

“Please Don’t Come Back”: A Pragmatic Study of Chinese Netizens’ Complaints Under Pandemic of COVID-19

Xin Xie¹ ✉ Yaqi Liu² and Deeana Kasa³

¹Student, M.A. (Thai Language), Department of Thai Language, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand

²Student, M.E. (Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages), The College of Literature and Journalism of Sichuan University, P.R. China

³Lecturer, Department of Thai Language, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand

✉ **Corresponding Author:** Xin Xie, **E-mail:** xiexin29@outlook.com

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 25 October 2021
Accepted: 14 November 2021
Published: 27 November 2021
DOI: 10.32996/jhss.2021.3.11.9

KEYWORDS

The Speech Act of Complaints,
Language and COVID-19, Chinese
Internet Context

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze Chinese netizens’ speech act of complaints under pandemic of COVID-19 by Searl’s felicity condition of speech act (1969) and discuss with politeness theories. Researchers collected data from the comment area of a short video on Douyin in September 2021. The result shows that there are 11 strategies employed to complain about the returnees, namely Suggestion, Statement, Order, Irony, Expectation, Expressing negative emotions, Request, Criticism, Asking for reasons, Calling for empathy, and Exclaiming strategies according to the order of most to least. In uneasy situations, Chinese speakers still try to employ polite strategies to express their dissatisfaction, however, they may threaten listeners’ “face” inevitably.

1. Introduction

Corona Virus Disease 2019, or as a well-known name of COVID-19 nowadays, was found firstly at Wuhan City, Hubei Province, P.R. China, around December 2019. After that, it was continued to be found in other countries around the world. After a long time of the pandemic, today (September 2021), there still hasn’t been a good way to cure this disease directly, while quarantine, a way of preventing and screening virus, was being widely applied almost the whole world. Due to the complex situation of the pandemic of COVID-19 outside mainland China, people who returned from outside mainland China excluding Macao must be quarantined in a certain hotel for 14 days and in their own houses for another 7 days or 14 days depending on different provinces, which means a total of at least 21 days quarantine must be taken before they could move about freely. However, such a strict policy could not screen this sly virus all the time. There were still a few people who tested positive after a long time of quarantine, which was going to result in a widely local test and lockdown, and a loss of freedom and economics of locals. Recently, in September 2021, there was a case of tested positive after full quarantine in Fujian Province, which resulted in a lot of loss to locals and drew the attention of the whole country. Even though there wasn’t a clear answer that amount of time of quarantine was responsible for these causes or mistakes of quarantine hotel should take the responsibility or something else, numbers of people complained about those who returned (or planned to return) from outside mainland China with different kinds of words and sentences.

Those words and sentences in all kinds of styles are academically interesting because people or netizens could express their opinions and emotions freely in the online world, where there are echoes of their words, and they are traced hard. For example, “quarantine for 6 months” (隔离6个月) “Because of one person’s coming back, everyone would be in trouble together.” (一个人回来了, 大家都要跟着一起遭殃) Readers can tell speakers’ dissatisfaction clearly from above words, but speakers were naturally expressing emotions not in a direct way. Maybe they wanted to keep their politeness and save “face” or gave others’ “face”, maybe they even didn’t notice that they were always in a polite way, the content may be seemed as impolite sometimes as well. Those

complaining words make returnees² get mentally hurt and give some stereotypes to readers as well, such as returnees equal to who has affected virus, which is not true at all. Moreover, it seemed like a contradiction between returnees and locals may be built, that went an opposite way against duties of politeness in China, as Gu (1990) suggested politeness *seems to have assumed two new duties, to enhance social harmony and to defuse interpersonal tension or conflict*.

After literature review, it was found that most of the researches on the speech act of complaints in Chinese focused on language ontology and language contrast nowadays (Zhang, 2008; Kang, 2010; Cao, 2018), and it was only found several works about the speech act of complaints under online context which were related to this paper nearly. For example, (Hu & Li (2019), Hu (2020), Jin & Yuan (2020) studied the speech act of complaints to online purchases in English and/or Chinese, and Li (2021) studied the speech act in danmaku appearing in a short video at www.bilibili.com in Chinese. These researchers found that it was important to study the speech act of complaints under online context, because of differences between online context and face-to-face context, and complaining's "face" threatening act. Chinese preferred to complain indirectly of soft words. Researchers haven't found any works related to studying the speech act of complaints on online social media to a certain group of people especially under pandemic of COVID-19 directly in Chinese. Researchers, therefore, were interested in studying the speech act of netizens' complaints about returnees.

2. Literature Review

Austin (1962) said that language usage under communication context involved not only utterances telling truth, but also trying to conduct a speech act. After that Searl (1965) said, a speaker, a hearer, and a speaker's utterance involved a speech situation. While the speaker was saying something, he had performed some acts as well. Later he (1969) mentioned that a speech act includes two parts which are propositional content and illocutionary acts, and he set up felicity conditions to divide different kinds of speech act which include four conditions namely propositional content, preparatory precondition, sincerity condition, and essential condition.

Olshain & Weinbach (1987) thought that the speech act of complaining is a kind of speech act expressing speakers' displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to past or ongoing behavior which could result in a bad effect to speakers, while Kang (2010), a Chinese pragmatic researcher, said that complaints are speakers' one kind of negative evaluation to past or ongoing status, to ventilate negative emotions such as anger dissatisfaction.

Thus, researchers defined the speech act of complaints in this paper by Searl's felicity condition as follows, 1) propositional content: messages of speakers must be regarding people who want to return from outside mainland China under pandemic of COVID-19 or the action of returning. 2) preparatory precondition: speakers believed that such persons or actions could cause losses or damages to themselves or others under the pandemic of COVID-19. 3) sincerity condition: speakers intended to complain about such persons or actions, or losses may be caused. 4) essential condition: purposes of speakers' complaints are to ventilate annoyance dissatisfaction and discomfort and try to change listeners' actions or decisions. This frame helps to determine whether the sample data belongs to the speech act of complaints in this paper.

3. Methodology

Firstly, researchers reviewed related academic works, theories and established a definition to screen data according to the conditions of the speech act of Searle (1969). Researchers collected samples (purposive sampling) from comments of a short video (with more than twenty thousand likes and more than twenty thousand comments) on mobile phone applications Douyin (overseas version is Tiktok) which is one of the popular applications in China with hundred million of users. The short video told that a Chinese who was living in Spain went to test COVID-19 for coming back home country because of homesickness, and she promised would be quarantined actively and not hang out anywhere. Samples involved verbal words only, excluding stickers and punctuations. 100 comments involving a total of 135 meeting-conditions utterances were applied to be samples in this paper. Then, researchers analyzed data with linguistic strategies and discussed it with different theories. Lastly, researchers presented results in descriptive research. All presented samples referred to the original orthography.

4. Results and Discussion

Linguistic strategies employed in the speech act of netizens' complaints about returnees on online social media under pandemic of COVID-19, a total of 11 strategies were presented as follows by frequency.

1. Suggestion strategy here means speakers gave some suggestions to listeners (returnees). Maybe they were suggested not to return to mainland China or extend the time of quarantine with direct words. For example, *It's not a good time to come back.* (琺)

² In this paper, returnees refer to mainland Chinese who plan to go back to mainland China from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and foreign countries, and must be quarantined before they can move about freely after landing.

在回来不是很好) *It's okay to come back but be quarantined for at least 3 months.* (回来没关系, 但是至少隔离三个月吧) *Be quarantined for more time.* (多隔离段时间吧)

2. Statement strategy here means speakers presented bad effects or bad results that those who returned from outside mainland China had caused or returnees may cause and presented some features about the virus right now. For example, *Our kids cannot go to school right now.* (我们孩子都上不了学了) *Business stopped, I cannot pay car loans.* (停业车贷供不上了) *This disease had a so long incubation period.* (这个病潜伏期太长了) *This king-bomb was too terrible.* (这王炸太厉害了)

3. Order strategy here means speakers ordered returnees to do or not to do as speakers' minds. In this paper, returnees were ordered not to come back or return to mainland China frequently or not hang out anywhere. For example, *You, do not come here.* (你别过来呀) *Do not come back forever.* (永远别回来了) *Do not come back and cause chaos.* (别回来添乱) *After coming back, do not visit others.* (回来别串门)

4. Irony strategy. Satire mock or irony (讽刺), means to use a metaphor, hyperbole, and other means to expose, criticize or laugh at people or things. (Dictionary Editing Office of Institute of Linguistics of CASS, 2012) Speakers use some artistic expressions to criticize and attack returnees or actions of returnees. For example, *Thank you.* (谢谢你了) Actually speakers didn't want to appreciate listeners, they wanted to express dissatisfactions instead. *Two years ago, you didn't miss home, after the pandemic for two years you started to miss home.* (两年前就不想家啊, 疫情两年后你倒是开始想家了) Actually speakers didn't believe the video owner missed home at that time.

5. Expectation strategy, here means speakers wished returnees to be quarantined for more time or not come back with words such as "wish" (希望). For example, *(I) wished that after quarantine, try to continue to quarantine at home for a time.* (希望隔离后尽量在家继续隔离一段时间)

6. Expressing negative emotions strategy, here means speakers express negative emotions with clear emotional words after hearing news that a people would return to mainland China. For example, *(I) had been afraid.* (害怕了) *Everyone all had been tired.* (大家都累了)

7. Request strategy here means speakers request returnees not to return from outside mainland China with words such as "please" (请) "excuse me" (麻烦了). For example, *If coming back home country, please be under medical observation for 60 days.* (如回国请医学观察60天) *Please be in quarantined for more than a half year by self before going outside.* (请自行隔离半年以上再出门)

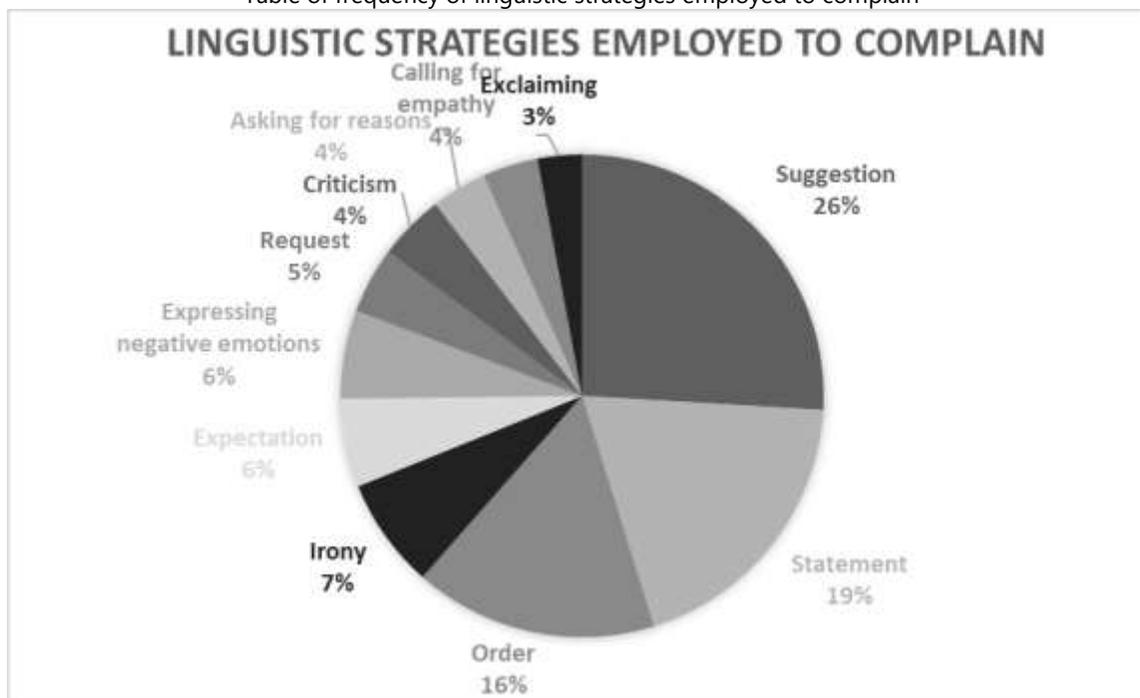
8. Criticism strategy here means speakers use some negative words to criticize returnees' personalities. For example, *Do not sympathize with these kinds of people.* (这种人不要同情的) *Actually people all are selfish, he had many reasons to go and come.* (其实人都是自私的, 他有很多理由去和来)

9. Asking for reasons strategy, here means speaker asked the returnees for real reasons why she/he wanted to go back home country because speakers didn't believe the reason of homesickness that she/he gave. For example, *(I) felt like it's not because of homesick* (感觉这不是因为想家吧) *Why did you not follow the words.* (干嘛不听话呀) Speakers want to ask for reasons why did returnees not take their advice (which was not to come back), and she/he still wanted to come back.

10. Calling for empathy strategy, here means speakers present some cases to call for empathy from returnees to change returnees' minds. For example, *You, come take a look at several-year-old kids in Fujian.* (你来看看福建那几岁的孩子) *Take a look at doctors and nurses who were paying effort in China and kid those who were in quarantine by themselves.* (看看国内付出的医生护士, 还有自己隔离的孩子们吧)

11. Exclaiming strategy, here means speakers use onomatopoeia words to simulate sounds of heaving a sign to express their dissatisfaction. For example, *哎, (ài...).*

Table of frequency of linguistic strategies employed to complain



The above table tells that the Suggestion strategy was the most employed strategy out of 11 strategies, as 26 percentage of data was expressed by it. Statement strategy accounts for 19 percentage, while Order strategy accounts for 16 percentage. Each of Expressing negative emotions, Expectation or Irony strategy was employed about 6-7 percentage separately, meanwhile Request, Criticism, Asking for reasons, Calling for empathy and Exclaiming strategy was less employed strategies that account for no more than 5 percentage.

As for Chinese listeners, when they heard such above-mentioned sentences (the speech act of complaints), most of the returnees may feel uncomfortable, and some of those who were living in mainland China all the time may get some wrong ideas, such as returnees carry the virus and pose a serious threat to security, due to word "do harm to" (害) appeared together with them many times. It also seemed like that complaint speakers tried to divide returnees into another group which was different from the speakers, such as the word "us" (我们) in sentence "Do not come back and do harm to us" Even some speakers suspected their citizenship. For example, "I would like to ask what's your nationality now" (想问一下你现在是哪个国家的人?) As discussed above and content of complaints, those sentences and thoughts express negative feelings, which is justifiable, because complaint speakers' big afraid of COVID-19 as in "already be really afraid" (真的怕了) and "0 infected case policy" in mainland China. It seems like be impolite and destroying social harmony. However, politeness also could be found in those sentences. Most of the complaints were presented in an indirect way such as Expressing negative emotions strategy. (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987) Some Suggestions, Request and Expectation strategies were employed which are more optional and less offensive. (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) Polite addressing words were used as well, such as "大姐" (elder sister) (Gu, 1992) Above-mentioned politeness may be seen as "negative politeness". According to Leech's theory (1983), complaints could be seen as an inherent impoliteness speech act, it's negative politeness that speakers were trying to reduce impoliteness in the inherent impoliteness speech act. It also matches GU's words "It is possible in Chinese to criticize someone (i.e. being impolite in content) politely." (Gu, 1990)

On another side, most of the above speech acts of complaints threatened rights to non-distraction, complaint speakers want returnees to do as their suggestions or orders which are a different way from their origin thoughts, they wanted to go back. It seemed like a negative face was threatening as Brown & Levinson (1987) suggested. However, Gu (1990) found that negative face in Chinese differs from Brown and Levinson's definition. Mao (1994) suggested that "Chinese mianzi foregrounds one's dependence on society's recognition of one's social standing and of one's 'reputable' existence, and subsequently, on society's endorsement of one's bragging about it." We can find that complaint speakers disagree with and did not accept returnees generally from the meaning of speech act of complaints. In other words, speakers did not give listeners' faces.

Internet context played an important role in how to express complaints in this paper's context. On the one hand, the internet context means speakers and listeners didn't know each other mostly. Speakers would like to use politeness more. (Leech, 1983; Gu, 1992) On the other hand, the internet context offers non-face-to-face and non-real-time communication so that speakers can hide real one of them and express themselves freely. (Ploykhao, 2008)

The metaphor RETURNEE IS KING-BOMB (王炸) was used several times. Actually, "KING-BOOM" is the greatest card combination in one of poker card games at first because of the meaning of great damage of bomb, later some people use this word to refer to things or person that could cause great damage. This metaphor reflected great damages in the speakers' eyes.

5. Conclusion

The researchers applied Searl's felicity condition of speech act (1969) and discussed several politeness theories to analyze and discuss with collected data. It found that netizens employed 11 strategies to complain returnees' the act of coming back, namely Suggestion, Statement, Order, Irony, Expectation, Expressing negative emotions, Request, Criticism, Asking for reasons, Calling for empathy, and Exclaiming strategies according to the order of most to least. Otherwise, we discussed some politeness phenomena involved in their expressions. For example, they tried to express their dissatisfaction indirectly. However, as listeners, they could feel speakers' dissatisfaction clearly and get mentally hurt from the words. It accords with "It is possible in Chinese to criticize someone a polite way." (Gu, 1990) We hope this article could enrich Chinese language usage studies especially under pandemic of COVID-19.

References

- [1] Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- [2] Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Cao, Q. (2018). A Contrastive Analysis of Speech Act of Complaints Between Chinese and American Customers. M.A. thesis, Zhejiang Normal University.
- [4] Gu, Y. (1990). Politeness phenomena in modern China. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2): 237-257.
- [5] Gu, Y. (1992). 礼貌, 语用与文化. *Journal of Foreign Languages Teaching and Research*, 9(4): 10-17.
- [6] Hu, Y. (2020). 网络交际中英汉抱怨言语行为对比研究. *Literature Education*, 17(6): 118-120.
- [7] Hu, Y. and Li, M. (2019). A Comparative Study on Complaining Between Britain and America from the Perspective of Variational Pragmatics: Taking Online Product Comments in Amazon as an example. *Journal of ZHEJIANG INTERNATIONAL STUDIES UNIVERSITY*, 19(6): 12-18.
- [8] Jin, M. and Yuan, Z. (2020). On Complaints of Chinese Online Shopping Reviews. *FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH*, 20(4): 9-14.
- [9] Kang, L. (2010). A study on the Speech Act of Chinese Complaining. M.A. thesis, Jinan University.
- [10] Lakoff, R. (1973). The logic of politeness: or, minding you P's and q's. *Papers from the 9th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago Linguistic Society, 292-305.
- [11] Leech, G., N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman.
- [12] Li, Y. (2021). 认知语用视域中的弹幕抱怨言语行为研究. *Modern Society*, 13(18): 85-87.
- [13] Mao, L. (1994). Beyond politeness theory: 'face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 21(5), 451-486.
- [14] Olshtain, E. & Weinbach, L. (1987). Complaints: a study of speech act behavior among native and nonnative speakers of Hebrew. *The Pragmatic Perspective: Selected Papers from the 1985 International Pragmatics Conference*: 195-208.
- [15] Ploykhao, S. (2008). The act of complaining about the Webboard. M.A. thesis, Chulalongkorn University.
- [16] Searl, J. R. (1965). What is a speech act? in Maurice Black (ed.), *Philosophy in America*, London: Allen and Unwin: 221-239.
- [17] Searl, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Dictionary Editing Office of Institute of Linguistics of CASS. (2012). *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*. The Commercial Press.
- [19] Zhang, J. (2008). A Pragmatic Study of the Speech Act of Complaining in Chinese. M.A. thesis, Northeast Normal University.