

# Semantic Analysis of Direct Oral Complaints in Indian English: A Study in Gender Performance

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Jyoti Jayal

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Sharda University, Gautam Budha Nagar, U.P., India, [jyoti.jayal@sharda.ac.in](mailto:jyoti.jayal@sharda.ac.in)

## Abstract

Empirical and ethnographic researches have proved speech acts to be semantically formulaic. Complaint as one of the most face-threatening speech acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978) appears to be the least researched speech act in terms of semantic formula. The paper focused upon identifying semantic discourse components prevailing in the direct oral complaints in Indian English articulated by the native speakers of Hindi that mitigated the impact of the face-threatening act, and made it more solution oriented. Moreover, the paper aimed at exploring the intra-cultural gender differences in the verbal and linguistic behaviour exhibited by the native speakers of Hindi while performing the speech act. In order to elicit data for the research, two hypothetical situations were designed based on the “solidarity politeness system” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 55). The respondents of the present study were male and female students, 18 to 24 years of age, enrolled in a four-year undergraduate program offered by Engineering colleges in Greater Noida, affiliated to UP Technical University, Uttar Pradesh. Being a native speaker of Hindi, their level of proficiency in spoken English was evaluated as intermediate and pre-advance. In the view of studying the role of gender in the selection of semantic formulae, the complaint tokens produced by the respondents were tape recorded through an oral discourse completion task (DCT). The complaint realizations were coded according to Schaefer’s (1980) semantic moves to perform a comparative gender study of the verbal and linguistic behaviour in the articulation of direct oral complaints in Indian English.

**Keywords:** complaints, face-threatening, gender, solidarity politeness system, semantic moves, discourse completion task.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is the production of speech act semantically formulaic? Does gender play a significant role in production of speech act? Towards the end of the twentieth century, gender study has become a prevalent subject in the area of ethnographic research. In recent years, production of speech acts with respect to language and gender has been studied to a great extent. However, speech act of complaint has received less importance, as compared to other speech acts, even after being a pervasive part of our day-to-day life. As stated by Brown and Levinson (1987, 65-66), the act of complaining

is a “face threatening act (FTA)” for the speaker as well as the hearer. It transpires to be a critical and complex verbal act as the speaker should be very cautious while articulating it. The articulation of complaint, even in the extreme complainable situation, is mostly discouraged in the society as it has the propensity to damage the ‘face’ or the ‘public image’ of the speaker as well as the hearer. ‘Public image’ or ‘face’ bears a significant value in Indian culture and needs to be handled strategically. Therefore, most of the time, people choose to remain silent rather than putting forth the issue and getting it resolved. This research aims to study semantic

formulation of the act of complaining used by both the respondents (male and female) in the “solidarity politeness system” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 55), in order to release their discomfort and feel more relaxed and satisfied, without much effecting the face of the hearer. Moreover, it also focuses on studying whether the respondents could successfully mitigate the impact of the face-threatening act and made it more solution oriented.

### 1.1. Speech Act of Complaints

Initially, the act of complaining was categorized as “behabitives” by J.L. Austin (1962, 81-83). Behabitives is a subcategory of “performatives”, which signifies that “the speaker performs an action explicitly by uttering a sentence” (81-83). Later, J. Searle (1979) defined the verbal act of complaints as an “assertive” and an “expressive”. The former refers to the verbal act of making assertions by the speaker about a certain state of affair (12), whereas, the latter refers to the verbal act of expressing by the speaker about her/his psychological state (15). Schaefer (1980) states that

“An utterance or set of utterances, which identifies a problem or trouble source and seeks rectification, either from the person responsible for the trouble source, or a third party who has the power to affect the situation is called complaint.”

(quoted in Piotrowska, 1987, 42)

The speech act of complaint is also defined as a “conflictive act” (Leech, 1983, 105) since the illocutionary goal of speech act of complaint “conflicts with the social goal” (105). Moreover, it is also identified as a “face-threatening acts” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 65-66) for the reason that it has the propensity to damage the ‘face’ of the interlocutors, that is, the speaker and the hearer.

“... complaining is usually addressed to a hearer (H) whom (S) holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action and possibly suggest/request a repair”. (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993, 108)

Anna Trosborg (1995) mentions that the speech act of complaint

“... includes moral judgment which expresses the speaker’s approval and disapproval of the behaviour mentioned in the judgment on something the complaineer has already done or fail to do, or in the process of doing. The event described in the proposition took place in the past”. (311)

Anna Trosborg (1995) also illustrates the act of complaining as “an offensive act” wherein the complainer expresses their disapproval or negative response towards the state of affairs described in the complainable. Boxer (1993a, 1993b) distinguished two categories of complaint: direct and indirect, which have their origin in D’AmicoReisner’s (1985) study on disapproval.

“[...] direct complaints are addressed to a complaineer who is held responsible for the offensive action.”

(Boxer, 1993a, 106-107)

on the contrary,

“[...] indirect complaints are given to addressees who are not responsible for the perceived offense.”

(Boxer, 1993a: 106-107)

The present study would focus on the semantic moves used by the respondents (male/female) to make the act of complaining less face-threatening for the speaker as well as the hearer. Moreover, this action becomes a source of releasing negative emotions for the speaker as well as an appropriate solution to the problematic situation.

### 1.2. Face (politeness) systems in interpersonal communication

In human interactions, we not only want to be “involved with other participants” and exhibit them “our involvement”, but also to uphold “some degree of independence from other participants” and exhibit them that “we respect their independence” (Scollon and Scollon,

2001, 46). Rooted in this reality, R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon (2001, 48-51) devised a “face (Politeness) system” that included “independence” and “involvement” face strategies depending upon the three social variables, namely, power (P), distance (D) and weight of imposition (W).

The interlocutors involved in communication process manipulated these strategies according to the social factors. The three face (politeness) systems in interpersonal communication are as follows:

a) In “deference politeness system” (–P, +D), the interlocutors are at the “same social level” (–P), but treat one another at a distance (+D). As a result, the interlocutors apply “politeness strategies of independence” while communicating with each other (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 54). For example: strangers, colleagues, etc.

b) In “solidarity politeness system” (–P, –D), the interlocutors are at an “equal social position” (–P), and share a close bonding with each other (–D). As a result, the interlocutors apply “politeness strategies of involvement” while communicating with each other (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 55). For example: friends, siblings, etc.

c) In “hierarchical politeness system” (+P, ±D), the interlocutors are at “unequal social position” (+P), and either share a close bonding or remain distant from each other (±D). As a result, the interlocutor with higher stature (superior) applies “politeness strategies of involvement” while the interlocutor with lower stature (subordinate) applies politeness strategies of independence during interactions with each other (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 56). For example: teacher-student, parents-children, employer-employee, etc.

The present study deals with “solidarity politeness system” (Fig. 1), that is, (–P, –D) (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 55), where the interlocutors are friends that are close (–D) to each other, and share an equal social position (–P).

**SPEAKER 1 < = involvement = > SPEAKER 2**

**[–D = Minimal distance between the speakers]**

Fig. 1: *Solidarity politeness system*

### 1.3. Rationale of the Study

In this paper, the speech act of direct oral complaints has been selected for investigation due to two major reasons. First, though complaints are most common in everyday lives and are socially complex acts even for native speakers, it is highly unexpected to know that little consideration is given to this speech act, and not much research has been carried out on it. Secondly, a few gender studies have been conducted on the speech act of complaints in different languages, but not on Hindi speakers. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to compare the speech act of complaints produced by male and female Hindi speakers in their second language (English). The present study is based on following questions:

a) What semantic formula do native speakers of Hindi use while complaining in Indian English in solidarity politeness system?

b) Do both male and female Hindi speakers semantically differ in the production of Indian English complaints?

c) Are the speakers (male/female) able to lessen the impact of the face-threatening act?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Respondents

Data collection was done from two groups of respondents, namely, male and female native Hindi speakers, aged between 18 to 24 years. Forty-five respondents (twenty-four males and twenty-one females) chosen for the study were students enrolled in an undergraduate course (B. Tech.) offered by the Departments of Engineering in technical colleges, affiliated by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technical University, Uttar Pradesh, located in Greater Noida and. They exhibited intermediate and pre-advance level of proficiency in the articulation of English, as a second language.

## 2.2. Instrument

As the present study focuses on gender study, a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), consisting two hypothetical situations based on solidarity politeness system (Scollon and Scollon, 2001) was used to collect data from the respondents, that is, male and female native Hindi speakers.

Situation 1: Your elder sister knew one of your secrets. S/he promised you not to disclose your secret to anybody. S/he broke the promise by telling your secret to your mother.

Situation 2: You lent Rs. 5000 to your friend three weeks ago. He is one of your good friends. Though he promised to return it within a week, three weeks have already passed. You are in need of money.

The DTC (see Appendix 1A and 1B) was divided into two sections. The first section of the DTC intended to record the respondent's assessment of social variables (power, distance, severity of situation) and choice of complaining. The second section of the DTC tape-recorded the token of complaints from male and female respondents in order to study semantic formula.

## 2.3. Framework

To study the semantic formula of the direct oral English complaints produced by native Hindi male and female respondents, Schaefer's (1982) eight complaint moves were used as the framework. The semantic moves are as follows (Schaefer, 1982 quoted in Piotrowska, 1987:26):

1. Opener (O): An utterance initiating the speech act set without giving information about the wrong, e.g. "See brother"
2. Orientation (OR): An utterance giving the speaker's intent in initiating the complaint, but with no detail, e.g. "I need to talk to you regarding the money that I lent you."
3. Act Statement (AS): An utterance which states the problem directly, e.g. "You told mother about my secret."

4. Justification of the speaker (JS): An utterance explaining why the speaker is making the complaint and the effects of the wrong on the speaker, e.g. ".... because I am in great need of money."

5. Remedy (R): An utterance calling for some corrective action, e.g. "Put a stop on this habit."

6. Threat (T): An utterance stating an action the speaker might take, depending on the reaction of the addressee, e.g. "Now see ... how I tell all your secrets to mother."

7. Closing (C): An utterance made by the speaker to conclude the complaint set, e.g.

8. "Please" or "Sorry".

9. Valuation (V): An utterance expressing the feelings of the speaker about either the addressee, or the problem, e.g. "You have broken my trust."

Since complaint is a face-threatening act and can negatively affect the image of both speaker and the listener, Bonikowska (1988, 170-171) coined the term "sociopragmatic competence", i.e., 'whether to perform' an act or not. This aspect of competence is also studied in the present study to analyse situations where the respondent chooses to opt out.

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS

On the basis of data collected through the written DTC (Appendix 1A), Table 1a and Fig. 1a clearly demonstrate that majority of respondents (both male/female) chose to complain in situation 1 (with elder sister for disclosing a secret), except a few who choose not to complain or complaint in native language, that is Hindi.

In situation 2 (with male friend for not returning the money), all the respondents (both male and female) chose to complaints, except a few who chose to complain in native language.

Table 1a: *Choice of complaining in both the situations (Sit. 1 & Sit. 2).*

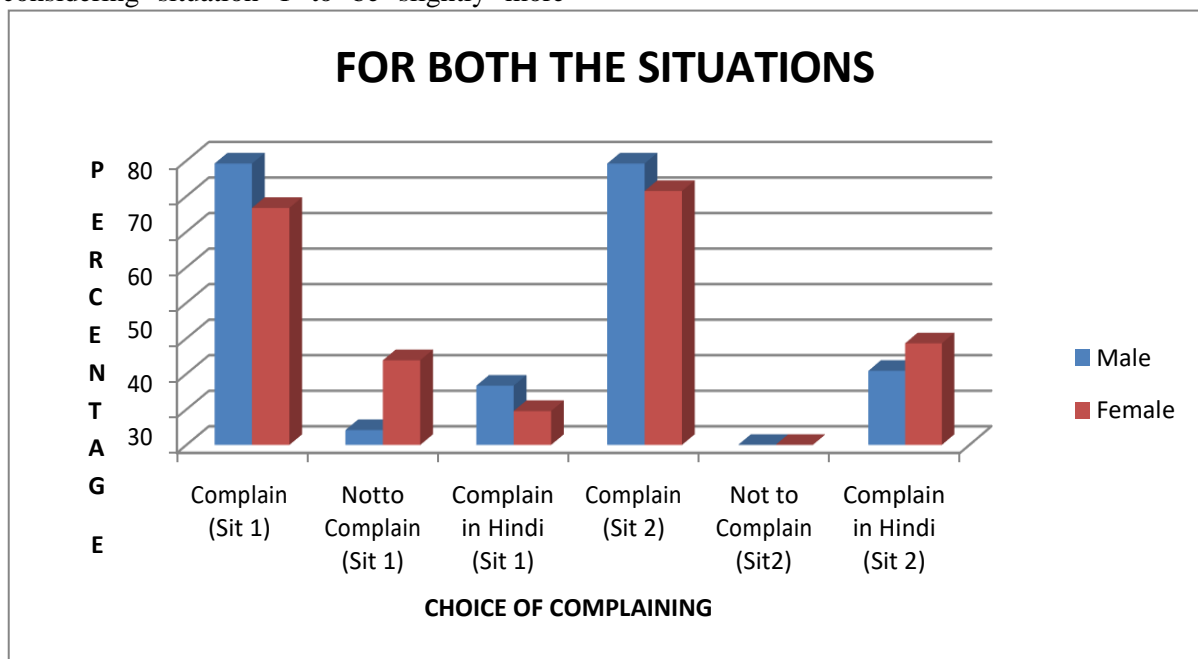
Respondent	Situation 1 (Sit. 1: Disclosed Secret)			Situation 2 (Sit. 2: Money Lent)		
	Complain	Not to Complain	Complain in Hindi	Complain	Not to Complain	Complain in Hindi
Male	19 (79.17%)	1 (4.17%)	4 (16.67%)	19 (79.17%)	0	5 (20.83%)
Female	14 (66.67%)	5 (23.81%)	2 (9.52%)	15 (71.43%)	0	6 (28.57%)

The data collected through DTC (Appendix 1A) was analysed using SPSS-16. Both male and female respondents rated power relationship with elder sister in situation 1 and with male friend in situation 2 as  $-P$ , that is, equal social position. Likewise, the mean values of 'D' reflected informal relation between the complainer and the complaine as informal. This evaluation of power (P) and distance (D) placed both the hypothetical situations under solidarity politeness system.

In both the situations, respondents interpreted the situation to be serious. Situation 1 was considered to be slightly more sever ( $W=2.46$ ) as compared to situation 2 ( $W=2.40$ ). Despite considering situation 1 to be slightly more

serious, a few choose (6/45) to opt out because they considered it to be irreparable. Moreover, respondents felt that expressing their discomfort would ruin their relationship with the person. A few (6/45) choose to articulate their grievance in native language, that is Hindi, as they found it the most appropriate language in an informal situation that would not only help them to articulate the complaint effectively but also lessen the impact of the complaint.

In situation 2, all the respondents choose to assertively put forth the issue. However, a few (11/45) decided to carry it out in the native language, that is, Hindi.

Fig. 1a: *Choice of complaining in both the situations.*

Based on the responses collected from the oral DTC (Appendix 1B), Table 1b and Fig. 1b show that the most frequently used semantic moves in both the situations were act statement (AS), justification of the speaker (JS), valuation (V) and opener (O), which are most direct moves that explicitly state the complainer/complainee in the utterance. However, around 20% to 22% of new

semantics moves other (Oth) than mentioned by Schaefer (1980) were used by both the respondents that lessened the effect of the face-threatening act. A slight variation in the use of semantic moves by male as well as female respondents was recorded which did not result in a significant difference. It shows that both the respondents utilized similar approach to achieve their goals.

Table 1b: *Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in both the situations.*

Respondents (Sit. 1& Sit. 2)	O (%)	OR (%)	AS (%)	JS (%)	R (%)	T (%)	C (%)	V (%)	Oth (%)
Male	12.79	5.48	18.72	13.24	6.85	10.05	0.91	11.87	20.09
Female	13.51	4.05	17.57	14.86	6.76	8.78	0	12.16	22.3

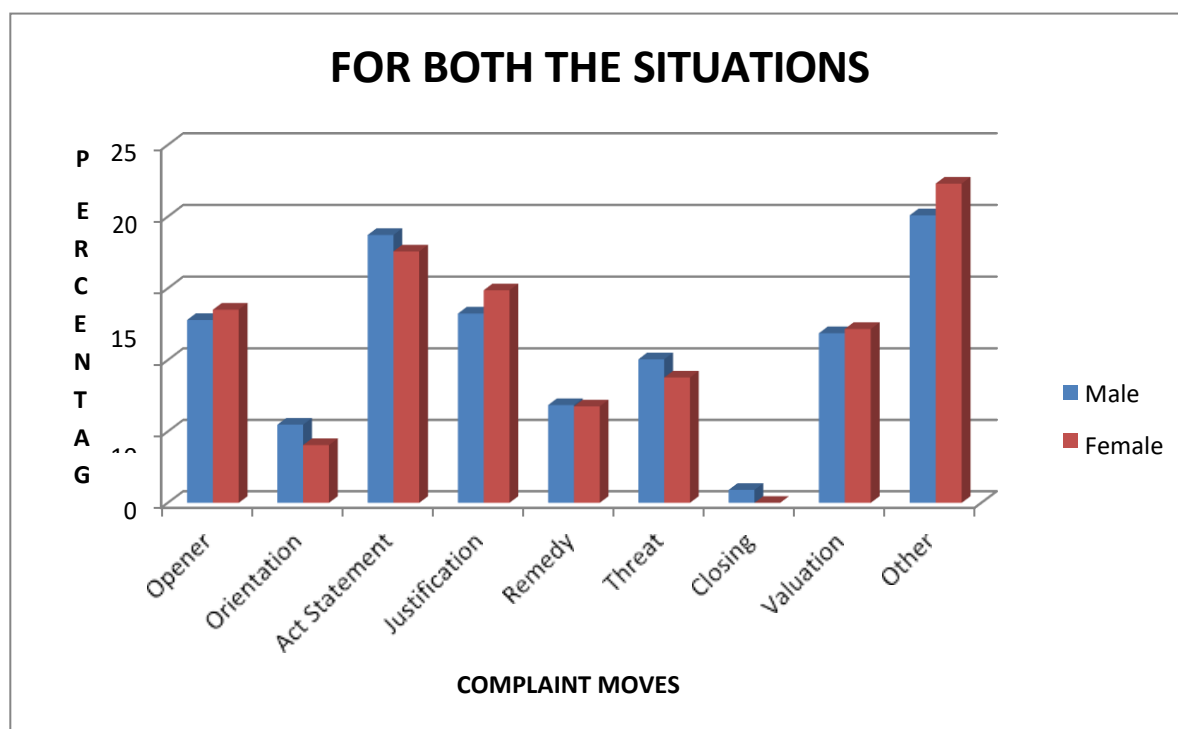


Fig. 1b: *Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in both the situations*

Table 2 and Fig. 2 clearly describe the use of semantic moves in situation 1 (Sit.1) by both the respondents. It also shows that the respondents made frequently use act statement (AS), valuation (V), threat (T), justification of the speaker (JS) and opener (O). From the use

of semantic moves it appears that female respondents tend to be slightly more severe than male respondents due to the use of threat (15.19%) and valuation (17.72), which is more than the male respondents.

Table 2: *Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in situation 1 (Sit.1: with the elder sister for disclosing the secret).*

Respondents (Sit. 1)	O (%)	OR (%)	AS (%)	JS (%)	R (%)	T (%)	C (%)	V (%)	Oth (%)
Male	10.58	3.85	20.19	11.54	0	12.5	1.92	17.31	22.11
Female	13.92	5.06	16.46	13.92	0	15.19	0	17.72	17.72

Nevertheless, the use to opener (O), orientation (OR), and other additional moves (Oth) helped the female respondents to mitigate the impact of the complaint without complicating the relationship; and to make the act more assertive

and solution oriented (discussed in detail in section 4 of the paper). On the contrary, male respondents appeared to be simple and straight forward in articulating the complaint without being much severe in situation 1.

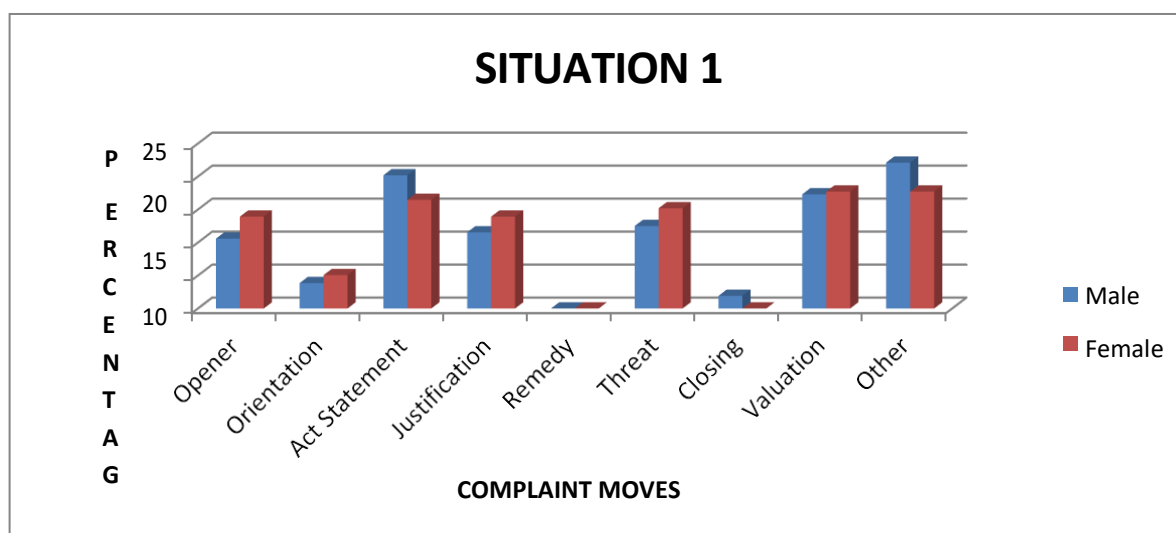


Fig. 2: *Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in situation 1 (Sit.1: with the elder sister for disclosing the secret).*

Table 3 and Fig. 3 clearly describe the use of semantic moves in situation 2 (with the male friend regarding the money lent) by both the respondents. It also shows that the respondents

made frequent use of act statement (AS), justification of the speaker (JS), remedy (R) and opener (O) as semantic moves to carry out the act of complaints.

Table 3: *Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in situation 2 (Sit.2: with the male friend regarding the money lent)*

Respondents (Sit. 2)	O (%)	OR (%)	AS (%)	JS (%)	R (%)	T (%)	C (%)	V (%)	Oth (%)
Male	14.78	6.96	17.39	14.78	13.04	7.83	0	6.96	18.26
Female	13.04	2.9	18.84	15.94	14.49	1.45	0	5.8	27.54

From the use of semantic moves such as 7.83% threat (T) and 6.96% valuation (V), it appears that male respondents are severe than female

respondents. Nonetheless, the male respondents have mitigated the situation by using a friendly opener (O), remedy (R) and other (Oth)

semantic moves as supportive moves. On the contrary, female respondents appeared to be more polite by using significantly more number of supportive moves (Oth), that is, 27.54%, and

insignificant amount of threat (T), that is, 1.45%, as compared to other moves (discussed in detail in section 4 of the paper).

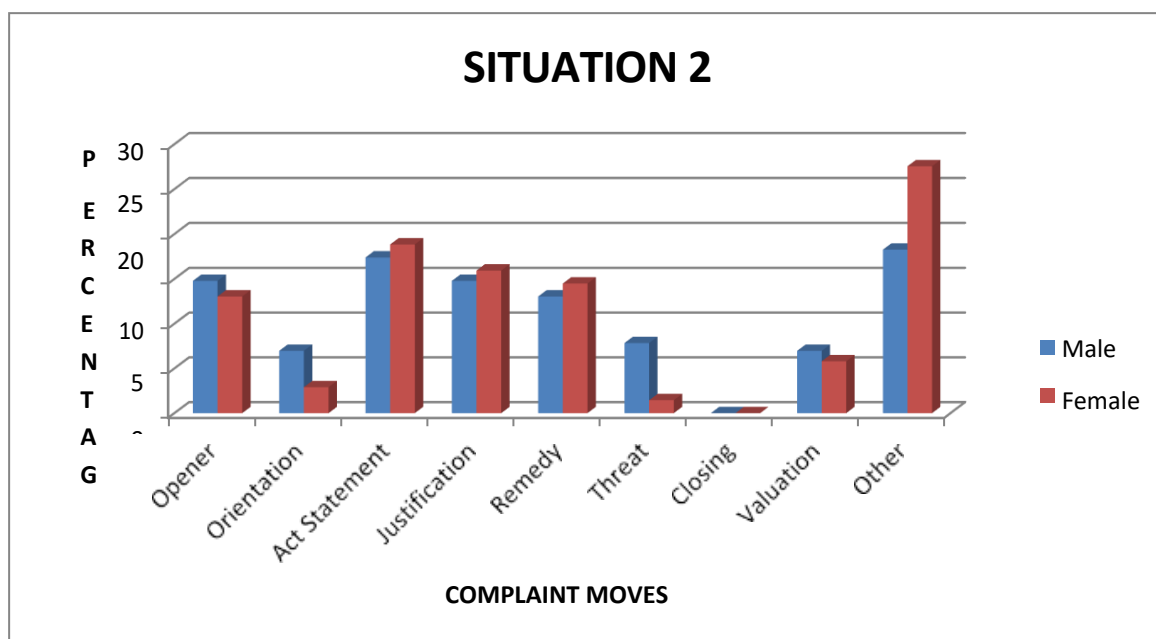


Fig. 3: Percentage (%) of semantic moves used by male and female respondents in situation 2 (Sit.2: with the male friend regarding the money lent)

#### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through the DTC (Appendix 1A and 1B) is interpreted as follows:

##### 4.1. Situation 1 (with elder sister for disclosing a secret)

According to the data both male and female Hindi speakers were consistent in their choice of semantic move for complaints in English. The frequently used semantic moves in situation 1 were Act Statement (AS), Valuation (V), Threat (T), justification (JS) and Opener (O).

Female respondents appear to be more severe as compared to male respondent due to more use of valuation (V) and threat (T). For example, respondent 40 said “Now I will also leak out all you secrets ... Now just wait and watch” in order to threaten her sister for disclosing her secret. On the contrary, respondent 42 made the complaint severe by expressing her emotions: “this is really not done ....This is really unfair on your part

...Yaar you broke my heart”. Female respondents tried to downgrade/mitigate their complaints by providing more number of justifications (JS), friendly opener (O), orientation (OR) and additional moves (Oth) as compared to male respondents. Justification and other additional moves helped them to create an emotional state wherein the hearer would feel guilty or empathetic towards the speaker, and this would save the relationship between the two even after the articulation the grievance, whereas friendly opener and orientation facilitated them to introduce the issue in a polite manner. For example, respondent 39 justified her act of complaining by stating that “I told you the secret because I thought you are my sister and you’ll not reveal it to anyone”. Respondent 45 opened the utterance by a very cordial address, that is, “O sister yaar, [...]” continuing with an orientation which gives ample space to the hearer to think for a reason, that is, “[...] what have you done?”. The following utterance made by respondent 26 develops a state of empathy: “How could you do this to me? I’m so hurt, I’m so hurt”. Another observation from the token of

complaint uttered by female indicated that female respondents were vocal, expressive and assertive while communicating with the person of same gender, yet tried to retain the sanctity of the relationship with the elder sister.

Though male respondents sound more polite as compared to female respondent by the less use of threats (T) and valuation (V), but they remained simple and straight forward by maximum use of act statement (AS) without justification (JS) as compared to female respondents. For example, respondent 8 directly stated his complaint, that is, "what were you thinking while telling my secret to mom?", without giving any justification. Respondent 19 mitigated the situation by asking his sister that "Ok, still, now, what did mom say? Was she angry?". He did not continue accusing the sister rather he shifted the whole argument towards showing concern/expressing his worries about his mothers reaction headed for his secret. It can also be taken as ill consequences (IC) which would produce sympathy in the heart of the hearer.

One of the reasons behind this result could be gender role. Male respondents are less severe or more polite towards female respondents as compared to female respondent towards female. With more use of other semantic moves other than Schaefer's moves both the respondents tried to reduce the intensity of complaints. Male respondents used more number of other moves as compared to female respondents making their utterance less severe.

#### 4.2. Situation 2 (with male friend for not returning the lent money)

According to the data both male and female native speakers of Hindi were consistent in their choice of semantic move for complaints in Indian English. The frequently used semantic moves in situation 2 were act statement (AS), justification of the speaker (JS), remedy (R) and opener (O).

Female respondents appear to be more polite as compared to male respondent due to slightly more use of justification (JS) and remedy (R). For example, respondent 26 justified her

complaint "... because I need it urgently" followed by a remedy: "Please [err] return my money." in form of a request. On the contrary, respondent 4 made the complaint severe by threatening his male friend by saying that "If you will not return I will come to your home and tell all your all your things in front of your papa.". Male respondents also intensified the complaint by passing valuations (V). For example, respondent 9 warns his friend by saying "So, don't ... don't judge me and don't test my patient now.". However, male respondent, like 1 and 2, started the complaint by a friendly opening "Yaar [...]" and "Hello, friend [...]" and continued the utterance by providing reasons followed by remedy to mitigate the conversation. For example, respondent 2 uttered "And don't take it otherwise I need the money right now. And if you have it please return it to me yaar". Female respondents tried to downgrade their complaints by providing more number of justifications (JS) and remedy in form of request.

This situation can be justified by the fact that male respondent is more severe towards male as compared to female respondent towards male friend. The complaint in situation 2 is less severe than the complaint in situation 1 because it can be repaired, unlike situation 1.

With more use of other semantic moves other than Schaefer's moves both the respondents tried to reduce the intensity of complaints. Female used more number of other moves as compared to male respondents.

#### 4.3. New Semantic Moves in both the Situations

The new semantic moves, other than the moves mentioned in Schaefer's model (1982), were as follows:

- a) Societal Justification (SJ): As in situation 1, "You should not do like that."; and situation 2, "Help me as I helped you when you were in need of money."
- b) Request for Explanation (RE): As in situation 1, "Why have you done this?"; and situation 2, "Do you have any financial issue?"

- c) Persuasion (PER): In Situation 2, "I know you can manage it from somewhere."
- d) Moral Obligations (MO): "You should not do like that."
- e) Appeal for understanding (AU): As in situation 2, "Please try to understand my situation."
- f) Plea (P): As in situation 2, "[...] so please return me the money that I lent you."

These moves were also discussed in the M.A. dissertation of Maria Piotrowska (1987, 158-160).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In a setting where the speaker was familiar with the addressee (–D) and was equally powerful (=P) as the addressee, an interesting result was obtained. The analysis of both the situation presents a scenario where male respondents were found to be more straight forward in communicating their grievances as their complaint token mostly consisted of an act statement (AS) followed by remedy (R)/threat (T), depending on the situation, and closing (C). Whereas, the complaint tokens taken from female respondents had more number of justifications (JS), valuation (V) and other moves (Oth) along with the direct complaint moves, such as act statement (AS), remedy (R)/threat (T) and closing (C). This investigation clearly points out towards the fact that male respondents were more straight forward and polite than the female respondents, who used other semantic moves to mitigate, that is, to downgrade by using justification (JS) and to upgrade by using valuation (V), the talk.

While studying each situation separately, it was observed that in situation 1 (with elder sister for disclosing the secret), male respondents, as compared to female respondents, very frequently started directly by stating the cause of complaint, act statement (AS), and a proper closing (C) with some other semantic complaint moves in order to mitigate the situation. However, in the complaint tokens by female respondents, it was found that they used

all the semantic moves and most of the moves, apart from act statement (AS) and closing (C), more than the male respondents. This could be understood in two ways. First, since it was an informal situation but a serious one, which could not be ignored, therefore, male respondents choose to complaint but remained direct as compared to female respondents. Secondly, the complaine was a female, elder to male respondents, therefore the male respondent choose to be direct and avoided being harsh. On the contrary, female respondents were observed to be more vocal, giving justification (JS) and providing valuation (V) about the complainable and complaine. Female respondents articulated more number of threats as compared to male respondents, and were both direct and harsh with a female complaine.

In situation 2 (with a male friend regarding the money lent), it was observed that male respondents, as compared to female respondents, used all the semantic moves while articulating complaint. Furthermore, male respondents sounded more harsh than female respondents as they used a lot of valuation and threat statements in order to create a strong impact on the complaine, though it was a repairable situation. However, in the complaint tokens by female respondents, it was found that they used all the semantic moves but remained slightly less harsh, by talking more about remedies, as compared to male respondents. The result for situation 2 can be interpreted as male respondents being more vocal with the same gender, whereas, female respondent being slightly less than the male respondent.

On combining the results of both the situations it was observed that male respondents tend to be more direct and severe with the same gender, as in situation 2, rather than the opposite gender, as in situation 1 (Sukyadi and Ayu 24). Maximum complaint moves were used by female respondents as compared to male respondents in both the situations. This clearly depicts that female respondents were more vocal to communicate their grievances with both the genders (elder sister in situation 1 and male friend in situation 2) as compared to male respondents. The statistical data shows

that with slightly more use of direct semantic moves, female respondents proved to be more severe and direct than male respondents in the production of complaints about situation 1, though the difference was not significant. The result of the current research clearly depicts that both the respondents very well articulated their grievances with semantic moves that not only saved the face of speaker as well as the hearer but also retained the sanctity of the relationship. Moreover, the utterances recorded as the token of complaint bore out to be an effective source of releasing the negative emotions/discomfort of the speaker along with providing a viable solution to the problematic situation.

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