened degree of commitment vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred in the proposition.	<i>I'm sure/certain/surely/certainly you won't mind giving me a lift.</i>
Expletive	<i>Why don't you clean that bloody/damn mess up?</i>
Time intensifier	<i>You'd better move your car right now/immediately!</i>
Lexical uptoner. A marked lexical choice whereby an element of the proposition is given negative connotations.	<i>Clean up that mess!</i>
Determination marker. Elements indicating a heightened degree of determination on the part of the speaker.	<i>I've explained myself and that's that!</i>
Repetition of request. (literally or paraphrase)	<i>Get lost! Leave me alone</i>
Orthophonic/suprasegmental emphasis. Underlining, using exclamation marks or, in the spoken mode, using marked pausing, stress, and intonation to achieve heightened or dramatic effect.	<i>Cleaning the kitchen is your business!!!</i>
Emphatic addition. Set of lexical collocations used to provide additional emphasis to the request.	<i>Go and clean that kitchen.</i>
Pejorative determiner	<i>Clean up that mess (there)!</i>
Combinations of the above subcategories of upgrading are possible.	

Table 4: The CCSARP types of modifiers.

B. Request strategies

According to the CCSARP, head acts of request sequences can vary on two dimensions, namely strategy and perspective (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:17). The project identifies the nine strategies presented in Table 5, as described by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989:18).

Strategy	Example
1. Mood derivable: utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force.	<i>Leave me alone</i>
2. Explicit performatives: utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named.	<i>I am asking you to clean up the mess</i>
3. Hedged performatives: utterances in which the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions	<i>I would like to ask you to give your presentation a week earlier than scheduled.</i>
4. Locution derivable: the illocutionary intent is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the utterance.	<i>You'll have to move that car</i>
5. Want statements: utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act.	<i>I really wish you'd stop bothering me.</i>
6. Suggestory formulae: utterances which contain a suggestion to do x	<i>How about cleaning up?</i>
7. Query preparatory: utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability, willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language.	<i>Could you clear up the kitchen, please?</i>
8. Strong hints: utterances containing partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act.	<i>You have left the kitchen in a right mess.</i>
9. Mild hints: utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as request by context.	<i>I am a nun (in response to a persistent hassle).</i>

Table 5: The CCSARP range of strategy types of request.

These nine strategy types are mutually exclusive, and are classified according to a scale of directness. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989:18), as we move up this scale, the nine strategy types differ with regard to three main levels of directness: (a) “direct strategies”, which comprise strategies (1)-(5); (b) “conventionally indirect” strategies, which comprise strategies (6) and (7); and (c) “nonconventionally indirect” strategies which comprise strategies (8) and (9).

In the present study the CCSARP classification of request strategy types was applied in analysing the speech act set of complaint in order to determine the level of directness which international students chose when performing this speech act.

C. Request perspectives

Perspective is the second dimension in which head acts of request sequences can vary. The CCSARP identifies four possible perspectives: “speaker oriented”, “hearer oriented”, “inclusive” and “impersonal” (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:19). These perspectives are described in Table 6.

Perspective	Example
Speaker oriented: requests which emphasize the role of the agent.	<i>Can I have it?</i>
Hearer oriented: requests which focus on the role of the recipient.	<i>Can you do it?</i>
Inclusive	<i>Can we start cleaning now?</i>
Impersonal	<i>It needs to be cleaned.</i>

Table 6: The CCSARP types of request perspectives.

3.5 Methods of analysing speech act social acceptability judgements

The responses to the five yes-no questions used in the data collection (see Appendix, Instrument B) were examined through a Chi-square test with a .05 alpha level of significance. The staff’s justifications of their responses were examined at the same time in order to measure the South-African staff’s social judgements of the international students’ complaints. The responses to the last open-ended question, and the staff’s replies to the complainers, were examined in order to ascertain the consequences or the effects of the complaints on the actions of the staff.

Chapter 4

Analysis and findings

4.1 Performance of the speech act sequence of complaint: analysis and findings

Eleven individual speech acts were identified from the data, two of which appear to be essential in the production of a complaint speech act sequence. The eleven individual speech acts are briefly described below.

1. A greeting speech act was performed by some complainers as the first component of their complaint sequence. Two expressions, *Hello* and *Hi*, were used to perform this speech act, as illustrated by the following utterances:

(20) Subject A3⁸: *Hi*, I've got a little problem. I have to study for my exam ...

(21) Subject N4: *Hello* _ I heard about the silent times and ...

2. Getting the attention of the addressee is also one of the individual speech acts that some complainers performed. In order to perform this speech act, complainers used either the two expressions *Hey* and *Excuse me*, or an address term made up of a Title + Surname. This attention-getting speech act is illustrated by the following utterances:

(22) Subject A4: *Hey A*. I'm studying, I try to study in the night and ...

(23) Subject U2: *Excuse me*, I have a problem because my neighbours often ...

(24) Subject G2: *Mr H*. I'm not happy, I'm trying to do my work ...

⁸ The letters stand for the cultural groups the subjects belong to: **A** = German; **C** = Chinese; **G** = Gabonese; **L** = Libyan; **N** = Dutch; **U** = American.

3. Introducing oneself occurs in some complainers' complaint sequence. Complainers performed this speech act by giving their name and/or some information about themselves, as in the following utterances:

(25) Subject A1: Hello, *my name is _ , I'm living in block 14* and I actually have some problem

...

(26) Subject L3: *I am one of the residents in Academia block 5*, I want just to complaint about

...

4. Giving the reason for approaching the addressee is also a speech act that occurs in some complainers' complaint sequence. The complainers performed this speech act in uttering sentences such as:

(27) Subject A3: Hi, *I've got a little problem*. I have to study ...

(28) Subject G1: Hello, *I think I have a problem*.

5. Complainers performed the individual speech act of complaining when they verbally expressed their feeling of displeasure or annoyance caused by the disturbance coming from their neighbours. This speech act was performed in uttering, for instance, sentences like:

(29) Subject G2: Mr _ *I'm not happy, I'm trying to do my work but there is some people that are doing noise in the campus ...*

(30) Subject N3: Hello _ , *I'm having trouble to sleep, all the neighbours are making too much noise ...*

6. An individual speech act of request was performed by all the complainers. This speech act occurred each time a complainer expressed the idea that she wants the addressee to do

something in order to stop the disturbance. This speech act was performed in uttering sentences such as:

(31) Subject A2: ... *it would be very nice if you can come to our block and talk to them and maybe we can have a quiet time ...*

(32) Subject G2: ... *I would like to ask you to do something, please.*

7. Giving a justification for the request occurs in some complainers' productions, with the complainers giving a reason why they wanted the addressee to intervene. The following examples illustrate the performance of this speech act.

(33) Subject A1: ... *maybe is it possible for you to intervene there to stop that noise because I have some exams and I want to study.*

(34) Subject L3: *So I would like you to do something about it because I'm not having a good sleeping time ...*

8. An expectation of an improvement of the complainer's situation (or an expression of a positive outcome) was uttered by some complainers in their complaint sequence. This speech act was performed in uttering, for instance, the following sentence:

(35) Subject A2: ... *It would be very nice if you can come to our block and talk to them and maybe we can have a quiet time at nine o'clock, ten o'clock.*

9. Some complainers also performed the speech act of thanking the addressee. This speech act occurs, for instances, in the following utterances:

(36) Subject A3: ... *I hope that you can help us and you can ... ja you can make sure that we can study. Thank you.*

(37) Subject U: ... I was just wondering if umm, you could take care of that if at all possible, umm ok, *thanks*.

10. Appealing to the addressee's understanding occurred in one complainer's complaint sequence, illustrated in (38).

(38) Subject N2: ... I've really have to make my exams and, otherwise I would get into trouble. *Do you understand that? ... Ok*.

11. Finally, one complainer also performed the speech act of threatening the addressee. Consider the following utterance:

(39) Subject G4: You need to speak to them, *otherwise things are gonna be ... oh, go wrong, very wrong, whatever*.

Table 7 shows the complainers' use of these eleven speech acts within and across the six cultural groups.

Individual speech act	Frequency of use of individual speech act					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Greeting	25	75	75	50	75	50
Getting the attention of the addressee	50	25	25	0	25	50
Introducing oneself	0	0	25	50	0	0
Giving a reason for the complainer's presence	0	25	50	25	25	50
Complaint	100	100	100	75	100	100
Request	75	100	100	100	100	100
Giving a justification for the request	25	50	25	50	50	0
Expectation of improvement of the situation	0	0	25	25	0	0
Thanking the addressee	50	25	25	25	0	75
Making sure of the addressee's understanding of the complainer's need	0	0	0	0	25	0
Threat	0	25	0	0	0	0

Table 7: Frequency of use of individual speech acts.

As Table 7 illustrates, not all the complainers, irrespective of their cultural group, performed all eleven of the above individual speech acts in their complaint sequences. However, if we consider the most performed speech acts within each cultural group, complainers' complaint sequences can be reduced to the dominant speech act sequences listed in Table 8.

Cultural group	Complaint sequence
Chinese	Getting Attention + Complaint + Request ⁹ + Thanking
Gabonese	Greeting + Complaint + Request
German	Greeting + Giving reason for presence + Complaint + Request
Libyan	Greeting + Introducing oneself + Complaint + Request
Dutch	Greeting + Complaint + Request
American	Greeting/Getting Attention + Complaint + Request + Thanking

Table 8: Dominant complaint sequences across cultural groups.

⁹ The request speech act includes the justification for the request or other supportive moves.

As shown in Table 8, the most common individual speech acts occurring in all the dominant complaint sequences are those of complaint and request. Therefore, it can be stated that these two individual speech acts are the core elements (i.e., the head act) that make up the complaint sequences.¹⁰ On the basis of this observation, the individual speech acts of complaint and request have been selected for analysis in this study.

Before commencing with the analysis, it may be of interest to briefly consider the utterances of two complainers, one Chinese and one Libyan, who did not use any or both of the two speech acts of complaint and request, and who therefore do not conform to the pattern associated with their cultural group in Table 8. The utterances in question are as follows:

(40) Subject C1: You can hear the noise, and maybe you follow me to hear the noise.

(41) Subject L1: Hello, uh...could you...could you come and ask the guys to stop noise because I have some work to do and I can't work, uh...if it's possible.

Consider, firstly, the utterance in (40). It would seem at first sight that the Chinese complainer's utterance is a sequence comprising two parts that correspond to two individual speech acts, namely a speech act of complaint (*You can hear the noise ...*) and a request speech act (*... and maybe you follow me to hear the noise*). The illocutionary intent of the first speech act, interpreted as a complaint, can be derived from the context: given the specific context of silent time period, a student's primary intention in bringing a situation of noise disturbance to the attention of a House Committee member, is to register a complaint and (implicitly, at least) to request an intervention by the addressee. The illocutionary force of what seems to be a second speech act in (40), the one interpreted as a request, can be derived from the grammatical mood of

¹⁰ In fact, the individual speech acts of complaint and request occur in the utterances of 95.83% of the complainers.

the utterance (... *you follow me to hear the noise*) mitigated as a suggestion by means of the adverb *maybe*. Following Searle (1969:23), if one considers the propositional dimension of the Chinese student's utterance, it could be claimed that when uttering *You can hear the noise ...*, the speaker is addressing an interlocutor (in this case, *you*) and she predicates something of the addressee (he can hear the noise). Similarly, when uttering ... *and maybe you follow me to hear the noise*, the speaker is addressing the same person (*you*) and she predicates something of him (he can follow her to hear the noise). As is clear from the propositional dimensions of the two apparent speech acts, they have in common the fact that the speaker wants to direct the addressee's attention to the noise. The speaker's intention is confirmed when one considers that in uttering ... *and maybe you follow me to hear the noise*, the speaker means exactly and literally what she says. As a result, one could argue that the second part of the utterance in (40) is actually not an individual speech act of request on its own, but is rather a supportive move of the complaint speech act performed in the first part of the utterance. Moreover, given the proposition expressed in this second part, the supportive move serves as an upgrader by means of which the speaker tries to convince the addressee of an ongoing situation of noise disturbance. In brief, it could be claimed that the Chinese student's utterance in (40) is a sequence made up only of the individual speech act of complaint and a supportive move. The absence of an individual speech act of request in this utterance can be explained by the fact that the student assumed that, given the context, the addressee will know what action to take. We will return to this case in section 4.2 below.

Consider, secondly, the Libyan student's utterance in (41). This utterance takes the form of a request sequence comprising the following elements:

- An alerter: *Hello ...*
- A head act: *... could you come and ask the guys to stop noise ...*
- A supportive move which, in this case, is a justification for the request: *... because I have some work to do and I can't work, uh...if it's possible.*

In (41) the complaint, given the context, is implicit in the request, i.e., indirectly expressed.

4.1.1 The individual speech act of complaint

In terms of segmentation, the individual speech act of complaint as performed by the complainers was identified as an individual speech act sequence (i.e., an individual complaint sequence) which includes the following two components:

- A **head act**, as illustrated by the following utterances:
 - (42) Subject C1: *You can hear the noise, and maybe you follow me to hear the noise.*
 - (43) Subject G2: Mr H. *I'm not happy I'm trying to do my work but there is some people that are doing noise in the campus.*
- A **supportive move**, as illustrated in (44) and (45):
 - (44) Subject N1: *... I heard about the silent times and actually I'm very happy with that that's happening here. But since this week I cannot really focus on my study anymore because it's too loud, and actually I already talk to the people that cause the loudness but they don't really wanna listen. So that's why I come to you ...*
 - (45) Subject U5: *... You know I like partying and everything you know, I like drinking you know, I like making noise but you know I have exams I got to study for and this party's been going on for a couple of days and they need to just quiet it down a little bit ...*

The complainers' performance of the individual speech act of complaint clustered in five different strategy preferences:

1. An **explicit performative** strategy was used by some complainers, as in the following utterances:

(46) Subject G3: Hello, *I'm coming to complain because my neighbours are making noise ...*

(47) Subject C4: Hey G., *I'm sorry to make the complaint but I really cannot sleep because of the noise ...*

2. A **hedged performative** strategy was used by some complainers, as illustrated by the following utterance:

(48) Subject L3: I am one of the residents in Academia block 5, *I want just to complain about something that ...*

3. A **locution derivable** strategy was used by some complainers, as in the following utterances:

(49) Subject C3: Hello, *the environment nearby is very unpleasant, because whenever I was studying and all the people from the neighbouring they are creating a little noise, and sometimes they are partying and even when they are talking they scream, yes so that I cannot concentrate on my study.*

(50) Subject G2: Mr H. *I'm not happy I'm trying to do my work but there is some people that are doing noise in the campus.*

4. A **strong hint** strategy was used by some complainers, as in the following utterance:

(51) Subject C1: *You can hear the noise, and maybe you follow me to hear the noise.*

5. A **mild hint** strategy was used by one complainer, as in the following utterance:

(52) Subject L1: Hello, uh...*could you...could you come and ask the guys to stop noise because I have some work to do and I can't work, uh...if it's possible.*

Table 9 below presents the frequency of use of these five strategy preferences among the four cultural groups.

Strategy	Frequency of use of strategy preferences					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Explicit performative	25	25	0	0	0	0
Hedged performative	0	0	0	25	0	0
Locution derivable	50	75	100	50	100	100
Strong hint	25					
Mild hint			0	25	0	0

Table 9: Frequency of use of complaint strategy preferences among the six cultural groups.

As Table 9 shows, most complainers chose a locution derivable strategy when performing the individual speech act of complaint. If we consider the scale of directness on which the five strategies are classified in the CCSARP, they can be reduced to two main categories, namely direct and indirect strategies¹¹. Table 10 shows the frequency of use of direct and indirect complaints among the six different cultural groups.

¹¹ Here the Indirect strategies include both the CCSARP's conventionally indirect and nonconventionally indirect strategies; see section 3.4.1.

Strategy	Frequency of use of strategy preferences					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Direct	75	100	100	75	100	100
Indirect	25	0	0	25	0	0

Table 10: Frequency of use of directness and indirectness strategies.

As is clear from this table, almost all the complainers (at least 75% of them in each cultural group) chose a direct strategy in order to perform the individual speech act of complaint; although the Chinese and Libyan groups are exceptions in this regard, they also clearly preferred the direct strategy.

The data also showed that complainers used modifiers (softeners and intensifiers¹²; see section 3.4.2.2) when performing the individual speech act of complaint. This use of upgraders and downgraders is illustrated by the utterances in (53) and (54), respectively.

(53) Subject A1: ... I *actually* have ... problems for the moment with all the noise, the *disturbance* happening there.

(54) Subject L3: ... I want *just* to complaint about something that uh recently I have been experiencing *some* problems, problems are loud voice and a lot of parties from the neighbours ...

A combination of downgraders and upgraders was also used, as illustrated by the following utterances:

¹² The terms “intensifier” and “softener” will be used when referring to modifiers in general; in the case of internal modifiers, the respective corresponding terms “upgrader” and “downgrader” will be used. This is in line with how these terms are used in the literature (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1989). Note, however, that the term “intensifier” is also used with a more specific content in traditional grammars, namely to refer to, amongst others, degree adverbs like *very*, *really*, *quite*, *almost*, etc. (as in e.g. Tables 11 and 12 below).

- (55) Subject C4: ... I'm *sorry* to complain but I *really* cannot sleep because of the noise and it's supposed to be the silent time and the noise it's *not expected* and I'm studying ...
- (56) Subject U2: ... I've been having a *little bit* of problem as of late with various members of my residence that don't *really* want to respect the rule of law and being quiet when they should be quiet. I've been troubling sleeping, I've been troubling studying and generally my quality of life is um, *deteriorating*.

As noted in section 3.4.1, the CCSARP was developed to give an account of the speech acts of request and apology. Two concepts that feature in that account are those of 'mitigated supportive moves' and 'aggravating supportive moves'. If the CCSARP framework is adopted for describing the speech act of complaint, as attempted in this study, the question arises whether mitigated supportive moves and aggravating supportive moves are also applicable in the case of complaints. The modifiers used in (53)-(56) above are all lexical items or at least fixed, lexicalised expressions. Note, however, that supportive moves, which usually take the form of non-lexicalised phrases, can also serve as modifiers even though they are not internal to the particular speech act. To illustrate, consider the utterance in (57):

- (57) Subject A2: ... ***We've got some problems in block 14.*** *So we have to study for our exams next week* and there are people making very loud noise and playing loud music ...

In this example, the head act of the complaint is preceded by two supportive moves, namely a preparator (in bold) and a grounder (in italics). Given the context, these supportive moves, if omitted, would not affect the illocutionary force of the head act. However, given the fact that these supportive moves are used to mitigate the complaint, they evidently also serve as modifiers.

The data also show that one Gabonese complainer did not make use of modifiers in their complaints, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (58) Subject G2: Mr H. *I'm not happy. I'm trying to do my work but there is some people that are doing noise in the campus ...*¹³

The various types of modifiers found in the data are illustrated in Table 11.

Modifier	Example
Softeners	
Adverb	<i>little (bit); maybe; some</i>
Apology	<i>I'm sorry</i>
Hedges	<i>just; like</i>
Subjectivizer	<i>I think</i>
Preparators	<i>I've got a little problem</i>
Cajoler	<i>you know</i>
Grounder	<i>I was wondering</i>
Intensifiers	
Intensifier	<i>very; really; a lot ; so; so/too much; too; generally; actually</i>
Lexical uptoner	<i>Disturbance; deteriorating</i>
Commitment indicator	<i>I know</i>
Critic	<i>I expected</i>

Table 11: Internal modifiers used by complainers in their complaints.

The use of the modifiers across the six cultural groups is described in Table 12 below.

¹³ The sequence *I'm not happy* is here taken to represent a mild hint (see section 3.4.2.2) on the basis of which the implied complaint can be inferred; in other words, this sequence does not serve as a modifying supportive move.

Modifier	Frequency of use of modifiers					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Softeners						
Adverb	50	0	50(y; z)	0	0	50(z)
Apology	25(x ¹⁴)	0	0	0	0	0
Hedges	0	0	0	50(x)	0	75(z; y)
Subjectivizers	0	75 (x; y)	25(z)	0	0	0
Preparators	0	25(x)	50(x; y)	0	0	25(y)
Cajoler	0	25(x)	0	0	0	25
Grounders	0	0	75(x; y; z)	0	75 (x; y; z)	50(x)
Intensifiers						
Intensifiers	75(x)	0	75(x; y; z)	50 (x)	100(x; y; z)	75(x; y; z)
Commitment indicator	0	25(y)	0	0	0	0
Lexical uptoner	0	0	25	0	0	0
Critic	0	0	0	25	0	0
Combination of softeners and intensifiers	25 (x)	25(x)	75(x; y; z)	25(x)	75(x; y; z)	75(x; y; z)
No use of modifiers	0	25	0	25	0	0

Table 12: Use of modifiers across the cultural groups.

More generally, the use of modifiers by the six cultural groups can be generalized as in Table 13 below.

¹⁴ x, y and z indicate the complainers who used a combination of modifiers. For instance, in the Chinese group the complainer (x) used at the same time a downgrader (in this case an apology) and an upgrader (in this case an intensifier).

Modifier	Frequency of use of modifiers					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Softeners	50	80	64.29	33.33	42.86	55
Intensifiers	50	10	35.71	50	57.14	45
No use of modifiers	0	10	0	16.67	0	0

Table 13: Use of softeners and intensifiers across the cultural groups.

The six cultural groups differ from one another as regards their use of modifiers in the performance of the individual speech act of complaint. As shown in Table 13, the Gabonese complainers most often made use of softeners (80%), followed by the German, the American and the Chinese complainers (respectively 64.29%, 55%, and 50%). The Libyan complainers used the least softeners (33.33%), followed by the Dutch (42.86%). In terms of use of intensifiers, the Dutch complainers had the highest total (57.14%) followed by the Chinese and the Libyan complainers (both 50%). Lower use of intensifiers was by the American complainers (45%), followed by the German complainers (35.71), and lowest of all the Gabonese (10%).

4.1.2 The individual speech act of request

In terms of segmentation, the individual speech act of request as performed by the complainers was identified as an individual speech act sequence (i.e., an individual request sequence) which includes the following two components:

- A **head act**, as illustrated by the following utterances:

(59) Subject L3: So please, *do something about it*.

(60) Subject U2: *Could you possibly talk to these people?* Thank you.
- A **supportive move**, as in the following utterances:

- (61) Subject A1: Maybe is it possible for you to intervene there to stop that noise *because I have some exams and I want to study.*
- (62) Subject G4: You need to speak to them, *otherwise things are gonna be... oh, go wrong, very wrong, whatever.*

The complainers' performance of the individual speech act of request clustered in six different strategy preferences:

1. A **mood derivable** strategy was used by some complainers, as illustrated by the following utterance:

(63) Subject L4: ... Please *do something about it.*

2. An **hedged performative** was used, as in the following utterances:

(64) Subject G2: ... *I would like to ask you to do something please.*

(65) Subject N2: ... *I would like to ask you if we can make a solution ...*

3. A **locution derivable** was used by some complainers, as illustrated by the following utterance:

(66) Subject G4: *You need to talk to them ...*

4. A **want statement** was used, as in the following utterance:

(67) Subject L3: So *I would like you to do something about it* because I'm not having a good sleeping time ...

5. A **suggestory formula** was used by some complainers, as illustrated by the following utterance:

(68) Subject A4: ... *Maybe you should... make...it more strict to...be more strict with them who disturb ...*

6. A **preparatory strategy** was used, as in the following utterance:

(69) Subject U2: ... *Could you possibly talk to these people? Thank you.*

Table 14 below presents the frequency of use of these strategy preferences among the six cultural groups.

Strategy	Frequency of use of strategy preferences					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Mood derivable	0	50	0	25	0	0
Hedged performative	25	25	0	0	25	0
Locution derivable	0	25	0	0	0	25
Want statement	25	25	0	25	0	0
Suggestory formula	25	0	75	0	25	0
Preparatory	50	25	25	75	50	75

Table 14: Frequency of use of request strategy preferences.

Considering the CCSARP scale of directness, the six strategies can be reduced to the two main categories of direct and indirect strategies.¹⁵ Table 15 shows the frequency of use of direct and indirect requests among the six different cultural groups.

Strategy	Frequency of use of strategy preferences					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Direct	40	83.33	0	40	25	25
Indirect	60	16.66	100	60	75	75

Table 15: Frequency of use of directness and indirectness strategies.

¹⁵ Here, the indirect strategies include both the CCSARP's conventionally indirect and nonconventionally indirect strategies; see section 3.4.2.2.

As shown in Table 15, the six cultural groups differ from one another as regards strategies used to perform the individual speech act of request. The highest use of the direct strategy was by the Gabonese students (83.33%), whereas the highest use of the indirect strategy was by the German students (100%).¹⁶ In contrast to the Gabonese (16.66%), all the other cultural groups more often made use of the indirect strategy: like the Germans, the American and Dutch students had a high use of the indirect strategy (both 75%), followed by the Chinese and the Libyan students (both 60%).

The data also show that the complainers made use of modifiers (comprising internal modifiers, syntactic downgraders and supportive moves; see section 4.1.1) in order to mitigate or to aggravate their requests. The use of these devices is illustrated by the following utterances; in (70) the interrogative form is used as a syntactic downgrader, in (71) *please* serves as an internal downgrader, and in (72) the italicised sequence represents an aggravating supportive move:

(70) Subject N3: So, *can you do something about that?* []

(71) Subject L3: *Please* do something about it.

(72) Subject G4: You need to speak to them, *otherwise things are gonna be... oh, go wrong, very wrong, whatever.*

Some complainers repeated their request by using different strategies, as illustrated in the following examples:

(73) Subject C2: *I want to ask you, I want to ask you for advice, ok? So can you help me?*

¹⁶ The fact that in the present study the German students are the least direct when performing the speech act of request, seems to contradict House (2005: 21) who claims that German speakers tend to prefer more direct strategies when performing speech acts such as request, complaints, refusals, and criticisms. However, owing to the limited amount of data dealt with in the present study, the validity of House's claim will not be discussed further here.

(74) Subject G1: ... So *I would really appreciate it if you can go, either right now or tomorrow whenever you can and try to really do something about it* because I've been trying to work and study. I have a couple of assignments to hand in soon, so please *do something about it* I'd really appreciate it.

In the example (74) the subject C2 used a hedged performative in uttering her request for the first time, whereas she used a preparatory strategy when she reformulated her request. A similar use of different strategies is found in the example (75), where the subject G1 first used a want statement to express her request and then opted for a mood derivable strategy. Some complainers also made use of combinations of downgraders and upgraders in their utterances, as illustrated in the following examples:

(75) Subject L3: ... So that *definitely* is affecting my life style so, *please* do something about it.

(76) Subject N4: ... *Maybe* you can do something about it because I *really* need to focus now and I don't want to complain too much but this is *very* important to me.

Examples of the various modifiers used by the complainers are given in Table 16 below.

Modifiers	Examples
Softeners	
Interrogative	<i>Can/could /would you...?</i>
Conditional	<i>I would like; maybe you should; could you</i>
Conditional clause	<i>It would be nice if; I was wondering if</i>
Subjectivizer	<i>I hope/think</i>
Adverb	<i>Little bit</i>
Hedge	<i>Just</i>
Politeness marker	<i>Please</i>
Downtoner	<i>Possible; possibly; if you can; maybe</i>
Grounder	<i>Because I have some exams...</i>
Appealer	<i>Do you understand that?</i>
Intensifiers	
Intensifier	<i>Very; really; more</i>
Repetition of request	<i>I want to ask you for advice, ok? So can you help me?</i>
Threat	<i>Otherwise things are gonna be...</i>

Table 16: Modifiers used to perform the individual speech act of request.

The frequency of use of these modifiers by the six cultural groups is presented in Table 17 below.

Modifier	Frequency of use of modifiers					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Softeners						
Interrogative	25	25	0	75	25	25
Conditional	25	25	25	75	25	50
Conditional clause	0	25	25	0	25	25
Subjectivizer	75(x, y)	0	25	0	25(x)	50(x)
Adverb						25(y)
Hedge						50(x; y)
Politeness marker	0	75(x; y)	0	75(y; z)	0	0
Downtoner	25	0	25(x)	50(x; y)	25(z)	50(x)
Grounder	50(x, y)	50(x; y)	50(x, y)	75(x; y; z)	25(z)	
Appealer	0	0	0	0	25(y)	
Intensifiers						
Intensifier	0	25(x)	50(y)	25(z)	75(x; y; z)	0
Time intensifier	0	25(x)				
Repetition of request	25(x)	50(x)	0	25(z)	0	0
Threat	0	25(y)	0	0	0	0
Combinations of softeners and intensifiers	50 (x; y; z)	50(x; y)	50(x; y)	75(x; y; z)	75(x; y; z)	50(x; y)

Table 17: Use of modifiers to perform the individual speech act of request across the six cultures.

The use of softeners and intensifiers by the six cultural groups can be generalized as in Table 18 below.

Modifiers	Frequency of use of modifiers					
	Chinese	Gabonese	German	Libyan	Dutch	American
Softeners	92.86	72.22	80	92.59	43.75	100
Intensifiers	7.14	27.77	20	7.41	56.25	0

Table 18: Use of softeners and intensifiers in the performance of the individual speech act of request.

The six cultural groups differ from one another as regards their use of modifiers in the performance of the individual speech act of request. As shown in Table 18, the highest use of softeners was by the American students (100%), followed by the Chinese and the Libyan complainers (92.86% and 92.59%, respectively). The German and the Gabonese students more often made use of softeners too (80% and 72.22%, respectively). Amongst all the cultural groups, the Dutch group was the only one which most often made use of intensifiers (56.65%).

4.2 Results of the South African staff's social judgements of complainers' utterances

In order to determine the South African staff members' social judgments of the international students' complaints, on the one hand, and their perception of the complainers, on the other hand, the staff members were asked to answer the following five yes-no questions:

1. Is the student respectful?
2. Is the student friendly?
3. Is the student informal?
4. Does the student express his/her complaint clearly?
5. Is the student's way of complaining appropriate for the situation?

As will be shown below, the data do not reveal any significant differences in the way the South African staff members perceived the complainers overall; however, there do appear to be differences when the cultural groups are considered individually.

4.2.1. Respectfulness

To the question whether or not they perceived the complainers as respectful, the staff answered “yes” in 58% and “no” in 42% of the cases.¹⁷ Differences regarding the degree of respectfulness with which the individual groups were perceived, are illustrated in Table 19.

Cultural Group	2-Way Summary Table: Observed Frequencies. Marked cells have counts >10 Chi-square test: p= .52691		
	Question 1 No	Question 1 Yes	Row Totals
Chinese	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
Gabonese	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
German	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Libyan	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Dutch	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
American	4	8	12
Row	33.33%	66.67%	
Totals	15	57	72

Table 19: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 1

As shown in the table, the South African staff members most often perceived the German and the Libyan students as respectful (91.67%), followed by the Chinese, the Gabonese, and the Dutch (all 75%). As regards the American complainers, they were perceived as respectful less often than the others (66.67%).

When asked to explain why they perceived some complainers as disrespectful, the staff members provided various answers. However, the analysis of their answers revealed that most often the

¹⁷ See the graph on page 71.

staff based their judgement on the way the complainers performed the individual speech acts of attention-getting and request. The findings regarding these two acts are discussed below.

4.2.1.1 Attention-getting

About two-thirds of the staff members were sensitive to the way they were addressed, noting in particular those cases where they felt a complainer did not address them in a way that would be appropriate when one deals with a person in a position of authority. Consider, for instance, the use of the terms *dude* and *man* by two American students in the following examples:

- (77) Subject U4: Hey *dude* I have a uh, I've been having a little bit of problem as of late with various members of my residence, that don't really want to respect the rule of law and being quiet when they should be quiet ...
- (78) Subject U5: Hey *man* you know I like partying and everything you know I like drinking, you know, I like making noise but you know I have exams I got to study for and this party's been going on for a couple of days ...

In reaction to being addressed as *dude* or *man*, one female staff member answered that:

- (79) I feel that it isn't respectful to greet a person with authority in such a manner. Or even a lady or a gentleman should be greeted by their names.

As shown in (80), and from an interpersonal relationship perspective (i.e., in terms of the social distance between staff members and complainers), most staff members considered as disrespectful the two American students' style of addressing someone as *dude* or *man*. It is important, however, to recall that during the oral discourse completion task (see Appendix, Instrument A), the complainers were actually addressing a male student (the investigator) who was playing the role of head student. Nevertheless, all the South African informants agreed that

it was disrespectful to address a House Committee member using these terms instead of using his name or title, or a conventional expression that does not require the use of a name or a title (like *excuse me* or *sorry*). According to the informants, the use of *dude* or *man* would be acceptable only if there is a close relationship between the House Committee member and the complainer. The other American complainers shared the same point of view. Indeed, they found that it was inappropriate to use the terms *dude* or *man* when addressing a person in a position of authority, unless that person and the complainer are friends.

The use of inappropriate terms of address could be a source of miscommunication or communication breakdown between the American complainers and the staff members. In other words, the communication breakdown could have been caused by a sociopragmatic failure (see section 2.4). As illustrated above, this failure would have stemmed not from cultural differences (between Americans and South Africans), but from a misjudgement by the complainers of their position (in terms of social distance) relative to the staff members.

4.2.1.2 Request

The data show that the staff members were also sensitive to the occurrence of *please* and/or *thank you* in the complainers' request sequences. About two-thirds of the staff perceived some complainers' individual speech acts of request as disrespectful because the complainer did not use the downgrader and politeness marker *please*, or because she did not add the speech act of thanking at the end of the request, as illustrated in the following utterances:

(80) Subject N3: Hello __, I'm having trouble to sleep, all the neighbours are making too much noise. So, can you do something about that?

(81) Subject G4: You need to talk to them because I don't wanna go there and talk to them otherwise I'm gonna be rude with them ...

Even in cases where they were addressed as *dude* and *man* (see examples (78) and (79)), the staff members perceived the two Americans' way of complaining as polite because of the presence of *thank you* in their requests, as illustrated by one staff member's assessment of the complaint in (78):

(82) I think the student is disrespectful, because he called me a *dude*, but I do not think that it was intentional, because the student did say *thank you*.

To the question whether the student's way of complaining in the utterance in (78) was appropriate, another staff member answered:

(83) The student asks for help and is very polite.

A Dutch native speaker student made the following request (in italic):

(84) Subject N3: Hello _, I'm having trouble to sleep, all the neighbours are making too much noise. So, *can you do something about that?*

In reaction to this request, two staff members answered that:

(85) [The student is not respectful] because the student sounds abrupt and rude. He did not introduce himself, say where he is calling from and he did not say *please/thank you*.

(86) The student doesn't really complain, but rather demands.

The two staff members' responses in (86) and (87) show that, given the specific speech event of complaining about noise, these (white Afrikaans native) speakers interpreted the English *Can you ...?* request strategy (without *please* and/or *thank you*) as a demand rather than a request.

According to the six white Afrikaans informants, the use of *please* represents a politeness marker and its occurrence is very important when making a request in white Afrikaans culture. Regardless of the type of social relationship between interlocutors, if someone does not say at least *please* when making a request in white Afrikaans culture, that person would be considered as having no manners. Moreover, the requirement of using *please* and/or *thank you* in a request increases with the increasing of social and power distance between the requester and the addressee in this culture.

In studies about the speech act of request, and specifically within the framework of the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), the *Can you ...?* type of request (as in (85)) is described as a "conventionally indirect request strategy". It is referred to as the "preparatory" or the "Query Preparatory" strategy according to which the requester uses utterances that question rather than state the addressee's ability, willingness, or likeliness to do something (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 280). What is more, using the indirect *Can you ...?* type of request can be considered as a face saving strategy by the requester, because in using this strategy the speaker considers the addressee's negative face wants, that is, the addressee's freedom of action and need not to be imposed on by the speaker. By contrast, it would seem from the responses of the two white staff members and the six informants that, in white Afrikaans culture, the use of the Query Preparatory strategy *Can you ...?* without the inclusion of *please* and/or *thank you* is regarded as an imposition on the addressee; hence, it could be considered as a face threatening strategy.

Cross-cultural studies like those by House (1989) and Blum-Kulka (1989) have examined the use of *please* in indirect request strategies, like the *Can you ...* preparatory request strategy, in several languages. Comparing the use of *please/bitte* in the Query Preparatory request strategy in British English and German, for instance, House (1989:113) claims that in a social situation where rights and obligations between speaker and addressee are well defined (“standard situations”), the use of *please/bitte* is a gesture of politeness. If, by contrast, these rights and obligations are not well defined (“nonstandard situations”), the use of *please/bitte* makes the illocutionary force of the utterance (request, in this case) explicit, and therefore robs the Query Preparatory strategy of its function, which is to keep the speaker’s intention “off record”. In Hebrew and White American English, according to Blum-Kulka (in House 1989:113-114), the insertion of *please* (and its equivalent in Hebrew) into the Query Preparatory strategy *Can/Could you ...* is mostly perceived only as a request, whereas the same utterances without *please* (and its equivalent in Hebrew) are mostly perceived as both questions and requests in these two languages.

In the data collected for the present study, the Query Preparatory strategy without the insertion of *please/thank you* was used by only one complainer, a Dutch native speaker. Investigating the relation between politeness and the speech act of request in The Netherlands, Le Pair (2005:76-77) came to the conclusion that, in small social distance situations and regardless of the power distance between speaker and addressee, indirect request strategies are the most common ones used by native speakers of Dutch. In large social distance situations, by contrast, native speakers of Dutch tend to use more direct strategies when the authority of the speaker over the addressee increases.

Le Pair (2005:78) seems to relate indirectness and politeness in Dutch requests, although he stresses the importance of distinguishing indirectness from politeness. From the perspective of the present study, and following Le Pair (2005:78), the links between politeness, on the one hand, and politeness markers (like *please/thank you*) and indirect request strategies, on the other hand, need to be investigated – not only in Dutch, but also in, for example, African, Arabic and Asian languages. For now, however, it should be noted that in many languages the use of ability questions, like the *Can you ...?* type, is the most common and trusted way to make an effective request (Blum-Kulka 1989:52). According to Sadock (2004:71), using a *Can you ...?* preparatory type of request strategy – as in, e.g., *Can you pass the salt?* – is more polite than using an imperative strategy – e.g., *Pass the salt!* – because the preparatory strategy gives the addressee the option of not carrying out the implied request without losing face. In short, a simple indirect request (without *please/thank you*) can be perceived as a polite request in some languages. The use of *please/thank you* in indirect request strategies to make polite requests seems to be a white Afrikaans norm of usage of indirect speech acts of request. Besides, it seems that the obligation to insert the politeness marker *please* and the speech act of thanking when using the preparatory request strategy provides support for Chick's (1995:236-237) claim that in social interactions (white) Afrikaners tend to make extensive use of positive politeness; and when interacting with members of an “out group” (i.e., strangers), Afrikaners tend to prefer using a deference strategy.

The staff members' reaction to the use of the indirect speech act *Can you ...?* without the insertion of the polite marker *please* and/or the speech act of thanking, supports the hypothesis A in Chapter 1 which states that the way in which complaints are made and responded to is influenced by factors that relate to cultural differences. Further support of this hypothesis is provided by some Chinese students' use of indirect strategies, as discussed below.

The data show that most staff members did not perceive as respectful the Chinese complainer who uttered the following complaint:

(87) Subject C1: You can hear the noise, and maybe you follow me to hear the noise.

The fact that this student did not start off with a greeting and also failed to say *please* and/or *thank you* could be the reason why she was perceived as disrespectful by the staff members. However, it is interesting to note that in response to the utterance in (87), one staff member remarked that the complainer was not proficient in English, and this made her sound “abrupt and rude and even ‘pushy’”, according to that staff member. The complaint strategy used by the Chinese student represents a hint, which is considered the most nonconventional and indirect strategy when it comes to requests and complaints; moreover, the strategy used in the Chinese student’s complaint can be described as a “strong” hint. According to the CCSARP framework, in a strong hint the illocutionary intent is not immediately derivable from the locution. However, the locution refers to relevant elements of the intended illocutionary and/or propositional act (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:280). According to Weizman (1993:124), the problem with hints in general is that the interpretation of the speaker’s intention depends highly on the context. From the task in the instrument B used to collect the data, the staff members were aware that the student was complaining to them about the noise during silent time. Given the context of silent time, it goes without saying that the primary intention of a student who brings a situation of noise disturbance to the attention of a House Committee member, would be to make a complaint and to seek for appropriate action. Therefore, what is important to consider here is not the illocutionary force of the utterance, but rather the complainer’s choice of the hint strategy to express her complaint.

It could be claimed that one of the reasons why the Chinese complainer in (87) preferred a strong hint complaint strategy, might be because most Chinese speakers appear to use a high-context communication style (Andersen et al. 2003). According to Hall (in Andersen et al. 2003:83), in a high-context communication style, the meaning of messages is largely invested in (and interpreted from) the context (i.e., the type of speech event, the physical context, social and power distance between interlocutors) in which the communication process takes place. In a low-context communication style, by contrast, the meaning of messages is largely invested in (and interpreted from) the linguistic or verbally coded part of the message. A high-context communication style predominates in high-context cultures, and Chinese culture is considered as one of the highest-context cultures (Andersen et al. 2003:83).

Another example that supports this claim about Chinese communication style comes from the complaint in (88), again uttered by a Chinese student:

(88) Subject C2: Excuse me; I have a problem because my neighbours often... today my neighbours are so noisy so I can't fall asleep. So I don't know how could you resist this situation. So can you give me any suggestion? So what should I do? I don't know. So what the rules of this house? I don't know Concordia's rules. So I want to ask you, I want to ask you for advice, ok? So can you help me? I think you can help me.

All the staff members answered that they would explain the rules of the residence to the complainer; still, one staff member regarded it as disrespectful that a student should make a complaint without being familiar with the rules. As is clear from the complaint, however, the complainer first asked for advice about what to do in the situation of noise disturbance during silent time (*So I don't know how could you resist this situation. So can you give me any*

suggestion? So what should I do?), before asking what the rules of the residence were (*So what the rules of this house?*). Accordingly, it could be claimed that, by asking about the rules, the complainer implied that there were rules which apply to that particular situation. Moreover, it could also be argued that the complainer was referring to the rules about what to do when the neighbours do not respect the silent time rules. This possibility is supported by the sequence *I want to ask you for advice* in (88). As stated earlier, given the specific context of a silent time period, the primary intention of a student who brings a situation of noise disturbance to the attention of a House Committee member, is to make a complaint and to request an intervention by the addressee; after all, the role of the House Committee member is to make sure that the silent time rules are obeyed. The expectation of the complainer was confirmed by the sequence *I think you can help me*, which implies that the addressee knew what to do in such a situation. Besides, by asking the question about the rules of the residence, the complainer was implying that there were rules which apply when someone does not respect the silent time. Therefore, the illocutionary intent of the complainer was not to ask for information about the rules, but rather to request that the addressee enforces the silent time rules. In short, then, the staff members were supposed to infer the indirect request mainly from the context (silent time period, a student talking about noise coming from the neighbours, social role relationships between speaker and addressee) and not, as they did, from the utterances alone. This point supports the hypothesis B in Chapter 1, which states that cultural differences in the way in which complaints are made and responded to may lead to misunderstandings and even to communication breakdown.

The staff members' reaction to the use of the indirect speech act *Can you...?* without the insertion of the politeness device *please* and/or the speech act of thanking on the one hand, and the Chinese way of complaining, for instance, on the other hand, support the hypothesis A,

namely: the way in which complaints are made and responded to is influenced by factors that relate to cultural differences.

4.2.2 Friendliness

The responses of the staff members to the question whether they perceived the complainers as friendly or not, are given in Table 20. The staff answered “yes” in 50% and “no” in 47.22% of the cases;¹⁸ in the remaining cases (2.78%) they failed to give a response.

Cultural Group	2-Way Summary Table: Observed Frequencies. Marked cells have counts >10 Chi-square test: p= .51292		
	Question 2 No	Question 2 Yes	Row Totals
Chinese	2	8	10
Row	20.00%	80.00%	
Gabonese	5	7	12
Row	41.67%	58.33%	
German	2	10	12
Row	16.67%	83.33%	
Libyan	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
Dutch	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
American	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Totals	16	54	70 ¹⁹

Table 20: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 2

As shown by the data in Table 20, the South African staff members most often perceived the American students as friendly (91.67%), followed by the German (83.33%), the Chinese (80%) and the Libyan and the Dutch students (both 75%). As regards the Gabonese students, they were less often than the others perceived as friendly (58.33%).

¹⁸ See the graph on page 71.

¹⁹ Recall that no responses were given in 2.78% of the cases.

4.2.3 Formality

When asked the question “Is the student informal?” the staff members answered “yes” in 79% and “no” in 21% of the cases.²⁰ Table 21 below presents the staff members’ perception of each cultural group.

Cultural Group	2-Way Summary Table: Observed Frequencies. Marked cells have counts >10 Chi-square test: p= .77745		
	Question 3 No	Question 3 Yes	Row Totals
Chinese	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
Gabonese	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
German	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Libyan	2	10	12
Row	16.67%	83.33%	
Dutch	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
American	2	10	12
Row	16.67%	83.33%	
Totals	12	60	72

Table 21: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 3

The data in this table show that more often (at least in 75% of cases in each cultural group) the staff members perceived the complainers as informal in their way of complaining. Note that the Dutch and German students were perceived to be most informal in their complaints (both 91.67%).

4.2.4 Clarity

When asked whether the students expressed their complaints clearly or not, the response of the staff members was “yes” in 67% and “no” in 33% of the cases.²¹ Table 22 below presents the staff members’ perception of each cultural group’s clarity of expression.

²⁰ See the graph on page 71.

²¹ See the graph on page 71.

Cultural Group	2-Way Summary Table: Observed Frequencies. Marked cells have counts >10 Chi-square test: p= .11545		
	Question 4 No	Question 4 Yes	Row Totals
Chinese	4	8	12
Row	33.33%	66.67%	
Gabonese	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
German	0	12	12
Row	0.00%	100.00%	
Libyan	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Dutch	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
American	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Totals	12	60	72

Table 22: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 4

The data in Table 22 shows that more often (at least in 66.77% of cases in each cultural group) the staff members perceived the complainers as clear in their way of complaining. The German students were all (100%) perceived to be clear in the way they made their complaints, followed closely by the Libyan and the American students (91.67%). The Chinese students, by contrast, were perceived as the least clear (66.67%) in their way of complaining.

4.2.5 Appropriateness

The staff members answered “yes” in 63% and “no” in 37% of the cases²² when asked whether the students' way of complaining was appropriate for the situation or not. However, a significant difference appeared in the way they rated each cultural group, as illustrated in Table 23 below.

²² See the graph on page 71.

Cultural Group	2-Way Summary Table: Observed Frequencies. Marked cells have counts >10 Chi-square test: p= .17987		
	Question 5 No	Question 5 Yes	Row Totals
Chinese	2	10	12
Row	16.67%	83.33%	
Gabonese	4	8	12
Row	33.33%	66.67%	
German	1	11	12
Row	8.33%	91.67%	
Libyan	0	12	12
Row	0.00%	100.00%	
Dutch	2	10	12
Row	16.67%	83.33%	
American	3	9	12
Row	25.00%	75.00%	
Totals	12	60	72

Table 23: Staff members' social judgements of complainers: Question 5

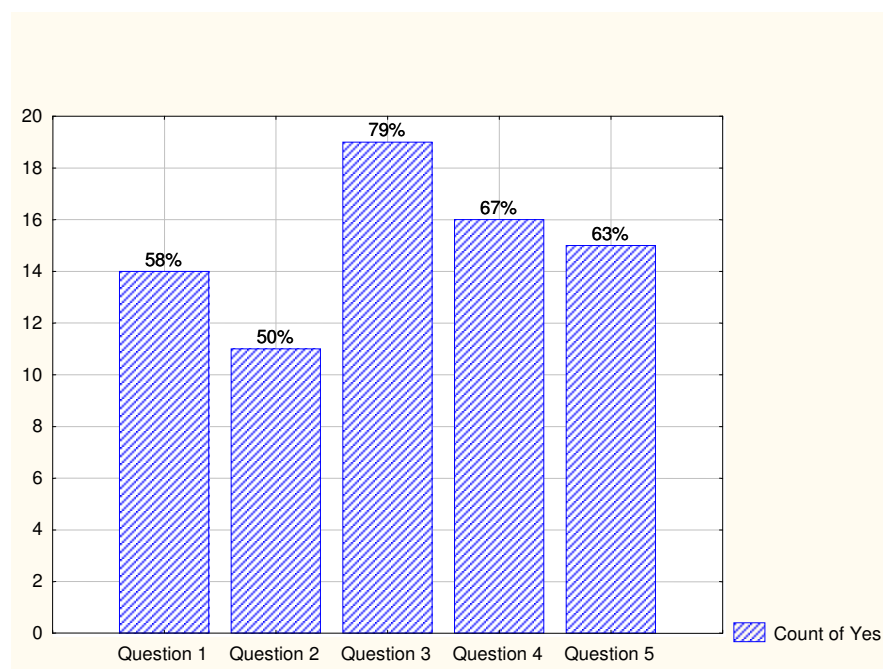
As this table shows, the staff members perceived the Libyan and German students' way of complaining the most appropriate (100% and 91.67%, respectively); the Gabonese students' way of complaining was perceived as the least appropriate (66.67%).

The staff members provided various answers when asked to explain why they judged some complaints as inappropriate to the situation. An analysis of their answers revealed that they based their judgement mostly on the fact that the complainer was not polite and/or clear when complaining, and also on the way the complainer handled the situation. These considerations are illustrated by the following examples:

- (89) His complaint [G2's] is not appropriate, because he is not being clear about who he is or what his exact problem is. This makes it impossible for me to help him. He also sounds rude, almost like he's "barking" orders at me.

(90) I would prefer that students like this one, complain about noise before they get upset. This sounds like a student who has been living with the problem for a while (without complaining) and now he is accusing the House Committee of not being strict enough.

To conclude the discussion in sections 4.2.1-4.2.5, the responses of the staff members to the five yes/no questions in Instrument B in the Appendix can be summarized in the following graph:



Graph 1: Staff members' social judgements of complainers.

4.2.6 Findings concerning the open-ended question

The staff members were asked to answer the open-ended question “What would you do about the complaint after the student has left?” (See Instrument B in the Appendix). In most cases, the staff members answered that they would deal with the problem or carry out the request, regardless of whether they found the complainer disrespectful or her way of complaining inappropriate; this is illustrated by the responses in (91) and (92). However, as shown in (93), staff members’

willingness to deal with the problem as a matter of urgency would sometimes depend on whether or not the complaint sounded polite and/or appropriate to them.

(91) I would be more than happy to assist this student [student N4].

(92) I will still tend to his [student U4] complaint immediately, because he asked for my help in a nice way.

(93) I would still try to help him [student G2], but I would not make the matter an urgent one. I would not be very happy to help him and I might not go to the same extent as I would, for students who are not rude to me.

Similarly, the staff members' action after listening to the complainer would also sometimes depend on how clearly the complaint was expressed, or on how they understood the complaint. For instance, dealing with the same complaint (that of student G2) in (94), the answers of two of the staff members indicate that they would take different actions, as shown in (95) and (96).

(94) Subject G2: Mr _ I'm not happy, I'm trying to do my work but there is some people that are doing noise in the campus, so I would like to ask you to do something, please.

(95) Head student 3: I would deal with the matter immediately.

(96) Head student 1: I would refer the complaint to university.

The research question (1) in Chapter 1 seeks to determine whether cultural differences influence the way that complaints are responded to. With regard to the South African staff members' social judgment of the international students' complaints and their perception of the complainers, the above findings suggest an affirmative answer to this question.

4.3 Findings concerning the staff members' replies to the complainers

From a conversational interaction perspective, the function of the last instrument (Instrument C in Appendix) was to determine what the staff members' replies would be when confronted with a complaint in a conversational setting. In other words: in their turn at speaking, what would each staff member say after listening to the complainer?

The data showed that, in their turn at speaking, the staff members produced a series of speech acts containing different semantic components. These components are briefly described below.

1. An acknowledgment of understanding occurred in some responses. In this way, the staff member tried to assure the complainer that her complaint was clearly understood. This is illustrated by the following example:

(97) Yes my friend, *I heard your complaint* and that is inappropriate that a person don't listen what you ask him and be sure I'll be there immediately and speak to him. If he doesn't listen we'll take further actions. So sorry about the noise. Thank you.

2. Some staff members performed the speech act of thanking the complainer for bringing the problem to their attention. This speech act was performed, for instance, in the following utterance:

(98) *Thank you for informing me*, I will see to it that students keep within the quiet time rules.

3. Agreeing with the complainer or sharing her dissatisfaction (i.e., affiliating with the complainer; see section 2.2 in Chapter 2) occurred in some staff members' responses. This is illustrated by the example in (99).

(99) Thank you U2 for informing me about this situation. *I agree with you about the fact that people should still respect each other, even when it is not “quiet time”* and I will communicate this to the rest of the house. I will also make an appointment with the girls next to you and then I will speak to them about the noise. If the problem does not stop after that, then you must please contact me again.

4. An apology occurred in some staff members' responses, as shown by the following example:

(100) [N1], *I am really sorry to hear about this.* Which block do you live in?

5. Two types of request were included in some of the responses of the staff members. The first was a request for more information about the problem, as illustrated in (100), and also (101) and (102) below. This speech act serves to obtain more details about the origin of the disturbance (where exactly does the noise come from, who is/are the offender(s), etc.).

(101) I will look into the problem, but *I would like to know who the students are or where they live*, so that I can go and sort out the problem. Thank you for bringing the problem to my attention.

(102) N2, *can I please come speak to you personally, so that you can tell me exactly what is going on and so that I can try and see how I can help you? Where in Academia do you live?*

The second type of request, a speech act dealing with a future physical action of the complainer, is illustrated by the following examples:

6. N4, I am very sorry to hear about this. Thank you for letting me know about your problem. I would like to come speak to these noisy students straight away. *Could you meet me at your block in five minutes so that we can solve this problem?* Where in Academia do you live?

(103) *G4, please do not deal with the matter yourself.* I will deal with the people in your block. Could you please give me their details? The next time this happens, you must contact your House Committee member immediately so that he can help you.

7. As illustrated by the example in (105), and also those in (103) and (104), some staff members performed the speech act of informing, that is, telling the complainer about a future action that they will take in connection with the problem.

(104) Unfortunately, *all I can do* is inform the university of this problem. As soon as I get feedback, *I will inform you.*

8. Some staff members explicitly committed themselves or assured the complainer of their intention to deal with the matter, as in the following examples:

(105) *I assure you that I will look into the matter.* If there is any such problems in the future don't hesitate to contact me.

(106) *I will do my best* to ensure that students keep to the silent time.

9. As illustrated in (108) and also (106) above, some staff members offered their on-going assistance, also with regard to other possible issues.

(107) Okay, I will see what I can find out and then I will get back to you about how I am going to handle the situation. *If there is anything else that I can help with, please let me know.*

10. In their response, some staff members gave advice to the complainer. This speech act of advising is illustrated by the following utterances:

(108) G4, please do not deal with the matter yourself. I will deal with the people in your block. Could you please give me their details? *The next time this happens, you must contact your House Committee member immediately so that he can help you.*

(109) *I would advise you to ask your neighbours to please keep to the quiet time rules, or come to me, as you did.* I will also put up new posters for the quiet time rules.

11. A warning speech act occurred in one staff member's answer, as shown below:

(110) *I would just like to warn you that it is not a good idea to take matters into your own hands.* You could just make thing worse. So let us handle it.

The table 24 below summarises the speech acts performed by the staff members in their replies to the complainers.

Speech act	Frequency of use of speech acts
Thanking	61.11%
Apologizing	12.5%
Acknowledging of understanding	12.5%
Agreeing with the complainer	19.44%
Requesting	38.88%
Informing	72.22%
Committing oneself or giving assurance	15.27%
Offering assistance	11.11%
Giving advice	9.72%
Warning	1.38%

Table 24: Speech acts performed in staff members' replies to complainers.

As is clear from this table, the most common individual speech acts included in all staff members' responses are those of thanking the complainer (61.11%), and informing the complainer about their intended action to deal with the matter (72.22%).

The analysis of the staff members' replies revealed that, regardless of how they perceived the complainers (i.e., whether the complaint sounded polite and/or appropriate or not to them), the staff members informed the addressee about their intention to deal with the problem. However, as regards the speech act of thanking, the analysis revealed that the staff members mostly performed this particular speech act (55.55% of cases) when they perceived the complainer as respectful and the complaint as appropriate. The analysis showed that other speech acts were also performed only when the staff members perceived the complainer as polite and the way of complaining as appropriate. These other speech acts are: apologizing, acknowledging of understanding the complaint, committing oneself or giving assurance to attend to the problem,

agreeing with the complainer, offering assistance for on-going assistance or for other matters. More generally, the data show that in most cases the staff members performed the speech act of thanking the complainer, and they affiliated with the complainer when the latter was perceived as polite.

As regards the status differences between the staff members, one of them (the head student 2) had a higher responsibility in the House Committee²³ of one of the residences. The analysis of that staff member's responses revealed that in some cases she would personally and willingly help the complainer, as illustrated in (112). In other cases, however, she would have preferred that the complainer had approached the staff member in charge of the specific unit (or block) of the residence, as illustrated by her utterance in (113).

(111) C4, thank you for informing me about the problem in your block. I would like to arrange a block meeting for your block, were we can speak about the noise in the block. In the meantime, if you have an urgent noise problem in your block, please phone me so that I can speak to those people immediately.

(112) [To student A4][...] The next time this happens you must inform [name], the House Committee member for your block immediately, so that he can speak to these people. I will also make sure that he organises a block meeting very soon, so that you can voice your complaints at the meeting too.

The replies of the staff member in question revealed that she would personally help the complainer in 70.84% of the cases, whereas in 29.16% of the cases she indicated that she would actually prefer the complaint to be attended to by someone else. Interestingly, in the latter cases,

²³ Recall that the House Committee is the body which is in charge of organising the social life in the residence.

she dealt with complainers whom she perceived as disrespectful and/or whose way of complaining struck her as inappropriate. Conversely, of those cases (70.84%) where she was willing to become involved personally, 62.5% represented cases where she perceived the complainers as respectful and/or their way of complaining appropriate. This staff member's response provides further support for the hypothesis B in Chapter 1, which states that cultural differences in the way in which complaints are made and responded to may lead to misunderstandings and even to communication breakdown.

The data dealing with the staff members' social judgements of the complainers, and their replies, indicate that potential situations of misunderstanding can be caused by at least three factors. First, it can be that information was not clearly expressed or only presented implicitly, as illustrated by the use of hints and a high-context communication style by some of the Chinese complainers. A second factor relates to contrasting expectations, for instance not following the social norm of saying *please/thank you* when making a request in white Afrikaans culture. A third factor can relate to the addressee making the wrong inference regarding the illocutionary intent of the complainer, as was the case where some complainers made use of indirect speech acts. It can be claimed that the potential situations of misunderstanding might have been avoided (i) if the international students were aware of the social appropriateness norms that apply when making complaints and requests in a predominantly Afrikaans cultural setting, and (ii) if the Afrikaans staff members were aware of the fact that in other cultures people do not necessarily make complaints and requests in the same way that they are made in Afrikaans culture. These claims are in line with hypothesis C in Chapter 1, which states that conscious efforts to create greater awareness of cultural differences will lead to a better understanding of the way in which people of different cultural groups make and respond to complaints.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusion

This study focused on the influence of cultural factors on the way individuals from different cultural groups make and respond to complaints. The study started by examining the components of the speech act set of complaint as performed in English by Chinese, Dutch, Gabonese, German, Libyan, and (white) American students living in some student residences of Stellenbosch University. Eleven individual speech acts were identified from the data, but only the two individual speech acts of complaint and request appeared to be essential in the production of all complainers' complaint sequences.

The analysis of the complainers' performance of the individual speech act of complaint revealed that, in all six of the cultural groups, almost all the complainers chose a direct strategy to perform the complaint speech act. However, the six cultural groups differed from one another as regards the use of modifiers (both intensifiers and softeners) in their performance of the individual speech act of complaint. The findings show that Gabonese complainers used softeners the most, followed by the German and the American complainers. The Chinese and the Libyan complainers used softeners less frequently, and the Dutch used the least. As regards the use of intensifiers, the Dutch complainers used the most, followed by the Chinese and the Libyan complainers; the American complainers used fewer intensifiers, followed by the German complainers and lastly the Gabonese, who used least of all.

The analysis of the complainers' performance of the individual speech act of request revealed that the six cultural groups differed in the degree of directness used in the performance of that

speech act. From among the six cultural groups, the Gabonese students were found to be the most direct, whereas the German students were the least direct. The German students were found to be the most indirect, followed by the American, the Dutch, the Chinese and the Libyan students, with the Gabonese students being the least indirect. The six cultural groups also differed from one another as regards the use of modifiers when performing the individual speech act of request. The American students used softeners the most, completely avoiding any intensifiers; the Dutch distinguished themselves from the others in being the only group to use more intensifiers than softeners in their utterances.

After having analysed the components of the speech act set of complaint as performed by the international students, the next step was to determine the staff members' social judgments of the students' complaints and their perception of the complainers.

The data showed that there were no significant differences in the overall way the staff members perceived the complainers. The staff members generally answered "yes" when asked whether the complainers struck them as respectful, friendly, informal, clear, and whether they judged the complaints to be appropriate for the situation. However, as regards perceived respectfulness, the results showed that the staff members considered the German and Libyan students as the most respectful, and the American students as the least respectful. The analysis of this finding revealed, however, that the staff members' judgement was mainly based on the way the complainers performed the individual speech acts of attention-getting and request. Most staff members found it disrespectful not to be addressed in a formal way by the complainers. As regards request strategies, the analysis revealed that the omission of the politeness marker *please* and/or the speech act of thanking, was perceived as impolite in white Afrikaans culture. Moreover, it was found that the use of the preparatory request strategy *Can you...* without

including *please* and/or *thank you* was also considered as impolite in white Afrikaans culture. The findings also indicated that the Chinese high-context communication style was not shared and understood by staff members.

Concerning the question whether the students' way of complaining was appropriate for the situation, it was found that the staff members' judgement was mostly based on the impression that the complainer was not respectful and/or clear, but also on the way the complainer handled the overall situation.

The analysis of the open-ended question revealed that, even though all the staff members stated that they would deal with the complaint regardless of whether the complaint struck them as disrespectful or inappropriate, their willingness to deal with the problem actually depends on whether the complaint sounded polite and/or appropriate to them. The staff members' action after being confronted with the complaint was moreover also found to depend on the clarity of the complaint.

From a conversational interaction perspective, the results showed that the most common individual speech acts included in all staff members' responses are those of thanking the complainer and informing him about the action that will be taken to deal with the matter. However, in most cases the staff members performed certain speech acts – such as thanking, apologizing, acknowledging understanding of the complaint, committing oneself or giving assurance to solve the problem, agreeing with the complainer, offering assistance for further help or for help in the future – only when they perceived the complainer as respectful and the complaint as appropriate.

The findings indicate that factors relating to cultural differences influenced, on the one hand, the way the international students performed the complaint speech act sequences, and on the other hand, the way the staff members responded to the complaints. Moreover, the findings reveal that cultural differences – in terms of social appropriateness norms when performing speech acts and in terms of cultural communication style preferences – may lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, conscious efforts to create greater awareness of cultural differences will lead to a better understanding of the way in which people from different cultural groups make and respond to complaints.

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this study is the influence of cultural differences on the interactions between international students of Stellenbosch University and (Afrikaans) staff members. It is important to emphasize that because of the limited scope of the study and the relatively small amount of data, the validity of the findings regarding complaint and requestive behaviour need to be tested by studies of larger scope. In particular, attention should be given to the relation between ‘politeness’ and complaint and requestive behaviour in Afrikaans, on the one hand, and other non-South African as well as indigenous languages, on the other hand, in order to give a proper account of potential sources of intercultural miscommunication involving students and staff at Stellenbosch University.

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Appendix

Instrument A: Spoken complaint about disturbance

According to the Internal Code of Conduct and House Rules for your residence, residents have to observe certain fixed “silent times”²⁴ during which making noise is strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, recently you have been having great difficulty in studying and sleeping during silent times because of all the noise coming from your neighbours. How would you present your complaint in informal spoken language to the head student?

Instrument B: Head Student Social Acceptability Judgement Questionnaire

A student resident is complaining to you about the disturbance caused by his/her noisy neighbours.

Student's complaint:	Head Student	
	Yes	No
1. (a) Is the student respectful? (b) If No, briefly explain the reason(s) for your judgement.		
2. Is the student friendly?		
3. Is the student informal?		
4. Does the student express his/her complaint clearly?		
5. Is the student's way of complaining appropriate for the situation?		
6. What would you do about the complaint after the student has left?		

Please briefly explain your answer to questions 1. (b), 4 and 5 below.

1. (b)

²⁴ Silent times are particular times of a day or a week during which no noise is tolerated. Many residences of Stellenbosch University have set silent times in order not only to maintain a peaceful co-existence amongst residents, but also to ensure silence and no disturbance in residences during test and exam periods.

4.

5.

Instrument C: Head Student's response to complaints.

You are in your office or on the phone with a resident student who is complaining to you about the disturbance caused by his/her noisy neighbours. After listening to him/her you say: ...