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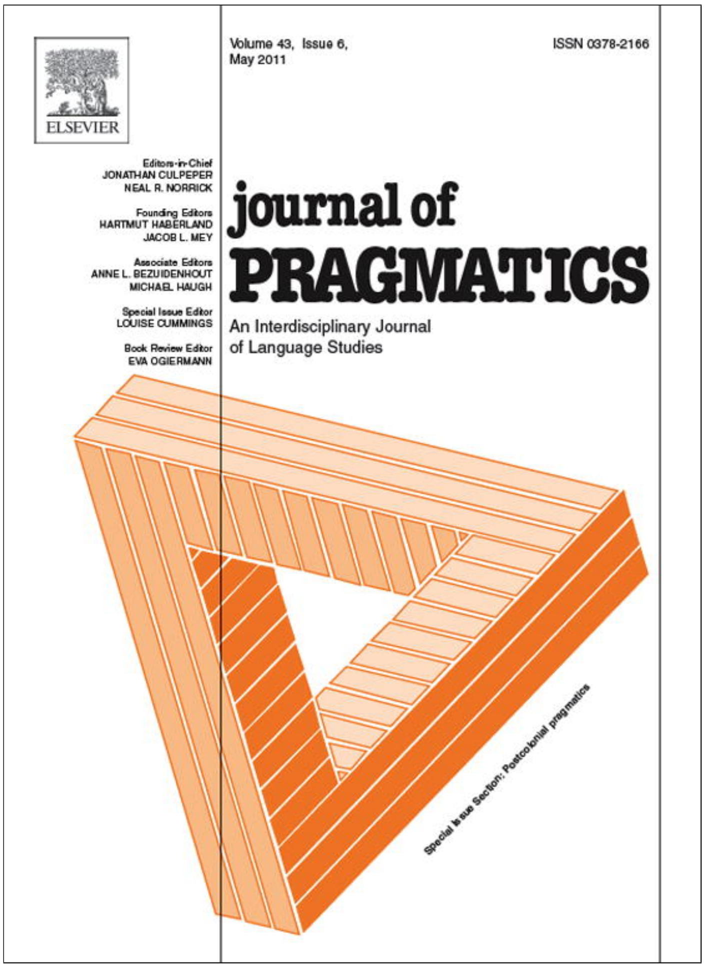
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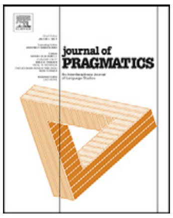

Complaints online: The case of *TripAdvisor*

Camilla Vásquez *

Department of World Languages, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, FL 33620, USA

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Complaints have been studied from two major disciplinary perspectives. Whereas pragmatic approaches have tended to rely on data elicited via discourse completion tests (DCTs), more ethnomethodologically informed approaches have focused on naturally occurring talk in interaction. In addition, a handful of studies have examined written complaints, while fewer still have investigated complaints in CMC (computer mediated communication). In order to determine the extent to which CMC complaints display some of the defining characteristics of complaints as identified by previous research, a data set of 100 complaints (negative reviews of hotels on the website, *TripAdvisor*) was examined. The study found that a significant proportion of complaints tended to juxtapose overall negative evaluation with some positive appraisal, and that a similar proportion of the complaints made explicit reference to reviewer's expectations not being met. The study also found that complaints tended to occur as a speech act set. Whereas previous studies have found that complaints tended to co-occur with speech acts such as warnings or threats, in this particular context, complaints tended to co-occur more frequently with advice and recommendations. Finally, the study found that while the majority of the complaints on *TripAdvisor* can be considered indirect (or third party) complaints, there were nevertheless some examples that blur the direct/indirect dichotomy.

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1. Introduction

Complaints have been studied from a number of disciplinary perspectives. The largest body of research on the speech act of complaint approaches the subject from a pragmatics perspective. Concentrating on which semantic formulas, or discourse strategies, are used in realizing complaints, research in this area tends either to describe how complaints are formulated in a specific language (or languages), or to compare and contrast how complaints differ between native speakers of a language and learners of the same language.[1] This type of research typically relies on data elicited via a DCT, or discourse completion test. Many of these studies (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Geluykens and Kraft, 2003, 2007), analyze complaint data using a taxonomy

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* Tel.: +1 813 974 7378; fax: +1 813 905 9937.
E-mail address: cvasquez@cas.usf.edu.

[1] Complaints have been studied in the following languages: English (Geluykens and Kraft, 2003, 2007; Murphy and Neu, 1996) Chinese (Du, 1995), Spanish (Bolivar, 2002; Pinto and Raschio, 2008), French (Kraft and Geluykens, 2002), German (Geluykens and Kraft, 2003); Farsi (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006), IsiXosa (Dlali, 2003); Hebrew (Katriel, 1985; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993). Some studies that have taken an interlanguage perspective, and examined complaints produced by language learners, comparing them either to native speakers of those languages, or to how learners complain in their first and second languages. The following language(s) and/or language backgrounds have been the focus of these studies: Chinese (Arent, 1996), Danish (Trosborg, 1995), French (Kraft and Geluykens, 2002), German (Geluykens and Kraft, 2003, 2007), Hebrew (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993), Japanese (Boxer, 1993a; Nakabachi, 1996; Tatsuki, 2000), Korean (Murphy and Neu, 1996), and Spanish (Pinto and Raschio, 2008).

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originally developed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), which subdivides complaints into five specific strategies.[2] Some of these studies have also analyzed variables such as gender (Geluykens and Kraft, 2003, 2007), social status (Boxer, 1993a,b), and cultural/ethnic differences (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993). In general, these studies assume that complaints are normally addressed to the individual responsible for some offense or situation, and, as such, that they represent a face-threatening act, or FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Consequently, a good deal of this research also addresses the linguistic means by which complaints may be mitigated.

A second body of work has its roots in ethnomethodology, and focuses on complaints as they occur in ongoing talk, in both personal (Drew, 1998; Drew and Holt, 1988; Drew and Walker, 2009; Dersley and Wootton, 2000; Haakana, 2007; Laforest, 2002) and professional (Heinemann, 2009; Roulston, 2000; Vásquez, 2009) contexts. These researchers often adopt the methodologies of conversation analysis (CA) or discursive psychology. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, the data in these studies are *un*elicited, in that the complaints under examination arose in some segment of spontaneous talk, rather than being produced deliberately in response to a researcher-designed prompt. In this line of inquiry, researchers have tended to focus on how complaints are interactionally produced and negotiated over a number of turns, as well as how individuals manage their subjectivity during complaints (Edwards, 2005).

In addition to these perspectives, which have focused on complaints in spoken interaction,[3] a handful of studies have also examined complaints in written genres, most specifically, in letters to the editor (Hartford and Mahboob, 2004; Ranosa-Madrunio, 2004). These, too, represent naturally occurring data, and in these studies, the analyses have compared the discourse structure of complaints in different varieties of English. However, to date, very few studies have examined complaints in any form of computer-mediated communication, or CMC, from a discourse-pragmatic perspective. (Exceptions include Tian, 2006, on Chinese complaints in electronic bulletin boards, and Köhl, 2009, on German and British complaints on online platforms such as *eBay*). CMC is commonly characterized as a hybrid medium, which includes elements that are characteristic of both spoken and written discourse. As such, it represents a medium of investigation in its own right, with respect to the realization of unelicited complaints. The present study thus describes some of the features of online, CMC complaints, in order to determine how similar or different these complaints are to complaints which have been studied via elicited means, as well as to those studied in natural spoken interaction.

Before proceeding further, it is important to define "complaint." As opposed to some other speech acts, it is quite difficult to map specific linguistic forms onto functions when it comes to complaints. While several researchers have observed that complaints are difficult to define in formal terms (Edwards, 2005; Laforest, 2002), some broader, more functional, definitions of complaints have nevertheless been proposed, ranging from the specific to the general. In general terms, Heinemann and Traverso (2009), for example, observe that almost any type of comment "with even the slightest negative valence" can be treated as a complaint (p. 2383). However, Edwards also makes the important point that speakers may work against giving an impression that what they are doing is complaining, even when that is exactly what they are doing (2005). In more general terms, a number of researchers (Edwards, 2005; Roulston, 2000) invoke Sacks's (1992) explanation that a complaint "may routinely be constructed in the form of a piece of praise plus 'but' plus something else" (p. 358).

In contrast, a more specific and commonly cited definition comes from early work by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), who explain that a complaint results when a speaker expects a favorable event to occur, and instead his/her expectations are somehow violated; the recipient of the complaint usually is the person responsible for having "enabled or failed to prevent the offensive event" (p. 195). A key element of complaints in this early definition is that of *expectation* – which, for some reason, does not appear in a subsequent (1993) definition by the same authors. Other examples of definitions of complaints include those offered by Wierzbicka (1991), which leaves open the relationship between addressee and complained-about action ("complaint is verbal, fully intentional and indicates 'something bad happened' to the speaker," p. 81, cited in Rasekh, 2004) or by Edmondson and House (1981), which assumes that the addressee is the responsible party ("a verbal communication whereby a speaker expresses his negative view of a past action by the hearer (i.e., for which he holds the hearer responsible), in view of the negative effects or consequences vis a vis himself") (p. 144, cited in Geluykens and Kraft, 2007). The present study starts with the broadest definition of complaint, by adopting that offered by Heinemann and Traverso (i.e., any type of comment "with a negative valence"), and then, by drawing on some of the previously discussed research, explores whether or not online complaints make explicit their status as complaints, and to what extent they juxtapose positive and negative comments.

Some researchers have observed that complaints often occur as a "speech act set" (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993). This notion of "speech act set" refers to the fact that any speech act may be realized by either using a single discourse strategy – or by combining two or more discourse strategies, some of which may represent other types of speech acts.[4] To give an example, a complaint can be realized by a single utterance such as, *The food in the restaurant was horrible* [complaint], or it can combine with other strategies to occur as a larger "speech act set," as in the following example: *The food in the restaurant was horrible. You should stay away and eat somewhere else.* [complaint + suggestion]. Murphy and Neu (1996) further explain that "A speech act set is a combination of speech acts that, taken together, make up a complete speech act. That is, it is often the case that one utterance alone does not perform a speech act. Some examples are apologies and invitations where several utterances are necessary for the intended illocutionary act to be accomplished" (p. 214). Similarly, complaints may be realized over several utterances, or – in the case of online complaints – sentences. Previous DCT-based research (e.g., Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987) has suggested that complaints may co-occur with other speech acts such as threats, warnings, admonitions, and suggestions. Thus, the present study also takes up the question of the extent to which other speech acts tend to occur with online complaints.

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[2] The speech act set of complaining may consist of 5 main strategies: (1) below the level of reproach, (2) expression of annoyance or disapproval, (3) explicit complaint, (4) accusation and (5) warning, immediate threat. These categories are slightly different in the authors' 1993 article – e.g., the last, strongest category also includes "direct insult."

[3] Although the DCT most often takes a written form, the general assumption is that participants produce in writing what they believe would say in a given situation. There are, of course, numerous critiques of the DCT as data elicitation method, however it is beyond the scope of the present study to address those critiques here.

[4] A more recent and concise discussion of speech act sets can be found on pages 8–9 in Ishihara and Cohen (2010).

Among these varied definitions and characterizations of complaints, a dichotomous distinction is often invoked (Boxer, 1993a,b) – that is, whether the complaint is direct or indirect (the latter is sometimes referred to as a "third party" complaint).[5] In a direct complaint, the recipient of the complaint is the same individual who is responsible for the complained-about action or state of affairs, whereas in an indirect complaint, the addressee is a third party (in other words, someone *other than* the individual who is responsible for the complained-about events/states). However, some researchers have problematized this distinction. For example, as Heinemann (2009) points out, in some third party complaints, the individual responsible for the complained-about action may be physically co-present in the interaction, even though the direct addressee of the complaint is some other individual or "third-party."[6] These studies have focused on complaints in spoken interactions, but what about complaints that occur in online contexts? Because participants are typically not co-present (i.e., sharing the same physical space) during many types of CMC, what are the implications for how complaints are expressed online? In other words, do online complaints tend to be more direct or indirect in their perspective?

The present study examined a corpus of complaints taken from the travel website, *TripAdvisor*. *TripAdvisor*, one of the world's most popular web sites for travel accommodations, was founded in early 2000 and is headquartered in the U.S. (Law, 2006). This website, which aims at providing "unbiased"[7] user-generated recommendations for travel destinations and accommodations, represents an ideal – and, to date, unexplored – medium for investigating unelicited CMC complaints. As Benwell and Stokoe (2007) point out, CMC data offer the following advantages for discourse analysts: they are "unmediated by the transcription process" and they also lack "the problems bound up with the observer's paradox," so they represent a source of "authentic" data (p. 253). Furthermore, since more than 80% of travelers today are currently consulting sites such as *TripAdvisor* (Yoo and Gretzel, 2009), these sites represent an important CMC platform, and one which is changing the way that consumers make travel decisions (Briggs et al., 2007; Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Miguéns et al., 2008; O'Connor, 2008). Consequently, it is believed that the impact and influence of such internet-based texts is potentially powerful and far-reaching.

Focusing on some of the features of complaints, as identified in the aforementioned studies (e.g., evaluation, complaints occurring as a "speech act set," direct/indirect complaints),[8] the present study of online complaints was guided by the following research questions. The first research question was "To what extent do *TripAdvisor* complaints display some of the defining characteristics of complaints?" Specifically, this question addressed the following issues:

(a) What proportion of complaints juxtapose positive commentary with some type of negative evaluation (Sacks, 1992)?
(b) To what extent do complaints make explicit reference to expectations (i.e., Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987)?
(c) What is the extent to which complaints occur as a "speech act set," in combination with warnings, accusations, threats (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987) – or perhaps with other identifiable speech acts (e.g., suggestions, recommendations, advice)?
(d) To what extent do negative reviews call attention to the fact that they are complaints (Edwards, 2005)? What proportion of complaints make reference to having demanded some type of "remedial action" (Geluykens & Kraft, 2007) during their visit?

The second research question was "What proportion of *TripAdvisor* complaints represent direct versus indirect complaints?" In other words, in their online complaints, do reviewers tend to address the hotels (direct complaints), or are they only addressing other travelers (indirect complaints)?

2. Methods

The data for this study consist of a purposeful sample of 100 negative reviews from *TripAdvisor*. Each week on its homepage, *TripAdvisor* showcases approximately five of "the best" and the same number of "the worst" hotel reviews: at the time of data collection, this section of the website was labeled "Rants and Raves."[9] Over a six-month period (November 2008–April 2009), the website's featured "worst" hotel reviews were collected. During this period, once per week, the

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[5] The label of "indirect complaint" may be additionally confusing, because in the speech act research (Hartford and Mahboob, 2004; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993; Trosborg, 1995) the semantic formulae used to express complaints are often represented as a continuum from more "direct" (i.e., explicit) to more "indirect" (i.e., implicit) in their illocutionary force, and thus, relatively more or less transparent in their intention. However, I follow the convention established by Boxer (1993a,b) in which a direct complaint is addressed to the individual responsible for the complained-about action, and an indirect complaint is one that is addressed to some other person, or third party.

[6] For example, in Heinemann's study, two home healthcare workers complain to one another about their aging client. Although this client is present during the interaction (and she may even be meant to overhear the complaint), the complaint is not addressed to her directly.

[7] See Scott (2009), for a more critical examination of this claim of "unbiased" reviews, and on the shifting construction of knowledge and evaluation as the result of such websites.

[8] Rather than selecting only one framework, a deliberate choice was made to draw on relevant insights from both research traditions (pragmatic and ethnomethodological approaches) in the identification of discourse-pragmatic features of complaints in this context.

[9] In order to obtain information about how *TripAdvisor* selects which reviews to showcase on this section of their website, the company was contacted on a number of occasions, yet chose not to respond to the author's repeated requests for this information.

"worst" reviews (i.e., those that focused on negative experiences, and could thus be classified as complaints) were downloaded and saved, and a small corpus of online complaints was created. Rather than focusing on one specific city or region (as *TripAdvisor* tourism studies have tended to do: e.g., Au et al., 2009, on Hong Kong hotels; or Briggs et al., 2007, on Scottish hotels), this alternative sampling procedure was used in the present study in order to yield a broader variety of writers and destinations.

To provide a very brief description of the corpus, the average negative review was approximately 300 words in length, with the shortest around 50 words in length and the longest approximately 2000 words. *TripAdvisor* gives reviewers an opportunity to construct a profile, which enables them to provide demographic information about themselves, however, not all authors of reviews choose to include this demographic information. Nevertheless, from the available data, a slight majority of reviewers appeared to female, between the ages of 35–49, and traveled for leisure as opposed to business. (This profile is consistent with what has been reported in other studies of *TripAdvisor* reviewer demographics, for instance, in Gretzel, 2007.) Approximately 70% of the reviewers resided in the United States or the United Kingdom, and the top destinations of hotels included cities in those same countries, as well as in Italy, Australia, and India. As for the content of complaints, the range of topics included: cleanliness, size, and condition of the room; location, price, security, and customer service in the hotel; and restaurant service and food quality. Most complaints included comments about several of these categories. All of the reviews were individually examined to ensure that they included some negative commentary. On this basis, it was determined that all 100 reviews could be considered complaints.

To analyze the data, a basic concordancing program was used, in combination with manual coding of selected features. The data were coded in several rounds, addressing one question at a time. Several of the research questions were addressed first by automated searching for related lexical items (e.g., *expect*, *expected*, *expecting*, *expectations*), or for a set of performatives and their related nominalization (e.g., *warn*, *warning*, *advise*, *advice*). Once identified, the data files were manually screened to ensure that related phenomena had not been overlooked. Other research questions were addressed by several rounds of manual coding, to obtain intra-rater reliability. For example, to address the final research question about whether a complaint was direct or indirect, each review was screened and all pronouns, verb forms, and other referents to determine addressee were coded as 2nd or 3rd person reference. This process was repeated one week later to ensure consistency in coding.

3. Results

Addressing the first research question, it was found that just over one-third (37/100) of negative reviews included one or more positive statements. Several of these used *but* or *however* to indicate that the author was contrasting an overall negative experience with some positive remark, as in examples 1, 2 and 4; while others used different adverbs of contrast (e.g., *unfortunately, despite*, *though*), as in example 3.

1) I will admit that it was relatively clean but the furniture was old, scuffed and so plain. <41>

2) I'm here (in the hotel) currently for a conference. My room is in the "Plaza" wing. The room is exceptionally large and spacious, but that doesn't make up for the shortcomings. <40>

3) Upon arrival in the lobby of the hotel we were highly impressed with the lobby and general ambience of the ground floor. Unfortunately that is where it stopped! <21>

4) The breakfast (included in the price) was just OK. . ...blood pudding and congealed eggs are not my idea of exciting. However, the service was good in the restaurant. <35>

Another way in which reviewers juxtaposed a positive appraisal within a primarily negative review, was to indicate that the given attribute was somehow anomalous: it was "the one" or "the only" positive thing about the accommodation, or their overall experience (examples 5, 6, 8, 9). Other structures used to express opposition in the data set include *the good/the bad*, and others, as can be seen in examples 7 and 10.

5) but i must admit, the place was clean. that is the one good thing i can say. <11>

6) This hotel is over priced and over rated. It is owned by an English couple whose only interest appears to be to make money. They show up at the hotel for about an hour a day and leave the running of the hotel to their local staff. (Who, by the way, are very helpful and the only positive thing about this place). <27>

7) The good: - It was a large room with a bed. The BAD:- NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! <79>

8) The place itself is very clean - that was really the one saving grace. <22>

9) For a European room, it was quite large - that's the good part of my review. Check in staff were nasty and rude. <50>

10) I am very torn as to what to say about the Inn. There were some really cool points about locale which includes the funky flavor of Fell's Point itself as well as the quaint facade of the Inn.
I can also say that every person at the Inn was very friendly and helpful. That being said let's move on to the not so good moments. <33>

When positive comments were juxtaposed with negative evaluation, the positive remarks tended to appear first, as can be seen in the above examples (although examples 4 and 6 represent exceptions to this tendency). And while many reviewers felt the need to balance a primarily negative review with one or more positive comments, nearly two-thirds of reviews did not include any positive comments. The review below is one example of a completely negative review, which consists of a series of complaints about the cleanliness and condition of the room.

11) We stayed in Vegas a few nights on our way to L.A. Husband booked our rooms at [hotel name] on Vegas.com for $25/night. We paid too much!!! I broke down and cried when we checked in. The place was so filthy and disgusting. One room had water and hair in the bath tub. The carpet in the room and halls was nasty!! The whole place smelled like smoke, and worse. We slept with our socks on, as we didn't want our bare feet on the floor. I woke up to a black bug crawling out of the weave of my sock!! We were supposed to have 3 nights there, but checking out early in the morning after the first night. Had it not been 117 degrees, we would have slept in the car. We moved to [hotel name], which interestingly is ranked 3 stars on Vegas.com, the same as [hotel name]. While I would rank [hotel name] as a negative 10 star hotel, [hotel name] would get the highest rating in our book. This hotel isn't fit to house prisoners!! <99>

Addressing the second part of the first research question, nearly one-third ($N = 32$) of the total reviews referred to traveler's expectations. Just over 15% of reviews ($N = 16$) used some form of *expect* (*expected, expecting,* etc.). Many of these related to travelers' expectations of quality of the accommodations that were based on either the price, or the star rating, of the hotel. The reviewer's resulting impressions were that the cost was not equivalent to the quality of experience. As the examples below illustrate, in nearly all cases explicit reference to the cost of the hotel is made in the complaint. In contrast, example 17 refers to the star rating of the hotel.

12) Our room was a rip-off. We were paying almost $300 a night and expected luxury. <86>

13) There is no value here for the money. I expected a little more for this kind of Euro/dollars we were shelling out. <50>

14) I stayed at [hotel name] last Summer (sorry taken ages to write the review). I was expecting the accommodation to be on a par with a Four Seasons or Ritz Carlton (as you are paying a similar price). <96>

15) Not what we expected in an expensive B&B. <26>

16) Considering the rates of the rooms, I was expecting a luxurious en-suite spacious room. <15>

17) As a 4 star plus all inclusive hotel this does not even remotely live up to its expectations. <12>

Other reviewers framed their expectations slightly differently. These reviewers positioned themselves as having reasonable expectations (i.e., not expecting too much), and in spite of not expecting much to begin with, they nevertheless found the quality of the hotel to be sub-standard. This can be seen in examples 18–21. Examples 20 and 21, in particular, illustrate how some reviewers offer extra information about themselves to demonstrate that their expectations are fair.

18) For a holiday as cheap as this i didn't expect much. <91>

19) I was not expecting the Hilton but I was expecting something clean and comfortable. <88>

20) The thing that bothers me the most about this is that I paid $125 for the night. I know $125 is not a great deal of money these days. I was not expecting a heck of a lot. However, I was expecting basic clean and comfortable accommodations. <81>

21) I love to travel and usually stay at 3 to 5 stars hotels. My expectations are very fair. I don't really have high standards or by any means high maintenance. <46>

Another way that reviewers indicated that their expectations were not met was by mentioning one or more aspect(s) of their hotel experience that they found to be disappointing. In total, sixteen reviews expressed disappointment. Several reviewers' expressed disappointment based on (a) once again, the price they were paying for the hotel, as in example 22, or (b) a previous experience at the same hotel, as in example 23, or (c) photos or information about the hotel they found on the internet prior to traveling, as in example 24.

22) Sorry to moan on about it, but we WERE paying Euros 145 a night for our double room.
It is being run indifferently, with little care or attention. We were very disappointed. <43>

23) Because we had stayed at that location so many times in the past, we were beyond disappointed that in 2 short years it could go down so badly and will NEVER stay there again unless someone else buys it that cares. <10>

24) I thought it was a very good hotel, looking at the beautiful pictures at the hotel site, but when we arrived it was a disappointment... <48>

Because several scholars (e.g., Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Murphy and Neu, 1996) have indicated that very often, complaints do not occur in isolation, but rather form part of a larger speech act set, which might include suggestions, warnings, advice, etc., other speech acts were examined. This section addresses the third part of the first research question. It should be noted that what follows is not an exhaustive account, but rather a brief exploration of the aforementioned performatives, as well as related conventional expressions.

Recommendations were one of the most frequently occurring speech acts with the complaints. Very often recommendations to other travelers occurred toward the end of the review, as a type of closing move. Some recommendations took a positive form (examples 25 and 26), while others took a negative form (examples 27 and 28).

25) I would highly recommend you stay somewhere else! <5>

26) I would recommend that you stay far, far away from this place. This was one of the most disgusting experiences of my entire life. <100>

27) I would not recommend staying here if you are looking for a good night's sleep. <19>

28) We will not be going back and we would not recommend it to anyone either. <28>

The next three examples illustrate the co-occurrence of a complaint, recommendation, and direct advice in the form of an imperative (i.e., *stay away*).

29) We will never, ever book at [hotel name] again and wouldn't recommend it to anyone. Stay as far away from it and the dodgy area it's located in as possible. <35>

30) We would never stay there again and would never, ever, recommend it to anyone. Also, we ate dinner at the prime rib restaurant. Horrible!!! Stay away! <41>

31) I would not recommend this place to anyone, ever. Frankly, I would have preferred to have slept in a rental car, or on one of their lounge chairs by the pool! Stay away! <55>

Along with complaints, advice occurred in numerous forms. Like recommendations, advice also tended to occur at the end of the complaint, as in examples 32 and 33.

32) I hope you will take my advice and stay somewhere else. This place is overpriced, badly put together, stinky and just plain disappointing. <32>

33) Overall, I will never go back to [hotel name] and do not advise anybody else to do so. <86>

Although in the examples above advice was expressed using the performative verb (as in example 33) or nominalization (as in example 32), most advice actually took the form of an imperative, as in the following few examples.

34) Do yourself a big favour and give this place complete miss. <1>

35) DON'T STAY HERE! I'M BEGGING YOU! <47>

36) Unless you feel like catching bed bugs and feeling locked up and depressed - do not stay at [hotel name]... <52>

37) Please do not let this happen to you. <79>

A few warnings occurred in the data set, but these were not as frequently – or perhaps as explicitly – expressed as the aforementioned speech acts.

38) This was one of the dirtiest, shabbiest hotels I've ever stayed in, and I simply had to post this warning to other travelers to stay away. <51>

39) First off, we tried to check in and our reservation wasn't in the system so we had to wait 20 minutes for them to enter us in manually. This wasn't a problem since we came early but beware if you're on a tight schedule. <33>

Addressing the fourth part of the first research question, it was found that sixteen reviews made one or more explicit references to complaint, or complaining. These can be subdivided into two subcategories. In other words, reference to *complaints* or *complaining* occurred with two different senses: (1) to describe a past action, and (2) to refer to the author's current action in writing the review. The majority of these were retrospective accounts of complaints that the reviewers had made during their stay. Many occurred in reviews that tended to be quite narrative in their structure, as can be seen in example 41.

40) We made various complaints about the noise levels but nothing was done about this. <3>

41) Housekeeping were immediately called and a formal complaint lodged (the name of the person who attended the room was taken and given to management the next day). We asked for another room but were advised nothing was available (I think a blatant lie as I could book a room in another category on the internet immediately). A follow up complaint the next morning showed no records in the hotel system of what had happened the previous night. <21>

Rather than depicting an action that took place in the past, the second type of references to complaint referred to what was happening in the review itself. Example 42 comes from the first line of a review, and the use of the performative here metapragmatically signals the review as a complaint. In example 43, while the reviewer acknowledges what s/he is doing is complaining, s/he also explains that this is an exceptional situation. In example 44, the author engages in quite a bit of self-positioning, in that he/she constructs him/herself – in two places within the same review – as typically a "non-complainer," which serves to underscore how exceptionally bad the experience was, and simultaneously positions the author as a reasonable person.

42) I have never had cause to complain but felt compelled! <71>

43) Usually not one to complain but the service is just terrible. <89>

44) Please let me make it clear that I am NOT a fussy person at all. I am not the complaining type and just take things on the chin with my mouth shut. So it is a big deal for me to be writing this review. [. . .] As I said before, I don't complain about much in life. So these complaints I've made have had to be pretty severe. <86>

Although this analysis of direct reference to the negative review as a complaint involved a search for that performative only, it is important to point out that complaints could be referenced in other ways: for example, to "moan on about" (Edwards, 2005) – as was seen previously in example 22. Such instances were quite rare.

This section addresses the second research question, which focused on "direct versus indirect" (Boxer, 1993a,b) complaints. In these data, most complaints were clearly addressed to fellow travelers. This was accomplished via the use of the second person pronoun, or the use of imperative – or both – and generally occurred in the context of giving some type of advice, directive or warning.

45) If you are at all of a delicate constitution with regards cleanliness, stay at some other hotel. <4>

46) Don't believe the photos that you see online. The place is a dump! <29>

47) We will never stay at this hotel again, and we recommend that you avoid it at all cost if you want to enjoy your vacation! <82>

48) PLEASE DO NOT EVEN ENTERTAIN THE THOUGHT OF STAYING THERE ESPECIALLY WITH THEIR REASONABLE WEEKLY RATES!! UGH...ROACHES BY THE DOZEN WERE NOT IN MY AGREEMENT<84>

49) Don't bother speaking to management about your concerns because they are one of the 80% of the people that hate their jobs and really do not want to hear your complaints or suggestions on how to improve the situation. If you read this and still decide to go, then you have no one to blame but yourself. Unless this trip is for free it is not worth a cent!!!!!!! <80>

In fewer examples ($N = 12$), it was somewhat more implicit that the addressee was a fellow traveler. This was accomplished mostly through the use of impersonal pronouns, such as *anyone*.

50) As I said before, I don't complain about much in life. So these complaints I've made have had to be pretty severe. Overall, I will never go back to [hotel name] and do not advise anybody else to do so. <86>

51) We will not be going back and we would not recommend it to anyone either. <28>

52) Those with a faint heart better skip this ride! <33>

Although smaller in number, there were also some examples of complaints addressed to the hotel owners or hotel companies. Most of these occurred toward the end of the review, in the form of an admonition or advice. There were a total of eleven examples in which complaints that can be considered to be addressed to the hotel management or owners. Of these, eight were expressed as a third person reference, either through the use of *whoever* (examples 53 and 54) or *they*, *the owners* (examples 55 and 56). (Whereas examples 57 and 58 clearly target the hotel as addressee, the following four examples might also be considered complaints addressed to the hotels, albeit in a less obvious fashion.)

53) Who ever owns this should be ashamed, this is not a 3 star it's a no star. <1>

54) Whoever owns it now really should get out of the hotel business forever!!!!!! It is obvious they have no clue. <10>

55) They need to clean up their act. <75>

56) The owners of this property should be ashamed of themselves. Also, [hotel name] and [hotel name] should be embarrassed to have their name affiliated with this property. <81>

Three of these 11 "hotel-directed complaints" had the hotel as addressee (examples 57–58), and were expressed either as a second-person reference through the use of pronoun *you*, or as an imperative.

57) Thanks [hotel name] for ripping us off. We thought you were a nice, upscale hotel. WE WERE FOOLED!! <73>

58) Get a cleaner and get it scrubbed and start again and do inspections on the rooms when they are vacated and spend some money on appliances!!! <34>

Interestingly, five of the examples addressed both the hotel and fellow travelers at different points in the same review. Examples 59-61 illustrate how in a single review, an author of a review addressed both audiences.

59) Who ever owns this should be ashamed, this is not a 3 star it's a no star. [. . .] Do yourself a big favour and give this place complete miss. <1>

60) DO NOT STAY HERE [. . .] Whoever owns it now really should get out of the hotel business forever!!!!!! It is obvious they have no clue. <10>

61) Don't stay here, there was not a single thing I enjoyed here; this hotel soured me on the city. What was worse, was that we stayed at far nicer hotels in Venice & Rome (generally expensive cities) for less money. [. . .] [hotel name], clean up your act! <53>

Although they do not represent a large proportion of the data, these instances nevertheless reveal that CMC offers the potential for the complainant to address both the complained-about entities as well as third parties simultaneously.

4. Discussion and conclusion

To briefly summarize, the present study found that just over one-third of complaints tended to juxtapose an overall negative evaluation with some type of positive appraisal, and that a similar proportion of the complaints made explicit reference to reviewer's expectations not being met. The study also found that complaints often occurred as a larger speech act set, and (perhaps not surprisingly) in this particular context, complaints tended to co-occur more frequently with advice and recommendations rather than with other types of speech acts such as warnings or threats. Also, while a handful of complaints were metapragmatically labeled as such by their authors, the majority were not. Finally, the study found that while the majority of the complaints on *TripAdvisor* can be considered indirect (or third party) complaints, there were nevertheless some examples that blur the direct/indirect dichotomy.

With respect to the study's limitations, it is important to point out that the present study examined a small corpus of complaints in a single genre (hotel reviews), and from only one website (*TripAdvisor*). Therefore, the findings of this study clearly cannot be extended to all complaints found online, nor should they even be extended to online complaints found in reviews of other types of services or goods. In addition, this study suggests another limitation of working with online data, which is a lack of reliable information about the individuals formulating the online complaints. There is no question that as stretches of discourse and as examples of complaints the data examined represent "authentic texts"; however it is very difficult (and perhaps even impossible) to identify or describe the individuals who have issued these complaints – at least according to traditional demographic categories, such as gender, cultural background, first language, etc. While some authors choose to provide this information, many do not. Furthermore, the traditional lack of reliability associated with self reports becomes further amplified in online context, where identity has become a fraught and often-contested category, and where issues related to "authenticity" and "representation" abound. In other words, with online complaints, there may simply be no way of knowing who is really responsible for the complaints.

Turning back now from larger methodical issues to the discourse-pragmatic features that comprised the focus of the present study, early work on complaints suggested that they often take the following form: something positive, plus but, plus something negative (Sacks, 1992). In this case, over one-third of the *TripAdvisor* complaints analyzed did include a mention of some positive attribute of the hotel – and most often, in the order indicated by Sacks: positive preceding negative. Indeed, this way of structuring a complaint – i.e., acknowledging that not all aspects of the experience were negative – may be particularly relevant in this context, because, according to at least one tourism study (Gretzel, 2007), more balanced or objective reviews are more likely to appeal to readers of reviews. Furthermore, including a positive comment in a mostly negative review also serves to position the author of the review as a reasonable person, who is able to acknowledge and appreciate the positive qualities or attributes, and at the same time has the ability to discern what is lacking, substandard, or inappropriate. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that nearly two-thirds of the online complaints in this study did not make reference to any positive characteristics of the property or the overall experience. Furthermore, it was found that several of the positive statements were framed as "the one" or "the only" good thing. These structures can be considered a type of ECF, or extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). ECFs have also been identified as a component of complaints in previous research (Edwards, 2005), and perhaps future research can reveal what other ECFs tend to occur in these, and other, online complaints.

In an early definition of complaints, Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) pointed out that complaints often occur as a result of expectations not being met. In the present study almost one-third (31) of complaints made explicit reference to expectations, or disappointment resulting from a mismatch between price and condition, or previous experiences, or how the hotel advertised itself online. Although the notion of expectations does not figure prominently in many other definitions of complaints, the present study's findings suggest that it does appear to be a relevant characteristic of at least some *TripAdvisor* complaints. Further research may help reveal if this is also the case in other types of online complaints – especially in online complaints about consumer products and services.

In their (1987) work Olshtain and Weinbach made the observation that complaints often occur as a speech act set. Although they concentrated on threats, accusations and warnings, the present study found that the most common speech acts co-occurring with complaints were advice, recommendations, and suggestions. This is not surprising, given the website's primary function of providing recommendations to travelers. Previous studies on complaints in written genres such as letters to the editor (Hartford & Mahboob, 2004; Ranosa-Madrunio, 2004) have found that those complaints also occurred in conjunction with suggestions as well as requests for redress. What this suggests is that the larger genre within which a complaint occurs clearly has some bearing on the types of speech acts which will co-occur with that complaint. For instance, complaints made in face-to-face service encounters may co-occur with quite different speech acts than those made in letters to the editor. Moreover, the participant framework – and, even more specifically, the relationship of the complainant with the addressee – is also relevant in this respect, and this topic will be addressed in more detail below, in the discussion of direct versus indirect complaints.

Subjectivity (Edwards, 2005) is related to how individuals uniquely experience a phenomenon, as well as how they respond to it. With respect to complaints, subjectivity has to do with the various ways in which different individuals package, enact, or perform complaints. In other words, *TripAdvisor* reviewers have at their disposal a number of resources to metapragmatically signal that one of the functions they are accomplishing by writing their review is complaining – or not. Although all 100 of the reviews analyzed can be considered complaints, only one-fifth of the reviewers made some explicit reference to performing a complaint. Interestingly, in these cases, while conceding that what they were doing was complaining, reviewers often stressed the fact that this was an unusual activity for them, and positioned themselves as "not the complaining type." The findings also indicate that, in some cases, *TripAdvisor* reviews can simultaneously function both as a complaint, as well as a "telling about complaint." Some reviewers may choose to use a narrative structure in their *TripAdvisor* review to depict how they issued complaints to the hotel management during their visit, which took place in the past. This suggests that author subjectivity within online "complaint narratives" (Haakana, 2007; Vásquez, 2009) might be an additional area to explore in more detail in future research on online complaints. Similarly, it would be interesting to examine how the reporting of actions and events are combined with evaluations in narratives in these texts.[10]

As for the second research question, the analysis shows that the majority of *TripAdvisor* complaints can be characterized as "indirect," or third-party, complaints. However, the analysis also revealed that the internet provides the opportunity for complaints to be both direct and indirect simultaneously. In other words, complaints online can – at the same time – address both the entity responsible for the complained-about actions or circumstances, as well as some other third party(s). Interestingly, in this particular forum, hotels do have the opportunity to respond to consumer complaints. However, several studies (Briggs et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2008) suggest the majority of hotels are currently not taking advantage of this function as much as they could be. The present study confirms this: of the 100 negative reviews analyzed, only one was followed by a response from the hotel. This has interesting implications for the authors of online reviews. Although it is clear that most authors of online reviews are primarily addressing an audience of fellow travelers, some seem to be aware that there is a possibility that the hotel management will also read the review – and, indeed they may construct their reviews with this dual audience in mind.

Consequently, while the binary distinction (i.e., direct/indirect) may be appropriate for classifying complaints in face-to-face interactions, the distinction may be less clear-cut in CMC complaints. As public texts that can be accessed by anyone, online complaints may be designed for a particular addressee, for a general undefined audience, or for both. In terms of their participant structure, or "who complains to whom about what," online complaints are quite different than face-to-face complaints. In face-to-face complaints, the speaker and address typically know one another, in at least some capacity. However, in online complaints, the complainant and addressee most likely do *not* know one another at all, their identities may not be at all transparent to one another, and the only feature that the two participants may actually share is some knowledge of/interest in the complained-about entity. In this respect, the participant framework – especially the relationship of the complainant to the addressee – is basically the reverse in online complaints as it is in face-to-face complaints.

According to Heinemann and Traverso (2009) "who complains, about whom/what to whom is of major importance for the way in which the complaint develops" (p. 2382). There is no doubt that complaints develop differently in an online forum, where people do not "know" one another in the same way they do in face-to-face interactions. As was illustrated, the differences in participant structure allowed online complaints to be simultaneously direct and indirect. With respect to other features of complaints, Heinemann and Traverso (2009) also claim that in face-to-face interactions, complaints require delicacy and implicitness because they make the complainant vulnerable, and that therefore, explicit "complaint-devices" like extreme case formulations, idiomatic expressions, and negative observations "only surface in extraordinary situations"

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[10] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

(p. 2381). Although not the explicit focus of this investigation, the examples of CMC complaints discussed earlier suggest that the reverse may be true of online complaints: because of the relative anonymity of both author and address, the complainant is not vulnerable; the complaint does not need to be delicate/implicit; and explicit complaint devices abound. This is supported by the finding that approximately one-third (or conversely, nearly two-thirds) of complaints did *not* include any positive commentary. Indeed, example 11, with its explicitness, ECFs, and idiomatic expressions, is quite representative of the majority of these unmitigated and categorically negative complaints in this small corpus. Future research will help shed light on whether this trend appears in online complaints found in other sites.

As Web 2.0 technologies continue to expand and develop, more and more websites for products and service are offering consumers forums for posting their reviews. However it is important to remember that besides these types of venues, online complaints may also occur in other formats as well – in email, on social networking sites, etc. Future research on online complaints will need to focus on these and other genres, as well as on data collected from a wide variety of online sources. Additional research which investigates features of online complaints (i.e., the ones discussed here, as well as potentially others), will help more clearly establish the parameters along which CMC complaints, in general, differ from spoken, written, or elicited complaint data. With the participatory potential of Web 2.0 technologies – which allow users to not only share information, but also to interact with one another in various ways – interest in pragmatics online is sure to grow.

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Camilla Vásquez is an Assistant Professor in the Department of World Languages at the University of South Florida. Her discourse analytic work has appeared in journals such as *Discourse Studies*, *Narrative Inquiry*, *Research on Language and Interaction*, and *Text & Talk*.