

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW AS A TOOL FOR SPEECH ACT RESEARCH: THE CASE OF COMPLAINTS

Diana Boxer (UNIV. OF FLORIDA)

**ABSTRACT:** Este artigo mostra que apesar de a entrevista etnográfica ser considerada um importante instrumento na análise de eventos e atos de fala é freqüentemente negligenciada. Pesquisas sobre comportamento verbal ou transferência de aspectos pragmáticos que oferecem dados básicos para comparação, em sua maioria, usam questionários escritos e/ou gravações espontâneas para coleta de dados. Todavia, nenhum desses instrumentos garante a descoberta de estratégias sociais subjacentes ao comportamento verbal. O foco deste artigo é a seqüência do ato de fala chamado "contando o problema" (trouble-telling); a queixa ou o lamento é o elemento iniciador desse ato de fala. Dois conjuntos de entrevistas, com 10 informantes nativos, sobre a seqüência "contando o problema" são descritos com detalhes iluminando o tipo de informação que pode ser obtida através de uma entrevista aberta de natureza etnográfica. Achados desta entrevista corroboraram a conclusão de que "queixar-se", embora contendo uma carga semântica negativa, funciona freqüentemente como um comportamento verbal positivo na comunidade de fala dos Estados Unidos examinada aqui. São discutidas as implicações para o ensino de língua.

The ethnographic interview as a research tool has been virtually ignored as a means of tapping the norms of communities both in research on speech act usage among native speakers of particular languages and research on non-native speaker pragmatic transfer. With the exception of very

few such studies (e.g. Katriel 1985), scholars have either concentrated on 1) analyzing spontaneous speech without the corroboration of insight from members of the speech community; 2) analyzing speech behavior based on only native speaker impressions derived from discourse completion questionnaires (DCTs) without the corroboration of spontaneous speech; or 3) analyzing speech behavior through some combination of 1) and 2). However, DCTs or more traditional survey techniques uncover only intuitions that native speakers have about how they *should* speak. They do not allow the researcher to discover the actual speech patterns of native speakers. By combining the use of DCT questionnaires with the analysis of spontaneous speech, scholars can compare the use of a specific speech act with the canonical shape of the patterning of that speech act in the minds of community members (Beebe, 1985; Beebe and Cummings, in press). But while such a combination allows for a system of checks on whether people indeed speak as they ought to, it falls short of uncovering the tacit knowledge that we all have about how and why we speak as we do.

Research into the speech behavior of native speakers of English is important not only for establishing of how we perform verbally in our day-to-day-interactions with other native speakers, but also for the purpose of making use of this baseline information in second language learning. From the viewpoint of ethnolinguistic study, it is important to discover what we as native speakers are doing when we use certain speech acts in order to learn about our values and social system. From the viewpoint of second language acquisition, such knowledge is a necessary underpinning for the successful teaching of sociolinguistic rules. It is now true that there are approximately as many non-native speakers of English in the world as native speakers. We must have effective communication among all English speakers if we are to avoid unwanted misunderstandings. Thus the need for sociolinguistic description and the application of sociolinguistic findings to TESOL is more critical than ever. As TESOL becomes a burgeoning endeavor internationally, both in ESL settings and EFL settings, the sociolinguistic component of language learning must be attended to. It is now imperative that descriptive analyses of the sociolinguistic rules of English-

speaking speech communities be carried out and widely replicated for increased generalizability and applicability.

While it is true the debate continues as to whether rules of speaking can or should be taught in ESL/EFL (Kachru 1988; Widdowson 1988), it is clear that where the ESL is not a non-native institutionalized variety, the ability to communicate with native speakers (NSs) according to native norms is important. NSs often forgive phonological, syntactic and lexical errors as clear signs that a speaker does not have native control of a language. NSs, however, typically interpret sociolinguistic errors as rudeness rather than as the transfer of different sociolinguistic rules (Ervin-Tripp 1972; Thomas 1983; Wolfson 1981, 1983, 1989).

There is a rapidly increasing population of adult learners studying English as a second language in the United States. For these learners the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is at least as important as linguistic competence for successful language learning. These adult learners are finding themselves ever more involved in communication with native speakers in settings including the academic, business, diplomatic, scientific and technical spheres. Since the potential for miscommunication is very great, it is of extreme timeliness that descriptive analyses of native speaker sociolinguistic behavior be undertaken and applied.

This paper reports on baseline findings on rules for the realization and underlying social strategies of a specific speech act sequence. Corroborating evidence in the form of ethnographic interviews is discussed in depth. Described here are the results of two sets of interviews, one structured and one open-ended, that were conducted with the aim of tapping the knowledge of native informants about a speech event termed "troubles telling" (Jefferson and Lee, 1981; Jefferson, 1984), "troubles talk" (Tannen, 1990) or "troubles-sharing" (Hatch, 1992). More specifically, it delves into what is frequently the initiating move of the speech event, namely the speech act of 'gripping' or what is termed here 'indirect complaining.' The term 'indirect complaint' is taken from the work of D'Amico-Reisner (1985) on disapproval exchanges. Indirect complaints are juxtaposed by D'Amico-Reisner with instances of direct complaint or disapproval. Indirect complaints differ from instances of direct complaint in that the

addressee is not held responsible for a perceived offense. Indirect complaint will be defined here as the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about oneself or someone/something that is not present. The following exchange will illustrate the nature of the griping/troubles-telling exchange.

(1) Two female graduate students in a course they both dislike.

*a: I sat through yesterday's class with total non-comprehension!*

*b: Oh, yesterday was the worst!*

In the exchange the speaker signals to the addressee her feelings by using an indirect complaint about a class they are both taking. By agreeing, the addressee demonstrates to the speaker a mutual sentiment. On this basis alone, an opening for further conversation and relationship-building is provided in which they might go on to discover precisely their common areas of interests, purposes or sympathies.

The spontaneous speech data of this study consists of 533 troubles-telling exchanges that were tape-recorded or recorded in the form of field notes. The methodological basis of data analysis was that of the ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1962). Categories emerged from the analysis. Six categories of complaint responses emerged as major categories of ways in which people in this community respond to indirect complaints: 1)  $\emptyset$  response or topic switch; 2) questions; 3) contradiction; 4) joke/teasing; 5) advice/ lecture; and 6) agreement/commiseration.

**TABLE 1: IC RESPONSES**

<b>Category</b>	<b>% of corpus</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1. ø or topic switch	10.19%	rhetorical, deliberate topic switch, repeated backchanneling
2. Question	11.70%	request for elaboration; challenge questions
3. Contradiction	14.72%	Intimates, status unequals, addressee wants distance
4. Joke/teasing	6.23%	making light of situation
5. Advice/lecture	13.58%	platitudes, specific advice, moralizing
6. Commiseration	43.58%	agreement, reassurance, exclamations, finishing speaker's sentence

Almost half of the responses to the initiating moves fell into one of six possible types of responses, that which was termed 'commiseration.' The apparent preponderance of responses of this one type was cause to speculate that the underlying social strategy of much complaining behavior in the community is not negative but positive in nature. In order to check this suspicion it seemed necessary to conduct an informal interview with members of the speech community in order to tap their native speaker tacit knowledge on the functions of this speech act/event.

The interviews that are reported on here do indeed illustrate that complaint sequences can often work toward establishing solidarity when they are part of the troubles-talk event. Of course, this fact is easily apparent for other more positively evaluated speech acts (e.g. compliments, offers, invitations). However, the speech act with the semantic label "complaint" is not typically thought of as rapport-inspiring speech behavior. Griping sequences are examined here precisely because, while it is not intuitively obvious, they do often fit into the category of speech behaviors that can lead to the establishment of relationships between interlocutors.

## **2. ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING AS CORROBORATING DATA FOR SPEECH ACT/EVENT ANALYSIS**

Since the ethnographic interview is a method of getting people to talk about what they know -- of discovering

what human behaviors mean to the individuals participating in those behaviors—it differs greatly from the traditional interview or questionnaire in that it seeks to uncover not only knowledge that is explicit but also knowledge that is tacit. The tacit knowledge that informants have about behavior is brought out only after a rapport has been established between the researcher and the informant.

Because ideal informants in studies of speech acts/events are sociolinguistically naive, it is often possible to bring their tacit knowledge to a state of explicitness through gentle questioning by the researcher within the setting/context in which the speech behavior typically occurs. The reverse is also true. Researchers themselves who are native speakers of the community they are studying also possess knowledge that is tacit, and by interviewing other native speakers their own tacit knowledge can be made explicit. Hence, by combining the researcher's own analysis of spontaneous speech with information gleaned from native informants through an ethnographic interview, a more complete analysis of the specific speech behavior can be made than that which results from a reliance on more traditional interviews or questionnaires.

The knowledge of how to go about conducting an ethnographic interview cannot be gained simply by reading about how these are best carried out. Although there are numerous sources available that deal directly with ethnographic interviewing (e.g. Spradley, 1979; Briggs, 1986), the best way to learn how to conduct such an interview is by doing one. I include here a description of a first attempt at such an interview and how it went awry. Although as researchers we rarely hear about what goes wrong in the process of collecting data, I believe it is fruitful for methodological papers to detail such trials and errors. The benefit accrues to those who are interested in employing new tools such as this type of interview, but who do not have firsthand experience with their use<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>. Details of the initial trial at ethnographic interviews for this project were presented at the 1994 Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning at the University of Illinois (parasession on research methodology). The audience welcomed remarks on what went wrong,

The first attempt at an ethnographic interview in this study was initiated by careful thought about who the best informants would be, what questions would be most fruitful, and how long each interview should last. First, given that the best informants are those with the ethnographer has built a rapport, ten people who were acquaintances of the researcher but who knew little about the research under investigation were chosen as informants. After locating ten informants who met these criteria (five males and five females), interview times were scheduled with the plan of asking eight structured questions of each informant. This was followed by having the informants listen to and comment on a reading of fourteen different sequences taken from the data. The intention was to find out what the informants thought about various aspects of troubles-telling as well as to get them to discuss what they saw as the social functions within the actual data sequences.

Asking the very same questions of each informant turned out to be a mistake. Although there seemed in theory to be nothing wrong with conducting the interview in a structured manner, adhering to a fixed agenda of questions led to an inflexibility that defeated the purpose of the interview: to uncover tacit as well as explicit knowledge about troubles talk. The fixed agenda did not allow the informants to lead the researcher to unplanned questions based on their answers. A second mistake was in trying to achieve too much within a relatively brief time allocation: forty-five minutes to one hour. Attempting to have each informant listen to fourteen sequences of data as well as answer eight structured questions imposed a heavy burden on the informants. One probable reason for the feeling of imposition might have been precisely the structured nature of the interviews. Apparently, the fact that they were more like interviews and less like conversations caused the informants to want to "get it over with". Many of the informants, knowing that they would also have to give their impressions on spontaneous speech data, seemed to want to quickly finish the structured questions. Indeed, several rushed through their responses, giving them less thought than they might have had the demands of the interview been different. Another drawback of this first attempt

---

indicating that such a description could be very helpful to researchers who plan to use this method in their future work.

at interviewing was the desire to get brief, concise answers to the structured questions so that they could be easily tabulated. Because of this, the interviewees were likely to elaborate. As a result, their responses offered very little insight on the various issues brought up.

Because there was no follow-up on issues brought up, the informant's short replies were accepted as satisfactory. This resulted in an inability to infer much about what they really knew. While their explicit knowledge was tapped, a point was never reached in being able to ascertain what they tacitly knew about indirect complaining. Spradley, in discussing ethnography states: "...a large part of any culture consists of tacit knowledge. We all know things that we cannot talk about or express in direct ways. The ethnographer must then make inferences about what people know by listening carefully to what they say, by observing their behavior, and by studying artifacts and their use."(Spradley 1979: 9).

Given that the results of this interview were less than satisfactory, it was apparent that a second interview would have to be conducted in a more informal, open-ended manner. Of course, this would mean finding ten new informants, as those who participated in the first interview were no longer naive. Before re-doing the interview some very good advice came forth from an ethnographer who had just been through a similar process of trial and error. C. Micheau (personal communication) had the following guidelines to offer: 1) do as little talking as possible; 2) pick three or four areas to cover; introduce the issues and let the informants talk; 3) get the informants to do narratives and then chain their narratives together.

Micheau's advice was followed in planning for the second interview. The ten new informants were offered a short introduction on the purpose of the interview. The introduction was an invitation to the informants to talk about an instance/instances in which they were either the speaker or addressee in a troubles telling exchange. The informant's tales were interspersed with researcher's questions on some of the issues under investigation in this study. Thus the informants talked while their cues were taken to ask gently questions at appropriate junctures in their narratives. In such a manner the researcher is able to touch upon the various issues of concern.

One of the drawbacks in such an approach is the inability to ask the very same questions of each informant. In this case, nor all ten informants addressed each issue. One of the advantages, on the other hand, is that each informant is able to become introspective in response to the questions asked of them -- questions that emerge directly from their narratives. Moreover, informants were more engaged in their talk and hence more willing to carry on with their narratives.

Six key issues on which it seemed important to discover community norms had emerged from the analysis of spontaneous speech data: 1) The first issue dealt with perceptions of the delineation between direct and indirect complaining. While a direct complaint is a face-threatening activity (Brown-Levinson 1978), an indirect complaint does not hold the addressee responsible for a perceived offense. Why is it, then, that these two speech behaviors share the same semantic label? It would seem that their underlying social functions differ greatly. 2) Given that there appear to be various options in responding to the indirect complaint (e.g. contradiction, topic switch, advice, commiseration) it seemed important to gather informants' perceptions on how these differing responses function to bring about differing outcomes in the troubles-telling speech event; 3) The analysis of the spontaneous speech data indicated vast differences in the way intimates respond to indirect complaints as opposed to non-intimates. Therefore, it seemed important to gather perceptions on how the social distance variable affects responses within the troubles-telling exchange; 4) Gender emerged as a very strong indicator of the propensity of addressees to respond with a reply that in some enhanced solidarity between the interlocutors: women were twice as likely to commiserate as men; men were twice as likely to give advice (this finding corroborates those of Tannen, 1990). This difference indicated a call to tap informants' perceptions on the gender variable in troubles talk; 5) Related to the gender difference is perception on how indirect complaints are used to open and support interactions; 6) A sixth issue that emerged had to do with ethnicity and the propensity to use indirect complaints as an initiating move in troubles talk. This sixth issue was not previously dealt with in the research, but which appeared, from an initial analysis of the speech data, to require attention. It

was not immediately apparent in the analysis of the data for this study that the ethnic makeup of the 295 interlocutors was heavily Jewish. This ethnicity factor gradually emerged throughout the data analysis and became a clearer variable only after the quantitative analysis of the study was completed. One of the disadvantages of conducting interviews after undertaking a quantitative analysis is precisely the possibility of missing an important variable when looking at social distribution of any speech act. Thus while ethnicity was not taken as an independent variable in the quantitative analysis of the larger study (Boxer 1991, 1993), it appeared to have important implications in complaining behavior. These implications were discussed in some detail by the informants in the course of our conversations, serving to shed light on the ethnicity issue from the native informants' viewpoint.

Each of these issues was discussed with most of the informants during our open-ended ethnographic interview. Two additional issues emerged from the informants' narratives, and these were added to the above six. They were: 7) troubles talk in academia; and 8) the community's image of troubles talk behavior. Table 2 indicates the various issues discussed, the number of informants who commented on them, and a summary of their comments. It also demonstrates how the results of such qualitative information can be quantified.

**TABLE 2: INFORMANTS' VIEWS ON IC/TROUBLES-TELLING ISSUES**

ISSUES	# OF INFORMANTS QUESTIONED	NUMBER IN AGREEMENT	COMMENTS
<b>1. D/IC distinction</b>	9	9	all 9 said ICs are more supportive  2 out of 9 said ICs are less constructive in problem solving
<b>2. Responses</b>			
Agreeing	10	10	ICs seek agreement
no response	6	5	5 of 6 claim to ignore chronic complainers
Disagreeing	6	5	Less likely with strangers, friends, and acquaintances
Advice	6	5	From men and among intimates
<b>3. Social Distance</b>	7	7	All said they are more agreeable w/friends and strangers than intimates
<b>4. Gender</b>	8	8	women complain more and both sexes use ICs more to other women. Women are more supportive.
<b>5. Ethnicity</b>	10	9	9 strongly agreed that Jews complain more
<b>6. ICs as Openers</b>	8	8	ICs used as openers w/ strangers
<b>7. ICs In Academia</b>	4	4	Academics like to talk and ICs play a part
<b>8. Image of Complaint</b>	8	8	All agree on negative image, but often positive reality

The ten informants were either students, staff or faculty members at a large university in the northeastern U. S. or alumni of this university working outside of the campus setting. These were individuals with whom the researcher had some kind of acquaintance or friendship. The group consisted of: 1) two graduate students, one male and one female; 2) three faculty members, all male; 3) three staff members, all female; and 4) two alumni, one male and one female. Because of the preponderance of faculty, staff and alumni, the average age of the informants is estimated to be late thirties to early

forties. Informants were interviewed either in their offices on campus or were invited to the researcher's home. A detailed examination of the results of the interviews follows.

### **3. PERCEPTIONS OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT COMPLAINING**

The informants were in general agreement that people within the community hesitate to participate in confrontational activities such as direct complaining. Although most thought immediately of direct complaining when hearing the term `complaint`, the majority later indicated that griping, grumbling, or indirect complaining is a more commonly occurring activity within the community. However, only two of the nine informants who addressed this issue even thought of indirect complaints upon being presented with the term "complaint." One female informant, a departmental administrative assistant stated: "I thought of direct complaints only. But I guess they're much more rare. And in fact most people won't confront directly. I'm timid myself." A male graduate student stated a similar idea: "One tends to think of the 'complaint department' or the 'complaint box.'"

In sum, nine informants addressed the issue of the distinction between direct and indirect complaints. Among these nine all agreed that indirect complaining is less confrontational as a verbal activity. The informants indicated that indirect complaints offer the complainer a way to let off steam, a means of leaking the complaint to the responsible party, and the possibility of establishing a common bond with the recipient of the indirect complaint.

## **4. PERCEPTIONS OF INDIRECT COMPLAINT RESPONSES**

### **4.1. Agreeing/commiserating as an indirect complaint response**

The possibility of establishing a commonality through troubles-telling exchanges is realized only if agreement is in some way obtained in the response to the initial indirect complaint. Indeed the seeking of agreement appears to be a widespread goal of indirect complaints. All ten informants mentioned either agreement as a goal of indirect complaint utterances or the fact that indirect complaint/agreement exchanges typically serve to forge a common bond between speakers and addressees. Some of their thoughts on the subject illustrate:

*I find a lot of people complain to me about other people because they know I agree with them.*

*I guess what causes the camaraderie among people is the empathy in agreeing.*

*There's common bond. That we're both subjected to the same obstacles and by dealing with it we share something.*

Community members perceived the expression of shared sentiments to be one of the important elements of indirect complaint exchanges. Shared feelings forge a common bond between interlocutors that may have the potential for fostering feelings of closeness—feelings that may eventually lead to the establishment or the deepening of a friendship between the speaker and addressee.

Immediately striking is the question of why it is that we employ negative evaluations to seek agreement or forge a common bond. The notion that complaints are used as strategically positive speech acts is counterintuitive. Several informants touched on this issue. One of them, a woman, had the following to say: "If you walk over to someone and say

‘gee, I’m so lucky’ or ‘what a wonderful day’ they’d think you’re weird.”

#### **4.2. Responding to chronic complainers**

One of the possible types of responses to indirect complaints is offering no response or changing the subject. Slightly more than 10% of the responses in the corpus fell into this category. One situation in which this response type frequently occurred was in reply to chronic complainers.

Six of the informants brought up the subject of chronic complaining, and in so doing were able to shed some light on how they respond to chronic complainers, offering insight into the response type that is here referred to as  $\emptyset$  response/topic switch. Of these six informants, five agreed that they tend to ignore or shun complaints from those they know to overuse such speech behavior:

*My mother was a constant complainer. I'd ignore it. My dad tunes it out because all she does is complain, by nobody listens to her.*

*You let it roll off your back -- ignore it. Which can lead to a situation of "crying wolf."*

Although this question was not asked of all ten informants, five out of the six did speak about this subject agreed they would typically respond to a person whom they knew to be a chronic complainer with either  $\emptyset$  response or an attempt to change the subject. It may indeed be the case that there is a critical level of complaints that is surpassed by those perceived as chronic complainers.

#### **4.3. Advice as an indirect complaint response**

The data from face-to face interactions in troubles talk indicated that men gave advice almost three times as often as did women; women commiserated approximately twice as much as did men. There was general agreement among the informants that advice is largely a male response to indirect complainers. Whereas women are more likely to commiserate,

men are more likely to give advice, especially in response to indirect complaints by female speakers. Of the six informants who specifically addressed this issue, five thought that they tend to give advice as a complaint response to intimates, particularly males to female intimates. Both male and female informants indicated that men give advice because they have been conditioned to think "more logically" and tend to want to "solve problems." While women want to provide emotional support, men want to get to the root of the problem and make it better.

## **5. THE SOCIAL DISTANCE VARIABLE**

### **5.1. Disagreeing/Contradicting as an indirect complaint response**

The findings from the analysis of the spontaneous speech data indicated that contradiction is a rare response to a troubles talk opener among people who are not well acquainted. While approximately 15% of the responses overall fell into this category, among strangers the incidence of contradiction responses was less than 10% as compared with over 30% among intimates. Six of the informants discussed this response type, and of these six five agreed that they would be most likely to contradict indirect complaints by intimates:

*My husband and I disagree about everything. His typical response is, 'oh, quit worrying.' It's so unsupportive. It ticks me off.*

*With your spouse or kids. I might contradict my wife on something like the salad dressing in a restaurant, but I'd probably agree with the guy at the next table.*

*With intimates you're more likely to disagree, with friends you want to be liked. With intimates your relationship is more established, you can vent more honestly.*

To summarize the informant's thoughts on disagreeing/contradicting, there was general consensus that in this community the tendency is for disagreement to occur as responses to indirect complaints from intimates. The reason for such a disparity seems evident, and has been put forth in Wolfson's Bulge theory (1988). It has to do with the relative certainty of our relationships with our intimates as compared with the uncertainty of our relationships with more distant friends and acquaintances. With this latter group we are more conscious of being inoffensive (see Boxer 1993a for further discussion of how the "Bulge" is skewed).

The social distance variable was discussed with seven of the ten informants. All seven agreed that they tend to behave differently with strangers than with close friends or intimates.

*Some of this stuff goes on in transient conversation, in a store, with a salesperson, with a parking attendant. Particular when the weather is bad. It's just a way of communicating and you might start with something like an indirect complaint. I think people just want to be nice to each other -- just want to talk to each other.*

Community members intuited that they behave differently with intimates than they do with friends, acquaintances and strangers. They claimed to be more agreeable with the latter than with those people closest to them. One informant's statement summarizes: "On almost every level you'd speak differently with people you know very well."

## 6. THE GENDER VARIABLE

The eight community members questioned for this portion of the study indicated that men and women behave very differently with respect to both complaining and responding to complaints. There was total agreement among the eight informants that women commiserate much more than

men and thus tend to be more supportive of speaker's complaints:

*I would tend to be less tolerant of a male that complained as much as my wife does. I'm much more likely to give advice than to commiserate. (male)*

*Women listen better in general and have more concern, that kind of thing. I would say men are more stubborn and `know it all` (not me, of course) being dominant, you know. I think women are more sensitive in general and therefore not as concerned with being in control, like cut-throat. (male)*

*Among women there are certain things we have in common, like raising children, which is not always joyous. they change your life and it's not all pleasant. (female)*

Informants intuited that women participate more in indirect complaining than men and individuals of both sexes complain more to other women than men. This is due to the increased likelihood of obtaining a satisfactory response, that is, one of agreement or commiseration. Women not only hesitate to complain to men, but find more common group with other women about which to complain. One reason for this is that women are the principal caregivers of children, a common cause of complaint. This is true even for women of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Women always have the children or husband issue in common, and these provide fertile subjects for indirect complaints. Whereas men tend to want to tell the complainer how to go about solving the problem, women just try to "be there" for the person complaining, providing the feeling that they understand because they have had similar experiences. Thus, for women, indirect complaining provides one important way for female bonding to take place (Boxer 1993 b).

## 7. ETHNICITY

Recall that during the analysis of data for this project it became evident that a large majority of the interlocutors recorded during the data collection were Jewish. As such, ethnicity gradually emerged as a factor affecting the way indirect complaints are used in the community. Thus it seemed clear that the ethnicity variable could not be ignored. Given this ethnic slant to the data, the question that arises is the following: is indirect complaining/troubles-telling a result of the ethnicity of the segment of the community studied? It seemed that the best way to ascertain the effect of Jewish ethnicity on complaining behavior would be to tap into the perceptions of the members of the community who served as informants for this study.

Informants of mixed ethnic/religious backgrounds were chosen to get to the heart of the interaction of Jewish ethnicity and complaining, just as a mixed group of male and female informants were selected in order to more clearly understand how gender and indirect complaints interact. Some of their comments follow:

### **Jewish informants:**

*I think complaining is part of the Jewish culture, but it's partially true also that Jews are generally taught to, if they find something wrong, to express that. Certain other ethnic groups are more restrained.*

*Maybe it has something to do with not getting a kinehura [a non-literal translation of this yiddish term means 'let the evil eye not be cast']. I remember my mother and father would never say 'things are wonderful.' It's been passed on in our culture. My father in business would never tell anyone how well things were going. It's definitely a Jewish thing, this complaining. Particularly in the generation before. How much has been passed on, I don't know.*

**Non-Jewish informant:**

*My girlfriend [who is Jewish] complains a lot... There's the religious perspective too. There's sort of a saintly attitude like you don't complain. I know tons of people like that in the Christian religion, particularly women who take all kinds of abuse and turn the other cheek. They have very difficult lives, some of these women I teach, but they never complain.*

There was 100% agreement among the informants that Jews participate heavily in complaining in general, and indirect complaining/troubles-telling in particular. Some insights were given as to why this may be true. It was stated by more than one informant that Jews are more vocal than some other groups (e.g. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and tend to express their feelings and emotions more openly. One informant, when speaking about her friend of Italian origin, expressed the perception that other ethnic groups may also be equally prone to complaining. Because of the relative paucity of data from that particular ethnic group in the corpus, no tentative statements can be made. Perhaps a replication of this study in an ethnic Italian neighborhood would bear out the validity of this intuition.

It may well be the case that indirect complaint/troubles telling behavior is not merely an ethnic/religious issue but a regional one as well. As the data for the present study is limited in regional scope, replication of the study might be fruitful in different regions of the U.S. as well as other ethnic communities.

## **8. INDIRECT COMPLAINTS AS CONVERSATIONAL OPENERS**

The subject of how indirect complaints are used to open the troubles-telling event and thus to open and support conversations and interactions came up either directly or indirectly with eight out of the ten informants in response to

several different questions and in various parts of our conversations. All eight informants said that they often use indirect complaints to open conversations with strangers or little-acquainted addressees. Some of their comments illustrate:

*You see those innocuous ones [indirect complaints] in the elevator all the time. It's a tremendous entree for more conversation which is a very safe entree to really express feelings somehow.*

*If you're waiting for service, for example. Someone behind me complained and I sort of agreed, I was waiting too. She was upset enough to say something to me and I agreed. It does happen that way... It's sort of an opener.*

Informants repeatedly brought up the issue of creating a common bond through the use of indirect complaints, and they noted that with strangers particular indirect complaints are frequently used to open and sustain conversations. With interlocutors of extreme social distance (i.e. strangers, casual bystanders) it is not the serious complaints that are used as openers but the small innocuous ones. These encompass such complaints as those about the weather, the bus or train being late, or waiting in lines. With little-acquainted interlocutors these small negative evaluations serve to find some point of common interest. The informants indicated that negative evaluations appear to be more commonly used as openers than positive evaluations. It may be the case that positive evaluations, such as compliments, threaten the negative face (Brown-Levinson, 1978) of addressees of extreme social distance more than negative evaluations.

## 9. TROUBLES-TELLING AND THE ACADEMY COMMUNITY

There is indication that talk about troubles, or complaining, is a prevalent verbal activity within the specific speech community studied here. As stated earlier, indirect complaints were found to be ubiquitous in spontaneous social conversations among students, faculty and staff on campus. The ethnic and regional factors were discussed by some of the informants in the preceding sections as possible contributing factors. In addition to these factors, however, several of the informants indicated that academia is fertile ground for indirect complaints due to its inherent intellectual atmosphere:

*People at [this University] are great talkers and it goes along with the intellectual atmosphere, leading to talking more than action. There's an atmosphere of that.*

*Students always complain about professors. Students bond by giving each other the feeling that we're all in this together... It's cooler and more fashionable to be cynical. It's more hip.*

*I have to watch myself, I think academics do because we tend to be argumentative and at dinner parties where other people aren't that way you can get into arguments. Other people aren't as fond of that.*

Indirect complaining may in fact be a commonly occurring speech behavior in many communities; however, in the particular community that is the focus of study here several factors combine to increase their incidence of occurrence. The ethnic variable has been discussed as one important contributing factor. The regional factor, that the University is a large, urban one in the northeastern part of the country, may in fact be a second contributing factor. Last, but perhaps not least in importance, the simple fact that it is an academic

community may be of significance in the ubiquity of indirect complaints.

## 10. THE NEGATIVE IMAGE OF COMPLAINING

The information gleaned from the ten informants offered strong indication that they perceive indirect complaints as a normal part of everyday communication. These community members indicated that indirect complaints serve to open and support conversations, that indirect complaints are often used with the purpose of seeking agreement, and that in obtaining agreeable responses indirect complaints aid in forging a common bond between speakers and addressees. These perceptions, however, run counter to the image community members have of `complaining.` In order to grapple with this contradiction, eight of the informants were asked to give their views on their image of complaining:

*Everybody complains. I can't imagine not being able to do that, how you feel inside. But when you say the word 'complain' it seems so negative.*

*Oh [it's] negative, very negative. But what we're talking about isn't so negative. You're bonded with the other person who agrees with you.*

*...It's not a good thing to do. But people do it all the time. Especially when you look at the small gripes... Most complaints serve a different purpose from what you traditionally think of.*

**Can you think of a better term for it?**

*"Complain" may be a little too strong for it. Maybe just like "venting."*

Of the eight informants directly questioned about the image that complaint conjures, all were in agreement that it definitely has a negative image. Notwithstanding this image, each had something to say on how what we had been discussing did not seem so negative. Part of the problem seems to lie in the fact that the semantic label "complain" covers a broad spectrum of negative evaluation. The term "complaint" or "indirect complaint" may be somewhat misleading. Troubles-telling, troubles-talk, or troubles-sharing all refer to the speech event for which indirect complaints is typically the initiating speech act. These terms seem to be more adequately descriptive and less connotationally negative than "indirect complaint."

What is so ubiquitous in the ordinary social conversation within the community are not those serious complaints about things that adversely affects people's lives but the commonplace small gripes about things not working right, the weather not being fair, or the professor not teaching well. It is these innocuous, everyday indirect complaints that are so frequently used to make small talk, that aid to establish common ground, and that may eventually evolve into getting to know another person better.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

The preceding discussion has had a two-fold focus. First, a comparison has been drawn between two interviews undertaken for this study, one structured and one open-ended in nature. The results of these have been contrasted in order to illuminate the benefits of the ethnographic interview in uncovering both tacit and explicit knowledge on community norms regarding speech behavior. Second, the results of the ethnographic interview were discussed in detail. The information gleaned from informally interviewing ten members of the community yielded data that served to elucidate several issues emerging from the analysis of spontaneous indirect complaint data.

The issue of how to go uncovering the norms of a speech community is exceedingly important in studies of the analysis of speech in face-to-face interaction. Interviewing

native speakers can yield data that either corroborates or disconfirms the researcher's own analysis of spontaneous speech data. However, the manner in which informants are interviewed bears significantly on the information they offer to the research. Informants should be relatively naive about the nature of the study so that they can offer a fresh perspective on the issues in question. Moreover, informants should be individuals with whom the researcher has developed a rapport that enables them to speak openly and at length on the subject. Individuals who are comfortable doing much of the talking make the best informants. Specific questions should emanate naturally from the narratives of the informants rather than be pre-conceived by the researcher. Clearly, the researcher will have to decide on the issues of importance during his/her discussions with informants; however, cues about other issues typically come from what the informants have to say. In such a way and only in such a way can tacit knowledge be uncovered.

Ethnographic interviewing techniques can sometimes be learned only by trial and error. The trials and errors reported in the above discussion enabled a comparison to be made between the results of two interviews that were very different in nature. By letting informants speak freely in the second, informal interview and allowing the questions to emerge from the informants' ideas, information was gleaned that added greatly to the analysis of troubles talk and its functions in the community.

Whereas most members of the community immediately perceived "complaint" as direct complaint, they indicated that indirect complaining is a more prevalent and positive activity. The informants were able to expound upon their perceptions about indirect complaints by talking about how indirect complaints were employed in their own conversations. They indicated that indirect complaints are typically used as an important part of "small talk" and with the underlying strategy of obtaining agreement. With strangers and non-intimates agreement or commiseration is the preferred response, with the end of establishing some kind of commonality, albeit brief, that makes encounters more pleasant.

Women participate more in troubles-talk than men and the recipients of more indirect complaints, since they are perceived to be more supportive in general than men. Men tend to give advice as an indirect complaint response to both male and female speakers. Informants generally agreed that it is a male tendency to want to take control of such situations and solve the problem. Religion/ethnicity is perceived to play a role in indirect complaint behavior, with some religious/ethnic groups participating in indirect complaint exchanges more than others (e.g. Jews, Italians). Academia is also perceived to be fertile ground for indirect complaint exchanges, as people involved in philosophical issues of all kinds are more likely to take part in the sort of debate that is sometimes characteristic of indirect complaining.

The community norm is that complaining is a negative speech behavior. Notwithstanding this explicit perception, the tacit knowledge of the informants is that indirect complaints more often than not have a positive function in the everyday social conversation of members of the community. Thus given certain requirements that are met by setting and interlocutor characteristics, what is explicitly thought of as negative is tacitly known to be a positive speech behavior.

These baseline findings on the underlying social strategies of troubles-telling among native speakers of U.S. English have important implications for applied linguists. Before we can go about teaching rules of speaking to language learners, we need to have information on what native speakers do with regard to specific speech acts and events. Research in applied linguistics over the past twenty years has given as much information on speech act realization and pragmatic transfer in rules of speaking. What is suggested here is to go a step beyond the gathering of data through questionnaires and/or recorded spontaneous speech. It is possible to add a deeper dimension to our insight about speech behavior through corroborating evidence gleaned from ethnographic interviews of members of the target language speech community.

If indirect complaints function to open and sustain troubles-telling sequences, and if, as indicated here, such speech behavior has a positive underlying social strategy, this

information can be extremely important for language learners whose rules for the realization of the speech act sequence differ from our own. As we have seen, the ethnographic interview has an important role to play in the analysis of speech behavior. Before we can apply findings on speech act/speech event patterning, we need to tap into the tacit knowledge of native speakers of the language. Only in this way can we hope to uncover the true functions of language forms as they are used among members of a speech community.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beebe, Leslie. 1985. Speech act performance: A function of the data collection procedure? Paper presented at the 18th annual TESOL Convention, New York, April.
- Beebe, Leslie and Martha Clark Cummings. In press. Natural speech act data vs. written questionnaire data: How data collection method affects speech act performance. In Joyce Neu and Susan Gass (eds.), *Speech Acts Across Cultures*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Boxer, Diana. 1991. *A descriptive analysis of indirect complaint sequences among speakers of American English*. [Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation., University of Pennsylvania].
- Boxer, Diana. 1993. *Complaining and commiserating: A speech act view of solidarity in spoken American English*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Boxer, Diana. 1993a. Social distance and speech behavior: The case of indirect complaints. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19:103-125.
- Boxer, Diana. 1993b. Complaining and commiserating: Exploring gender issues. *Text* 13(3): 371-395.

- Briggs, Charles. 1986. *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen Levinson. 1978. Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena. In Esther Goody (ed.), *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- D'Amico-Reisner, Lynne. 1985. *An ethnolinguistic study of disapproval exchanges*. [Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania].
- Ervin-Tripp, Susan. 1972. On sociolinguistic rules: Alternation and co-occurrence. In John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.
- Hatch, Evelyn. 1992. *Discourse Analysis and Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hymes, Dell. 1962. The Ethnography of Speaking. In T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (eds.), *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Washington, D. C.: Anthropological Society of Washington.
- Jefferson, Gail and J.R.E. Lee. 1981. The rejection of advice: managing the problematic convergence of a 'troubles-telling' and a 'service encounter.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 5(5).
- Jefferson, Gail. 1984. On stepwise transition from talk about a trouble to inappropriately next-positioned matters. In J. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, Braj. 1988. Teaching world Englishes. *ERIC/CLL Bulletin*, 12(1), 1-4.

- Katriel, Tamar. 1985. Gripping as a verbal ritual in some Israeli discourse. In M. Dascal (ed.), *Dialogue in Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Spradley, John. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.
- Tannen, Deborah. 1990. *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Thomas, Jenny. 1983. Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4(2): 91-109.
- Widdowson, Henry. 1988. Language, context and culture in the classroom. *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin*, 12(1): 6-7.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1981. Invitations, compliments and the competence of the native speaker. *International Journal of Psycholinguistics* 24(4): 7-22.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1988. The Bulge: A theory of speech behavior and social distance. In Jonathan Fine (ed.), *Second Language Discourse: A textbook of current research*. Norwood, N. J.: Ablex.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1989. *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.