Tunisian Business Students' Handling of the Complaint Letter Rhetoric across, Arabic, French and English: Interdependence Revisited

Mhamdi Faycal

Abstract

This paper examines Tunisian business students' LSP writing the complaint letter genre across Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), French and English, the languages assumed to be known by the informants of this study. The general hypothesis that this study tests is that writing the complaint letter genre in MSA and French (L2) might interfere with its writing in English. Responding to a writing task, a group of thirty (30) students majoring in International Trade at the Business School of Tunis (BST) wrote a total of ninety (90) letters of complaints. The results obtained from a discourse-based analysis indicate that writing the genre shows degrees of cross-linguistic influence at the level of the lay out, formality of style and the complain speech act across MSA, French and English. Statements of interdependence can be concluded.

Key words: interdependence hypothesis, EFL business writing, Face Threatening Acts, Politeness

Introduction

The ever growing use of English as a contact language for business communication and as a literacy language in a number of educational contexts calls on a majority of language planners across the globe to promote the teaching of English to serve these ends. This vulgarization of English language resulted in educational situations where English is taught as a second language (L2) or a foreign language (L3), often taught along a literacy-supportive first language (L1), and in specific contexts along a second language. This « Englishization » of educational contexts created a growing number of learners learning many languages and undergoing all the psycho-educational underpinnings related to such a fact. Indeed, the process of learning several non-native languages (i.e. multilingual acquisition) and the final outcome of this process (i.e. multilingualism) implicate all the factors and processes associated with learning a second language as well as the factors and effects that are likely to result from the interactions that might exist between the various linguistic systems in contact.

The issue of language contact received much attention by Second Language Acquisition Research (SLAR). Since Lado's (1957) original assumption that second language learners rely on all or some of their L1 knowledge to reach proficiency in an L2, attempts have been made to explain this process (Corder, 1974; Selinker, 1974; Nemser, 1974). One of the raised questions to be addressed then pertains to validating a comprehensive theoretical construct of what reports to the existence of what came to be known in the SLAR literature "interlanguage" (IL), which Selinker (1974) defines as the "separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a TL [Target Language] norm" (p.176, brackets mine). The assumption prevailing at the time was that learning a second language, whether in natural contexts or classroom contexts, implicates an evitable process of *transfer* between the linguistic systems in contact. In this line of thinking, transfer is considered as one of the "psycholinguistic processes which establish [es] the knowledge which underlies IL behavior" (Selinker, 1974, p. 177). This perspective has been entertained by a large body of research which concerned itself with studying transfer-induced L2 output, assuming that learners tend to *transfer* structures from their Native Language (NL) while learning and mastering a Target Language (TL), sometimes positively (*facilitation*) and sometimes negatively (*interference*). The notion of transfer, as the underlying process of interlanguage formation, is in essence a behaviourist stipulation fed with the view that much of language is a structure and language learning and linguistic proficiency are a matter of copying structures from the surrounding environment through a process of association and habit formation (Gass & Selinker, 1996). This view has resulted in pedagogical methods and materials whose purpose was to teach language learners through this spirit of association and habit formation, with the Direct and the Audio-lingual methods as the two major pedagogical models. Unfortunately, much of the early assumptions made on transfer are product-based (based on lexically-made errors), though this line of research acknowledges its process-based nature (cognitively-driven) (Selinker, 1974). Essentially, these assumptions fall short in providing a comprehensive account on the cognitive mechanisms involved in transfer activation nor could they provide a comprehensive cognitively-driven understanding of the developmental nature of second language acquisition (SLA) (Bialystok & Sherwood-Smith, 1985; Faerch and Kasper, 1984).

Interdependence

Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith (1985) and Faerch and Kasper (1990) took what seemed to them to be a weakness in the treatment of transfer, interlanguage and SLA in general by researchers like Selinker, postulating that approaching SLA starts with a theoretically determined construct for what constitutes language learning enterprise (LL). Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith (1985, p. 104) state this perspective in this quote:

> Our theoretical framework is based on the assumption that explanations of learner performance should be related to two separate components, namely, the way in which the language system is represented in the mind of the learner (the categories and relationships in long-term memory), and the processing system for controlling that knowledge during actual performance.

Hence, IL, in Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith's view, as a 'system' different from a TL, is attributed to (1) differences in the representation of the language system, (2) differences in the procedures for retrieving that knowledge, and (3) both (p.106). It is this universal knowledge/processing distinction which feeds the view that «the processes that underlie first-language acquisition must be implicated in second-language acquisition» (p.104), thus reformulating cross-linguistic influence differently in terms of transfer of higher-order modes of knowledge representation and diffusion across language systems. Faerch and Kasper (1990), subscribing to Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith's view of transfer, take a more 'dynamic' stand with regard to reformulating a psycholinguistic base line for transfer. Characterizing language learning in terms of *declarative* knowledge ('knowledge' in Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith's terms) and *procedura*l knowledge ('processing' in Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith's terms), Faerch and Kasper favour the idea that transfer is part of a learner's procedural knowledge, acting both on the level of declarative knowledge and knowledge processing, thus diverting the view of transfer from a product-based to a process-based view.

This latter view on transfer, particularly Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith's (1985), has been recast within the educational context to account for the development of bilingual and multilingual proficiency, with proficiency defined in terms of traits, communicative ability and cognitive maturity (Bialystok, 1991; Cummins 1991, 1987, 1981; Cummins & Bialystok, 1991; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Sherwood Smith, 1991). The underlying assumptions of this body of research assumes that : (1) proficiency, i.e. the ability to appropriately say what, when, where and to whom, takes the shape of linguistic traits and communicative domains, (2) cognitive functioning, i.e. the mental representation of linguistic knowledge, reports to matching these traits with related communicative domains, and (3) cognitive functioning is common to all normal language users.

Under these assumptions, Cummins (1991, 1987, 1981; Cummins & Bialystok, 1991; Cummins & Swain, 1986) proposes an 'interdependence hypothesis' to explain development of proficiency across languages. Cummins sums up this hypothesis in the following quote:

> To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly. (Cummins, 1981, cited in Cummins 1987, p. 156).

Under this hypothesis, Cummins seems to imply the same process-based claims on transfer presented by Bialystok and Sherwood-Smith (1985) and Faerch and Kasper (1990), as he uses an appealing understanding of cross-lingual influence to, (a) study instances of language contact ; (b) explain transfer beyond the lexical and syntactic levels, and (c) set up a platform for leveraging statements about bilingual/multilingual proficiency. One of the significant assumptions made by Cummins pertains to measuring development of bilingual/multilingual proficiency and to gathering evidence for cross-linguistic proficiency interdependence. Indeed, the hypothesis received a wider acceptance as revealed by a number of studies and it accounted for a significant interdependent development of proficiency in different skills across different languages (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998 ; Cummins & Swain, 1986). Eventually, Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis' presents an appealing approach for us to investigate the research concerns raised within the context of the present study.

Indeed, several studies of bilingual/ multilingual acquisition are consistent with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis and they report a positive proficiency transfer from second language learning to learning additional languages (Cummins, 1987; Cummins & Swain, 1986, for a review). Using quantitative approaches, these studies indicate that bilingualism does not hinder the acquisition of an additional language, and in most cases bilingualism favours the acquisition of third languages. For example, Cummins (1987), reporting studies conducted on US and Canadian bilingual programs, gathers empirical evidence and establishes the rationale for his 'interdependence hypothesis'. Cummins, surveying and comparing a number of monolingual and bilingual immersion programs, notes that exposure to an L2 is not enough a condition for success in it. The psycho-educational implications of his survey points to the success obtained by bilingual programs where emphasis is given to instructing L2 students through promoting their L1, the San Diego Spanish-English language immersion program and the Manitoba Francophone study are Cummins' representative cases (1987, pp. 151-152). Similarly, Swain, Lapkin, Rowen, & Hart (1990, cited in Cenoz & Genesee 1998, p. 23) found out that bilingual students who were literate in their first and second languages demonstrated advantages in third language acquisition over bilingual students who were literate in only their second language. Similarly, Klein (1995), in a study of lexical and syntactic learning by students learning English as a second language (Unilingual students (Uls)) vs students learning English as a third language (Multilingual students (Mls)), found that Mls outperformed Uls in both types of learning, suggesting that heightened metalinguistic skills, enhanced lexical knowledge and flexible learning procedures gained by Mls through sustained linguistic experiences helped lexical and syntactic learning. Friedlander (1990), investigating metalinguistic nodes of Chinese learners of English as a second language, found out that the Chinese learners when they plan in Chinese and then write in English would produce more accurate written prose, suggesting that L1 facilitates writing proficiency in English.

Other studies of specific literacy skills development by multilinguals have developed Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, but targeted specific interconnections between the linguistic and the strategic knowledge across language systems. Cumming (1988), surveying writing of francophone learners of English as a second language, distinguished between writing *expertise*, which is the processes and mechanisms responsible for making decisions about discoursal features (*metalinguistic knowledge* in Bialystok's and Sherwood-Smith's terms) and second language *proficiency*, which is knowledge of the linguistic, rhetorical and discoursal features of a particular L2 (*analysis of linguistic knowledge* in Bialystok's terms and *knowledge processing* in Sherwood-Smith's). Cumming found out that both writing expertise and second language proficiency accounted for the differences among students in the qualities of texts and writing behaviors. However, these effects were judged independent from each other, suggesting that they are psychologically distinct abilities and that linguistic knowledge is but an additive factor to the overall quality of written production (p.81). The implications of Cumming's results relate specifically to the fact that, (a) writing expertise is common across languages; (b) effective writing in L2 requires both expertise and linguistic knowledge of L2, and (c), (b) holds true for writing in L1, implying, on the basis of Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, that proficiency/deficiency at the level of L1 writing expertise may affect positively/negatively L2/L3 writing behaviour.

Thus, it seems reasonable to state that multilingual proficiency is most likely to succeed in settings where the learners' first language is given every opportunity to develop fully. This, however, may raise some interesting challenges in *diglossic* (D) situations, where "two functional varieties within one language, one of which, called the High (H) variety, is used for formal functions and is formally learned, the other, the Low (L) variety, is used in informal situations" (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, p. 174). From a language planning perspective, the H variety receives all support in countries where the linguistic situation calls for particular linguistic adjustments (*Arabization* in former francophone Arab countries) (Daoud, 1991b; Ezzaki & Wagner, 1992). For example, in most Arab countries, literacy is achieved in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the H variety and L1, which is often acquired through formal education and mostly written and read, but rarely spoken for daily life purposes. A variety of Arabic, the L variety and the mother tongue (MT) of all Arabs, is however very operational in spoken form. This functional distinction has its pitfalls on the social and psychological appreciation of these varieties among most Arabs. The magnitude of this distinction is echoed in Hamers and Blanc's (1989) statement:

> The child's social network will usually reflect the societal values of the languages and transmit them to the child. The child will develop shared representations of the languages which will include the status, values and attitudes transmitted by his social network; he will thus more or less valorise his own mother tongue(s) relatively to the other languages around him (p.76)

Valorization of the mother tongue in this sense may be detrimental to developing the H variety and the language of literacy which may remain upheld from imminent functional attributes in spite of adjustment efforts (Daoud, 1991b; Ezzaki & Wagner, 1992), and thus literacy-related functions are cognitively delayed for those individuals. This may imply a form of subtractive literacy skills development.

This cross-lingual literacy skills development may be exposed further not only on the basis that L3 literacy skills development may depend on L1 or L1/L2 literacy skills development, but also on the basis that particular discourse (genre) may have different organizational, rhetorical and interpersonal modes which need specific educational intervention across languages. These issues need to be investigated, especially in LSP contexts and from the view point of Cummins' interdependence hypothesis. If L3 literacy-related proficiency development depends on L1/L2 literacy-related proficiency development, then development of particular literacy skills and specifically development of a particular literacy-related discourse (genre) in L3 depends as well on its development in L1/L2.

Against these assumptions, the following three research questions may be asked with regard to the present study:

(1) Does the informants' writing of the complaint letter genre in MSA, French and English show similarities across the three languages?
(2) To what extent does the 'interdependence hypothesis' provide an explanatory framework for the development of LSP proficiency across the three languages?
(3) What are the possible implications of the 'interdependence hypothesis' on the teaching of language for specific purposes in the BST?

Methodology

The context of the study

The linguistic context of this study addresses some if not all of the above communicative and psycho-educational issues. A former French colony and an active proponent of the concept of "global village" in its economic, cultural, and linguistic senses, Tunisia is described as a linguistically complex situation characterized by a diglossic High-Low continuum in Fergusson's (1959) sense and by language contact (Battenburg, 1997; Daoud, 1991b; El Arbi, 1981, 1997, 2000; Grandguillaume, 2000; Salhi, 2000; Maamouri, 1983; Walters, 2000).

The diglossic Tunisian context as described by Maamouri (1983), El Arbi (1981, 1997, 2000), Daoud (1991b), Battenburg (1997), Salhi (2000), and Walters (2000) amounts to some disagreement concerning the number of language varieties co-existing together and functionally distributed. Maamouri (1983), El Arbi (1981, 1997, 2000) and Walters (2000) describe four varieties which are: Classical Arabic (CA), the variety which owes much of its semantic, syntax and lexicon to the language of Qur'an, hardly written or spoken in informal settings. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is a learned variety which is simplified in syntax and lexicon from CA and which is essentially existent in written form and serves educational purposes, hence the language of literacy and the High variety (H). MSA is the language of literature, science, press, media and political public speeches. Educated Arabic (EA) is the variety which is similar in some respect to MSA, but it is reduced in formality, existent in spoken form and correlating in some respect with education. Tunisian Arabic (TA) is considered the mother tongue of all Tunisians, present essentially in informal everyday speech and the variety that can be said to be cherished by most Tunisians for its wide functional uses (Grandguillaume 2000), the Low variety (L).

Likewise, Salhi (2000) sorts out a list of three varieties; MSA, TA and EA, and maintains the related functional attributes presented above. The source for such disagreement as pointed by Salhi pertains to some confusion concerning the linguistic, stylistic and functional boundaries of identifying these varieties, which adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation (p.32). Nonetheless, it is clear in all of these accounts on diglossic Tunisia that a stress is on the functional distinction between TA, the L variety and CA/MSA, the H variety, i.e. the variety which is restricted to formal education, the expression of national and pan-Arab membership, enjoying a significant administrative role, superseding in some respect the traditional role of colonial French (Salhi, 2000, p. 34).

The complexity of the linguistic context of Tunisia is also depicted in the presence of French and English in addition to diglossic Arabic, and in a controversial language planning policy as revealed in the Tunisian government's official statements and decisions on MSA, French and English teaching. Indeed, Salhi (2000), surveying the language situation of independent Tunisia acknowledges that French is losing functional attributes in favour of MSA in some domains. However, he admits that French is still a privileged language in some sectors. In fact, Salhi maintains that French is still the language of business, financial and banking sectors. Scientific subjects in secondary and tertiary levels are taught in French, and it is highly unlikely to see MSA taking on this role (p.36).

Planning the status of English in the Tunisian educational system adds to the complexity of the language situation of Tunisia. Nevertheless, its importance is primarily seen in its growth as a third/foreign language (L3) as predicted by Moortel (cited in Salhi, 2000) in sectors considered exclusive to French. In fact, from the early 1970s and onward, interest in promoting foreign languages and particularly English to serve specific scientific, business, occupational and research needs was clear in the Tunisian government's official statements and decisions. Driss Guiga (cited in El Arbi, 1983, p. 79), the then Minister of Education, explained that promotion of foreign languages "implied in the shift of emphasis from humanities to technology and science is a need for better communication in English and for more training to handle specialized languages". In 1976, a decree made the Institute Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes (IBLV) a university establishment in which the teaching of languages, interpretation and translation is scheduled and "as much is needed at the university level, courses both for those who need English for special purposes and for those who require training as future teachers of this kind of language" are offered (Guiga, cited in El arbi, 1983, p.79). Much of Guiga's pioneering thinking explains in part the creation of the English-medium Lycée Ariana in 1983, the teaching of English as from the 4th year of national secondary education, and its promotion throughout the Tunisian educational system. In 1996[1], a significant decree, suggestive of Guiga's supportive thinking and the idea that the earlier a language is taught the better[4], came with the introduction of English as a language course in 8th and 9th levels of the new national Basic Education system. Actually and as from September 2000[2], English is taught as from the 1st level of Basic Education[5]. Guiga's wanted to maintain English as a language course for students of arts, sciences, medicine, law, engineering, business and technology at university level (El Arbi, 1983, p.80). At present, at

4 Decree n° 96-680 of April 15, 1996, published in JORT n° 34, April 26 1996
5 Decree n° 2000-2168 of September 25, 2000, published in JORT n° 79, October 3, 2000.

the university level, English, as an ESP course, enjoys the same coefficient as that of content courses in some universities; the Business School of Tunis is just an example.

To sum up, the linguistic situation of Tunisia is characterized by a French-Arabic bilingualism (El Arbi, 1997, 2000; Walters, 2000), an Arabic-English-French language contact, and the MSA/CA-TA diglossic continuum, which means that a university Tunisian student, for example, uses TA and a mixture of French and TA in his daily life, writes and reads in French and MSA and uses English in specific situations.

The Business School of Tunis (BST)

Most students oriented to the BST to complete a business degree have received a French-MSA bilingual education during Basic and Secondary school education, and expected thus to have no difficulties in assimilating the 4-year French-based BST instruction. Two 2-year cycles form the 4-year educational cycle. In the first cycle, students follow a 2-year basic common trunk in management sciences. Then, students who succeed in the first cycle are oriented on the basis of their records to one of the four specialties. In addition to French as the language of instruction, English is an ESP module in the BST curriculum, the aim of which is to enhance students' mastery of language of business and business communication skills. English enjoys considerable recognition, as revealed in the time devoted to English in each educational degree in comparison to other languages such as German, Italian and Spanish. Whereas German, Spanish and Italian are optional modules, English is compulsory for all students at all levels and in all specialties. In addition to these language courses, only students specializing in International Trade are introduced to a French-based language module labelled 'Technique de Communication' (Technical Communication) in the 3rd year of the 2nd cycle. The course, according to the Official Program of BST, is meant to teach 3rd year International Trade students business communication skills, including writing business reports and letters. The course qualifies as a French for Specific Purposes (FSP) course.

The absence of an MSA course as an LSP course makes the BST students majoring in International Trade suitable informants to test Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis'. Indeed, informal conversations and interviews with business content instructors and foreign language teachers of the BST inform us about these students' communicative deficiencies in foreign languages. Most BST teachers believe that students' knowledge of and performance in foreign languages is below the academic requirements. Many commented negatively and even sarcastically on their knowledge of TA and MSA. Thus, BST students' linguistic behaviour seems to provide interesting data to test Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis'.

Seen from Cummins' perspective as applied to cross-linguistic LSP proficiency, the absence of an MSA as an LSP course for these students may affect the development of business writing proficiency in French and/or in English.

The Participants

Thirty (30) fourth level BST business students majoring in international trade were targeted to examine the questions and hypotheses under study. The informants received a bilingual education throughout Basic and Secondary school education and to a lesser degree throughout university education and they often show complex linguistic behaviour like code-switching from English to TA and/or to French and from TA to French while conversing informally in the corridors of the school. On the basis of what we mentioned about the absence of a LSP-tailored MSA language course in BST curriculum, these informants' proficiency in MSA and particularly their proficiency in writing business letters in MSA is expected to be very low. Seen from Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, these informants would replicate this low performance while writing business content in English.

Initially, we thought that each single informant should write three written business letters in English, French and MSA and only those who would write the three business letters in these different languages would be retained for the study. At the outset, we thought that the informants' number can be fixed once all of the participant students would perform on a data collection instrument, i.e., the writing task. This data collection stage took place over three successive weeks, in which participant students worked on a writing task during a 90-minute English course session in each week. The number of participant students who wrote three business letters during the three-week data collection period is given in Table 3 below:

Data collection week	*number of Students*
Week 1 : English data	*44*
Week 2 : French data	*50*
Week 3 : MSA data	43

Table 1*:* Number of informants Who Sat for Data Collection

After collecting the business letters, we cross-checked them in order to determine the number of letters to be retained as data for this study. This cross-checking resulted in only 36 business letters in English, and the same number in French and MSA, as only 36 students were regular attendants to the English course during those three weeks. Then we photocopied the business letters and submitted them to raters for scoring. Finally, only 30 business letters were retained as some letters were illegible after having been photocopied because some students wrote letters using pencils. The data provided are labelled for the purpose of the study as follows:

- Data **I:** 30 letters of complaints written in English by the informants responding to an English writing task prompt.
- Data **II:** 30 letters of complaints written in French by the same informants thereby responding to a French writing task prompt.
- Data **III**: 30 letters of complaints written in MSA by the same informants thereby responding to an MSA writing task prompt.

Instruments

The Writing Task

Testing writing practice proposes that the best way to evaluate FL learner's writing ability is to ask them to write. Tasks can be used to test learners' written abilities. Testing literature distinguishes between direct evaluative methods of writing ability which incite learners to produce continuous texts to be then evaluated, and indirect methods which attempt to measure rather disconnected parts of what evaluators judge as the construct of writing ability (Weir, 1993, p.133). Since the study's concern is to uncover the informants' writing productive abilities, the instrument used for collecting the business letters is *a controlled task* (Weir, 1993, p. 144), through which and by using a *stimulus* (prompt), learners are asked to provide full written texts which are considered by evaluators as sources for statements about FL learners' writing ability in its productive sense. Controlled tasks are thought to be sensitive to issues of writing ability in its targeted context and can sample 'important productive skills, which indirect forms of assessment cannot' (Weir, 1993, p. 144).

In fact, the writing task used in this study is embedded in a test-like format where the students have to fill in certain biographic data (name, age and sex) followed by the prompt and the task instructions. To take care of the feasibility, appropriateness and realistic requirements of tasks (Weir, 1993, p. 135), we included information about the contextual features of the correspondence which relate to the companies' names, the addressee, the job specifications and titles. The prompt, with which the students were familiar to enhance business letter writing skills during the English and the French language courses, consists of a description of a transactional business situation, the object of which is a reception of damaged sweaters, and to which the students were instructed to respond by writing a letter of complaint. The same test format is translated into French and MSA. The transactional situation is held consistent in the French and MSA translated versions. For matters of feasibility and authenticity of the situation, slight changes occurred in the contextual features related to the addressee. For example, for the English transactional situation the informants were asked to deal with a company based in England. In the French and MSA versions, the students were asked to deal with companies located respectively in France and Morocco.

Method of Analysis

Crucial to discussing the discoursal and pragmatic features of the complaint letter is understanding the transition between what is textual, and what is discoursal. While the value of a text is its texture, the value of discourse is the message projected from such texture. Indeed, much of enquiry about discourse assumes that discourse is never understood in terms of bits and pieces, rather it assumes that discourse is the sum of its parts. Much of research on reading confirms this view (Carrel, 1985, 1987). Writing genres is also essentially discoursal in nature and goes beyond the genre's texture to fulfil higher-order communicative intents that are nevertheless bound to lower-order projections and to what Swales (1990) refers to as "moves". It is the parts of discourse which make up its whole. Indeed, this view is at the very basis of discourse coherence. Genre analysis has assumed and has advanced this view (Swales, 1990: Paltridge, 1997).

The transition from what is textual to what is discoursal assumes among other things a sift in content focus and in method of analysis and even implicates a shift in the view of what counts as an error. Even putting the label 'error' implicates that we are still viewing discourse in terms of TL rule infringement. However, the idea to be endorsed is that while analysis of sentence-level errors relies essentially on the view of errors as rule infringement, in addition to such infringements analysis of discourse also implicates a view of discourse as a product based on socio-cultural norms and to some extent on individual idiosyncrasies and deviance from these norms is better attested for in terms of failure or inappropriateness (Thomas, 1984, 1983). With discourse, being an internalization of particular cultural modes rather then of rules, researchers tend to contrast non-native speakers' products against particular discourse models in order to better account for the existence or absence of these modes in the non-native speakers' discourse. Contrastive rhetoricians have favoured the recourse to discourse models and have long implemented this comparative perspective (Kaplan, A.C, 1988; Kaplan, R.B, 1982; Kaplan & Ostler, 1982). Yet their studies reported the existence of some higher-order form of transfer in the writing of non-native speakers. The fact that non-native speakers' writing behaviour has been found to be tainted with culture-specific discoursal modes led discourse analysts, genre analysts and pragmaticians to opt for comparative designs in order to approach the study of non-native speakers' discourse in terms of accommodation or deviance from a particular TL discourse norm. Deviance from the TL norm implicates among other things a form of "mother culture" influence.

It is against these stipulations that we undertake the following cross-linguistic discourse analysis. Given the fact that we are moving beyond the sentence level, we are no longer looking for errors per se. But we wish to study relationships between the informants' performance on the complaint letter across MSA, French and English, basically in terms of transfer of particular rhetorical modes of the complaint letter. Corollary to this is the selection of a corpus of 30 complaint letters to be used as a yardstick against which our informants' complaint letters written in English will be checked for discoursal and pragmatic effectiveness and appropriateness. The choice of this corpus goes along with BST business letter teaching materials which are designed by educators, teachers and business professionals such as Ashley's A handbook of commercial correspondence. Some letters are selected from these materials; others were collected from materials available on the market such as Eckersley & Kauffman's A commercial course for foreign students/volume 1 and Little's Communication in business (3rd ed) and English for the office (2nd ed).

In the letter of complaint, the addresser expresses displeasure or annoyance - complaining - as a reaction to past or on going action, the consequences of which are perceived by him as affecting him/her unfavorably. This complaint is usually addressed to the addressee whom the addresser holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993, p.103), studying the interpersonal variables involved in the realization of the speech act of complaining, present the following preconditions for the speech act of complaining to take place:

1. Addressee performs a socially unacceptable act (SUA) that is contrary to social code of behavioral norms shared by S and H.
2. Addresser perceives the SUA as having unfavorable consequences for him/herself, and /or for the general public.
3. The verbal expression of Addresser relates post facto directly or indirectly to the SUA, thus having the illocutionary force of complaining.
4. Addresser perceives the SUA as:

    (a) freeing Addresser at least partially from the implicit understanding of a social cooperative relationship with Addressee; Addresser therefore chooses to express his/her frustration or annoyance

(b) giving Addresser the legitimate right to ask for repair in order to undo the SUA either for his/her benefit or the public benefit

In relation to Brown & Levinson's face-derived distinctions, the realization of an act of complaint is an aggressive FTA to both H's positive and negative face (B&L, 1987, p. 67). B&L identify three main steps of decision-making with regard to its realization:

1. The speaker (S) has the possibility of completely ‘opting out’ from performing the act.
2. S has the possibility to do the act ‘on’ or ‘off’ record. Off record in the case of complaining would be some hint related to the inconvenience that resulted from the SUA, without explicitly mentioning either the SUA or Hearer (H). e.g. ‘This is really unacceptable behavior’.
3. S decides to express a complaint ‘on’ record, i.e. to realize the speech act with or without redress. S chooses not to use redress, then complaining is expressed unmitigated as a statement or request that explicitly mentions the SUA and / or H as violator. e.g. ‘you’re inconsiderate, one should not postpone this type of operation’

Given the interpersonal mechanisms to which the act of complaining is bound, ends-means mapping, or rationality in B&L terms, greatly interferes with its encoding. When complaining, S evaluates some aspects of H’s positive face negatively (B&L, 1987, p. 66). In business communication, cooperation between parties to maintain business and face is highly marked in the systematic use of polite language (Ellis & Johnston, 1992; Charles, 1996; Pilegaard, 1997). Negative politeness strategies are polite in nature for their “self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspect of H's self image” (B&L, 1987, p. 70). That S opts for negative politeness to encode this act is at the most rational of laymen's decisions and the most likely (Pilegaard, 1997). Such forms of politeness might be realized as a mitigated (softened) conventional request for repair, or as a statement relating to the SUA but not directly to H. Mitigation, being an 'indirect mechanism' (B&L, 1987, p. 70), might lower the risk and thus lessen the face threat.

Mitigation or indirectness is one strategy available among others for face redress. Although cautious to link indirectness with the expression of polite beliefs (Bilbow, 1995; Pilegaard, 1997), following B&L, we nevertheless acknowledge its centrality in maintaining face in formal contexts.

With regard to the structure of the complaint letter, Pilegaard divides business letters into three sections:

1. *The opening section*, which contains the salutation, the opening lines of the letter and secondary illocutions as well as propositional elements.
2. *The propositional section* is the central part of the letter. It contains the primary propositions of the text and the central communicative aims and the core of the illocutionary program.
3. *The closing section* contains elements external or secondary to the illocutionary and propositional program of the text.

(Pilegaard, 1997, p. 228)

Johnson (1992), relying on B&L's FTAs, makes a distinction between *'specific FTAs'*, i.e. the different sections or 'moves' of the letter (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990), and *'global FTAs'*, the letter as a whole. Johnson's distinction is further exposed by Johnston, Kasper and Ross' (1998) view of the realization of complaint speech act. According to Jonhston et al, the act of complaining (global FTA) is realized in different functional categories (specific FTAs), which are:

Below reproach: utterance that does not itself have complaining force, i.e. no reference is made to the offensive act or to any negative consequences of the act for S.

e.g. I am writing to inform you that our order of the 17th April for ninety air conditioners, dispatched by you on the 2nd May, has arrived. (Ashley, 1984[3])

Disapproval: utterance expressing S's disapproval or annoyance with the offensive act. It is:

- emphasizing cost of act to others:

e.g. in the past few weeks a number of faults have appeared in the electrical circuits and the flooring which have been particularly dangerous to our customers (A.A).

- demanding justification:

e.g. It is now late June, and we are wondering why there is such a long delay in this delivery. This information is crucial for our future production planning. May we hear from you soon?

- expressing annoyance:

e.g. with regard to the electrical faults, we have found that spotlights on the far wall have either failed to work, or flicker, which they are on, and replacing the bulbs has not corrected the fault (A.A).

[3] All further references in this section are to this addition and they figure as (A.A) at the end of quote.

- pre-empting excuse:

e.g. I would also take the opportunity to remind you that you have guaranteed all your fixtures and fittings for one year (A.A).

Reproach: S holds H accountable for committing the offensive act, emphasizing preconditions or consequences. It is:

- prior obligation not honored by H:

e.g. we are writing to you with reference to the above order and our letter of 22 May in which we asked you when we could expect delivery of the 60 dynamos (Artex model 55) you were to have supplied on 3 June for an export order (A.A).

- bad consequences:

e.g. and because of the rummaging in the boxes quite a few other garments were crushed or stained and cannot be sold as new articles in our shops (A.A).

- accusation:

e.g. the Duraflooring which you laid has been showing signs of deterioration with some areas being worn through to the concrete creating a hazard to our customers (A.A).

Future action: non-confrontational statement expressing how the offence can be remedied or avoided in the future, often as suggestion or request.

e.g. will you please come and inspect the damage and arrange for repairs within next week? (A.A)

Threat: statement of negative consequences for H, often confrontational.

e.g. we should warn you that we are holding you to your delivery contract and if any loss results because of this late delivery we will be taking legal action (A.A).

This structural division and the rhetorical properties of the complaint letter reviewed above make it an elusive genre type for business letter writers. Indeed, the choice of this genre to be under the present study's investigation is basically informed by the interpersonal variables surrounding the context of the complaint, which need higher rhetorical sensitivity and a geared contextual assessment that fit the business situation and the unfolding of the business being traded. Awareness of these 'moves' and preconditions are highly required and they are valued as aspects of mastery of this genre.

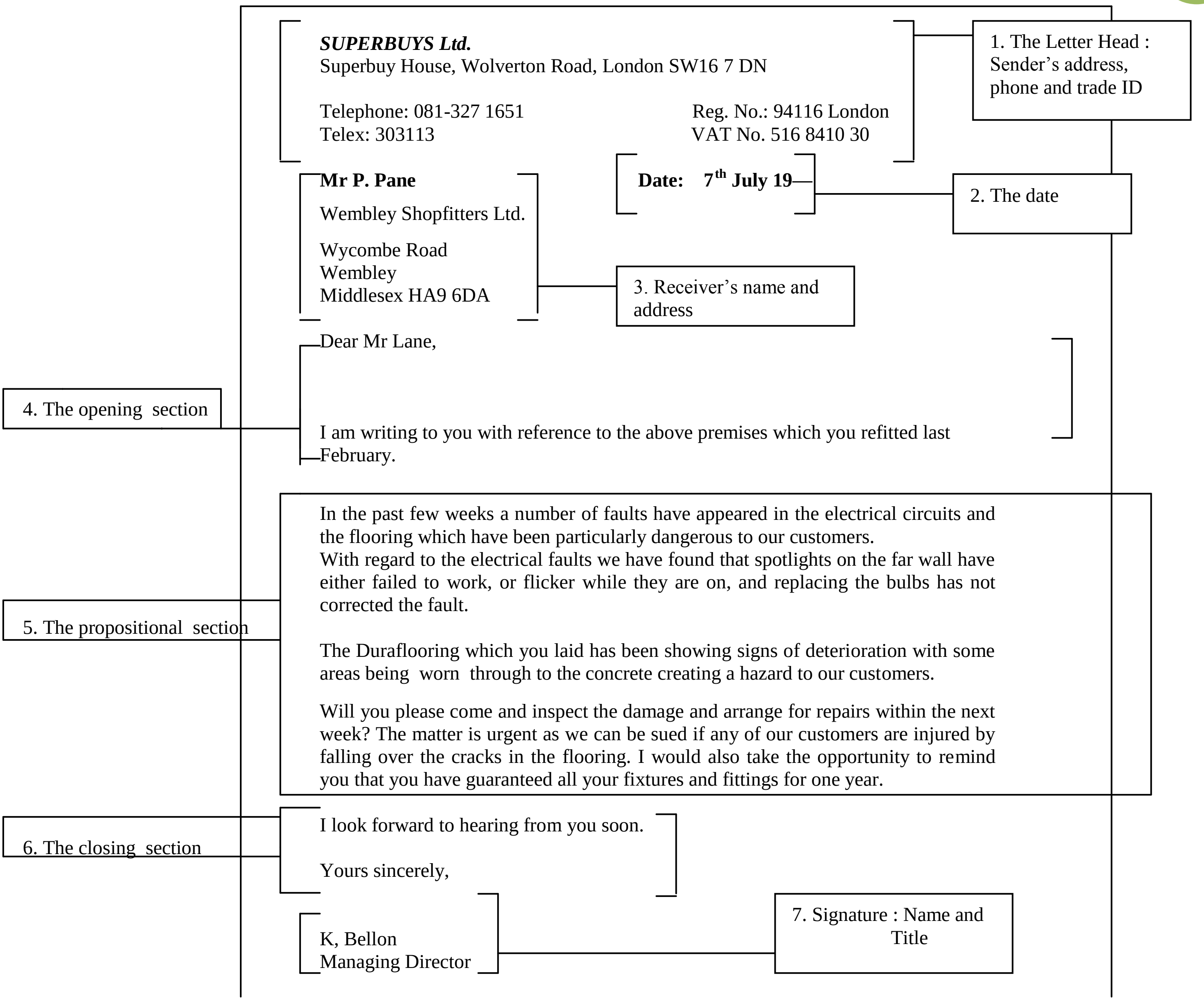
The Results

The lay out of the complaint letter

Figure 1 below presents a sample of a complaint letter selected from BST business letter teaching materials. Of importance in this sample is the presentation features of typical complaint letters and eventually a business letter for the difference between a complaint letter and for example a request letter is not the lay out per se, but rather the propositional content of each section of the business letter. Pilegaard divides business letters into three sections:

1. *The opening section*, which contains the salutation, the opening lines of the letter and secondary illocutions as well as propositional elements.
2. *The propositional section* is the central part of the letter. It contains the primary propositions of the text and the central communicative aims and the core of the illocutionary program.
3. *The closing section* contains elements external or secondary to the illocutionary and propositional program of the text.

(Pilegaard, 1997, p. 228, adapted)


SUPERBUYS Ltd.
Superbuy House, Wolverton Road, London SW16 7 DN

Telephone: 081-327 1651 Reg. No.: 94116 London
Telex: 303113 VAT No. 516 8410 30

1. The Letter Head : Sender's address, phone and trade ID

Mr P. Pane
Wembley Shopfitters Ltd.
Wycombe Road
Wembley
Middlesex HA9 6DA

Date: 7th July 19

2. The date

3. Receiver's name and address

Dear Mr Lane,

I am writing to you with reference to the above premises which you refitted last February.

4. The opening section

In the past few weeks a number of faults have appeared in the electrical circuits and the flooring which have been particularly dangerous to our customers.
With regard to the electrical faults we have found that spotlights on the far wall have either failed to work, or flicker while they are on, and replacing the bulbs has not corrected the fault.

The Duraflooring which you laid has been showing signs of deterioration with some areas being worn through to the concrete creating a hazard to our customers.

Will you please come and inspect the damage and arrange for repairs within the next week? The matter is urgent as we can be sued if any of our customers are injured by falling over the cracks in the flooring. I would also take the opportunity to remind you that you have guaranteed all your fixtures and fittings for one year.

5. The propositional section

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

6. The closing section

K, Bellon
Managing Director

7. Signature : Name and Title

Figure 1: SAMPLE LETTER OF COMPLAINT (Ashley, 1984, p.100)

On the whole, 8 slots make up the lay out of the complaint letter. The letter head which includes the sender's name, address and phone number with the telex and trade ID as optional features since not all the corpus includes this type of information. The second slot identifies the receiver in terms of name and address. The third slot mentions the date of correspondence. Next are the opening section, followed by the propositional and the closing sections. Finally, there is the signature with the name and title of the signer. If applicable, the enclosure slot indicates the type and number of documents attached to the letter.

Using this sample letter of complaint as a model, we processed the informants' complaint letters for instances of deviance. We found out that all the informants adhered to 7 of the 8 slots forming the lay out of the complaint letter. The missed slot is the enclosure slot which was omitted by the 7 informants who mentioned that they were attaching documents to their letters. Such an omission indicates that they had not internalised yet the value of the enclosure slot as a reminder for the receiver that there are documents attached to the letter, which some times have crucial importance to the issue subject of the trade in question.

Other forms of deviance have also been noticed and they can be described in terms of omission and overinclusion. We counted 29 omissions, of which 2 at the level of slot 2 (date), 1 at the level of the opening greeting (omission of "Dear"), 8 at the level of the closing greeting with 5 omissions of the whole closing greeting and 3 omissions of the phrase "yours sincerely", and 18 at the level of the signature slot, with 11 omissions of the title and 7 omissions of both the receiver's name and the title. Such omissions reveal the informants' difficulty with the lay out, yet they do not reveal any transfer pattern.

Overinclusions, however, may be approached from a transfer perspective. We counted 18 overinclusions. There are fourteen (14) overinclusions at the level of the opening section, of which 12 inclusions of the first name resulting in structures like "Dear Mr. Kriss Bellon", and 2 inclusions in the title resulting in structures like "Dear Mr. Kriss Bellon, the Sales Manager". In addition to these is the creation of 2 extra sections, which are "The Attention Line" and "Topic" sections, which obviously illustrate a form of transfer from French and /or MSA as the analysis of the lay out of these informants' letters in MSA and French might indicate. We found out that the three informants who included the "The Attention Line" and the "Topic" sections in the lay out of the complaint letter in English did so in MSA and French. As a matter of gathering evidence for this transfer pattern, we categorised the 60 letters written in MSA and French in terms of the sections presented by Pilegaard. We have found that the same three-level structure presented by Pilegaard is more or less respected. However, we have noticed some inconsistencies. We found that at the level of the complaint letters written in French 11 informants included both the “Attention Line” and “Topic” sections. Out of these, 2 informants included the “Attention Line” section, 1 informant included the “Topic” section, and 8 informants included both sections. Seventeen (17) informants included the first and second name of the receiver preceded by ‘Monsieur’ (Mr), and 3 informants included only the title resulting in structures like [məsjØ lə dirɛktər dɛ vάt] (Mr the Sales Manager).

Processing the informants’ complaint letters written in MSA, we came out with 27 cases where informants including the “Attention Line” section, 15 of whom included both the “Attention Line” and “Topic” sections. At the level of the Attention Line, 14 informants included the first and second name of the receiver like [ilɛ essɛjid Bdiri Hliwa] (to Mr Bdiri Hliwa), 12 informants included the first and second name plus the title [ilɛ essɛjid Bdiri Hliwa, mudir al mabiʕat] to mean (To Mr Bdiri Hliwa, the Sales Manager), and only 1 informant who included in the Attention Line the title but not the name of the receiver : [ilɛ essɛjid mudir ʃɛrikɛt al findi] (To the Manager of Al Findi Company).

Recasting these results on the informants’ performance on the lay out of the complaint letter in English, we come to the conclusion that the informants did in fact rely on the MSA and French lay out at least to add the “Attention Line” and “Topic” sections and to include the first name of the receiver in the opening section. What makes this conclusion plausible is that these features do not exist in the native speakers of English corpus. It is only at this level of the lay out of the complaint letter written in MSA and French that these features emerge.

The above results point to similarities between the informants’ performance on the complaint letter lay out across MSA, French and English and to some form of transfer from both MSA and French. The source of this transfer would be better accounted for by means of a lay out analysis of “authentic” letters written by Arab and French business professionals to find out whether the “Attention Line” and “Topic” sections are part of MSA or French complaint letters lay out or of both. Time and space constraints did not allow for such an analysis.

Although omissions and overinclusions of this kind reveal these informants’ difficulties with the English complaint letter lay out, the ESP interraters do not seem to have sanctioned them as the mode value of the informants' scores on the lay out indicates that they performed "fairly satisfactory" on it. It would be interesting to investigate native speakers' reactions to these omissions and overinclusions.

The cross-linguistic realization of the complaint speech act

The above division of the complaint letter into sections is merely structural. The complaint speech act assumes propositional and communicative elements projected by the different sections identified. Yet, our focus will be on the propositional section of the complaint letter as "it contains the primary propositions of the text and the central communicative aims and the core of the illocutionary program" (Pilegaard, 1997, p.228). In order to make our focus manageable, we adopt Johnston, Kasper & Ross (1998) categorization of the complaint speech act described above.

These functional categories form the basis for the categorization and analysis of the informants' realization of the macro complaint speech act, with special focus on the patterns and forms that emerge across-MSA, French and English. Then, the patterns and forms presented in their English complaint letters are contrasted with the patterns presented in the native speakers' corpus to control for any form of transfer from MSA and/or French. The overall objective of this analysis is to cross-linguistically describe the informants' realization of the complaint speech act and to assess with reference to the native speakers' corpus their ability to sequence the above functional categories into a coherent and effective complaint letter.

Surveying the propositional content of these functional categories, we notice much variability in the sequencing of these categories. Consequently, a clear defined sequential pattern was difficult to extract.

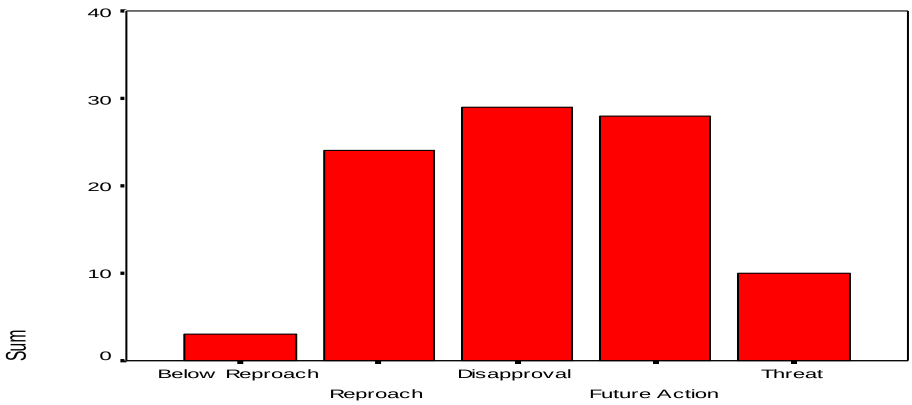


Chart 1: Informants' realization of complaint speech act in English

In linguistic terms, the informants opted first and foremost for the "expressing annoyance" subcategory of the "Disapproval" functional category, second for the "Future" category, third for the "bad consequences" subcategory of the "Reproach" category, fourth for the "Threat" category and fifth for the "Below Reproach" category. In interpersonal terms, the informants, while complaining in English, show a strategic concern with explicitly foregrounding their annoyance and misfortune with the receiver's act and often with involving themselves in direct confrontation with him as some of the future actions they presented may be qualified as threats not suggestions or requests, thereby illustrating ultimately difficulties with encoding polite beliefs. But for analytical purposes, we consider them as future actions, as at the level of the categorical choice the structures used look like incentives for future actions, but at the level of wording they are more like threats.

In structural terms, we notice much confusion with regard to the choice of these functional categories which made the extraction of a clear-cut sequential pattern difficult. Although with reference to Chart 1 above, at least 15 sequential combinations were extracted. In Figure 2 below we reproduce only the pattern 15 informants most frequently used.

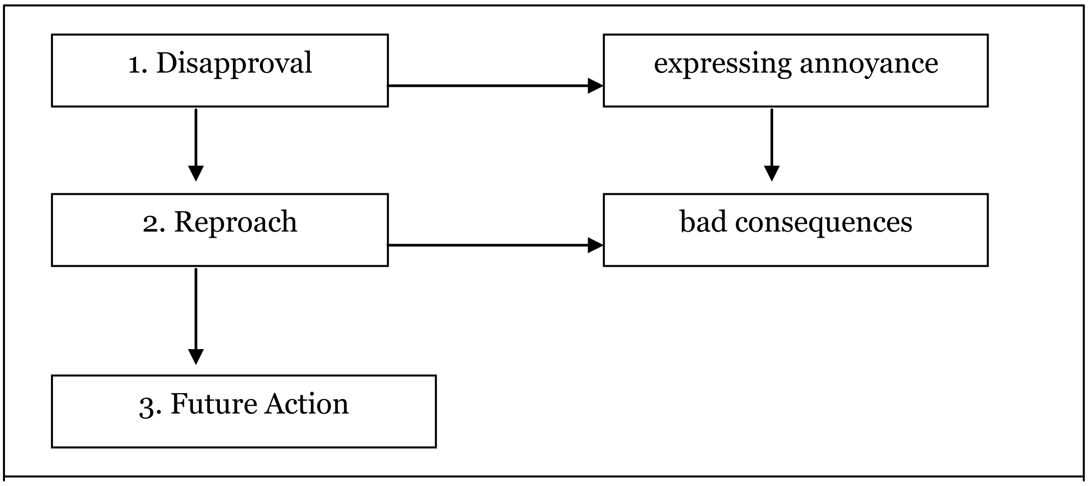


Figure 2: Informants' sequencing of functional categories of the English complaint speech act

Other patterns range from the inclusion of 2 functional categories to 4 functional categories, illustrating the informants' difficulties in sequencing the propositional content of the complaint letter, mostly with sequencing these functional categories into a coherent whole, as most of the informants tended to embed, omit, and overuse categories as the following extracts may illustrate:

Informant N°12

Dear Mr. Kriss Bellon:

expressing annoyance

we was delivered the sweaters and we were dissatisfied with the few garments which were crushed and can't be sold as new articles.

bad consequences

I wait for you to compensate the damaged goods with new ones.

Future Action

expressing annoyance

the damage wasn't our fault, they have been broken open in transit and we are not responsible for this and if you don't agree with this suggestion we will try to arrange this problem by another way which will suites and suits me too

Future Action

Informant N°20

Dear Mr Kriss Bellon

expressing annoyance

I would like to inform you that the boxes in which the sweaters were packed were damaged, and looked as if they had been broken open in transit. Few garments were crushed and they seems to be dirty and in a bad benhaviour, so they cannot be sold as new articles.

bad consequences

Closing Section

Our company looks forward Hearing from you. We suggest to decrease the price of the garments or we will turn you all the sweaters.

Threat

future action

Thus, while Informant N°12 illustrates a form of overinclusion of the functional categories "expressing annoyance" and "future action", Informant N°20 illustrates a form of structural misselection by embedding a "threat" within a "future action" and these after the closing section. Now, investigating the informants' realization of the complaint speech act in MSA and French is necessary to find out whether their performance in MSA and /or French approximates or deviates from their performance in English.

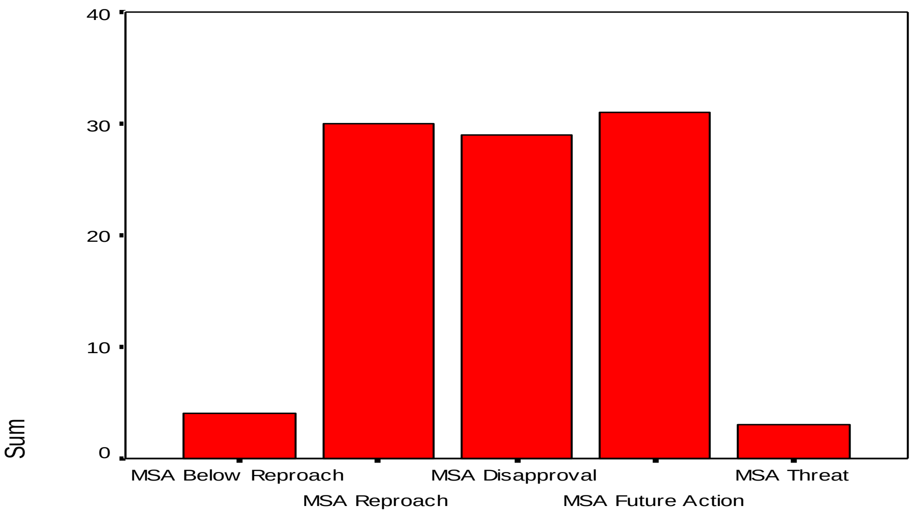


Chart 2: Informants' realization of complaint speech act in MSA

Looking into their MSA performance on the complaint speech act produced in Chart 2, we conclude that the informants approximately identified and encoded the same functional categories they identified and used to encode the English complaint speech act, as 17 informants opted for the "disapproval-reproach-future action" pattern, and the other 13 opted for 8 sequential patterns. However, a closer look into the structural sequencing of these functional categories reveals that many informants added other categories that are, we believe, external to the genre of the complaint letter. Cases in point are "Identification Line" in which the informants tend to introduce the company they work for and a few words on their position in this company all of which resulting in structures like the following:

Informant N°02

ilɛj-kum aħarra ɛssalɛm ɛmmɛ baʕd
to – you (plural) warmest peace and next

fa inni ɛtaqaddamu lɛ-kum bi ha|ihi ɛʃɛkwa
so I present to -you (plural) with this complaint

bi ɛʕtibari əl- masʔulɛ ʕɛn kitabɛt murasɛlɛt ɛʃɛrika
as considered the responsible for writing letters company

li umθi lɛ ʃɛrikɛt-unɛ "promo tekstil" ɛl qatinɛ bi ɛ-ʃɛrɣija
to represent company-our "Promo Textile" the-located in the-Charguia
bi tunis wa uʕlima-kum ɛnnɛ ɛtalabija ɛllɛti ….
in Tunis and inform-you (plural) that the order which …….

[Dir Sirs, I present this complaint as I am the person in charge of writing the letters of the company “Promo Textile” which I stand on behalf of and which is located in Al Sharguia in Tunis and I inform you that the order ………]

Informant N°04

ilɛ ɛ-ssɛjid ɛl hliwi bdira
to the-mr the hliwi bdira

innɛni ɛl mum|iya ɛsfɛlɛ-hu sɛlma zammit ɛl mɛsʔulɛ ʕɛn
I the signed below-it salma zammit the responsible for

kitɛbɛt murasalɛt ɛ-ʃɛrikɛ, ɛ- tɛqaddamu ……
writing letters the-company, I - present

[To Mr Hliwi Bdira
I, the undersigned, Salma Zammit the person in charge of writing the company’s letters, I present ..]

Including these examples reveal that the informants’ sequencing of the complaint letter lacks strategic choice and mostly points to a form of transfer from other business genres, essentially the “Application Letter” genre where “Identification Line” is deemed useful (Henry & Roseberry, 2001)., but in the present case it was wrongly exploited. The same remarks can be made about the inclusion of the “undersigned” phrase, but suffice to say that it is typical of official documents such as “Certificates” and other administrative documents delivered by schools and private companies where the person in charge affirms that s/he is the person responsible for issuing the document in question. The informants’ difficulty in sequencing the complaint speech act in MSA is minimal as we counted only 4 informants who produced the patterns just discussed. However, sequencing their complaint letters into a “disapproval-reproach-future action’ pattern reflects a transfer from MSA into their performance in English. In the following section, attempts are made to find out how the informants sequenced the complaint speech act in French.

The procedure used for analyzing the informants’ sequencing of the complaint speech act in MSA has been used for analyzing the one they used in French. Results are presented in Chart 3 below.

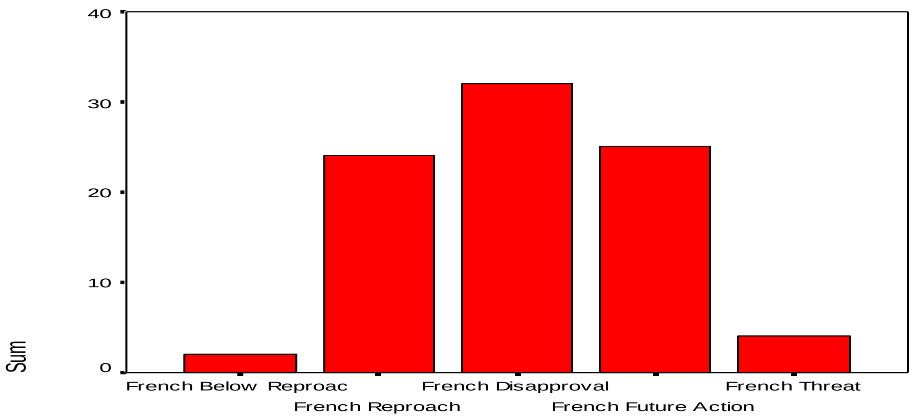


Chart 3: Informants' realization of the complaint speech act in French

With reference to Chart 3, 16 informants used the "disapproval-reproach-future action" pattern and 14 to 10 sequential patterns. As a first conclusion, approximately 50% of the informants seem to have opted for the same sequential pattern across MSA, French and English. This conclusion awaits further substantiation by means of an analysis of the way native speakers realize the complaint speech act. The objective is to see whether the informants' realization of the complaint speech act in English is deviant from that of the native speakers'. If it is, transfer claims may be proposed. Otherwise, poor English language proficiency may account for the informants' deviant sequencing of the complaint speech act in English.

The native speakers' corpus contained 30 complaint letters. Processing how these native speakers sequenced the complaint speech act resulted in Chart 4 below:

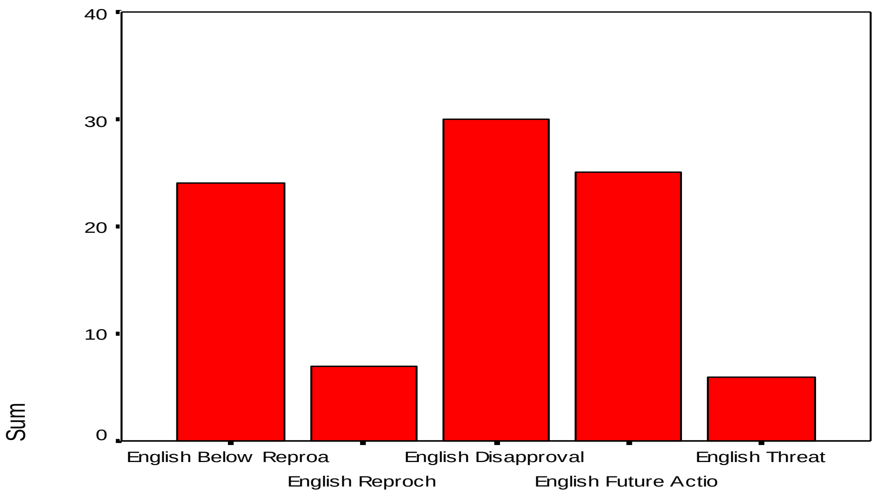


Chart 4: Native speakers' sequencing of the English complaint act

Of much importance in Chart 4 is the fact that 24 native opted for the “Below Reproach” functional category, making the “Below Reproach-Disapproval-Future Action” the canon pattern in the native speakers’ corpus, with 19 opted for this pattern and the other 21 opted for 7 sequential patterns. Comparing the native speakers’ realization of the complaint speech act with the informants’ realization of the complaint speech act in English, we are able to uncover the difference in use of strategic rhetorical categories. The rhetorical differences concern primarily the way the two groups of speakers approach interpersonal space while in conflict. At the level of the opening section of the complaint letter, while the native speakers seem to be more careful with their complaining force in order not to create antagonist outcomes by using the “Below Reproach” category, the informants of this study seem to foreground their dissatisfaction, by emphasizing their annoyance with the receiver’s act. At the level of the propositional section of the complaining force, native speakers devote much space to expressing their dissatisfaction with the receiver’s act and even use much of this space to describe in detail the problem under dispute. However, the informants retake the bad consequences caused to their businesses or to other parties as 24 of them chose the “Reproach” category. At the end of the complaining force, the native speakers essentially opt for proposing solutions and suggesting ways by which the issue under dispute can be resolved. In addition to awkwardly-worded suggestions, the informants, on the other hand, use threatening words before abruptly concluding their complaint letters. While twelve (12) informants opted for the “Threat” category, only 6 native speakers did so.

From a rhetorical perspective, the informants’ choice of the “Disapproval-Reproach-Future Action” pattern across MSA, French and English may indicate some form of culture-bound strategic sequential pattern that surprisingly outgo the nature of the genre of complaint letter where cooperation and face redress are usually highly valued for the continuation of the business in question. From a transfer perspective, the informants’ reproduction of the same pattern across MSA, French and English may be a signal of cross-linguistic interference in so far as the omission of the “Below Reproach” category may lead us to conclude. We remain nevertheless cautious about this conclusion knowing that comparing our informants, who are still learners, with native professionals is like forcing through an “unequal encounter” to use Thomas’ terms (1984). However, we believe that much of the informants’ realization of the complaint speech act in English is discoursal but it bespeaks their serious English language problems as well and foretells their pragmatic ineffectiveness. In sum, in addition to cross-linguistic influence, poor English language proficiency seems to explain why the informants’ complaint letters are so aggressive and lack strategic coherence. This latter aspect is going to be reformulated while discussing the informants' performance on the pragmatic features of "formality of style".

Formality of style and informants' assessment of the D variable

Before embarking on this analysis, the distinction between what is discoursal and what is pragmatic should be clarified at least to legitimize the selection of the "formality of style" items under the pragmatics label. When analyzing discourse in terms of units and the way these units combine together to convey meaning and communicative intent, this is done with the ultimate objective of identifying the structural "moves" that distinguish and finally identify a particular discourse from other distinguishable discourse types. Our discussion of the informants' realization of the complaint speech act above assumed essentially this view since the objective of that analysis is to describe the informants' ability to produce coherent complaint letters. Nevertheless, we admit that towards achieving a structural description of our informants' discourse coherence we were forced to identify and analyze the informants' complaint letters in terms of the functions the different "moves" carry. For this reason, we preferred to include the discussion of discourse coherence presented above under a discourse label.

When analyzing discourse in terms of the way units convey particular interpersonal attitudes and effects, we scored a move from what is structural to what is functional. In other words, such an analysis highlights the communicative value of discourse for speakers and hearers in a given context. It is because of the functionalism that "formality of style" items carry that we included it under the label pragmatics as we believe that these features have been conventionally viewed as carriers of interpersonal functions and as features of interpersonal rhetoric by theorists of language usage and pragmatics (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Now, we provide our understanding of the perception and assessment of the informants' handling of formality of their letters. According to B&L (1987), being formal implicates an assessment of the variables Power (P), Distance (D), and Ranking of Imposition (R). However, given the complex task of generalizing a straight forward pattern that handles the application of these variables in a uniform way, a reformulation of their relevance to the concept of "formality" and by the same token their relevance to the genre of the complaint letter is necessary.

Aware of the dependence between formality, politeness and the P, D, and R variables, we prefer to distinguish “formality” from politeness on the basis of the requirement of the complaint letter genre and on the basis of the application of the P, D, and R variables in contexts of business conflicts. While encoding polite beliefs, the P, D, and R variables are applied dynamically and in a variety of ways which are first and foremost context-dependent. With regard to conveying formality in a business context and specifically in complaint letters, empirical evidence seems to support a view that business letter writers seem to neutralize those variables in favour of one unique principle: be formal, as they seem to constantly set the D variable into a +D mode, which is, we believe, responsible for having business letter writers immersed in formality and social distance. Crediting this perspective is Ellis and Johnson’s (1994, p. 8) emphasis on the value of producing business discourse ‘typified by a desire to build a good relationship while avoiding over-familiarity’. An exception would be face-to-face business interactions. Charles (1996), investigating the influence that new and old business relationships inflict on business negotiations, found out differences between old and new business relationships at the level of the topics initiated, the rhetorical moves produced and the way politeness is encoded, recording a move from a well-defined institutional status (new business negotiators) to more personalized social roles (old friends). However, Charles’ evidence concerns face-to-face negotiations not business letters. We believe that business letters, at least those dealing with conflict resolutions, do not assume this dynamic use of formality markers.

Formality, as a linguistic manifestation of the assessment of the D variable, takes the form of a variety of linguistic forms and strategies which, nevertheless, add to the assessment of the degree of politeness encoded in discourse. Among the forms and strategies used to assess the formality of the informants’ complaint letters, we concern ourselves with the use of honorifics in terms of address terms, use of pronouns and the T/V distinction, as we believe that, in addition to addressing the receiver’s face wants, these markers convey “direct grammatical encodings of relative social status between participants” (B&L, 1987, p.179) which is at the very essence of formality. The objective is to examine how the informants assessed the formality of the context across MSA, French and English by means of a qualitative discussion of their use of honorifics and to contrast and discuss these with the way native speakers’ manipulate honorifics.

What makes address terms tune well with formality is the distance they carry while addressing people. In English, the use of 'Mr' counts as a social marker and at the same time it conveys some sort of distance from and respect to the addressee, 'məsjœ' (Mr) in French, 'sɛjidi' (my master) and 'ha∂ratukum'/'síjɛdɛtukum" (your-plural highness) in MSA do the same. Processing the informants' use of these markers across MSA, French and English, we notice a systematic use of such markers at all levels of the complaint letter sections. The native speakers' corpus revealed the same strategic use of these markers. Although these terms are believed to be "frozen" and "formulaic" phrases and routines that business writers always use in the opening section of business letters, there are two peculiarities related to the use of these markers by our informants in MSA and French which B&L discuss in relation to expressing deference and redressing Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). It appears that the use of these markers by the informants in MSA is to express social distance and to redress FTAs. We notice that the use of "sɛjidi" at the greeting line never occurs alone but often attached to the adjectives "ɛl mohtaram" (the respectful) and "ɛl kɛri:m" (the kind), illustrating what B&L has termed 'deferential' and 'humiliative' continuum of honorifics. An utterance such as "sɛjidi ɛl mohtaram" (my master, the respectful) indicates by implicature ("sɛjidi" implicates that the speaker is his slave) how humiliative forms are used here to express deference, i.e. "S humbles and abases himself, and another where S raises H" (B&L, 1987, p.178).

The use of in-text address terms are also meant to redress the potential face-threat the informants' wording may cause. This pattern was obvious in the informants' complaint letters in MSA and French. The following extracts are examples of some such terms:

Informant 01

li|ɛ	na-tlubu	min-kum	taʕwi|a	ɛl	bi|aʕa	ɛttalifɛ
so	we-request	from-you (plural)	changing	the	goods	damaged

wa	|ɛlikɛ	fi	aqrabi	ɛl	ɛjɛl
and	that	in	nearest	the	delays

[Consequently, we request that you change the damaged goods as soon as possible]

Informant 19

Mr rabi,	vəųɛ	άvwajɛ	œ	rəprɛzάtά	də	votrɛ	άtrəpri :z
mr rabi	please	send	one	reepresentative	of	your	company

pur	evalųɛ	lɛ	dɛga
to	evaluate	the (plural)	damages

[Mr. Raby, please send one of your representatives to evaluate the damage]

These forms emerge only in the informants' MSA and French complaint letters, and none of them were used in the native speakers' corpus nor in the complaint letters the informants wrote in English. The overall impression gained from the use of address terms is that the informants seem to be aware of the necessity to be formal across MSA, French and English.

The use of the T/V distinction is a way among others to express social distance and formality in French. All the informants used the V form in the complaint letters written in French. However, in MSA and English this distinction is conveyed by pluralizing deictic particles and opting for referential forms, the objective of which is to avoid the singular pronouns 'I' and 'you' which convey informality rather than formality (B&L, 1987, p.190). In MSA, the morpheme "-kum" (you-plural), usually post-attached to verbs and nouns, "lєkum" (to you-plural), "mίnkum" (from you-plural) and the plural marker "- u" convey that distinction and encode a greater degree of distance when encoded at the opening section of the letter and face redress when they are attached to FTAs as this extract may indicate:

Informant N°03

li-|ɛlikɛ	fa	innɛn-ɛ	natlubu	min	ћa|ratu-kum
to-that	so	we –(plural)	request	from	highness-your (plural)

tamki-nuna min nisbɛtu inxifa| tusɛwi 5 % min ʒɛmiʕ ɛssutrat

enable-us from proportion reduction equal 5% from total sweaters

[so, we request that you provide us with a 5% discount on the value of all the sweaters]

What is relevant here is that the honorific address term (‘hà∂ratukum’ (your-plural highness)) is pluralized to convey distance and face redress. Processing the informants’ complaint letters written in English, we found no such uses of honorifics, a fact which indicates that the informants did not transfer these specific uses probably believing that such uses do not sound English. However, we notice a systematic use of the ‘you’ pronoun by the informants, which we believe shows a limited mastery of the ways and strategies which native speakers use to convey social distance and formality in English. Among these strategies, and as an alternative to compensate for the inexistence of the pronominal T/V distinctions in English and to redress the ‘rudeness’ attached to the use of ‘you’, B&L (1987, p.203) present the strategy “address terms as ‘you’ avoidance”.

Corollary to pluralizing ‘you’ is the pluralization of “I” which has the same social distance and formality attributes of the plural ‘you’ and results in what B&L terms the “business ‘we’ ” (1987, p.202), i.e. corporate “we”. B&L distinguish two types, the “ ‘we’ as office and incumbent and predecessors” (ibid), and the “ ‘we’ of the group” as a group membership marker (ibid). The business ‘we’ is used to indicate “I + powerful” (ibid). At the level of its manipulation, a further distinction between inclusive ‘we’ which includes H and exclusive ‘we’ which excludes H is made. Both of these “become the conventionalized polite form more appropriate to formal situations and negative politeness” (B&L, 1987, p.203). The informants seem to be aware of the particular uses of the “business ‘we’ ” across MSA and French as the following extracts show:

Informant N°04

wa li-ǀεlikε *na*-tlubu min sijεdεtu-kum taʕwiǀa
and for-that we-request from highness-your (plural) change

εl biǀaʕa εl mutlafε fi aqrabi εl εjεl
the goods the damaged in nearest the delays

[Consequently, we request that you change the damaged goods as soon as possible]

Informant N°01

pur	sεt	rεzƆ	*nu*	vu	prijƆ	məsjØ
for	this	reason	we	you	beg	mr

də	bjέ	vulwar	rάplasε	la	marʃάdiz	difεktųəz
to	well	want	replace	the	goods	defective

dά	lε	plu	brεf	dεlε	ά	rεzƆ	də	*no*
in	the	most	short	delays	for	reason	of	our

obligasjά	άvεr	*no*	klijά
obligations	towards	our	customers

[For this reason, we would like you to replace the defective goods as soon as possible because of our obligations towards our customers]

In the MSA extract, pluralizing the ‘I’ is done by means of the pre- attachment of the “nun εl jamʕ” to verb roots resulting in “na-tlubu” (we-request). In French, pluralizing the ‘I’ results in the pronoun “nu” (we). Twenty (20) informants used the “nun εl jamʕ” in MSA, 25 informants used the pronoun “nu” (we) in French. However, a pattern is noticed with regard to the use of these pronouns. First, we noticed an unsystematic way of encoding this feature, making us incline towards considering a form of transfer at work. It seems that the uses of “nun εl jamʕ” and French “nu” obey the same considerations presented above on the use of honorifics by the informants in that in addition to conveying social status attributes in terms of social distance and power, they also seem to be used in conjunction with FTAs to redress the imposition they carry. The “nun εl jamʕ” and the French “nu” seem to emerge progressively at the level of the future action section in 8 MSA complaint letters and in 7 French complaint letters where those informants shift from the use of the ‘I’ to that of ‘we’ when encoding FTAs. Four of these informants did so both in MSA and French.

In order to substantiate evidence for a transfer pattern, we processed the informants’ complaint letters in English and we found out that 14 informants used the business ‘we’; of these 7 showed the same pattern, 3 of them did so in both MSA and French. In front of this limited yet significant evidence, it seems that the informants’ encoding of the business ‘we’ in MSA, French and English stems from the informants’ desire to be perceived as not standing alone as all the ‘we’ forms they used are the ‘exclusive’ ‘we’ type not the 'inclusive' one. In sum, the informants seem to opt for 'we' as a marker of power and as such a guarantor of better results. By contrast, the native speakers' corpus showed a systematic and a varied use of honorifics in terms of address terms, avoidance of 'you' by using lexical reference such as the bracketed phrases in the following native speakers' extract:

> Since this is the only type of sprayer [High-Mart] stocks and since [High-Mart] is the only store in Bastrop that carries sprayers, your customers are forced to either buy this faulty sprayer, or go out of town to meet their needs.

We found out that the natives adopt a strategic use of both the inclusive and exclusive 'we'. In all, these are forms and strategies addressed by B&L (1987).

On the whole, on a quantitative basis, the informants were unsystematic in their use of honorifics, i.e. address terms, pronouns and phrases that value the receiver's face wants, in both MSA and English, and better in French, which explains why the informants were rated 'Inappropriate' on their performance on the 'formality of style' item in MSA and English and 'fairly acceptable" in French.

The above discussion of formality in terms of honorifics remains limited as formality bears aspects that are deemed prerequisite for the assessment of how polite discourse evolves, notably the assessment of the P, D, and R variables and the application of other markers of politeness. However, analysing formality markers we are able to find out at least how our informants encode polite discourse. It also induced us to look in depth into the way the politeness strategies the informants used convey polite beliefs and the way these strategies are used across MSA, French and English.

Conclusions and Implications

This study helped to prove on quantitative and qualitative bases that ESP writing can be approached from a cross-linguistic perspective. This study meant to merge common ESP practice in Tunisia within a broad language learning theoretical understanding that nurtures the teaching of English as a second/third language. Without being oblivious to the merits and usefulness of needs analysis to ESP practice, we believe that advancing the field reports to addressing issues beyond this institutional level by focusing more on the ESP learner's internal and external experiences. Within this understanding, ESP is a learning and teaching field which is not different, at least in scope, from language ESL/EFL learning and teaching practices and which is liable to evolve through mainstream SLA language learning theories.

Indeed, much of its advancement can be sought in bringing answers from mainstream language learning disciplines and theoretical approaches and thus give its specific purpose a multidisciplinary approach.

This study has a number of implications in so far as the teaching of ESP writing is concerned in the BST context. On the basis of the findings obtained on the textual cross-linguistic analysis, we might propose that some transfer phenomenon has manifested itself in our informants' performance. Through a textual transfer based analysis, we were able to localise both the direction of transfer and the nature of transferable items. French, the second language our informants are believed to know, seems to act as a syntactic/lexical safety hatch. Syntactic and lexical similarities between English and French were psychologically real in our informants as the amount of transfer from French was obvious in their English performance on the language items. Lexical transfer was most evident from French to English. Teaching business letter writing in English should focus on clarifying the lexical and syntactic differences that particular 'faux amis" may misrepresent. ESP teachers should be more aware of this lexical problem and should select/design teaching materials that should categorize, differentiate and treat these lexical similarities within a rigorous communicative approach.

The textual cross-linguistic analysis gives credence to a number of assumptions about the cross-linguistic reality of the notion of formality to the importance of this feature in the complaint business letter, and ultimately to Cummins' 'Interdependence Hypothesis'. Of more importance is the direction of the transfer of this feature. Our informants relied on both French and MSA to encode polite forms in English. Textual evidence seems to indicate that our informants' performance on this item in MSA is reproduced in English. Such evidence, probably coupled with English proficiency problems, indicates that the informants' poor writing mechanics in MSA exerted some kind of effect on the quality of their complaint letters in English, minimally replicating Cummins' 'Interdependence Hypothesis'. In this regard, MSA, as the language of literacy in Tunisia, should be encouraged within the context of BST, and the benefits that business students are likely to gain from exposure to the use of this language for specific purposes should be highlighted. Exposure to MSA through an Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) course should be scheduled to create functional and rhetorical awareness that are always deemed useful to any language learning enterprise. ESP teachers should be encouraged to adapt materials that adopt a cross-cultural stand to this issue and in "house" cross-cultural materials should be designed to better suit the needs of our Tunisian students. These materials have to highlight the syntactic, structural and stylistic differences between business letters in MSA, French and English. Accordingly, BST language teachers should cooperate to better understand and solve their students' language problems and to better help adopt, adapt and design business teaching materials. A comparative teaching approach should be encouraged in this regard within the BST ESP classroom.

In the same vein, although all Arab countries are diglossic, have different low varieties of Arabic and to a certain extent different perceptions of various aspects of their cultures and of the value of the communication channels at their disposition, a large scale needs analysis is necessary to find out whether Tunisians need ASP to communicate with other Arabic-speaking natives. This needs analysis should report as well to the attitudinal, motivational and professional aspects attributed to the use of MSA for business purposes. Analysis of the communication patterns that characterize the use of business MSA by different Arab-speaking natives should be undertaken and description of these patterns and the ways they differ from English native speakers should be included in the design of MSA-based business teaching materials.

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