Can you complain? Cross-cultural comparison of indirect complaints in Russian and American English

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the structure and cultural styles of indirect complaints in Russian and American English, and politeness strategies used by native speakers of these languages when complaining. It has been found that although indirect complaints in these languages are structured similarly, in some instances Russian complaints lack the problem solution component and optimistic attitude towards the resolution of the problem in the centre of the complaints. Humorous complaints in American English and laments in Russian reflect different styles of expressing indirect complaints in these cultures. The politeness strategies used by native speakers of Russian and American English demonstrate that Russians prefer positive politeness, whereas Americans favour negative politeness in the realisation of indirect complaints. Fourteen Russian native speakers and 21 native speakers of American English participated in this study. The data were collected by tape-recording natural conversations through participant-observation. Learners both of Russian and of American English will benefit from classroom instruction on the differences of structural and stylistic features of indirect complaints and politeness strategies when communicating in the target language. Awareness of the cultural differences of indirect complaints will help learners to avoid inter-cultural miscommunication.

Introduction
Of all the distinctive Russian speech genres, I would argue that the genre I have termed ‘litany’ (Ries 1991) had a special significance during perestroika.1 (Ries 1997: 83)

This is how Nancy Ries begins one of the chapters in her book on culture of conversation during that historical period in Russia. Her characterisation of ‘litany’ as a ‘distinctive Russian genre’ instigated this study of indirect complaints. I was curious as to whether this speech genre retained its prominence, or at least had its traits in the speech of native Russian speakers after perestroika. Furthermore, it was appealing to investigate whether American complaints could also be associated with a specific conversational style.
The speech act of indirect complaints, and responses to them – with respect to gender, relative social status and social distance – in American English has been studied in detail by Diana Boxer (1993a, 1993b, 1993c). Her study identified the function of indirect complaints as a solidarity building strategy. Research on realisation of indirect complaints by non-native speakers of English, and native speakers of Japanese (Boxer 1993a; 1993c), Korean and French (Ouellette 2001), have contributed to the study of this speech act. There were also efforts to discuss indirect complaints as part of social conversation in Russian (Tarasova 1999), and to spotlight some of the problems with the realisation of indirect complaints in intercultural encounters between Russians and Americans (Gorodotskaya 1996; Kartavova 1996). However, the differences in the realisation of indirect complaints in Russian and American English remain relatively unexplored. This study compares the structure, style and politeness strategies that Russians and Americans employ when complaining in their native language.

**Theoretical background**

**THE SPEECH ACT OF INDIRECT COMPLAINTS**

Complaining as a speech act has been analysed by Austin (1962), Edmondson (1981), Olshtain and Weinbach (1987, 1993), Searle (1976), and Trosborg (1995). Austin placed complaints in the class of performatives and the subclass of behabitives, which are concerned with our attitudes and expressions of attitudes towards one’s social behaviour. Searle, in contrast, included complaints (‘deplore’) into the class of expressives because they express the psychological state of a person. For example, when we complain we express our dissatisfaction about the matter of the complaint. The matter of complaints (‘causal agent’) varies: we complain about situations, about our dissatisfactions in different areas of our everyday life, about other people’s behaviour (Newell and Stutman 1989/1990), and even about ourselves, for example, ‘Oh! I’m so stupid’ (Boxer 1993a: 31). Therefore, there are different types of complaints.

A *direct complaint* is a direct confrontation (Newell and Stutman 1989/1990) performed by a speaker who expresses displeasure or annoyance towards a hearer for a socially unacceptable behaviour, and holds the hearer responsible for this behaviour (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). Similar to a direct complaint, an *indirect complaint* also expresses displeasure and annoyance but, unlike a direct complaint, does not hold the hearer responsible for the substance of the complaint (Boxer 1993a). This kind of complaint leads the hearer to potential commiseration and sympathy with the complainer (Boxer 1993a; Newell and Stutman 1989/1990).

An indirect complaint may also be referred to as ‘griping’ or ‘grumbling’
IRYNA KOZLOVA

(Boxer 1993a), ‘troubles-talk’ (Tannen 1990; Michaud and Warner 1997), ‘troubles-telling’ (Brenneis 1988; Tannen 1990), and ‘troubles-talk narrative’ (Ouellette 2001). Although these terms are often used inter-changeably, an indirect complaint is often a smaller unit of ‘the troubles-telling (talk) speech event in that it is often the initiating speech acts of such an event’ (Boxer 1993a: 2). Consequently, troubles-talk narrative is characterised as:

a speech event which builds solidarity between interlocutors through the indirect speech act of complaining and through face-saving strategies such as speaker ‘hedges’ and listener ‘commiserative responses’ as backchannels.

(Ouellette 2001: 3)

Boxer refers to troubles-telling events as indirect complaint exchanges or sequences that ‘can work toward establishing solidarity’ (1993a: 3). Thus, when interlocutors are engaged in indirect complaining, they are working toward creating relationships of camaraderie.

Indirect complaints as a face-threatening act

Brown and Levinson (1987) treat speech acts as face threatening either to the speaker or to the hearer. All members of a society have ‘face’, or ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: (a) negative face … [and] (b) positive face’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). According to Brown and Levinson, ‘face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction’ (1987: 61). While negative face is defined as one’s desire to be unimpeded by others, positive face is characterised as the wish of every member ‘that his wants be desirable to at least some others’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Brown and Levinson propose that different types of speech acts can affect either the speaker’s or the hearer’s negative or positive face, that is they are face-threatening.

Direct complaints, for example, threaten the hearer’s positive face, as the speaker holds the interlocutor responsible for the violation of social norms. Indirect complaints do not threaten in the same way, since the hearer is not accountable for the speaker’s dissatisfaction, offence or frustration, but they do put the speaker’s positive face at risk. Ouellette found that in order to save their positive face when troubles telling, speakers often used a mitigating strategy, such as hedging, as ‘an attempt on the part of the narrator to maintain his or her face while complaining so as not to seem too mean or critical in the eyes of audience members’ (2001: 111).

Concomitantly, indirect complaints can be considered as face threatening to the hearer’s negative face, as it can be assigned to those acts that ‘predicate
some future act A of H, and in so doing put some pressure on H to do (or refrain from doing) the act A’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66). For example, by sharing a negative evaluation of something or somebody with a hearer (Boxer 1993a), the speaker wants the hearer to display solidarity and understanding of the problem that is introduced. To satisfy the hearer’s desire ‘not to be impinged on’ (Brown and Levinson 1987), the speaker can use negative-politeness strategies demonstrating that the speaker cares for the hearer’s wants.

**Structure of indirect complaints**

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) assert that speech acts are not produced alone; they are incorporated into speech act sets, or formulas, which include several moves. Direct complaints in American English were investigated by Murphy and Neu (1996) who distinguished four components of this speech act set:

1. explanation of purpose (speaker explains the purpose for initiating the conversation);
2. complaint (speaker expresses dissatisfaction about the hearer’s behaviour);
3. justification (complainer states the reasons for complaining); and
4. a candidate solution: request (complainer offers a resolution to resolve the problem).

Hence, the speech act set of direct complaints has a beginning, body and an end.

Indirect complaints also have boundaries and consist of distinctive parts. In his study of hedges and indirect complaints in the troubles-talk narrative of American English native speakers, and Korean and French speakers of English, Ouellette (2001) determined that troubles-talk narrative incorporates elements identical to those identified by Labov (1972), specifically, abstract, orientation, complications, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Each of these elements has a communicative function: abstract summarises the story; orientation sets the stage and identifies the participants; complication charts the details of what happened; evaluation reflects the speaker’s attitude towards the story; resolution outlines how the problem that evoked the speaker’s complaints could be solved or treated in future; and coda signals the end of the indirect complaint sequence (Labov 1972). Since troubles talk often consists of many turns, orientation, complications and evaluation can be performed several times in a different order while a complainer develops the story (see Ouellette 2001).

Ouellette (2001) pointed out that the structure of the troubles-talk...
narrative of Korean and French participants was similar to the narratives performed by Americans. He also admitted that while each troubles talk has orientation and coda, ‘resolution and evaluation, although present in some narratives, is less frequent’ (Ouellette 2001: 116). However, the examples provided in his article illustrate that a narrative performed by a Korean speaker of English lacks the resolution move, whereas a narrative of a French speaker of English contains the resolution component (see Tables 4 and 5 in Ouellette 2001: 117–18).

These examples raise the question as to whether or not the moves of resolution and evaluation frequently occur in the troubles-talk narratives of all the participants or only in the narratives of the representatives of a particular culture. This study investigates whether the structure of indirect complaints in Russian is similar to the structure of indirect complaints in American English.

**Indirect complaints in American and Russian cultures**

Insofar as the purpose of this study is to compare the speech act of indirect complaints in Russian and American English, it is necessary to consider the functions of indirect complaints in both cultures. In American English, indirect complaints are employed to attract the hearer’s attention by a speaker who shares a negative evaluation with a hearer (Boxer 1993a). In addition, indirect complaints communicate the psychological state of a person (Searle 1976), or vent one’s emotions (Boxer and Pickering 1995). When sharing a negative evaluation or getting negative feelings off one’s chest, interlocutors usually demonstrate mutual understanding and display similar attitudes to the matter of their complaints, thus establishing ‘solidarity’ or ‘common bonds’ (Boxer 1993a). They may discuss a variety of subjects, which involve a broad range of personal and impersonal situations and cover various topics of social life, while their complaints may range from trivial remarks about the weather to serious troubles dealing with illness or family problems (Boxer 1993a).

Similarly to Americans, Russians also employ indirect complaints and troubles telling as a solidarity-building strategy. Their troubles telling and complaining are performed with a remedial purpose, since they expect to hear empathy and commiseration in response (Tarasova 1999). Tarasova characterises Russian complaints as those that Boxer (1993a) refers to as ‘griping’ and ‘grumbling’. Since indirect complaints carry the same social function in both cultures, it is assumed that Russians and Americans should not experience any problems in intercultural communication. Nevertheless, Ries (1997) commented that when conducting her research in Russia, she
was distressed by the Russian complaints about the problems they faced at the time of perestroika. She further mentioned that her ‘continual experience of frustration over the communicative gap’ she felt with her Russian friends was due to their ‘radically different ways of conceiving and communicating the problems facing Russia’ (Ries 1997: 18).

Russian complaining and troubles telling mainly reflect the conditions of the speakers’ social and economic life (Tarasova 1999), while the source of their complaining has its origin in ‘the entire history of Russia and Ukraine where “spiritual merit has always been associated with hardship and poverty”’ (Ries 1997 cited in Tarasova 1999: 61). Stories about hardship and poverty permeated social conversations in Russia during perestroika, and were characterised as laments and litanies (Ries 1997). Ries defines litanies as stories that include sequences of complaints reflecting the speaker’s misfortunes, ordeals, sufferings and problems; these stories vary in length, and are often structured.

The existence of a specific genre for expressing indirect complaints in Russian leads to an assumption that there might be a different way of expressing indirect complaints in American English. This paper presents a comparison of the structure and style of indirect complaints in Russian and American English, and politeness strategies employed by Russian and American interlocutors. The identification of distinctive features of this speech act will be beneficial for learners of these languages because it will assist them to perform indirect complaints more in accordance with the norms of the target culture, and also to interpret this speech act correctly. Teachers will then be able to focus their instruction on the differences between indirect complaints in Russian and American English to help their students avoid possible intercultural miscommunication.

**Method**

Fourteen Russian native speakers, originally from Russia and Ukraine, and 21 native speakers of American English participated in this study. As most of those taking part were my friends, acquaintances or students, in most conversations I was one of the participants. This type of data collection allowed me to observe natural occurrences of the speech act of complaining both in Russian and American English.

The data were collected in naturalistic settings in a small city in the United States of America. Conversations were tape-recorded, and 112 samples containing indirect complaints were extracted for qualitative analysis. To identify the differences in the realisation of the speech act of complaining in Russian and American English, I looked at the components incorporated in indirect complaints, the politeness strategies employed, the syntactic
devices such as repetitions and rhetorical questions, and the functions that they carry when used in indirect complaints in both cultures.

Findings and discussion

STRUCTURE OF INDIRECT COMPLAINTS

Since this study is concerned with indirect complaints as social interaction, I adopted Boxer’s (1993a) view of an indirect complaint as a part of indirect complaint exchanges consisting of two or more turns. Indirect complaints performed by Russians and Americans demonstrated a striking difference in their length, varying from very short exchanges of two, or several, turns, to lengthier indirect complaints of many turns resembling troubles-telling stories (the longest one was 45 minutes performed by an American participant). The length difference was one of the challenges for the comparison of complaints structure, since shorter exchanges included some, but not all, elements of the indirect complaints. Mutual complaints or participants’ exchanges of matching stories to initial openers (Boxer 1993a) were another challenge for this analysis. Despite the fact that this type of indirect complaint included many turns, interlocutors often chose to perform counter complaints at different points of the conversation, and this also did not allow for observing all possible elements of the indirect complaints sequence. Therefore, only indirect complaints in the form of a fully developed story with a beginning, middle and end (Labov 1972) were used for the structure analysis.

Five elements – introduction, details, evaluative statement, problem solution, and conclusion – which correspond to the components introduced by Labov (1972), namely, orientation, complications, evaluation, resolution, and coda were identified. Sometimes, the order of these components was so flexible that the problem solution could appear at the end of the story as well as in the middle, or even at the very beginning of the complaint, as is evident from the following situation.

Luda, a native Russian speaker, asks her American friend Anna about Anna’s mother who was in hospital. First, Anna provides a problem solution: her mother’s health condition is much better and she can already walk (lines 2–6), and only then does she begin to tell her friend about the trouble her mother has had (see transcription conventions in the appendix, p 102).

EXAMPLE 1

1 Luda: What about your mother?
2 Anna: My mother, oh, (xxxx). My mother is much better.
3 Luda: Thank god.
Anna begins to describe her mother’s state with the repeated twice evaluative statement, which is at the same time an introduction to the story: ‘Her blood pressure seems so low,’ ‘Her blood pressure is so low’ (line 9 and 11). She pronounces this phrase again in the middle of the story (line 17), and later in line 21, but this time she changes it a little bit: ‘Her blood pressure was just like barely going’. In line 23, Anna utters another evaluation, ‘She was just barely, barely alive’. Although after this evaluative statement the conversation continues, this utterance sounds like a conclusion: as a result of all these
health complications, Anna’s mother was barely alive. This chain of repetitive evaluations alternating with a detailed explanation of what happened (lines 12–20; 27–29) intensifies the situation and leads the hearer to understand how serious the problem is.

Similar structure was identified in indirect complaints in Russian. In Example 2, which was originally performed in Russian, Victor, a native speaker of Russian, complained about the hotel in which he stayed in London because there were bugs in the rooms. He could not imagine that in London, such a beautiful city, he could encounter such ugliness. This experience became the topic of his complaint.

**EXAMPLE 2**

1 Victor: When I arrived, they gave me a hotel with bugs. Did I tell you?=
2 Luda: =Told-, you know by the way, my acquaintance, we lived on the
3 same floor, they, boy, they are in London now, she told me that
4 when they, she came there, they rented their first apartment
5 there (2), she said there were bugs and mice, she said, you know, (.)
6 I even-
7 Victor: Mice is not bad, I can bear mice-
8 Luda: ‘I could not believe I am in London,’ she said.=
9 Victor: =But bugs, (1) it’s just awful! When I saw them on my pillow
10 sneaking up to me-, (2) it was terrible! First of all, it was
11 disgusting, second, I got so mad, immediately, I got so mad.
12 Luda: That-?
13 Victor: That I went to them and complained.
14 Luda: You, (1) a cool American, you got accustomed to clean life!
15 //((laughing))//
16 Victor: // Yes ((laughing))//, I got used to clean life, well, you know, how
17 can it happen? In London, in London, a hotel is with bugs!
18 *It’s just a nightmare*! London is so beautiful, and then oops, bugs
19 in a hotel! *It’s a nightmare*! (2)
20 Luda: (Sarcastically!) Wonderful!
21 Victor: *Terrible*! (1) *It’s just terrible*!=
22 Luda: =Well, what can I tell you?=  
23 Victor: =Those hotels that I stayed in Kiev and Moscow when I went there
24 were better and frankly speaking much cheaper.
Victor’s complaints begin with the introduction of the problem (line 1) followed by a chain of six evaluative statements (lines 9–11, 18, 19, 21). In this example, evaluative statements and details rotate and follow each other (lines 9–11, 16–19); for example, ‘it’s just awful!’ (evaluative statement), ‘When I saw them on my pillow sneaking up to me-, (details) it was terrible! First of all, it was disgusting,’ (evaluative statements) ‘second, I got so mad, immediately, I got so mad’ (details). He finished his complaining with a conclusion, which, similar to situation (1), is an evaluative statement (line 21). It appears that the function of evaluative statements is not only to intensify indirect complaints, but can also operate as an introduction or conclusion to indirect complaints exchanges. Remarkably, the indirect complaints of both speakers are filled with evaluative statements. As such evaluations usually ‘indicate the point of the narrative, … why it was told and what the narrator is getting at’ (Labov 1972: 366), it would appear that speakers often incorporate evaluative statements to emphasise that the situation is worth complaining about.

The problem solution component of indirect complaints deserves special attention. Although indirect complaints both of Russian and American participants contain this element, the problem solution is the component that makes Russian and American complaints different. Anna’s solution to her problem is optimistic; she assures her friend that her mother’s health has improved greatly and, finally, that she is able to walk. While expressing indirect complaints a speaker anticipates that the hearer commiserates and, thus, threatens the hearer’s negative face. To reduce this imposition and the negative impact of the complaints on the hearer, Anna employed an optimistic resolution of the problem as a negative-politeness strategy to ‘minimize the imposition’ (Brown and Levinson 1987). By providing an optimistic resolution at the beginning of her complaint, the speaker no longer expected the hearer to commiserate. At the same time, Anna’s optimism prevented her from being perceived as a hopeless complainer.

Victor’s solution of the problem, on the contrary, lacked optimism. In complaining about the situation at the hotel (line 13), he was never optimistic that it would change, and implied that all London hotels might be similar to that one. Moreover, at the end, he mentioned that hotels in Kiev and Moscow were much better and cheaper, thereby making the situation rather more unpleasant. Hence, Victor did not mitigate his complaints by being optimistic.

In summary, indirect complaints in the form of a fully developed story were included for the structure analysis. The data indicate that the structure of American and Russian complaints is similar in regards to which elements are included. However, a common pattern throughout the data illuminated
a general tendency among the native speakers of Russian to omit optimistic remarks in their indirect complaints. Americans, on the other hand, were inclined to include utterances that demonstrated their optimistic attitude to the matter of their complaint or its outcomes. It appears that the optimism shown in American complaints mitigates the negative effect of complaining on both the speaker and the hearer, whereas the lack of optimism in Russian complaints serves to make them more intense.

**Stylistic differences**

**LAMENTS**

A traditional lament, being ‘a strictly female genre’ (Ries 1997: 86), is a song or poem expressing grief, for example, *a funeral lament* (Cowie 1995). The speaker’s tone of voice is significant in this case: sometimes it is monotonous, at the same time it is very emotional. Tone is defined as ‘the affect indirectly conveyed by the Speaker or perceived by the Hearer’ (Beebe and Waring 2002: 5), and consists of emotion and attitude. The speaker’s negative emotions together with the attitude towards the situation as an unsolvable one make the complaint sound like a lament. Rhetorical questions are one of the distinguishing features of a lament (Ries 1997).

Only female native speakers of Russian, speaking Russian, used laments; there were four who did so in my data. The following example, originally performed in Russian by the speaker who underlines her belief that the situation is irreparable, is classified as a lament by its structure. Galina, a graduate student from Ukraine, has a problem: she cannot use the full amount of her professional development because she missed the deadline. She begins a long monologue (lines 1–17), describing all her problems in detail.

**EXAMPLE 3**

1 Galina:  This is what I have, but, man, I cannot use as much
2 because yesterday was the deadline. (1) Why can I not use
3 this money? (1) Because I cannot spend it for books (1) (x), I
4 can only (.), spend it for conferences (.) membership in some
5 organizations, meetings. What kind of meetings can I find here,
6 where? I was looking for conferences, no conferences. The
7 conferences I had to plan-, you know, the deadlines they
8 set, the conferences I should plan by the end of September, the end
9 of September. Well, I could not find them by the end of
10 September to plan them. Then, after the end of September I did
Galina begins her complaint by introducing the fact that she cannot use the full amount of her professional development fund (PDF) (lines 1, 2). She then goes into details by enumerating the reasons why she cannot use her PDF. For example, she was supposed to find conferences to go to by the end of September but she failed to do so. After this date, she did not look for any more conferences as she had missed her deadline. Nor did she understand on which membership and meetings she was allowed to spend her PDF. These details comprise the entire body of her lament (lines 3–14). In her evaluating statement she displays her attitude to the situation, ‘It is very strange’ (line 15), and finishes her complaint with a pessimistic conclusion (line 31). However, one element, problem solution, is missing. Ries argues that Russian laments are associated with a relative or temporal lack of status, and reflect ‘an ideology about the natural and inescapable dichotomies between high and low, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Them and Us, elites and people’ (1997: 19). This powerlessness is to be one of the reasons the problem solution element is omitted. Indeed, it is impossible to change the situation without the power to do so.
Galina’s complaint consists of a sequence of rhetorical questions ‘that are a hallmark of lament’ (Ries 1997: 86) and pessimistic answers to them, as the problem that Galina describes seems insoluble to her. By asking rhetorical questions (lines 5, 14, 22–25, 27), Galina attracts Luda’s attention and intensifies her interest in the story. Although she answers these questions herself, it sounds like she wants to include ‘both [speaker] S and [hearer] H in the activity’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 102), thus displaying positive politeness. In effect, the function of litanies and laments is to establish common bonds, and in Russian culture ‘this “generalized social bond”… was the fantasized bond of connection to and belonging in some kind of moral community—a community of shared suffering’ (Ries 1997).

On the note of suffering, Galina finishes her complaint by saying, ‘I am not even going to try to fight with the windmills’ (line 31), thus concluding that she is not going to try to prove anything as she will not be understood. This sample can be referred to as a lament because it is monotonous and pessimistic, because the speaker puts herself in a situation which cannot be solved by any means, because of its stylistic and prosodic features – rhetorical questions and intonation – and, finally, because the problem-solving component is missing.

The fact that laments as a way of expressing indirect complaints were found in the conversations of native speakers of Russian supports the view that this genre has some prominence in Russian culture. ‘Genres reflect the relative stability of the ways that we socially interact’ (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble 1993: 192), which may be why this way of complaining is found in Russian conversations of expatriates living at such a distance from their place of birth more than a decade after perestroika.

HUMOROUS COMPLAINTS

A group of complaints in the American corpus attracted my attention because of the manner in which they were performed. I called them humorous complaints because they sound amusing and comical. In Example 4, the speaker, Bill, describes what happened when he went through US Customs at the airport on his return from Korea. When the customs officer found that Bill was a teacher of English, he asked him to name the seven parts of speech.

EXAMPLE 4

1 Bill: So, I am completely tired, totally jet-lagged. I get to the San Francisco airport, I go through customs, (.) and the
guy, and the guy looks at my passport, he goes-

2 Luda: You are not American. (laughing)
Bill: No, no, no, no, no, he says, he says: ‘Why were you in Korea?’ And I said, ‘Well, I was in Korea teaching English.’ And he goes, he says: ‘Oh, you are an English teacher!’ And I said: ‘Yeah.’ So, he goes, so, he says: ‘OK, well, give me the seven parts of speech.’

Luda: Really? You’re kidding!

Bill: No, no=

Luda: =You’re //kidding, you’re not serious.//

Bill: //So, so I said to him, so // I am telling you, so I’m just cracked and (xxx) That’s it. I said I told him what I’ve just told you, I’ve just been on the flight for twelve hours whatever I had absolutely no sleep and now you’re gonna ask me- the seven parts of speech //(laughing)//

Bill: //the seven parts of speech in English.//

Luda: the seven parts of speech =(laughing)=

Bill: //the seven parts of speech in English.//

Luda: (xxxxxx)

Bill: and he, he goes, well, well, yeah, I thought, and said OK, fine, I’m just-, I’m just-, I’m just- I’m just flicking out, I’m just cracking up. So, I said, //well, noun, adjective, verb, adverb//

Luda: //(laughing)//

You are kidding

Bill: No, and (I go, no, I was getting lost) I found, I go a preposition and he goes, ‘Wow!’=

Luda: =Wow!

Bill: ‘Wow! You really must be an English teacher. I’ve-, I’ve asked these people, I’ve asked this question before to lots of people and no one’s, ever’=

Luda: =Are you=

Bill: =‘No one, ever, //mentioned the preposition//' //Are you serious?!//

Luda: //I cannot believe it//

Bill: //This is, that is my-// this is my test to get back into the country.

The situation that Bill describes is ridiculous: customs officers are not supposed to give people linguistic tests. So although Bill tells the story in a
very serious manner, to Luda Bill’s story does not seem sincere and, in lines 10 and 12, she indicates her doubts about the truthfulness of the situation. This situation can be characterised as ironical. Indeed, saying something other or opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance is referred to as verbal irony. Consequently, doing something other or opposite to what is expected can be viewed as situational irony, which is defined as ‘a state of the world which is perceived as ironical, for example, the fire station burning down to the ground’ (Attardo 2000: 794). The customs officer, by giving Bill a linguistic test, does something which is not normally part of his role and, therefore, the situation seems absurd. Bill’s serious tone of voice contributes to the absurdity of the situation, which is why Luda, rather than commiserating, just laughs.

Bill performs his indirect complaints in unexpected fashion. On the one hand, his introduction, ‘So, I am completely tired, totally jet-lagged’ (line 1), makes the hearer believe that he is going to complain. On the other hand, the story itself sounds entertaining. Thus, it is not clear whether the purpose of his story is to complain or to entertain the hearer. When complaining, Bill goes ‘off record’ which means that he ‘wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it … and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret it’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 211). By going ‘off-record’ and ‘making a good story’ (Brown and Levinson 1987), the speaker mitigates the negative effect of complaints on the hearer, thus demonstrating that his desire is to entertain the hearer rather than to share his negative experience. When telling an amusing story, the speaker also shares some of the hearer’s wants, and the speaker’s positive face is enhanced by the fact that some of the hearer’s wants are satisfied.

POLITENESS STRATEGIES

The analysis of the indirect complaints revealed cross-cultural differences regarding politeness strategies employed by the participants. It seems that Americans prefer negative politeness as they tend to employ such strategies to ‘minimize the imposition’ or go ‘off record’ (Brown and Levinson 1987). Russians, conversely, avoid negative-politeness strategies and favour positive-politeness strategies such as to ‘include both S and H in the activity’ (Brown and Levinson 1987). These interactional sequences are aligned with Tarasova’s (1999) findings: positive-politeness strategies are more often found in Russian/Ukrainian encounters, whereas negative-politeness strategies are more commonly used by British and American interlocutors.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), cultures differ in terms of their preferences for positive or negative politeness. In positive-politeness cultures,
the level of satisfaction of the negative face wants is relatively low and the
impositions are viewed as small, whereas in negative-politeness cultures, the
negative face wants are highly valued. Russian/Ukrainian culture is collectivistic and places ‘the needs of the group above their personal needs’
(Triandis 1995 as cited in Nelson 2000: 78). Thus, the hearer is more likely
to be less sensitive to his or her negative-face wants as the individual wants
of the members of a collectivistic culture are treated as less important than
the wants of others. We could postulate that it was due to this cultural value
that the Russian/Ukrainian participants did not strive to lessen the imposition
of their complaints on the hearers. Americans, on the other hand, come from
an individualistic culture where individuals ‘tend to be motivated by their own
needs, preferences and goals’ (Nelson 2000: 76). They employed strategies
directed to the satisfaction of their interlocutors’ face wants, and tried not to
overwhelm hearers with their complaints.

These cultural values were reflected in the styles of the Russian and
American complaints. Styles or genres are ‘the ways that we get particular
things done through language – the ways we exchange information and
knowledge and interact socially’ (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble 1993: 192).
In spite of the fact that the function of indirect complaints both in Russian
and American culture is to establish solidarity, the ways of achieving solidarity
differ. Russians establish common bonds through creating access to the
community (Ries 1997), by displaying positive politeness and by including
both the speaker and the hearer in the activity, whereas Americans attain their
purpose of establishing solidarity by entertaining the hearer. Different ways
of achieving solidarity in Russian and American cultures may challenge
intercultural exchanges and lead to miscommunication between non-native
speakers of Russian and American English.

What the teacher needs to know
When teaching indirect complaints in Russian and American English, the
emphasis should be on the common function of indirect complaints in
these cultures, namely establishing solidarity (Boxer 1993a) and displaying
commiseration in response (Boxer 1993c; Tarasova 1999). At the same time,
it should be stressed that while carrying the same function, there are still dif-
fferences in the realisation of indirect complaints on which teachers should
focus their instruction.

Since indirect complaints exchanges are often complex sequences that
include different elements, it is advisable when teaching indirect complaints
to be aware of the following issues. First, students should be encouraged to
analyse the structure of indirect complaints to determine the elements and
their functions. It may benefit Russian native speakers to discover that indirect complaints which lack a problem solution component and have a pessimistic attitude to the resolution of the problem are rather unusual for Americans, who are optimistic in their expectations. For American learners of Russian, on the other hand, it will be advantageous to know that Russians, for whom belonging to a certain community is culturally important, will do their best to create an ‘access to that belonging’ (Ries 1997: 87) for their hearers. When practising indirect complaints, Russian native speakers should be instructed to include a problem solution component and an optimistic attitude. Moreover, their problem solution should entail the negative-politeness strategy of minimising the imposition on the hearer. To go ‘off record’ and tell an entertaining story rather than overtly complain about misfortunes is another strategy that Russians could adopt to satisfy the individualistic face wants of the Americans. Native speakers of American English learning Russian, on the other hand, should be informed about the purpose of lamenting so as not to be affected by the pessimistic discourse of laments. Classroom instruction incorporating thorough analysis and practice of indirect complaints in Russian and American English will help the learners of both languages to avoid any intercultural misunderstandings and make adaptation to the target culture less painful.

Conclusion

The present study was concerned with the comparison of the structure and style of indirect complaints in Russian and American English, as well as the politeness strategies used by native speakers to achieve their communicative goal of establishing solidarity. The main differences between Russian and American complaints are the lack of a problem solution component in some Russian complaints, and the optimistic approach of American speakers towards the matter of complaints. Politeness strategies employed by the participants varied: Americans used negative-politeness strategies or went ‘off record’ to safeguard the hearer’s negative face, whereas Russians were less sensitive to negative politeness and favoured more positive-politeness strategies. Two cultural styles of indirect complaints, Russian laments and American humorous complaints, reflected two different ways of achieving the same social goal of establishing common bonds.

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Appendix

REPORTING AND TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTION

Overlapping utterances Overlapping utterances are marked with a double slash at the point where the overlap begins and at the point where the overlap ends, for example, //You know what //

Latched Utterances When turns do not overlap, but at the same time, there is not a normal pause between them, the quickness of the turn exchange is marked by an equal sign, for example, =Well=

Pauses Silent pauses indicated by the length of the pause (to the nearest second) in parenthesis, for example, Why can I not use this money? (1).

A brief pause (under one second) is sometimes indicated by (.), for example, I am gonna have four kids! (.)

Interruptions Words or sentences that are interrupted by the speaker or by another participant are indicated by a hyphen, for example, you know, I-, maybe-I don't know-. 

Uncertainties When there is some doubt that the words have been heard correctly, those words are enclosed in single parentheses, for example, (You are simply tired.) When the words could not be heard well enough to be understood, x's enclosed in parentheses are used to indicate the number of syllables that could be heard on the tape. For example, (xxx) would indicate that three syllables had been heard but not understood.

Comments in the Transcripts Vocalisation which cannot be easily spelled out (such as laughter or coughs) and comments on the context are indicated by double parentheses, for example, //((laughing))//

Non-verbal Contextual Information Non-verbal contextual information is transcribed and should be interpreted as following:

Affirmative responses: Ah-hah or Uh-huh.

Surprise: Wow! Uh!
NOTES

1. Ries (1997) describes perestroika (1985–88) in the former Soviet Union as a ‘period of industrial acceleration and modernization’ (Ries 1997: 16). This reform, which promised economic and social changes, was not successful. The years following this period were marked with shortages of food and goods, and also material challenges. People were frustrated as the future of the country was not clear.

2. These speakers were grouped together because both Russia and Ukraine were among the republics of the former Soviet Union where the Russian language was the language of intercultural communication and was taught in schools. Due to this fact, the participants who grew up in the Soviet Union spoke Russian as a native language no matter what language they spoke in their families. Although Russia and Ukraine have their own traditions and customs, they both share many features of Slavic culture. Both countries have also been influenced by Soviet culture for many years. Since Russia and Ukraine now experience similar, if not identical, problems of the post-Soviet period, these problems are reflected in the conversation of both Ukrainians and Russians. These two cultures were also grouped together by Tarasova (1999) in her study on solidarity strategies used by the speakers of English and Russian in sociable talk.

3. Unfortunately, the Russian transcripts are not included in the final version of this article due to the technical problems with conversion of a Russian font. To avoid inaccuracy of printing, it was suggested that only the English translation be included.

4. Professional Development Fund.

REFERENCES


