

Cyberpragmatics: Complaints and the Collective Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to lay some groundwork for expanding the study of speech act pragmatics within the cyber-world. For this purpose, we have investigated complaints in Hebrew online, in an attempt to highlight features that distinguish online communication from face-to-face communication. We have analysed complaints in three major spheres: a) complaints towards public institutions, b) complaints against commercial firms and c) sharing complaints for the common benefit of a social community. In all instances, complainers online co-construct the context and the shared knowledge of the offence (complainable).

Like many other studies of online communication, we too found a tendency towards uncivil or aggressive expressions (Vladimirou et al., 2021) especially when there was no hope for “repair” of the situation (ex: these *damned people* lie to us (in Hebrew ‘*aru-rim*’)). Furthermore, there were individual complainers who used the online platform to gain social and political power presenting themselves as defenders of justice and of the well-being of the community.

Keywords

complaints – cyberpragmatics – face-threatening acts – super-participants – virtual communities

1 Introduction and Theoretical Background*

Formal linguistic analysis of syntax and semantics does not usually concern itself with the users of language. The field of pragmatics, on the other hand, deals explicitly with the study of relationships between linguistic forms and the human beings who use these forms. As such, pragmatics is concerned with people's intentions, assumptions, beliefs, goals, and kinds of actions they perform while using language. Pragmatics is also concerned with contexts, situations, and settings within which such language uses occur (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, p. 19). All these pragmatic elements are central to cyberpragmatics within virtual spaces where interlocutors don't necessarily know each other but where often virtual speech communities are co-constructed.

The term cyberpragmatics was coined by Yus, (2002, 2011) in order to describe and promote our eagerness to communicate with one another via modern technologies that keep us in permanent connection with other people. The focus of the term is on internet-mediated human communication and on the exchange of information online in the internet environment. According to Paltridge (2021) the participants evaluate texts and promote collective network collaboration (p. 193). In contrast to face-to-face interaction, participants can choose how they present themselves and how they project their self to others. Vladimirov, House and Kadar (2021) distinguish between interactive complaints on social media as opposed to face-to-face or written complaints, by focusing on the complex addressivity and complex participation online. Accordingly, while people engage in mimetic complaining they tend to escalate aggressiveness (p. 17). The notion of multiple audiences also comes up in the work of Marwick and Boyd (2010) who studied twitter posts.

The interactants on the internet may know each other or be limited to cyber personalities. No long-term relationships are expected. Cyberpragmatics can be considered a new specialization within the general field of pragmatics which studies human language and which focuses on the relationship between meaning and context. In cyberpragmatics meaning and context must be studied within a digital communicative exchange such as on Facebook or

* This paper is written in memory of Shoshana Blum-Kulka.

on any other online platform, and within other social media platforms (SMP) in general. The early studies relating to internet technology are mostly studies of e-mail exchanges, as specified by Atifi and Marcoccia, (2020). The latter focused on requests in e-mails and therefore discussed issues of directness and politeness related to the speech act of requesting, which is considered a face threatening act (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Yus (2021) also devotes considerable discussion to e-mail exchanges.

More recent studies in cyberpragmatics have focused on online communication as a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2004, 2016; Hong, 2016;) and its political potential. Bennett (2012) is concerned with identity and different patterns of participation online. He claims that individual expressions displace collective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) provide connective and collective frameworks of interaction online (p. 756). These will be considered in the analysis of the data in this article.

1.1 *The Speech Act of Complaining*

A negative attitude towards an existing situation (known to the interactants) is the basic felicity condition for complaining (Searle, 1969) if the situation makes us feel annoyed, unhappy or dissatisfied. In order to express this feeling of “being a victim of the situation” we often perform the speech act of complaining (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993). Drew (1998) expands the use of complaints to refer to misconduct of others, from the speaker’s point of view, including implicit or explicit moral purposes which become part of the complaint.

The level of im/politeness may be different in different cultures (Blum-Kulka, 1982) but even in the Hebrew speaking community, where directness is valued (Katriel, 1986), there is a scale of directness from which the speaker can make choices.

Since in the present article we are concerned with the speech act of complaining as expressed online, we would like to expand our understanding of the process which leads to the creation of social media communities that share an underlying negative feeling or disapproval towards a state of affairs (Trosborg, 1995), leading to a *complaint*.

In order to realise a complaint, the complainer needs to mention an offence (complainable) which has a negative effect on him/her (felicity condition as mentioned above). The mention of the offence is a key feature of the complaint. According to the gravity of the offence, the complainer may choose the level of severity of the complaint. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987, 1993) suggest five levels of severity: 1) the lowest being reproach which is actually an indirect expression with no specification of who holds responsibility for the

offence, 2) general disapproval which is not necessarily addressed to a specific addressee, 3) a direct complaint specifying the offence as well as the person(s) responsible, 4) an accusation and warning towards the complaine, 5) a threat and 6) (added in this article) the most intensified expression could consist of insults and curses (aggression).

The strategies suggested by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987, 1993) relate to individual encounters where the complainer knows the complaine and therefore directs his/her speech act towards the addressee. Thus, if for example, the situation is a case where the speaker brought the car for repair at the garage and was promised to have it ready at a certain time and day – when the speaker arrives to pick it up, the car isn't ready. The customer, who now becomes the complainer, can choose the realization strategy that suits the speaker's intention and his/her need to express it verbally:

- 1) Reproach – “one shouldn't make promises and then fail to keep them”.
(no direct mention of offense or offender)
- 2) Disapproval – “I made arrangements and now I don't have the car”.
(personal annoyance and damage)
- 3) A direct complaint – “You promised me that the car will be ready and now you are telling me that it isn't”.
- 4) An accusation and warning – “You made me a promise to have the car ready for today and you did not do it. I will not come back to this garage in the future”.
- 5) Threat – “I will tell all my friends that you are not reliable and you will lose your customers”.
- 6) Insult – This garage should not be allowed to provide service, you are a disgrace, as far as I am concerned. You can go to hell!

These examples are taken from data collected via a discourse-completion-test DCT, in OLSHTAIN AND WEINBACH 1987, 1993

For every complaint there are various considerations that the complainer will take into account when choosing the severity with which to react. Sometimes, the complainer feels uneasy about complaining altogether and may just choose to say nothing (no complaint on record) or something that is even soothing “never mind, I will come back later”, which in Paltridge's (2021) approach could be a *face saving act*. This is the case when the speaker prefers not to carry out the speech act (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Preferences and choices of strategy realizations depend on value perceptions of the individual (social power, politeness, social distance, etc) and of the culture to which s/he belongs (Schwartz, 1992). If for instance, the relevant culture places value on ‘respect for

the elderly', the complainer may take this into consideration, over and above other considerations. In the Hebrew speaking culture it seems that solidarity and equality are highly regarded values and therefore the need for politeness in general is minimised (Katriel, 1986).

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) coined the term 'speech act set' in order to focus research on cross linguistic studies comparing realizations of speech acts in different languages. Their basic assumption was that certain semantic formulas will be shared by most languages and yet individual languages will exhibit particular cultural preferences. The speech act set was not envisaged as static but as a basis for further study and expansion. Murphy and Neu (1996) expanded the speech act set for complaints and added: an explanation of purpose, a justification and a request for solution. Tanck (2002) provided support for all the complaining strategies mentioned above. Furthermore, various studies looked at cross cultural similarities and differences with respect to complaints: Gallaher (2014) found that American English speakers and Russian speakers share many semantic formulas yet their politeness norms differ, and Nikoobin and Shahrokhi (2017) found that both Iranian EFL learners and Native English speakers used similar strategies but again culturally there were significant differences in the actual realizations of these strategies. It is, therefore, our assumption that in any culture there would be a "severity scale" for the realization of complaints, yet each culture will have its specific preferred norms (Schawrtz, 1992).

When performing face-threatening acts the speaker decides what level of social harmony to maintain and accordingly prefers a strategy along the severity scale. Indirectness is a common feature of softening face-threatening acts, allowing the complainees to take responsibility or refute it. When politeness plays an important role from the speaker's point of view, the complainer will look for ways to minimise the severity of the complaint. In addition to using the basic complaining strategies, the speaker might add elements of aggravation or on the other hand, try to minimise the severity of the offence. Often a speaker chooses to express blame and create a situation of intrusive communication towards the hearer (aggressive complaining).

We have based our analysis of complaints in this article on our earlier work (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993) which has also been used by others (Vasquez, 2011). Some researchers have proposed different definitions of complaints. Depraetere, Decock, and Ruytenbeck (2021) use a model of implicit versus explicit complaints, but they too propose similar components of the complaint: a complainable (offence), dissatisfaction (negative affect), a person/institution held responsible and a wish for the complainable to be remedied. In their model they make a clear distinction between an explicit

and an implicit complaint, which is similar to our distinction of direct versus indirect complaints.

Sometimes cultures have preferences for: gender, age, social power, or other social norms. Al-Shboul (2021) found differences between men and women expressing complaints in Arabic. The participants were students at a university and males used more direct accusation in comparison to their female counterparts. In the present analysis we did not collect such information on the complainers but tried to analyse their actual speech acts in the given context.

Online communication according to Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017) can be realised in ping-pong exchanges, in a snow-ball sequence or an expression of digressive comments. In this paper we are looking at the snow-ball development which starts out with an existing group whose title is a complaint such as “victims of bad service”. Since the complainee is usually mentioned, more participants join, expressing their similar complaints relating to the offence and to the complainee appearing in the title the post. Such examples are available on Facebook, creating the snow-ball effect with many complainers adding their own perspective. This serves as a description of the situation deserving a complaint and the new participants consider themselves victims of the same situation. They can post a personal story or the description of some event that adds content to the title of the group. This, further sparks relevant reactions from others leading to the process of groupism: the exchange and sharing of information resulting in a group of people sharing similar feelings, a virtual speech community. This group can decide to share an identity and a common goal, “we want a clean city”, “we should get better service from the post office”, etc. Sometimes this sequence leads to communal bonding and even to self-appointed leadership of the group since this socially shared information can lead to potential benefits for the individual as well as the whole group or the community at large. Thus, a perception of the ‘collective’ is created.

Such a snow-ball effect can also take place in a WhatsApp group. One of the members of the group may act as an initiator of a complaining situation and others in the group may join in. Either the initiator or others may seek leading roles in these exchanges.

Dell'Aquila (1999) describes “Groups of people who congregate electronically to discuss specific topics which range from academic research to hobbies. They are linked by a common interest or profession” (pp. x–29). In the process of mutual sharing of new information each participant can look for relevance to help him/her interpret the message. Papacharissi (2004) emphasises the fact that the internet manages to bring individuals together overcoming geographical and other boundaries (p. 268).

Furthermore, by participating in the online interaction, participants make themselves and their ideas known to all the other participants thus greatly

increasing the visibility of their ideas and personal positions. Graham and Wright (2014) identified super-participants who tend to undertake special roles, describing events, connecting parts of the debate, making recommendations, etc. In the analysis of our data, it seems important to describe the function and special interaction features of these super-participants. Papacharissi (2004) adds the notion of the *few* in the online interaction who succeed to dominate the discourse.

1.2 *Politeness and Indirectness*

In our daily understanding of the term “politeness” we think of behaviour that shows respect and consideration for others. Linguistic choices that we make within social interactions, may be conducive to interpretations of politeness while others might lead to what may be considered impolite or uncivil, within the context of the particular situation. In general, speakers and hearers should preserve one another’s face and minimise the risks of face loss and embarrassment. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers can choose from a potential list of four binary choices when performing face-threatening acts: 1) bald on record, 2) off-record, and 3) redress added to the main strategy either to intensify or minimise offence, 4) choose negative or positive politeness (model on p. 69). Positive politeness emphasises sharing and solidarity – “it can happen to anyone” and negative politeness emphasises the endeavour *not* to impose on the addressee “let me know what time suits you”.

Politeness theories are discussed in detail in Eelen (2001) and he draws our attention to the fact that politeness and impoliteness are two separate and opposing terms (p. 87), in other words, impoliteness is not part of the politeness continuum, according to Eelen. However, there are differences among researchers of politeness. Blum-Kulka (1992) describes the study of politeness comprising both politeness and impoliteness, so in the case of the severity scale for complaints described above, the last two strategies (5) and (6) are in fact impolite. Most researchers find that in practice the definition of politeness leads to the focus on polite behaviour alone and not enough work has been done on impoliteness (Sifianou, 2019). Furthermore, we accept Locker and Watts (2005) position that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory which is based on face-threatening mitigation does not provide a full theory of politeness but in our work, it provides a useful framework for analyzing face-threatening speech acts such as complaints and requests.

An example of a face-threatening act is a request which creates an obligation on the hearer’s part to act for the benefit of the speaker. (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The more direct the request, the more face-threatening it is, leaving very little freedom of action for the hearer. Indirect requests are therefore generally considered more polite. In

most cases a person will want to minimise the threat of such an act in order to maintain social harmony. A person may equally employ a *face saving act*, which aims to appease or relieve the hearer of the responsibility for the offence (Paltridge, 2022, p. 61).

In the case of complaining, as is the case with other face-threatening speech acts, (such as refusals, requests, etc.) the less direct strategy is more polite, since the direct and bald-on record specification of the offence places more responsibility on the offender, the complainer or the person who has to accept a request for repair. Face-threatening acts curb the hearer's freedom of action and place various levels of imposition. In the case of complaining one may say, therefore, that indirectness is more polite than directness (just as the case of requesting). This should be true about any language but the specific scale of severity will be realised differently according to the relevant culture and personality of the complainer. When British English was compared to Hebrew, there were many situations in which English speakers opted out by avoiding the realization of complaints, while Hebrew speakers preferred mild complaints (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993).

Indirectness in language has, however, a much broader use than its relation to face-threatening speech acts. The compilation of key studies in indirectness, Livnat et al. (2020), is an important contribution to our understanding of indirectness. Indirectness is a key concept in the process of interpretation of utterances and various texts in natural human communication. Indirectness may be a deliberate choice of the speaker for reasons of expressing intention and expectation of hearers' interpretation.

Mey (2020) distinguishes between two types of indirectness, here we are concerned with the second type which is specific to the co-constructing of meaning between speaker and hearer. According to Mey speech acts are envisaged in classical speech act theory as "egocentric" originated and addressed to a single speaker/hearer. In contrast to this approach Mey suggests a speech act that is pluricentric and involves several interactants. This pluricentricity happens naturally in cyberpragmatics and accounts for the collective benefit of the group.

In the case of complaining the choice for indirectness can be related to the offensive situation or to the person(s) responsible for it. Furthermore, it can be related to the severity of damage caused to the speaker. Thus, in our example above with the car and the garage the mildest strategy avoids the mention of the garage personnel and of the exact offence. Even in the second strategy which expresses disapproval there is no direct mention of the offence. It is only in the third strategy on the scale, that the use of directness leads to the mention of the offence and of the ones responsible for it. This general avoidance of

directness in the first strategies on the scale minimises the need for confrontation, and sometimes results in the complaineer's apology (Trosborg, 1995).

In this paper we are concerned with behaviour related to complaints within cyberpragmatics. When a person decides to share a complaint on Facebook or on any other social media platform, it immediately becomes pluricentric since it is very likely that other interactants will add their expressions supporting or denying the initial complaint. While in classical speech act theory a certain amount of shared knowledge is part of the felicity conditions (Searle, 1969) of any particular speech act, online complaining requires the creation and co-construction of the shared knowledge related to the complaint. The title of the group (victims of the post office) may present the essence of the offence. Each additional participant has the opportunity to "tell his/her own story" in order to share the situation and state of affairs that calls for the complaint. This sequence of exchanges enhances shared knowledge and collective perception of the offence.

The term *civility* is often used in studies relating to cyber-interactions. Some researchers have tried to differentiate civility from politeness but the distinction is not very clear. Papacharissi (2004) defines civility as the positive collective face which is deference to the social and democratic identity of an individual and incivility as disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy. (p. 267) She finds this distinction particularly significant in cyberspace where it is easy for individuals to be rude. In this context the use of stereotypes, the use of labels that are derogative in nature are considered uncivil.

Coe et al. (2014) and Rossini (2020) found that uncivil messages frequently relate to disagreements that group participants expressed against the content published or issues raised on a website. In general, civility is discussed in relation to political interaction and is less relevant to this paper. Instead, our analysis is based on the scale of severity discussed earlier, where the first three strategies are considered polite and the last three create a gradual increase in impoliteness (Blum-Kulka, 1992).

In the case of complaints, the major message is based on annoyance or dissatisfaction related to an event or state of affairs, therefore uncivil or aggressive expressions are to be expected.

2 Data and Method

The data for this study were collected in Hebrew from authentic posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, including comments to some of the posts. The posts collected focused on a variety of complaints, including

complaints against authorities, national institutions, and commercial companies. In addition, we looked at complaints related to community life, where the participants point to hazards which require repair or regulations which don't fit the social harmony.

For complaints addressed to national authorities we looked at posts that raised the issue of inefficient service provided by the Israel Post Office. For complaints against commercial firms, we looked at posts addressed to a small furniture store and a store that sells refrigerators of a large international company. The two communities we looked at, were a small town and university students on a campus, both located in the centre of Israel.

In order to locate complaints online we looked for the key word "victim(s)" (Nifgaim in Hebrew) on Facebook. Many group names start with "Are you too a victim of ..." or just "Victims of the post office" These are groups that seek to add participants who share the same goal and fate and every additional participant can join the group. The representatives of the "complainees" are not part of the group. They are the logical addressees of the complaint but are not necessarily aware of these posts and they don't react to them. Yet, commercial firms often tend to wipe out complaining posts that shame them on the internet. One group of complainers emphasised the fact that they cannot post anything on the commercial Facebook page without it being immediately deleted and so they think it is important to create a group that points to the lack of good service. One of the indirect results of complaints against commercial firms is 'shaming' and the posting of damaging evidence.

Complaints from communities (the town and the university) were collected by us as participants of the group. In other words, we joined the groups. In order to single out speech acts of complaints we searched key words or expressions such as: this is annoying, it requires explanation, our community deserves better than that, etc. (See the examples in the appendix.)

In order to maintain participant anonymity no real names or real locations were mentioned. The Hebrew examples were translated into English, as closely as possible to the original choice of words and keeping the "Hebrew" flavour even when it meant sounding a little strange in English. (Examples are given in the appendix.)

The data analysis was based on considerations of politeness and indirectness, on mention of the situation causing aggravation, and on personal objectives and explanations provided by the participants. More than 200 complaints were collected and analysed for this paper: 42 related to the post office service, 30 to the furniture store, 31 to the refrigerator branch, 57 in Green City and 60 at the university. In addition, we included in the article a small number of examples from digital sources such as WhatsApp and e-mail.

3 Findings

The complaining instances which will be discussed in this article are divided into three evolving groups: complaints towards **public institutions** (such as the post office), complaints towards **commercial firms**, complaints related to the **well-being of a community** (in particular, complaints intended to increase local political activities and preservation of the community) or complaints within the university intended to improve fair treatment and equality for students (vis-à-vis the university regulations). Each of these groups presents a specific context which is part of the situation calling for a complaint and affects the choices made by the participants.

3.1 *Complaints concerning the Post Office*

The first group of complaints in our discussion comprises interactants on Facebook who commensurate about the low level of service they experience as a result of post office inefficacy. The mention of the specific offence (the package was not delivered on time; the letter was intended for a different addressee, when I talked to the Post Office employees they were very impolite and inconsiderate, etc) is deliberately direct in nature and the institution is mentioned with all necessary specification (the post office in Petach Tickva, for example). Some of the people complaining wrote that they tried to approach the relevant customer service department but were not given useful answers, which created more aggravation for the complainers. They were simply told to be patient and that there was no way to change things. This situation gives the complainers a feeling of legitimacy to insult and even curse the institution. Since they have very little hope for repair they don't mind choosing the uncivil approach and the participants tend to support each other and thus enhance the common complaint. Each additional instance adds aggravation to the complaint but there is no response from the institution responsible for the offence since they are not participants in the group. The discussion and expansion of the situation creates the "shared knowledge" for the group turning them into a temporary speech community. Since the complaint is published online, there is no direct impact on the face of the complaineé yet there is a certain degree of "shaming" and the collective expression of "all of us are victims". Although the complaineé is not part of the interaction, the structure of the complaint is very clear – there is mention of the offence and the institutions responsible for it. In general, it seems that the complainers look for support and hope the service will improve but they have no means of affecting the efficacy of the post office.

Examples: (translated from Hebrew)

- (1) *"Disgusting! It's the second time I try to get service at the Post Office (exact location), but the service is abominable".*
- (2) *"I tried to find out what happened to two items which I ordered and which were sent via The Israeli Post Office. I tried to call but my call was denied, this is the nightmare in my life".*

The common disapproval of how the post office functions, becomes the binding force of this new group of people who have never met each other and may never meet in the future. Their only communicative interaction relates to issues related to the post office. It is always possible that a "leading figure" in the group will suggest a plausible action against the offending institution, such as a public demonstration. This would turn the complaint into a "call for action". These are like "super-participants" as mentioned in Graham and Wright (2014) who tend to dominate the interaction. Most of the participants, however, share their frustration with others in the collective complaint towards the institution but they also give voice to individual suffering.

The use of directness is usually preferred since this is the binding force of the group. The offence is stated in detail, the institution and sometimes the representing staff are also stated in detail but there is very little expectations for repair and improvement. The aggravation and intensification of the complaint is done through strong words like: *disgusting and abominable*. The general feeling is "whatever we do, it will not change things". The common sentiment is that we will try to do everything to avoid using the post office's service in the future.

3.2 *Complaints against Commercial Firms*

The commercial world assigns great importance to customer satisfaction and therefore requires serious companies to manage their customers' complaints. In their article which seeks ways to identify customer complaints, Singh et al. (2020) claim that: "In today's competitive business world, customer service is often at the heart of business that can help strengthen their brands. Resolution of customers' complaints in a timely and efficient manner is key to improving customer satisfaction". In other words, well known and successful commercial firms need to learn from customers' complaints and react to them as soon as possible.

Stauss and Seidel (2019) suggest a variety of ways in which companies can manage their customer complaints and they define such complains as follows: "In customer complaints, potential, current or lost customers express their dissatisfaction with any aspect of the market offer directly to the company"

(p. 27). Stauss and Seidel further claim that the greatest opportunity for achieving customer loyalty is complaint management. They recommend customer complaint management for improving product and service quality and focus on social political behaviour of the staff and sales personnel.

The above described focus on complaint management is obviously true of good and responsible business operations. However, in our group of complaints this is not true for small and relatively inexpensive firms that don't cope with customers' complaints.

In our group of complaints that appeared on Facebook mentioning two firms, one a furniture store and the second a store for refrigerators, the customers do not seem to get useful answers and problem solutions from the firm. The complaints come after these customers have tried to be in contact with the commercial firms and in many cases received some kind of repair and solution. Nevertheless, they still have not been able to get a full answer to their needs. The complainers tell their individual stories and basically declare not to ever use these firms again and usually recommend to the rest of the world not to buy from them as well. There is a certain degree of shaming involved in the way the complaint is presented, and it can harm the *corporate face* deliberately as is evident in the following examples:

- (3) *If you thought to buy at this store (the full name and address) forget it. Bad service And the personnel talks to you in an offensive manner. It's been over a month and they still haven't sent the furniture we bought. We've been sitting on the floor for the whole month. These damned people lie to us every day.* (Word for word translation)

In the above example the complainer starts with the recommendation not to buy from this store. Then s/he presents the content of the complaint and the personal suffering. It seems that despite promises the store has not delivered their goods. The customers seem to be discouraged and have lost hope for quick delivery, but mostly they complain about being lied to.

Other customers also put emphasis on the lack of consideration exhibited by the people who work at this firm:

- (4) *We came to the store from the far North. We believed that they give good service but we made a big mistake. When they sell you the item they are very nice and polite but when you have a problem there is no one to talk to. We won't recommend this store and we will never buy there again.*

- (5) *We went to the store my wife and I. It turns out that what you see on the web site is big and beautiful but when you get to the store it is small and shabby. Don't go there, it isn't worth the gasoline for the trip.*
(Word for word translation)

What stands out in all the above examples is the disappointment with the service and the lack of customer consideration. Customers bought the product and then had trouble getting it to their home on time. And here again, the issue is always around the way the sales personnel treat their customers after the deal is closed. Contrary to the understanding specified by Singh et al. (2022) that selling companies seek to improve their business by paying attention to customer complaints and contrary to Stauss and Seidel (2019) who recommend to the company to pay special attention to social behaviour of their staff. The complainers stress the fact that the way they were treated by the staff deviated from the norm of behaviour expected.

The second issue that stands out is reference to personal suffering and frustration that does not seem to elicit any reaction from the complaineé. Often this frustration legitimises the use of curses or strong words like “those damned people”. Sometimes a solicitor joins the group and offers legal action against the complaineés.

Once in a while we might find complaints that are addressed at strong commercial organizations without mentioning any particular offence. The objective is often simply to recruit more support for their dissatisfaction and to create more opposition to the commercial institution. There is no direct offence but there is an assumption that everybody knows what is wrong, such as in the following example:

- (6) *Boycott American Airlines, they deserve no better. There is little chance of winning but something needs to be done.*

Such complaints create a certain amount of shaming for the mentioned offender and might damage their business but it also emphasises the need to act in some collective manner.

3.3 *Complaints for the Well-Being of a Live Community*

Facebook interaction within a live community has a significant representation of the “collective” features of that community. The participants, whether “they know each other or not” have socially shared information which enables them to interpret messages and recognise elements that lead to potential benefits

for the individual and the community as a whole or to events and situations that might impinge upon the community. Additional sharing of information leads to further development of the sense of community. Potential leaders in the community can use this platform for furthering social and political issues and become super-participants. They have the opportunity to present themselves and their concerns for the “good of the community”.

In our corpus we have two communities: one represents a small town in the centre of Israel and the second represents students on a university campus. In the small town the content relates to the physical environment and its upkeep by the authorities and on campus students are mainly concerned with unclear regulations during covid-19. In both communities the participants want to maintain certain social harmony and politeness and at the same time hope for a possible ‘repair’ of the situation, in response to their call for action. It seems like considerations of cost-benefit underlie the choices made when presenting complaints under these circumstances.

(7) In the Facebook group of Green City:

A garbage hill is growing in the Southern part of our town and there is no one to talk to – to file a complaint. I tried to call the mayor's office and then to talk to John Doe who is the mayor's deputy. They don't answer. This is a health hazard and does not suit our community of Green City. Who can do something?

In this post the complainer is recognised by name. S/he tries to recruit more participants to join the concern. S/he points to the municipality and the person perceived to be responsible for finding a solution to the situation. In doing this the complainer wins a position of power and is recognised as “someone who cares”. S/he has the potential to become a super-participant.

(8) Comments to complaint (7) above

- a) *The garbage pile is growing in Green City and the whole city is dirty beyond explanation. And by the way, this is also a safety hazard: two weeks ago I broke my toe while I was walking my dog because of debris thrown all over the place and the lack of proper light at night. I feel like this whole city is one big safety and health hazard.*
- b) *They have not cleaned up the place for at least three years. Then people complain about vandalism and graffiti. I believe that if a place is clean then people keep it clean.*

- (9) Addressing the complaint to the person held responsible for how Green City is managed:

"I am addressing this message to John Doe who is the mayor deputy. In your letter to the people in Green City a few days ago, you declared that you are working day and night to improve the city. So, where are you??? Why don't you answer the people who are calling you? Why don't you stop some of the work that creates such debris? And why do you react only to people who answer the posts and make them feel uncomfortable? This is called "shutting people up".

Sorry, this is not shutting people up, this is threatening them".

In all of the exchanges of the Green City residents, it seems clear that people know each other to some degree and they are familiar with the annoying situation about which they are complaining. They all emphasise the hazard for the "collective" group and they all express concern for the benefit of the community. They try to recruit more support from other residents but mostly they are trying to solve the situation first by shaming the municipality and then by trying to name the responsible person.

The participants in Green City use appropriate and generally polite language and they present themselves as people who worry about the good of the community. They present a stand of strength and virtue and hope to make a difference. These messages might be a good springboard for "new" leaders in the community. Yet, some people voice their own grievance in a slightly sarcastic manner:

- (10) *Is it absolutely necessary, every night at 2:00 AM for a motorcycle to drive through the streets of our city and make the most horrible noise? Am I the only one who hears this motorcycle or are other people also aware of it?*

In the above case, the complainer presents the annoying state of affairs in a direct and clear manner. However, there is no potential abuser. The reference to who produces the hazard remains unmentioned. The complainer tries to recruit additional community support in order to create a group. Perhaps such a group could deal with the situation.

The following example comes from a smaller community: neighbors in an apartment building (on WhatsApp):

- (11) *Dear neighbors! We are all trying to maintain a clean and spic and span apartment building and yet there are spots of garbage in the*

elevator. Will some miracle urge the person(s) who dirty the elevator and make them clean the spots?

The present situation is not appropriate for our well-maintained building.

In the small community there is pressure on everybody and everybody feels guilty, and the shaming is on everybody who lives in the building. One of the neighbours says “I did not dirty the place but I am prepared to clean up and make everybody happy”. The collective responsibility is expected from all the neighbours. There almost seems to be a ‘collective dictatorship’ for proper conduct.

In addition to all these “direct” complaints there are sometimes clearly “indirect” ones which attempt not to create any direct blame and yet there is a request for “repair” without a clear complainee. The irony in the following complaint is intended to make every dog-owner take some responsibility:

- (12) *Dear neighbours, when dogs are left outside they tend to poop but there is no one to Collect the dirt. We would be very pleased if you took your dog out for a walk but right now (a picture of a dog in the park) he is on his own.*

3.4 *Complaints on a University Campus*

The complaints that were collected on campus, related mostly to the Covid 19 period, where many of the regulations for students were not clear and well-understood and did not always align with the general fear of the pandemic.

- (13) *I received a lower grade in a course because I missed a session when I was ill, and I even brought a doctor's certification.*

Students at this university, I am sorry to tell you if you are sick or will be sick in the future, even if you are bedridden and have high fever and there is a strong chance that you have Covid 19, it is entirely up to the lecturer to lower your grade for not attending one of the classes, and that is even in the case where you have a letter from a physician and this is the first time you missed a session. In my personal case, when I asked whether I was expected to come to class sick, the lecturer replied that this is the only way to get a full grade.

I spoke to the Dean but the answer was the same and finally I spoke to the Students' Union and they too claimed that it is up to the lecturer.

Many participants commented on this post on Facebook and emphasised the fact that this was an illogical situation and that the University should make sure that students don't endanger others by coming sick to class and they should adapt the regulations to the situation. The complainer had tried everything before s/he posted her complaint but finally lost hope for repair and decided to warn all other students of the ridiculous situation. In fact, s/he got a lot of personal support and empathy but no solution.

It seems that at the university students are much more careful to use acceptable language since they are known to others as well as to the authorities. Still, sometimes complainers have a hard time restricting themselves, as in example (14) where one student decided to shame some of the lecturers in an indirect manner:

- (14) *There are lecturers who have an 'evil' heart, these are usually old-timers who have accumulated grievances against the system and they don't care.*

The complaint in (14) does not name the culprits and only refers to the type of lecturer in a very general manner but the criticism is obvious and 'on record'. Yet, when looking at all the complaints on campus it is clear that students try to be careful and leave room for repair and they often use softening features of the complaint.

4 Discussion

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning in human communication. Meaning can be derived from the relation between language and the context within which it is used, focusing on the speaker or writer's intention. Without full consideration of context, we may not be able to reach an understanding of the speaker's intention. The co-construction of context seems to be built into online communication far beyond such co-construction in face-to-face communication. In the latter there are important elements in the immediate environment that are easily accessible to the interactants. They tend to affect the interaction simultaneously such as: tone of voice, body language, power

and social distance between the interactants, and other social, cultural and situational factors. Online, the information and content are transmitted within the digital message and it relates to the context within which it is posted and the specified goal of the interaction (such a goal is either explicit, such as in the title of the group or implicit within the content of the interactions). Sometimes the distinction between explicit and implicit complaints becomes vague leading to a collapsed context (Depraetere et al., 2021).

When language users decide to participate in communicative interaction on social media platforms such as Facebook, their primary objective is to join or create a social group with a common, collective goal. They are fully aware of the fact that they are addressing many silent and invisible addressees (multiple addressees/multiple audiences) and they choose linguistic forms that will enable them to “talk” to many others while representing themselves and sharing their identity and ideas. Instead of negotiating with a well-defined addressee, (as is typical of face-to-face communication) they co-construct communication and meaning, with many new and mostly unknown participants. The features and felicity preconditions of such interactions are different in cyberpragmatics, when compared to classical pragmatics. We tried in this article to point to some of these differences, which have been described in each of the three contexts investigated here: public institutions, commercial firms and active communities.

One of the prominent cyberpragmatics features is the fact that participants don't choose to use politeness strategies in their posts and most of the research on online communication points to unexpected levels of incivility. (Coe et al., 2014; Lewandowska-Tamoszczyk, 2017; Nikoobin and Shahroki, 2014; Rossini, 2020; Vladimirou et al., 2021). The complaint posts that we examined are usually direct in nature and present personal as well as collective concerns. Instead of the negotiation and cooperation with the main addressee we find in cyberpragmatics cooperation and mutual support among participants leading to the grouping phenomena (Dell'Aquila, 1999). In some ways the resulting groups develop an internal positive politeness environment (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020, p. 61) and the participants address, each other accordingly, focusing on common solidarity (If you thought to buy at this store, forget it (3)! Don't go there, it isn't worth the gasoline (5). I feel like this city is one big garbage and health hazard (8a)). This directness and solidarity perspective may be particularly appropriate in the Israeli culture but could have more universal features in certain contexts.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, enable the development of cyber speech communities whose participants are related and connected by a

common force. When we are looking at complaints, the binding force is usually the “offence” that calls for a complaint. This force can be loose when the participants’ objective is mostly to share annoyance and anger and personal frustrations or it can be very strong when the objective is to “blame” the offender and threaten his/her virtual face. In cases where the participants only expect support and sharing of the frustration, they might choose harsh directness and incivility in their realization of complaints. When there is hope for “repair” or when there is fear of retribution, the complainer may prefer less direct language and perhaps even use downgraders of the offense. (I believe that if a place is clean people will keep it clean! (8b)).

The instances of complaints in this article were presented according to three types of contexts: in the first, the offender is clearly stated “the post office”. Similarly, in the second group, which addresses commercial firms, the relevant firm is blamed openly but in the third group there is usually an attempt to avoid individual blame and to maintain the goal of “the common benefit of the community”. Yet, in one of the complaints about garbage and packages left near the official garbage bins, the Facebook complainer used the person’s name, which s/he found on the package. This was a case of personal shaming which most people tend to avoid when interacting in posts shared with their live community.

A complainer online can gain power and influence by presenting him/herself as a “justice defender”. The participants who join can also claim this special super-status of justice defenders. In these cases, the language register is higher and more official in nature and the “collective” goal is mentioned explicitly: the nature of Green City, the cleanliness of our building, the well-being of students on campus, etc. This also enables the super-participants to try and find a solution to the problem by approaching the authorities on behalf of the collective.

An important factor in the choice of realization patterns, as mentioned above, depends on the complainer’s hope for repair. If there is a good chance that there will be a solution to the problem or state of affairs, the complainer might tend to avoid incivility and directness. This is usually the case with students at the university, however sometimes students are too angry or too eager to complain as in the example below:

- (15) A student sent a message to the instructors in a course where s/he is complaining about an unfair assignment:

It is frustrating that I have already seen this film and now I have to see parts again. 100 students have to do this, had we known ahead of time we could’ve ... It is like not enough thinking was invested in developing the assignment. I hope you will take this into consideration.

The head instructor in the course provides explicit answers to all the underlying “accusations”:

- (16) *I read your complaint carefully and will answer at several levels:*
 1) *the way you phrased the complaint is disrespectful and insulting. The team running this course is doing its utmost ...* 2) *there are many assignments at the university which demand ...* 3) *your claim that ‘all the students’ understood ... Are you representing the students? ...*
I hope you will read my answers carefully and if you want to get advise on how to phrase your message to the faculty, in an appropriate manner, I will be happy to do so.

There is no doubt that approaching the faculty face-to-face is different from writing an electronic message and the norms in the latter are not always clear. The instructor, in her answer, points to an “invisible” norm that the student failed to adhere to. Such norms become part of the myriad of considerations that guide our interactions online.

This article has tried to expand the study of the pragmatics of complaining to communicative exchanges online. We sought to describe the co-construction of shared knowledge that online communication requires and the in-group solidarity that develops amongst these virtual interactants.

The limitations of the study lie in the fact that the data is incidental and not necessarily representative. Yet, it tries to highlight features that relate to communication online and aims to lay the foundation for further research on speech acts in cyberpragmatics. The topic deserves to be studied in a cross-cultural approach and with follow-up interviews in order to understand participants’ choices and preferences.

We would like to end this article with a complaint that was sent to us anonymously and which is neither face-to-face nor digital, but simply a handwritten note. It does not mention the offender and the offence is presented most indirectly and quite ironically. The irony is achieved through the use of very high-level language, generalities and the mention of Spiderman. Yet, the illocutionary force is powerful. This was a note left on a car shield in a residential neighbourhood:

Dear Sir or Madam,

You may have noticed that your vehicle seems to have found itself in two parking spaces. The truth is, it actually fits in one. For the benefit of all humanity, please lower your parking space consumption.

XOXO

Your friendly neighborhood Spiderman

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Appendix

Some examples in Hebrew (the numbers are according to the examples given in the article)

- 1) (גועל נפש של שירות! כבר פעם שנייה שמגיע לסניף הדאר ב... השירות מתחת לכל ביקורת.
- 3) (מי שחשב אי פעם להתקרב ולקנות ב... שלא יעז אפילו בחינם! שירות מזעזע, נציגים מדברים בחוצפה, מטרטרים אותנו כבר חודש שלם ללא סלון. אנחנו יושבים על הרצפה חודש שלם. יום משקרים לנו הנציגים הארורים שלהם!

7) (מזבלה מתפתחת וגודלת ביישוב שלנו ואין עם מי לדבר/להגיש תלונה. ניסיתי במזכירות היישוב ועם האחראי שבכלל לא עונה לי. סכנה בריאותית, תברואתית, ביטחונית ולא מתאים ליישוב שלנו.

מי יכול לעשות משהו?

10) (שלום, האם זה הכרחי בכל לילה בשעה 2:00 שאופנוע הכי מרעיש שאפשר יסע ברחובות היישוב? האם רק אני שומעת אותו או שיש עוד אנשים ששומעים את האופנוע הזה?)

14) (יש מרצים בעלי לב רע. בדרך כלל מדובר במרמור מצטבר משנים עברו שיוצא כלפי הפחותים מהם בסולם הדרגות. הם נהנים כמובן ממשכורת שמנמנה.

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