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#### A Study of Speech Act of Oral English Complaints: Politeness and Gender

**ABSTRACT:** *Do men and women use the language differently? Is there any association between language use and the role of men and women in the society?* In recent years, gender study has been one of the most prevalent subjects of research in Pragmatics. This article investigates the correlation between gender and politeness strategies employed by bilingual Hindi speakers in the production of oral complaints in English in hierarchical politeness system (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Brown and Levinson (1987) identified complaints as a face threatening act (FTA). 'Face' has a significant meaning in Indian culture as it is associated with 'public image'. Complaint realizations can damage both speaker's and hearer's face, therefore the speaker should be thoughtful while deciding the complain strategy in order to avoid damaging good relationships with the hearer. The speaker may choose off record strategies or mitigate complaints by selecting indirect strategies either to establish solidarity or to give the hearer an alternative. If the speaker chooses an on-record strategy, that may lead to open confrontations between the interlocutors. The primary aim of this study is to analyze the degree of formality and strategy use in the articulation of complaints by male and female respondents in a contrastive way in order to explore the possible differences in this particular type of speech act. To evaluate the impact of gender in the selection of complaint strategies, an oral discourse completion task (DCT) was used to tape-record the

complaint tokens produced by undergraduate students of Engineering enrolled in Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technical University (earlier UPTU), Uttar Pradesh. The complaint realizations were coded according to Trosborg's (1995) coding system and statistically analyzed with the help of t-test.

**KEYWORDS: Pragmatics; Hierarchical Politeness System; Direct Oral Complaint; Face Threatening Act; Bilingual**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the 20th century, the interest of linguists has experienced a gradual change from the study of the formal aspect of language to the study of language use. In contrast to Chomsky's view that language is "a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a set of elements" (Chomsky, 1957: 13), now linguists perceive language as performing different acts through an utterance rather than a set of words or sentences (Searle, 1969: 22-23). According to Searle, "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts" (Searle, 1969: 16). Hence, while speaking a language, people perform certain linguistic actions, known as '*Speech Acts*'.

### 1.1. Speech Act Theory

John L. Austin (1962), a language philosopher, was the first to introduce the concept of Speech Act in his famous work '*How To Do Things With Words*'. Austin (1962) states that "to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something" (ibid.: 12). In other words, people carry out an act by saying something. Austin (1962: 150-151) presents a taxonomy consisting of five categories of speech acts based on performative verbs, namely, *Verdictives*, *Exercitives*, *Commissives*, *Behabitives* and *Expositives*.

J. R. Searle (1969) was the second most influential person who revised Austin's work. Searle stated that "speaking a language is engaging a rule-governed form of behaviour" (1969: 11). According to Searle (1979: 1-16), there are five categories in his system, namely, *Representatives*, *Directives*, *Commissives*, *Declarations* and *Expressives*. By offering an invitation, apology, greeting, denial and complaint, people perform speech acts. The current study will focus on the speech act of complaint.

### 1.2. The Speech Act of Complaint

Austin (1962: 81-83) categorizes speech act of complaining as *Behabitives*, which conveys the speakers' attitudes and feelings; and a subclass of *performatives*, which indicates that the speaker performs an act explicitly by uttering a sentence. Searle (1979: 12) defines complaints as *assertive*, which states that while producing a complaint, speakers make assertions about the state of affairs. Searle (*ibid.*: 15) also categorizes complaints as *expressive* as complaints express a speaker's psychological state.

Leech (1983) describes complaints as *a conflictive act* because their illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal (*ibid.*: 105). Brown and Levinson (1987: 65-66) identifies complaints as *face-threatening acts* because their realization can damage the speaker's and the hearer's positive and negative face.

According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1993: 108), "complaining is usually addressed to a hearer (H) whom (S) holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action and possibly suggest/request a repair". Trosborg (1995: 311) states that an act of complaint "includes moral judgment which expresses the speaker's approval and disapproval of the behaviour mentioned in the judgment on something the complainees has already done or fail to do, or in the process of doing. The event described in the proposition took place in the past". She also describes complaint as "an offensive act" in which the complainer expresses his/her disapproval or negative reaction towards the state of affairs described in the complainable. Boxer (1993a, 1993b) distinguished two categories of complaint: direct and indirect, which have their origin in D'AmicoReisner's (1985) study on disapproval. "Direct complaints are addressed to a complainees who is held responsible for the offensive action", whereas, "indirect complaints are given to addressees who are not responsible for the perceived offense." (Boxer, 1993a: 106-107).

Present study aims to examine and compare the choice of complaint strategies and use of directive acts in the production of oral direct complaints by male and female bilingual Hindi speakers.

## **2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

With a hope to contribute to the area of pragmatics, an attempt was made to conduct a comparative study on complaint strategies in the production of complaints in English languages by male and female bilingual Hindi respondents (students enrolled in B. Tech. courses).

The speech act of complaints has been chosen for investigation in this study for two major reasons. Firstly, not much research has been carried out on speech act of complaint. Even

though, complaints are common in everyday lives and are socially complex even for native speakers, it is surprising that a little consideration is given to this topic. Secondly, a few gender studies regarding the speech act of complaints have been carried out in different languages, but not by bilingual Hindi speakers. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to compare the speech act of complaints produced by male and female bilingual Hindi speakers in their second language (English).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Respondents

Data were collected from two groups of respondents: male and female bilingual Hindi speakers. Both groups of respondents were second language speakers of English, who were enrolled in an undergraduate course (B. Tech.) at the Engineering Departments of the Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technical University (earlier UPTU), Uttar Pradesh. Respondents of the study were either the resident of Greater Noida and Noida (U.P.) or Delhi. They were in their second, third and fourth year of the courses, and were aged between 18 and 24. Their level of English was intermediate and pre-advanced as English was their medium of instruction at all three levels of education: Primary level, Secondary level and University level. In contrast to the medical field, engineering field is considered to be a male dominated area. Therefore, fairly less number of female candidates as compared to male candidates is observed in all the engineering colleges. Data of complaint tokens was recorded from 45 bilingual Hindi speakers (24 males and 21 females), who got the complaints recorded in English language. As stated earlier, the purpose of this research is to study the use of complaints strategies by male and female bilingual Hindi speakers in the production of complaints in English language. The present study does not include the data from the native speakers of English.

#### 3.2. Instrument

Discourse Completion Task (DCT) has been used to collect data from male and female bilingual Hindi speakers as the present study focuses on gender. The hypothetical constructs used to build up the situations were drawn from Hierarchical Politeness System by Scollon and Scollon (2001) on politeness and speech act realization. The two hypothetical situations are as follows:

*Situation 1: Your younger sister borrowed your pen drive for a day. The pen drive contained some of your important documents. When you ask for your pen drive, she says she has misplaced the pen drive.*

- (a) How serious is your younger sister's offence?
- (b) What is the status/power relationship between you and your younger sister?
- (c) How close is your younger sister to you in this situation?
- (d) Do you talk to your younger sister regarding this situation? What will you say?

***Situation 2: You are assigned as a group leader at your college for a research project. One of the members always comes late for the meeting. Today is the third time that s/he has come late. What will you say?***

- (a) How serious is the offence of your group member?
- (b) What is the status/power relationship between you and your group member?
- (c) How close is your group member to you in this situation?
- (d) Do you talk to your group member regarding this situation? What will you say?

### 3.3. Framework

To analyse the complaint tokens of both male and female respondents, classification system developed by Anna Trosborg (1995) was adopted. Trosborg's model (1995) for analyzing speech act of complaint consists of 4 categories that are further divided into 8 sub-categories (Complaint Strategies) in the increasing order of directness (ibid.: 316-319).

CATEGORY	STRATEGY
<p><b>Cat.1 (NO EXPLICIT REPROACH)</b>  <i>In order to avoid a conflict, a complainer does not mention the complainable in the proposition.</i></p>	<p><b>Str.1 (Hints)</b>  <i>This is a weak complaint strategy, but it might be used to prepare for more forceful strategy.</i></p>
<p><b>Cat.2 (EXPRESSION OF DISAPPROVAL)</b>  <i>A complainer explicitly asserts a deplorable state of affairs in the presence of the complainee, which implies that the complainer holds complainee responsible, but avoids mentioning him/her as the guilty person.</i></p>	<p><b>Str.2 (Annoyance)</b>  <i>A complainer expresses his/her annoyance, dislike or disapproval concerning a deplorable state of affair.</i></p> <p><b>Str.3 (Ill Consequences)</b>  <i>A complainer expresses the worst consequences of affair that he/she considers to be bad.</i></p>

<p><b>Cat.3 (ACCUSATION)</b></p> <p><i>It seeks to establish the agent of the complainable.</i></p>	<p><b>Str.4 (Indirect Accusation)</b></p> <p><i>The complainer can ask the hearer about the situation or assert that he/she was in some way connected with the offence, and thereby establish the hearer as a potential agent of the complainable.</i></p>
	<p><b>Str.5 (Direct Accusation)</b></p> <p><i>A Complainer directly accuses the complainee of having committed the offence.</i></p>
<p><b>Cat.4 (BLAMING)</b></p> <p><i>In the act of blaming, the complainer presupposes that the accused is guilty of the offence.</i></p>	<p><b>Str.6 (Modified Blame)</b></p> <p><i>The complainer expresses modified disapproval of an action for which the accused is responsible.</i></p>
	<p><b>Str.7 (Explicit condemnation of the accused's action)</b></p> <p><i>The complainer explicitly states that an action for which the accused is held responsible (in direct terms) is bad.</i></p>
	<p><b>Str.8 (Explicit condemnation of the accused as a person)</b></p> <p><i>The complainer explicitly states that he/she finds the accused as a non responsible social member.</i></p>

### 3.4. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

SPSS is a software package used for statistical analysis. It is used for manipulating, analyzing, and presenting data. For the purpose of the present study, I have used *Independent t-test* and *Paired t-test*. I chose independent t-test and paired sample t-test for the statistical analysis, as both the tests are suitable for analyzing data collected from one population twice using the same measurement.

#### 4. RESULT

The tape-recorded data (qualitative data) of complaints produced in English languages on two hypothetical problematic situations by 45 bilingual Hindi speakers (24 males and 21 females) enrolled in B. Tech. courses in Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technical University (earlier UPTU), Uttar Pradesh were analysed for the study.

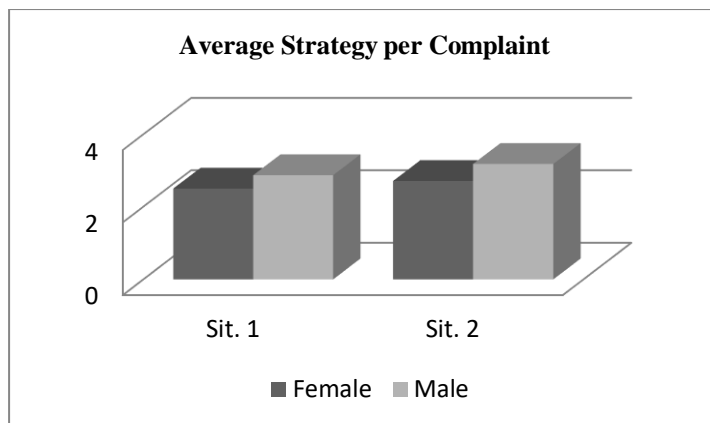
The data was analyzed using Independent Sample t-test of SPSS 16.0 to determine whether there is a likelihood of a significant difference between the means of complaint strategies used in English complaints produced by male and female B.Tech. students.

##### 4.1. Choice of Complaint Strategy in Hierarchical Politeness System (+P/±D)

Sit.1 (Lost pen drive) and Sit.2 (Punctuality) belong to Hierarchical politeness system as they represent the setting where the speaker has more power than the addressee. However, the speaker is a relative (-D) of the addressee (younger sister) in Sit.1 and has an acquaintance (+D) with the addressee (team member) in Sit.2. The statistical data clearly depicts the use of complaint strategies by the two groups of bilingual Hindi respondents (B. Tech. students) in the production of English complaints.

	Sit. 1 (Lost Pen Drive)		Sit. 2 (Punctuality)	
	Complaint in English Language		Complaint in English Language	
	Female (n=15)	Male (n=23)	Female (n=18)	Male (n=24)
<b>Total Strategies</b>	35	66	46	73
<b>Avg. Strategy per complaint</b>	2.50	2.87	2.71	3.18

**Table 1: Average Strategy per complaint in Sit. 1 & Sit. 2**



**Figure 1: Average Strategy per complaint used by female and male respondents in Sit. 1 & Sit. 2**

In the Hierarchical politeness system, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that in both the situations, i.e., Sit.1 (Lost pen drive) and Sit.2 (Punctuality), male respondents used slightly more complaints strategies as compared to female respondents in the production of complaints in English Language. Although there is no significant difference in the average strategies per complaints, male respondents used 2.87 (Sit.1) and 3.18 (Sit.2) as compared to female respondents (2.50 in Sit.1 and 2.71 in Sit.2). Comparing both the situations, the data shows that both male and female respondents used more complaint strategies in the production of English complaints in Sit.2 (Punctuality) as compared to English complaints in Sit.1 (Lost pen drive).

The outcome represented that respondents are more comfortable in articulating their annoyance/disapproval in English language in a formal settings (Sit.2 with team member) than in an informal setting (Sit. 1 with younger sister).

The result shows that male respondents are somewhat more effective in articulating complaints as compared to female respondents. According to Tannen (1990), men are more confrontational than women. Since respondents study in a male dominated field (Engineering), male respondents are more expressive and direct in voicing their complaints as compared to female respondents.

	Sit. 1 (Lost Pen Drive)				Sit. 2 (Punctuality)			
	Female (n=15)		Male (n=23)		Female (n=18)		Male (n=24)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Str. 1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4.54</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4.44</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2.73</b>
<b>Str. 2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23.52</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19.69</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2.22</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.36</b>

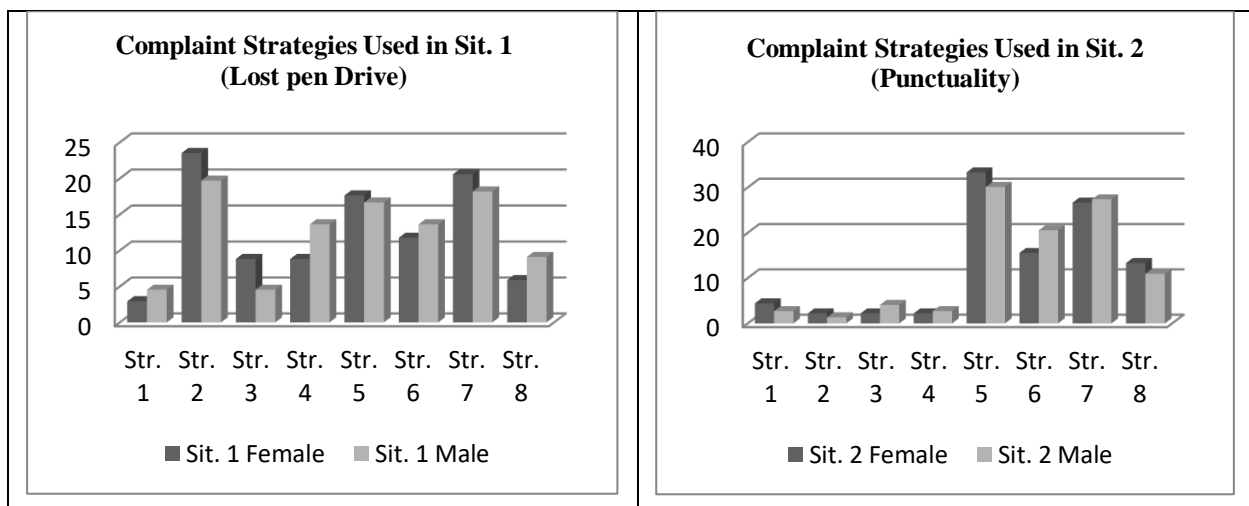
Str. 3	3	8.82	3	4.54	1	2.22	3	4.10
Str. 4	3	8.82	9	13.63	1	2.22	2	2.73
Str. 5	6	17.64	11	16.66	15	33.33	22	30.13
Str. 6	4	11.76	9	13.63	7	15.55	15	20.54
Str. 7	7	20.58	12	18.18	12	26.66	20	27.39
Str. 8	2	5.88	6	9.09	6	13.33	8	10.95
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>		<b>66</b>		<b>45</b>		<b>73</b>	

**Table 2: Choice of Strategy (%) by female and male respondents in the production of complaints in Sit. 1 and Sit. 2**

Table 2 represents variation in frequency and percentage of strategy selection by male and female respondents in the production of English complaints in both the situations (Sit.1 (Lost pen drive) and Sit.2 (Punctuality)), which is clearly depicted in and Figure 2a and Figure 2b.

Table 2 clearly shows that the choice of strategies by both the genders in both the situations were almost same. In Sit. 1, the most preferred complaint strategy by both the respondents were Str. 2 (Annoyance) and Str. 7 (Explicit condemnation of accused’s action); whereas amongst the least preferred was Str. 1 (Hint). In Sit. 2, the most preferred complaint strategy by both the respondents were Str. 5 (Direct Accusation), Str. 7 (Explicit condemnation of accused’s action) and Str. 6 (Modified Blame); whereas amongst the least preferred were Str. 1- 4 (Hint, Annoyance, Ill Consequences and Indirect Accusation).

As seen in Table 2 and Figures 2a & 2b, difference can be observed in the choice of strategies in both the situations. In Sit. 1, respondents have made use of all the strategies, whereas, in Sit. 2, respondents have mostly used direct strategies (Str. 5 – 8) as compared to indirect strategies (Str. 1 – 4).



<p><b>Figure 2a: Choice of Strategy (%) by female and male respondents in the production of complaints in Sit. 1</b></p>	<p><b>Figure 2b: Choice of Strategy (%) by female and male respondents in the production of complaints in Sit. 2</b></p>
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In Sit. 1, complaints produced by male respondents showed frequent use of Annoyance (19.70%), Explicit Blame Behaviour (18.18%) and Direct Accusation (16.67%). Similarly, English complaints produced by female respondents mostly contained 23.53% of Annoyance, 20.59% of Explicit Blame Behaviour and 17.65% of Direct Accusation. For example, the respondent showed their annoyance about the complainable act without mentioning the accused explicitly:

**Male Respondent:** *“I don’t know from where I’ll get all the documents.”*

**Female Respondent:** *“That pen drive had very important documents. How would I get that?”*

In another example, the respondent directly accused his younger sister for carrying out the complainable act followed by blaming the behaviour of his younger sister as in:

**Male Respondent:** *“I gave you the pen drive and you misplaced it? It’s very irresponsible of you to do so.”*

**Female respondent:** *“You deleted all my documents? This was really not expected.”*

The least preferred complaint strategies used by male and female respondents in the production of complaints were Hints (male: 4.55%; female: 2.94%) and Explicitly Blame Person (male: 9.09%; female: 5.88%). For example, respondents downgraded the effect of complaint and sympathise with younger sister along with reminding her about her duties by the use of Hints:

**Male Respondent:** *“Ok Ok don’t worry don’t worry. I’ll I’ll try out with my friends.”*

**Female Respondent:** *“It’s ok but, you should take care of it.”*

In another example, respondents criticized their sister as an accused person as in:

**Male respondent: “*How careless you are?*”**

**Female Respondent: “*You were so careless.*”**

Table 2 clearly depicts that, in Sit. 1, female respondents were slightly more severe and impolite than male respondents with the younger sister.

In Sit.2 (Punctuality), the most frequently used complaint strategies (descending order of use) in the production of complaints by male respondents were Direct Accusation (30.14%), Modified Blame (20.75%) and Explicit Blame Behaviour (27.40%) and Explicitly Blame Person (10.96%). The most commonly used complaint strategies in complaints about Sit.2 by female respondents were Explicit Blame Behaviour (26.67%), Modified Blame (15.55%) and Explicitly Blame Person (13.33%).

The male respondent directly stated his team member responsible for the act as in: “*Every every time you come late and I have to finish all work myself.*”

Respondents explicitly blamed the team member for the complainable act as in:

**Male Respondent: “*What is this brother? This is not good.*”**

**Male Respondent: “*Again you are late. This is not at all good.*”**

**Female Respondent: “*What the hell is your problem?*”**

In another example, the respondents modify the blame on the accused (team member) by reminding the team member about his responsibilities as in:

**Male respondent: “*You are in the group. [err] You have certain responsibilities for the group. [err] You should be there for [err] you should be there in time.*”**

**Female respondent: “*How many times should I remind you about coming on time for the meeting?*”**

Respondent blame the behaviour of the accused as in:

**Male Respondent: “*You just can’t set your priorities.*”**

**Female Respondent: “*What the hell is your problem?*”**

All the indirect complaint strategies were the least preferred strategies in the production of complaints about Sit.2 by both male and female respondents. English complaints produced by male and female respondents showed minimal use of Hints (2.74% and 4.44%, respectively), Annoyance (1.37% and 2.22%, respectively), Ill consequences (4.11% and 2.22%, respectively) and Indirect Accusation (2.74% and 2.22%, respectively).

On comparing both the situations (Sit.1 and Sit.2), it was observed that being in a more powerful setting (+P) as compared to the addressee, male respondents used somewhat more strategies as compared to female respondents. With an increase in the degree of formality,

both male and female respondents increased the intensity and directness of complaints. Male respondents were slightly more severe and direct in the production of English complaints in both the situations as compared to female respondents.

The data shows that with less use of indirect strategies both male and female respondents produced severe and direct complaints in the English language. Male respondents were more direct and impolite with respect to the English complaints produced by female respondents.

The statistical data represented in Table 5 clearly represent the mean and significant difference between the choices made by male and female respondents in case of complaint strategies.

The critical value of the independent t-test is 2.09 and the two degrees of freedom (df) is 20. Since the mean of male and female respondents' choices in all the complaints strategies is less the critical value ( $t \leq 2.09$ ), therefore there is no significant difference between the choices of complaint strategies made by male and female respondents.

	Sit. 1 (Lost Pen Drive)			Sit. 2 (Punctuality)		
Complaint Strategies and Directive Acts	Female vs. Male (English complaint)			Female vs. Male (English complaint)		
	Mean	df	p	Mean	df	P
Hints	.0476/.0952	20	N	.0952/.0476	2	N
	52			6	0	
Annoyance	.3810/.61	20	N	.0476/.047	2	N
	90			6	0	
Ill Consequences	.1429/.09	20	N	.0476/.142	2	N
	52			9	0	
Indirect Accusation	.1429/.38	20	N	.0476/.095	2	N
	10			2	0	
Direct Accusation	.2857/.52	20	N	.7143/.952	2	N
	38			4	0	
Modified Blame	.1905/.38	20	N	.3333/.571	2	N
	10			4	0	
Explicit Blame	.3333/.52	20	N	.5714/.809	2	N

(Behaviour)	38			5	0	
Explicit Blame	.0952/.19	20	N	.2857/.238	2	N
(Person)	05			1	0	

**Table 5: Significant Difference in the Use of Complaint Strategies and Directive Acts in Hierarchical Politeness System. [N = no significant difference (p), if  $t \leq 2.09$  (df = 20); Y = significant difference (p), if  $t \geq 2.09$  (df = 20).]**

## 5. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

It is evident from the study that in a hierarchical setting (+P) the number of complaint strategies produced by male respondents was more than female respondents in both the complaining situations. The outcome of the study shows that, in an authoritative position, male respondents were more effective in articulating complaints as compared to female respondents.

It is also observed that, in a Hierarchical politeness system, with the increase in distance (D) between the interlocutors, the use of complaint strategies increased in the production of English complaints in case of both the respondents. The outcome could be interpreted as the respondents' preference for English language for expressing their annoyance/disapproval in a formal settings (+D). In case of both male and female respondents, it is obvious from the result that the level of directness increases in the production of English complaints with the increase in distance between the speaker and the accused.

The result also demonstrated that respondents made frequent use of Str.5 (Direct Accusation) and Str.7 (Explicit Blame Behaviour). With the increase in the level of formality, i.e., (-D) to (+D), the severity and directness of English complaints produced by both the respondents increased. Male respondents tended to be more severe and direct in articulating complaints than the female respondents. It can be interpreted that the females are less proficient in the use of English in formal settings as compared to male respondents.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through this study it has become obvious that even if the classification of speech acts appears to be universal, their understanding and articulation can vary across gender. The focus of the present study was to analyze the use of complaint strategies following Anna Trosborg (1995: 316-319) in the production of English complaints by bilingual Hindi speaker in the given problematic situations.

The findings of the present study indicate that the choice of complaint strategies appears to be mainly associated with individual's perception of situational seriousness. Gender of the interlocutors, power and the level of formality (D) also affect the respondents' choice of complaining. Gender variation of the respondents did not show any significant amount of difference as male and female respondents slightly varied in the selection of complaint strategies.

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