

The act of complaining in Brunei—Then and now

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Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate the English complaint speech act in Brunei Darussalam, a country in South East Asia where English is the second language. Based on a corpus of letters of complaint written by Bruneian English speakers to the then only English medium newspaper in the country the Borneo Bulletin over a 17-year period from 1988 to 2005, the paper attempts to (i) make explicit the move structure of the public complaint speech act; (ii) ascertain the degree of politeness in such complaints, particularly of a personal nature and (iii) compare changes, if any, in the politeness of these public complaints over a 17-year period. In addition to using the Swalesian move analysis, a two-level directness scale-modality marker model was also utilised to determine the degree of politeness in the letters of complaint. The results show that this genre has changed markedly over the period under investigation. The act of complaining has metamorphosized from one that was indiscriminately direct and aggressive to one that is direct but diplomatic and polite.

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1. Introduction

In looking at language used in everyday life in Brunei 18 years ago, Hamdan et al. (1991) made this claim:

Language is supposed to reflect the feelings of its user. In addition to that, language is also used as a yardstick to the education and learning of its user. A speaker is said to be ‘tidak tahu bahasa’ (does not know language) if he uses rude words and words which are not appropriate for a situation. Such a person does not speak properly, and does not behave according to the rules of courtesy (p. 80).

He went on further to state that politeness lies in making language less direct and blunt through “metaphors, euphemisms, or allusions” (p. 80). These are valued highly “because they evoke vague thoughts, somehow appealing to some deeper meanings which in the end suit the goals of the conversation” (p. 80). Thus, polite language is equated with indirectness, a quality that expresses “the refined moral values of the Brunei people” (p.81). Certainly, in talking to Bruneian colleagues, and after living in Brunei for close to 20 years, this impression still appears to hold true. Here, in any interactive encounter, be it in Malay or English, the indirect way is much preferred over the direct alternative because it is deemed more polite and less confrontational. Confrontation in any form is considered not only to be rude, but also aggressive, a trait quite alien to a generally peace-loving nation like Brunei.

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While *Haji Hamdan et al. (1991)* was concerned with polite language in everyday life, it would be interesting to find out if the same impression holds true for language used in other more specific domains in Bruneian life. Of particular interest to this paper is whether the courteous or polite language written about in everyday Bruneian life extends to the act of complaining, specifically when it is carried out in the second language of its people – English. Complaining in this paper concerns the personal complaints by the local people against the various public authorities in the country expressed in letters to the editor of the most widely read English language newspaper in Brunei, the *Borneo Bulletin*.

1.1. *Complaints and politeness*

Before proceeding further, we have to consider the term “complaining”: what it is and what constitutes an act as a complaint. A review of the term from the pragmatics viewpoint would seem most useful for our purposes. Although studies on complaints and the act of complaining, particularly from a cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics standpoint, have not been extensive (*Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993; Tatsuki, 2000*), some ideas about what it is have been provided in the field of general pragmatics. *Searle (1976)* calls complaints expressive speech acts, and as the term suggests, they exhibit, consciously and unconsciously, the psychological state of the aggrieved party. However, contrary to Searle, this paper considers the complaint act not to be a single utterance but rather as a combination of several utterances taken together. This combination is called a speech act set (*Murphy and Neu, 1996*).

In looking at expressions found in complaints, *DuFon (1995)* claims in many instances it is more a case of griping rather than complaining where often the aim is not so much to seek redress for a wrong suffered but to lighten the “load” by sharing it with someone else. *Eggin and Slade (1997)* use the term ‘whinging’ (p. 1370) to describe a similar situation in casual conversations. In their studies on casual conversation, they use the term ‘whinging’ to express a speaker’s attitude towards people, things or events. Although their study is not directly related to the present study, this element of amplification in casual conversation is certainly present in written complaints when one considers that a complainant may well express some kind of stress or frustration (*Tatsuki, 2000*). This could lead a complainant to become emotionally upset and start criticising the agent(s) responsible, particularly if s/he is not familiar with the complaint act of the target culture. *Murphy and Neu (1996)* found this to be the case in their study of American native English speaker and Korean non-native English speaker complaints in an American university. Their study showed the criticism element to be present in more than half of the Korean students’ complaints but found none in the complaints of the American students. In such cases, the aim of a complaint may not necessarily be to seek redress but to express frustration over an act deemed to be unacceptable behaviour. While acknowledging the griping, whinging, and criticism elements of complaints, this paper focuses on personal complaints and takes as our definition of a complaint that offered in *Olshtain and Weinbach (1993)*. According to them, complaining is a speech act where

the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance – censure – as a reaction to a past or on-going action, the consequences of which are perceived by S (the speaker) as affecting her unfavourably. This complaint is usually addressed to the hearer (H), whom the S holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action (p. 108).

From this definition, it is possible to assume a further ‘justification’ element to a complaint. It is a justifiable act in response to a “socially unacceptable act” (*Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993:108*), the latter being a precondition for a complaint to take place. In addition, we can assume that response to a socially unacceptable act could well be face-threatening for the agent of the act. It is not surprising, therefore, that integral to any discussion of the complaint act is the notion of politeness, the indication of the addressors’ ‘face’.

According to *Brown and Levinson (1987, 1989)*, “face” is a trait all humans possess, equivalent to what we might call self-esteem. Thus, in responding to a socially unacceptable act, the face or self-esteem of the addressee may be threatened. Based on the assumption that in most encounters, there is always the threat of a loss of face for one or more of the interlocutors, Brown and Levinson believe that acts like complaints may usually be accompanied by some form of redressive language aimed at compensating for the potential loss of face to the addressee. Central to the issue of “face” in a potentially face-threatening act such as a complaint is the notion of politeness.

How then does one assess the politeness of an act such as complaining? The face-saving strategies put forward by *Grundy (2000)* may suggest that the degree of politeness may be evaluated by looking at the level of directness of a complaint. The more direct a complaint, the more impolite it is. This linear relationship between directness and degree of politeness of a complaint, however, may not always hold true. If one is to go along with Brown and Levinson’s “face” theory mentioned above, then it may be assumed that the more direct a complaint, the more polite the

complainant will strive to be through some form of redressive language. However, House and Kasper (1981) found in their study of complaints between native English speakers and German speakers that directness of complaints alone does not say much about the degree of politeness of a complaint. They had to also look at the modality markers of the complaints. Furthermore, it was the modality markers that determine the degree of implicitness or explicitness in mentioning the offence, in expressing the complainant's evaluation of the act, in describing the addressee's agentive involvement and the speaker's opinion about the addressee and the offence, all of which impact the degree of politeness in this particular speech act.

Leech (1995) argues that politeness may not only be expressed in the content of the speech act but also in the way it is being managed and structured by the participants involved. He was referring to hedged performatives, which serve to mitigate impoliteness through the use of indirect speech utterances (Leech, 1995; Peccei, 1999). Thus, a direct speech utterance: *Are you married? (impolite)* could be prefaced with the indirect form: *May I ask if you're married? (polite)* (Leech, 1995:139). His argument may also hold true for the request for corrective action in a complaint. Here the request can be direct and impolite: *Improve the payment system in the telephone billing department*, or it could be direct and polite: *Please improve the payment system in the telephone billing department*. Conversely, it does not mean that an indirect utterance will always be seen to be more polite. Irony and sarcasm, which can be said to be quite common in a speech act such as complaints, could either serve to support or exploit politeness (Leech, 1995; Roberts and Kreuz, 1994; Dews et al., 1995; Colston, 1997; Toplak and Katz, 2000).

1.2. The act of complaining as a genre

The model employed in this paper to track the historical change in the Letter of Complaint is based on genre theory and draws heavily on Miller (1984), Halliday and Hassan (1985), Swales (1981, 1990) and Bhatia (1993). This model posits that a genre is a social activity designed to achieve particular goals by linguistic means (Miller, 1984; Halliday and Hassan, 1985). A genre is defined as a series of communicative events which have a similar communicative purpose (Swales, 1990). The genre under investigation in this study, the Letter of Complaint, has the rather obvious purpose of expressing dissatisfaction with a situation or an activity. To narrow the focus of our study we only look at personal complaints directed towards official authorities such as government departments, quasi-government departments and private organisations.

A second feature of a genre is that it has an identifiable discourse community who are able to participate in the genre and if necessary, provide feedback (Swales, 1990). In the case of the Borneo Bulletin, the discourse community encompasses not only readers in Brunei but also in Sabah and Sarawak, the states of eastern Malaysia, where the newspaper is sold. The discourse community is able to participate in the genre by reading the Letters of Complaint and by sending their own opinions to be published.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of a genre for our type of investigation is the notion that it is composed of a series of units of purpose initially called elements by Hasan (1989) but now more commonly known as moves after Swales (1981, 1990) and Bhatia (1993). Each genre is made up of a series of obligatory and optional moves which are arranged in an allowable order. For any example of a genre to be effective it must contain all the obligatory moves in an acceptable order. The role of the obligatory moves is to enhance the communicative effectiveness of a particular instance of a genre. Bhatia (1993) also noted that certain moves can be realised through a number of different strategies depending on the tactics a writer or speaker may want to use. Thus by identifying the obligatory and optional moves, the allowable move order and the strategies and linguistic features used to realise them, we can track any changes in the Letter of Complaint that have occurred over a particular period of time.

1.3. The act of complaining in Brunei

While there have not been many studies in the area of the complaint speech act in the Brunei context, the few initial studies showed that in complaining, Bruneians tended to avoid confrontation of any form (McLellan, 1996; Othman and McLellan, 2000). In a textual study of letters of complaint written in the Borneo Bulletin, McLellan (1996) claims that most introductory sentences tend to adopt an indirect or gradual approach to the main complaint through a buffer move that seeks to "preface the criticism with a positive statement, thereby showing that the criticism is not to be mistaken for disloyalty and is not intended as an attack on the country or the ministry concerned" (p. 234). This claim, however, came under question in Ho (1998) in a revisit of this area of complaint. She showed that contrary to McLellan

(1996), letters of complaint written by Bruneians tended to follow a “straight-in” pattern of introductory sentence that could be both direct and confrontational as in the data below:

I have a complaint about DST’s procedure of cutting off lines for delay in the payment of bills [...]
 I’m writing to wake up some of the staff and their bosses at the Land Transport Department [...]
 I just don’t understand what’s going on at the housing unit of the Ministry of Education [...]
 (Data source: Ho, 1998)

Perhaps the confusion lies in the way in which a buffer was defined in the initial studies. Included in the definition of a buffer in Othman and McLellan (2000) are strategies such as identification of addressee(s), identification of writer, a general statement, narrating one or more incidents, all of which could raise potential problems of interpretation. Making a general statement, for example, could be direct and unpleasant as shown in the examples provided above, in which case it would not qualify as a buffer at all. Even in the third example, where it might seem, through a literal interpretation, the writer is being indirect by putting blame on him/herself, the writer is in fact using an expression commonly associated with exasperation and is therefore being confrontational. Both their definition of what constitutes a buffer and the conclusions they drew from using this definition have been questioned (Henry et al., 2005). In a genre-based study on the use of the English language in complaints in the opinion pages of the Borneo Bulletin, they concluded, in contrast to Othman and McLellan (2000), but in agreement with Ho (1998), that Bruneians do use English to express their anger in a manner which is hostile, aggressive and direct to the point of being confrontational and which is in stark contrast to the true Bruneian identity that seeks peace-loving and harmonious relationships.

2. Purpose and study questions

This paper argues that the different and often contradictory conclusions drawn from the few previous studies on the act of complaining in Brunei may be due to the lack of vigorous studies on the move structure and notion of politeness of the English complaint act here. Previous studies have not made clear what components make up the move structure of the complaint act. Second, the question of the degree of politeness exhibited in this potentially face-threatening act has not been adequately explored. In addition, with Brunei making visible strides towards modernisation, there has been no investigation to determine if the complaint act in Brunei has changed over the years in terms of its structure and degree of politeness. These areas form the focus of this paper. Based on a study of letters of complaint in English written by the public in the Borneo Bulletin over the last two decades or so (1988–2005), this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- (i) What components make up the move structure of the letter of complaint in Brunei and has it changed over the last two decades or so?
- (ii) Has there been a change in the level of directness of complaints over the last 20 years or so, and if so to what extent?
- (iii) Has there been a change in the politeness of complaints over the last two decades or so, and if so to what extent?

3. Methodology

3.1. Selection of letters

The letters of complaint used to create the corpus for this study were from a three-month period in each of the years 1988, 1995 and 2005. They had a clearly identifiable complaint move and were addressed to a government or semi-government organization. Although it is unclear whether letters to the editor from the public were subject to a screening process in the 1980 and early 1990s, presently such letters do undergo screening. According to the present editor, letters are edited for grammar mistakes and any content which is deemed offensive to the public. As such, this was kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this study. In addition, for this study, only those letters written by Bruneians that were personal in nature were considered, meaning that the writer of the complaint was directly affected by the topic of the complaint. From 1988 to 1995, the Letters to the Editor page only occurred in the Saturday edition, while in 2005 this page appeared twice, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. By applying these criteria, the corpus consisted of a total of 112 letters, 27 from 1988, 29 from 1995 and 56 from 2005.

3.2. *Move definitions and analysis*

Taking into account the moves and definitions used in previous studies the two authors independently carried out a move analysis of 15 letters from the 1988 corpus. Following Crookes (1986), their results were compared and the names of the moves and their definitions finalised. Where differences occurred, discussion took place until agreement was reached. One example was when one of the authors suggested that Making a Recommendation for Corrective Action was a separate move from Requesting Corrective Action. After some discussion it was felt that Making a Recommendation for Corrective Action was simply a strategy of the Requesting Corrective Action move and was thus subsumed under this move. After agreement had been reached over the move definitions and the move boundaries for the 15 letters, the remaining letters were similarly analysed. This methodology allowed the first research question to be addressed: what move components make up the Letter of Complaint, and whether the pattern of the move structure has changed over the last two decades or so.

3.3. *Determining the directness levels and degree of politeness in the Stating the Complaint Move (SC)*

Letters from 1988, 1995 and 2005 were analysed in terms of directness levels and modality markers. Here, the Stating the Complaint (SC) move was extracted for analysis. First, the SC move was accorded a level of directness based on the directness scale used in House and Kasper (1981). This scale is based on a progressive eight-point scale from 1 to 8 with Level 1 being the most indirect and 8 being the most direct. Levels 1–4 are all indirect while Levels 5–8 are direct. This scale was found to be uncomplicated on a theoretical level, and after attempting it on a sample of letters, the authors found it to be a useful tool in practice. The descriptors for each level are found in Appendix A. To assign a level of directness to each SC move, the authors again worked independently on a sample of 15 letters and then met to discuss any differences. After working on these 15 letters both authors came to very similar interpretations of the scales. An analysis was then carried out independently on the remaining letters and the results finalised. These results allowed for a comparison of the general levels of directness of complaints in the corpus. A second level of analysis of politeness was carried out through a study of the modality markers found within each level of directness of complaints. A similar observation was documented in House and Kasper's (1981) study, that "on one and the same directness level, quite different effects of 'politeness' may result depending on the kind and number of . . . *modality markers* present" (p. 166). They distinguish between two classes of such markers: downgraders and upgraders. A downgrader is a marker which attempts to play down the impact an utterance is likely to produce. An upgrader has the opposite effect as a downgrader and serves to intensify the impact of an utterance. House and Kasper (1981) have identified eleven main classes of downgraders and six classes of upgraders (see Appendix B for the complete list of classes). Using the same analytical method, a classification of the modality markers was set up in the corpus under the downgrader and upgrader categories.

Following the procedures described above, the authors were able to address the second and third questions set out in this paper: Has there been a change in the level of directness of complaints over the last 20 years, and if so to what extent? Has there been a change in the politeness of complaints over the last two decades or so, and if so to what extent?

4. Results

In order to find out the move structure of the complaint genre, a move analysis was carried out on the letters of complaint for the years 1988, 1995 and 2005 separately to determine the move order that make up the Personal Public Letter of Complaint in a Brunei newspaper. The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 1.

The analysis of the letters found seven moves as shown in Table 1. The Referring to Previous Letters move (RPL) makes a reference to previous complaints made by other people in the Borneo Bulletin. This move presumably is used by a complainant to make a stronger case for the complaint. The Buffering the Complaint move (BuC) contains some kind of positive comment made by a complainant to soften the potential threatening act of the complaint to the agent responsible. Typically, this would be a positive statement made about the public authority or body responsible for the unacceptable act before the actual complaint is lodged. The Stating the Complaint move (SC) is the actual statement of the complaint. The Background Information of the Complaint move (BC) provides relevant background information to help the reader understand the events or situation leading up to the problem. This move is used to clarify and justify a complaint. In the Complainant's Viewpoint (CV) move, the complainant gives his/her opinion about the negative

Table 1

Move components of the Personal Public Letter of Complaint by Bruneians for 1988, 1995 and 2005. Explanations provided in square brackets.

Move component	Frequency of use (%)			Examples
	1988 (N = 27)	1995 (N = 29)	2005 (N = 56)	
Referring to Previous Letters (RPL)	22%	24%	9%	I totally agree with the comments of Sahabat Alam in his letter “Village hit by disruptions in water supply. (1995:7)
Buffering the Complaint (BuC)	11%	21%	23%	The authorities have put in tremendous efforts to ensure that continual supply of water to every house in the country. (1995:2)
Statement of Complaint (SC)	100%	100%	100%	I am a resident of Spg. 545 in Kg. Jangsak, Gadong. It has been more than two years since our main road has been in its sorry state with potholes and unlevelled road surface. (2005:22)
Background Information of Complaint (BC)	93%	72%	95%	Recently, I went to a post office in BSB [Bandar Seri Begawan] to buy some stamps. After I had bought what I wanted, I found that I had five one-cent coins and three five-cent coins. Wanting to get rid of them, I asked for a 20-cent stamp.” (1988:1)
Complainant’s Viewpoint (CV)	41%	31%	29%	I have been to many countries and through many airports and sadly though I’d say that our airport trolley is the worst. (2005:9)
Request for Corrective Action (RCA)	74%	93%	96%	I hope the department [Municipal Board] would evaluate their projects’ feasibility and practicality before they actually carry out the works! (2005:32)
Stating Ill Consequences (IC)	0	17%	4%	This is a serious health hazard [stench emanating from a nearby abattoir] in addition to making the air almost impossible to breathe. (1995:16)

act/situation. In many instances, this is the stage where some criticism is directed towards either the act/situation or the agent responsible. The Request for Corrective Action move (RCA) is a request or a demand for corrective action by the agent responsible. The Ill Consequences move (IC) describes the negative effects a complainant has suffered as a result of an unacceptable act or situation.

Table 1 allows us to determine which moves are obligatory and which optional. If the obligatory moves of the complaint speech act are those that have a frequency of occurrence set at 90% and above then we can determine the obligatory moves for each year. In 1988, two moves are obligatory: the SC move which as the defining move of the genre is present in every letter, and BC move which is present in 93% of the letters. In 1995, the obligatory moves differ in that the BC move is not obligatory but the RCA move is. In 2005, all three of these moves are obligatory. An analysis of the order in which the obligatory moves occur revealed some interesting changes over time as shown in Fig. 1.

The first is that from 1988 to 2005, the letters of complaint in terms of generic structure have moved toward the standard structure of the genre commonly found in business writing handbooks and websites: to state the complaint explicitly, to provide the relevant background information to justify the complaint, and to request for some sort of corrective action by the agent responsible.

The second trend is the gradual introduction of the RCA move in which the writers ask the government body concerned to do something. This might be explained by considering the changes in Brunei over this period which resulted in the general public becoming empowered to demand better services from the government departments even to the extent of asking specific departments to do specific things. In 1988, the only public outlet for complaints to the government was in the Letters to the Editor page of the Borneo Bulletin on Saturdays. In those days the letters page was shared with writers from Sabah and Sarawak and so the number of letters was limited. By 1995, the Letter to the Editor page appeared twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays and there were very few if any letters from Sabah or Sarawak. Moreover, with 1988 being the first year the public was given an opportunity to air their complaints publicly through letters to the editor of the local newspaper, the complaint act was more a cathartic experience rather than one where some form of corrective action from the agent responsible was expected. Thus people were doing what DuFon (1995) claims to be the case with complaints found elsewhere – that they were griping about inconveniences and hardships suffered as a result of an unacceptable act or situation. By 2005, however, most Bruneians were members of the digital age with Internet access and satellite TV. The Internet provided another forum for their complaints; the online Have Your Say which appears on www.Brudirect.bn encouraged the public to air their views, which they

1988	N=27
{RPL} •SC• {BuC} •BC• {CV} {RCA}	
1995	N=29
{RPL} {BuC} •SC• {IC} {BC} •RCA• {CV}	
2005	N=56
{RPL} •SC• •BC• {BuC} •RCA• {IC} {CV}	

Key: { } Optional move
• Obligatory move

Fig. 1. The move structure of the Personal Letter of Complaint in 1988, 1995 and 2005.

undoubtedly did. Thus, despite the fact that airing one's viewpoint publicly seemed alien to the Bruneian way of life, a culture of open self expression gradually developed during the 10 years from 1995 to 2005. This, together with the government's efforts to increase the efficiency of government departments and provide better public services, may well account for the introduction of the RCA move.

The move towards a generic structure more closely resembling the structure recommended in business writing handbooks may well have come about through increased exposure to English through the Internet and also through the education system, which after independence in 1984 began employing hundreds of expatriate native speaker English teachers to support the newly introduced bilingual education system. In the years between 1995 and 2005 schools were producing graduates who had benefited from the bilingual system in terms of their exposure to English and in their ability to use English.

Going back to Table 1, there appears to be a drop in two move components between 1988 and 2005 – the RPL move and CV move. When it comes to complaints, Bruneians seem less inclined to refer to other previous complaints, probably because the RPL move may not be seen to be an effective device to strengthen their own complaints. There was also an overall drop in the CV move. As this move was frequently a criticism aimed at the agent responsible, the drop in frequency of occurrence could mean that Bruneians are now more able to see and state a complaint without looking at the problem from how it affects them personally. This may be because the writers have deduced that a complaint which is objective in nature rather than personal is more likely to succeed. This strategy of being objective rather than personal reflects those of native English speaker complaints found by Murphy and Neu (1996).

Table 1 also reveals the role buffering plays in the attitudes towards the use of buffering in the personal public letter of complaint. In terms of frequency of use, the BuC move is used less than 25% in the letters under study between 1988 and 2005. It was used in only 11%, 23% and 21% of letters in 1988, 1995 and 2005, respectively. This particular finding is interesting because it appears to contradict conclusions drawn from earlier related studies carried out by McLellan (1996) and Othman and McLellan (2000), where it was argued that Bruneians commonly preface a complaint with a buffering move in an attempt to avoid confrontational and therefore potentially unpleasant and rude situations. The fact that they found so much buffering may well be due to their definition of what constitutes a buffer. For them any of the following strategies was a buffer (p. 13):

a compliment or positive statement;
 identification of the addressee(s);
 identification of the writer;
 a general statement;
 reference to a previous letter or article;
 narrating one or more incidents; and
 outlining the background to the complaint.

It is hard to see how any of the last six strategies listed above could possibly save someone's face by softening the blow of the complaint. What these six strategies simply represent is the text that came before the complaint move. In other words Othman and McLellan considered sentences to be 'buffering' based on the position of the complaint within the letter, rather than, as this paper does using a genre model, on the purpose of the parts of the text. Given the

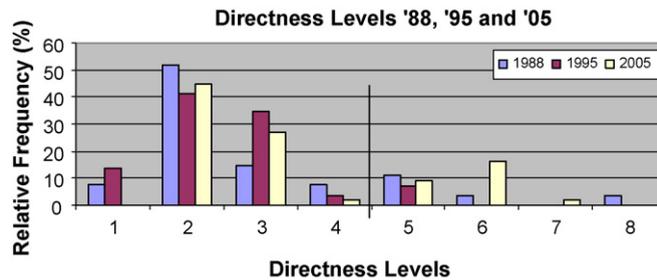


Chart 1. Directness levels of complaints in 1988, 1995 and 2005.

fact that buffering is found in bad news letters in other cultures (e.g. as discussed in Swales, 1990, p. 53), we also doubt that buffering is somehow a uniquely ‘Bruneian’ discourse feature. Buffering, when present, is more likely to be a device which is used to increase the chance of the complaint being dealt with quickly and efficiently. In this study, it appears that when it comes to a grievance suffered personally by the complainant as a result of an unacceptable act or situation which a public authority or body is responsible for, the BuC move may not feature prominently. The main purpose is to lodge the complaint and request for a corrective action to alleviate the inconvenience or suffering of the complainant. This brings us to the second question posed in this paper and that is to examine the pattern of the complaint speech act in Brunei and the extent to which it has changed, or not, over the last 20 years.

In order to investigate whether there has been any change in directness levels of the complaint genre over the 17-year period from 1988 to 2005, we applied House and Kasper’s (1981) taxonomy of directness levels (see Appendix A) to the Stating the Complaint Move which is found in each letter. The following are examples of complaints at the two ends of the scale taken from House & Kasper: by X to Y who has stained X’s blouse: *Odd, my blouse was perfectly clean last night* (Level 1); *You are really mean* (Level 8). The results are presented in Chart 1 below.

Along the Y-axis is the relative frequency of occurrence of complaints for each year at a particular level of directness expressed in percentage terms. The X-axis shows the directness levels. The levels range from being least direct and most implicit at Level 1 to being most direct and explicit at Level 8. For a clearer discussion of the results, a demarcating line is drawn between Level 4 and 5 to distinguish the implicit lower levels of directness (Levels 1–4) from the explicit higher levels of directness (Levels 5–8).

When looked at from the directness levels perspective Chart 1 shows some definite changes in the trend of politeness in the time period under study in the complaint move. In 1988, with the exception of Level 7, complaints fluctuate over the entire scale of directness levels with Level 2 being the most frequent. This spread over the scale for this particular year seems to indicate a certain degree of random occurrence with complaints ranging from being very indirect (Level 1) to those of being so direct as to be rude and aggressive (Level 8).

In 1995, compared to 1988, there was a marked and definite toning down of complaints. During this period, complaints appear to take on a more definite pattern with a larger number of complaints concentrated at the lower levels of directness and tapering off at the middle levels (4 and 5). There were no occurrences of complaints at the higher Levels 6, 7 and 8. Most of the complaints were centred at Levels 2 and 3 and although the socially unacceptable acts were mentioned, no names were explicitly mentioned. The total absence of complaints at Levels 6–8 shows that, as much as possible, the agent responsible for the act was deliberately and consciously left out of the complaint.

The complaints found in 2005 show a quite different pattern of distribution from those in 1988 and 1995. In this year, most of the complaints were distributed between Levels 2 and 7 with no complaints occurring at the extreme ends of the scale 1 and 8. Moreover, there seems to be a higher percentage of complaints clustered around Level 6 when compared to 1988 and 1995. Thus, complaints in 2005 were not so indirect as to be considered “weak” statements. Neither were they so aggressive that they become criticisms aimed at the agent responsible rather than the act. The picture shows a period of evenly distributed complaints.

In answer to our research question, the data reveals significant changes: the 1988 complaints were not discriminating in terms of directness; in 1995 they exhibited a high level of indirectness; but by 2005 such complaints were more acceptably direct. Might it be a bold statement to say that these findings show that Bruneians have developed a more sophisticated understanding of how to complain in English over the years?

So far, we have described the changes in the data from the perspective of the levels of directness. However, being direct or indirect is not in itself an indicator of how polite the complainants were when stating their complaints. One

way to ascertain the politeness of a direct or indirect complaint is to look at the use of modality markers as used by House and Kasper (1981) in a study of politeness markers in German and English complaints. We now look at this aspect in greater detail.

The two major kinds of modality markers – downgraders and upgraders (House and Kasper, 1981) – found in the SC move were identified and compared in the three corpora of letters. Downgraders are markers which play down the forcefulness of a complaint while upgraders serve to increase the impact a complaint is likely to have on the agent responsible for the socially unacceptable act or situation. An analysis was carried out on the number and kind of modality markers found in the complaints at their different levels of directness. The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 2.

The highest frequency of downgrader markers occurred in 1995 (0.52) and the lowest frequency in 2005 (0.29). The reverse is true for the upgrader markers. Here, the highest occurrence is in 2005 (0.34) with the lowest occurrence found in 1995 (0.14). This finding, however, does not mean that complaints were more impolite in 2005 compared to that in 1988 and 1995. Although a lower frequency of downgrader markers are found in the 2005 letters compared to 1988 and 1995, the highest frequency of these markers per letters occurs in Level 7 (2) on the directness scale. Thus, the more direct a complaint, the more there is the tendency by the complainant to downplay its impact with a downgrader marker. It should be noted that this finding may be due to the fact that at this level of politeness there was only one letter and this letter exhibited the two downgraders. And even though the highest total number of upgraders is found in 2005, most of these markers are concentrated at the lower Level 3 (9) and not at the higher levels of directness. The non-linear relationship between modality markers and directness levels in 2005 supports Brown and Levinson's

Table 2

Frequency of downgraders and upgraders across the scale of directness levels for 1988, 1995 and 2005.

Modal markers	Directness levels								Total
	1 N = 2	2 N = 14	3 N = 4	4 N = 2	5 N = 3	6 N = 1	7 N = 0	8 N = 1	
1988									
Total no. of downgraders at this directness level	1	6	3	1					11
Frequency	0.50	0.43	0.75	0.50					0.41
Total no. of upgraders at this directness level		3	1	2					6
Frequency		0.21	0.25	1					0.22
Modal markers	Directness levels								Total
	1 N = 4	2 N = 12	3 N = 10	4 N = 1	5 N = 2	6 N = 0	7 N = 0	8 N = 0	
1995									
Total no. of downgraders at this directness level		6	7		2				15
Frequency		0.50	0.70		1				0.52
Total no. of upgraders at this directness level		2	2						4
Frequency		0.17	0.20						0.14
Modal markers	Directness levels								Total
	1 N = 0	2 N = 25	3 N = 15	4 N = 1	5 N = 5	6 N = 9	7 N = 1	8 N = 0	
2005									
Total no. of downgraders at this directness level		3	8		1	2	2		16
Frequency		0.12	0.53		0.20	0.22	2		0.29
Total no. of upgraders at this directness level		2	9	2	2	4			19
Frequency		0.08	0.60	2	0.40	0.44			0.34

N: number of letters; frequency: the number of occurrences divided by the number of letters (N).

(1987) theory of politeness, that the more direct and face-threatening the utterance, the more the speaker seeks to employ some face-saving linguistic strategy to soften the impact of the utterance on the hearer.

An observation that emerges from the tables is that there appears to be a marked absence of modality markers at the higher levels of directness in 1988 and 1995. There were in total 17 modality markers found in the 27 complaints in 1988, all of which occur at the lower levels of directness. In 1995, there were 19 modality markers in the 29 complaints under study. While downgrader modality markers do occur at directness Level 5, there were no upgrader modality markers occurring at the same level. The reason for the absence of modality markers is not clear. It could be that in the earlier years, Bruneians might not have been aware of the impact of modality markers in potentially face-threatening speech acts. Thus, the picture becomes less clear when it comes to looking at whether there has been a change in the trend of politeness of complaints over the last two decades. What the findings show quite clearly, however, is that the complaints exhibited a higher degree of sophistication in the use of modality markers in 2005 when compared to 1988 and 1995.

A closer look at the kinds of downgrader and upgraders modality markers found in the letters showed these markers to fall into eleven different types of downgraders and six subtypes of upgraders (see Appendix B). The categories of the different types of modality markers for each year were then correlated against the directness levels of complaints to ascertain the kinds of modality markers used at the different levels of complaints. The results are shown in Tables 3a, 3b and 3c in Appendix C.

From these tables, it appears that the most frequent class of downgrader modality marker for all three years is the *Forewarn*. It accounts for 45% of 1988s downgraders, 40% of 1995s downgraders and 56% of the total for 2005. Furthermore, all the *Forewarn* downgraders appear to occur only at the lower levels of directness (Levels 1–3) in 1988 and 1995, but they also occur at the higher levels of directness in 2005 (Levels 5–7).

The *Forewarn* downgrader was used more often as a face-saving device in 1988 and 1995 in the sense that it serves to downplay the potential negative impact of a complaint on the agent responsible as in these examples from the corpus:

(1988:19) Although there is a wide selection of books in the adult section (in the public library), there are only detectives and hard cover mystery books.

(1988:11) When the new postal code system was introduced, we were told it would significantly improve the country's services. But I can report that in some instances the opposite is true.

(1995:20) There have been book fairs, seminars on the benefits of reading books, countless good advice from high ranking officials to encourage on the reading of books. Yet, the Brunei national library and other public libraries contain books which are lacking in quality.

(1995:21) It is a sad fact, especially when our country is attempting to diversify its economy, that not only the unskilled ones are jobless but the graduates are having the same problem.

(1995:11) As a long-term resident of Brunei Darussalam, I have joined its citizens in taking pride in the many developments which have taken place in many fields. Occasionally, unfortunately, one finds that an area had taken a retrogressive step. I write about the parcel post system.

The *Forewarn* marker in the above extracts taken from 1988 and 1995 seek to preface the actual complaint with positive and often general comments. General comments appeared as appreciative remarks about what the agent has achieved: "... *there is a wide selection of books in the adult section...*"; "... *there have been book fairs... encourage on the reading of books.*" Also, personal positive remarks tended to be endorsed by public praise through the use of the inclusive 'we' and 'our': "*our country... attempting to diversify its economy*"; "... *I have joined its citizens in taking pride...*" In a sense, it is as though the complainant is taking extra effort to ensure that the agent should not suffer a loss of face by the actual complaint. Thus, we could say that the *Forewarn* marker tended to be more agent-oriented.

The *Forewarn* is also the most frequently occurring downgrader marker in 2005. And although, it also generally functioned as a complimentary and positive device, its manner of expression differs somewhat from those between 1988 and 1995.

(2005:19) My husband and I are retired citizens. We started a small business in town hoping to be on our own while waiting for the children to grow up. But the Labour Licence took 10 months to get renewed.

(2005:20) RTB (Radio Television Brunei) is fast approaching its 30th anniversary but production of some programmes has not improved at all. Instead it seems to go from bad to worse.

(2005:30) First of all, I must say that I really appreciate the university accepting my daughter, though I was annoyed and frustrated over the way the ‘Halehwal Pelajar’ (HEP) staff treated her when she went to lodge in her application.

(2005:25) People that I have been dealing with at the Immigration department have always been very nice and courteous. But I want to share my first unpleasant experience at the Immigration Department.

From the above examples taken from 2005, the Forewarn markers tended to be a positive comment confined to the complainant’s personal viewpoints. Note the exclusive use of ‘I’ to refer to the complainants themselves: “. . . I really appreciate the university accepting my daughter. . .”; “People that I have been dealing. . . always been very nice and courteous”. Even if a general comment is made, it is less rhetorical but more specific and matter-of-fact: “My husband and I. . . retired citizens. . . small business. . . labour licence took 10 months to get renewed”; “RTB is fast approaching its 30th anniversary. . .” Thus, the Forewarn marker appears to be used to highlight the significance of the complaint for the complainant. This emphasis on the complainant shows the Forewarn marker to be more complainant-oriented compared to that found a decade or more earlier.

For the upgrader modality markers, Table 3a shows that in 1988, there are two most frequently used subtypes, and they are the *Intensifier* and *Aggressive Interrogative*. Each of these markers account for 33% of the total number of upgraders found in the complaints under study for that year. The *Intensifier* is also the most frequent type of upgrader used in 1995 (75%) and 2005 (42%) as shown in Tables 3b and 3c. The *Intensifiers* are usually adverbial modifiers used by complainants with the aim of intensifying the propositional elements of the complaints. The following are a few examples of instances of the use of the *Intensifier* markers taken from our corpus:

(1988:2) I’m very surprised that no official action has been taken regarding the factory.

(2005:65) I am a regular commuter between Seria and Tungku. What really upsets me is the condition of the highway, mainly from Tutong to Tungku.

The examples above show that while the agent responsible for the complaint may not be explicitly mentioned, the adverbial modifiers “very” and “really” acts to convey strongly the hardship suffered by the complainant as a result of the socially unacceptable act or situation. It is hoped that by intensifying the effect of the act/situation on the complainant, the agent responsible will be able to identify with the inconvenience caused to the complainant and therefore to redress the act or situation.

Thus, on the surface, there appears to be little change in the kinds of modality markers used in complaints over the years between 1988 and 2005. A close study, however, shows some subtle and significant differences. Although Tables 3a, 3b and 3c show *Forewarn* to be the most frequently used downgrader in complaints in 1988, 1995 and 2005, the nature of this particular marker changed quite considerably in 2005. While it was used frequently to “buffer” a complaint in the 1980s and 1990s, in 2005 it was used more to reinforce the justification for a complaint. The results in Table 2a also shows that when it came to using the upgrader modality markers in 1988, there was a tendency among Bruneians to both intensify their grievance and inconvenience and also to explicitly and aggressively mention the agent responsible. In the years following 1988, however, there appears to be an inclination towards showing the displeasure of or inconvenience to the complainant as a result of the act or situation without actively involving or accusing the agent responsible.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that a surface-level move analysis of the Public Letter of Complaint is not sufficient to provide a true picture of how polite a particular letter is. Previous publications in this area differed in their conclusions as to whether Bruneians were polite when writing this genre. Ho (1998) and Henry et al. (2005) found that Bruneians were not as polite as their cultural values might demand, while Othman and McLellan (2000) found the opposite.

All three studies relied heavily for their conclusions on the presence or absence of a ‘buffer’ move. The main reason for the different findings can be found in their differing definitions of what constitutes a buffer. This present study of Public Letters of Complaint in the years 1988, 1995 and 2005 has shown that the presence or absence of a buffer move in itself is not the main contributing factor to the overall politeness of a letter of complaint. By using a more refined instrument, such as that described in House and Kasper (1981), we have shown that the analysis of the complaint move itself allows us to determine how direct each complaint is and in addition, whether this level of directness has been

upgraded or downgraded to convey certain degrees of politeness, intended or not. Using this methodology we have shown how over the 17-year time period from 1988 to 2005 Bruneians have changed the way they write the personal letter of complaint. The act of complaining has metamorphosized from one that was indiscriminately direct and aggressive to one that is direct but diplomatic and polite. Whether this change has created more effective letters is a matter for future research. In addition, we cannot be sure what has brought about these changes in discourse structure and levels of politeness. Although, writing letters of complaint is not part of the school syllabus, there are literally thousands of websites offering advice on how to write the genre. A second area of future research would be to determine the role the Internet has had on business writing in Brunei.

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Appendix A. Directness levels of complaints (*House and Kasper, 1981:159–161*)

X = complainant

Y = agent responsible for the unacceptable act/situation

P = the unacceptable act/situation

1. By performing the utterance U in the presence of Y, X implies that he knows that P has happened and he implies that Y did P
Odd, my blouse was perfectly clean last night.
2. By explicitly asserting that P, X implies that Y did P
There's a stain on my blouse.
3. By explicitly asserting that P is bad for him, X implies that Y did P
Terrible, this stain won't ever come off.
4. By explicitly asking Y about conditions for the execution of P or stating that Y was in some way connected with the conditions for doing of P, X implies that Y did P
Did you wear my blouse by any chance?
5. X explicitly asserts that Y did P
You've stained my blouse.
6. By explicitly asserting that the action P for which Y is agentively responsible is bad, or explicitly stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by Y, X implies that Y is bad/or X asserts explicitly that Y did P and that P is bad for X, thus also implying that Y is bad
You shouldn't have taken my blouse without my asking my permission/You have ruined my blouse.
7. X asserts explicitly that Y's doing of P is bad
I think it's mean that you just take my things.
8. X asserts explicitly that Y is bad
You are really mean.

Appendix B. Modality markers for complaint act (*House and Kasper, 1981:166–170*)

X = complainant

Y = the agent responsible for the unacceptable act/situation

P = the unacceptable act/situation

Downgraders

1. Politeness marker

Optional elements added to an act to show deference to the interlocutor and to bid for cooperative behaviour, e.g. *please*

2. Play-down

Syntactical devices used to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the addressee, e.g.

 - (a) past tense: *I wondered if . . .*
 - (b) durative aspect marker: *I was wondering*
 - (c) negation: *Mightn't it be a good idea . . .*
 - (d) interrogative: *Mightn't it be a good idea*
 - (e) modal: *Mightn't . . .*
3. Consultative device

Optional devices by means of which X seeks to involve Y and bid for Y's cooperation; frequently these devices are ritualized formulas, e.g., *Would you mind if . . .*
4. Hedge

Adverbials – excluding sentence adverbials – by means of which X avoids a precise propositional specification thus circumventing the potential provocation such a specification might entail; X leaves the option open for Y to complete his utterance and thereby imposes his own intent less forcefully on Y, e.g. *kind of, sort of, somehow, and so on, and what have you, more or less, rather*
5. Understater

Adverbial modifiers by means of which X underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition, e.g. *a little bit, a second, not very much, just a trifle*
6. Downtoner

Sentence modifiers which are used by X in order to modulate the impact his utterance is likely to have on Y, e.g. *just, simply, possibly, perhaps, rather.*
Couldn't you just move over a bit
7. – (“minus”) committer

Sentence modifiers which are used to lower the degree to which X commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition. X thus explicitly characterizes his utterance as his personal opinion, e.g. *I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion. I think you've made a mistake*
8. Forewarn

A kind of anticipatory disarmament device used by X to forewarn Y and to forestall his possible negative reactions to X's act. Typically a forewarn is a metacomment about what X is about to do, a compliment paid to Y as a preliminary to a potentially offensive utterance, or an invocation of a generally accepted cooperative principle which X is about to flout, e.g. *far be it from me to belittle your efforts, but. . ., you're a nice guy, Jim, but. . ., this may be a bit boring to you, but. . .*
9. Hesitator

Deliberately employed malformulations, used to impress on Y the fact that X has qualms about performing his ensuing act, e.g. *erm*; stuttering, reduplication
10. Scope-stater

Elements in which X explicitly expresses his subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of his utterance, e.g. *I'm afraid you're in my seat; I'm a bit disappointed that you did P; I'm not happy about the fact that you did P*
11. Agent avoider

Syntactic devices by means of which it is possible for X not to mention either himself or his interlocutor Y as agents, thus, for instance, avoiding direct attack, e.g. passive, impersonal constructions using *people, they, one, you* as “neutral agents” lacking [+ definite] and [+ specific] reference. *This is just not done, Mr. Robinson*

Upgraders

1. Overstater

Adverbial modifiers by means of which X overrepresents the reality denoted in the proposition in the interests of increasing the force of his utterance, e.g. *absolutely, purely, terribly, frightfully. I'm absolutely disgusted that you left the bathroom in such a state*

2. Intensifier

Adverbial modifier used by X to intensify certain elements of the proposition of his utterance, e.g. *very, so, such, quite, really, just, indeed. I'd be really pleased if you could help me*

3. + (“plus”) Committer

Sentence modifiers by means of which X indicates his heightened degree of commitment vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, e.g. *I'm sure, certainly, obviously, really. You should certainly have informed me*

4. Lexical intensifier

Lexical items which are strongly marked for their negative social attitude, e.g. swear words. *That's bloody mean of you*

5. Aggressive interrogative

Employment by X of interrogative mood to explicitly involve Y and thus to intensify the impact of his utterance on Y, e.g. *Why haven't you told me before?*

6. Rhetorical appeal

In using a rhetorical appeal, X attempts – by claiming or implying the non-possibility of not accepting that P – to debar Y from not accepting that P, e.g. *You must understand that, anyone can see that, it's common knowledge that.*

You must understand that this is public property.

Appendix C

Tables showing the types of downgraders and upgraders across different directness levels of complaints in 1988, 1995 and 2005.

Table 3a

Types of downgraders and upgraders across different directness levels of complaints in 1988.

Modal markers (<i>n</i> = 17)	Directness levels 1988								Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Downgraders									
Politeness marker									
Play-down		1		1					2
Consultative device									
Hedge									
Understater			1						1
Downtoner									
– (minus) committer		1							1
Forewarn	1	3	1						5
Hesitator									
Scope stater			1						1
Agent avoider									
Gambit cajoler									
Gambit token									
Gambit appealer		1							1
Total	1	6	3	1	0	0	0	0	11
Upgraders									
Overstater		1							1
Intensifier		1	1						2
+ (plus) committer		1							1
Lexical intensifier									
Aggressive interrogative				2					2
Rhetorical appeal									
Total	0	3	1	2					6

Table 3b

Types of downgraders and upgraders across different directness levels of complaints in 1995.

Modal markers (<i>n</i> = 19)	Directness levels 1995								Total	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
Downgraders										
Politeness marker										
Play-down					1					1
Consultative device										
Hedge										
Understater			1		1					2
Downtoner		2								2
– (minus) committer			3							3
Forewarn		4	2							6
Hesitator										
Scope stater			1							1
Agent avoider										
Gambit cajoler										
Gambit token										
Gambit appealer										
Total		6	7		2					15
Upgraders										
Overstater										
Intensifier		2	1							3
+ (plus) committer			1							1
Lexical intensifier										
Aggressive interrogative										
Rhetorical appeal										
Total		2	2							4

Table 3c

Types of downgraders and upgraders across different directness levels of complaints in 2005.

Modal markers (<i>n</i> = 35)	Directness levels 2005								Total	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
Downgraders										
Politeness marker										
Play-down										
Consultative device										
Hedge			1							1
Understater										
Downtoner										
– (minus) committer										
Forewarn		2	3		1	2	1			9
Hesitator										
Scope Stater		1	2				1			4
Agent avoider			2							2
Gambit cajoler										
Gambit token										
Gambit appealer										
Total		3	8		1	2	2			16
Upgraders										
Overstater			1			1				2
Intensifier		1	4	1	1	1				8
+ (plus) committer		1				1				2
Lexical intensifier			1		1					2
Aggressive interrogative			3	1		1				5
Rhetorical appeal										
Total		2	9	2	2	4				19

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