

Examining the role of face work in a workplace complaint narrative

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In recent years, interest in examining the diverse functions and features of oral narratives told in workplace contexts has grown alongside the body of research investigating the role of language in enacting politeness in the workplace. Yet, to date, there has been little integration of these two strands of inquiry. This paper forges a link between linguistic politeness and some social functions of institutional narratives. Specifically, the micro-analysis of one narrative taken from a corpus of teacher/supervisor feedback sessions demonstrates how the narrator, a novice teacher, negotiates the telling of a complaint narrative to her supervisor along with the politeness demands embedded in the local context of telling. I argue that the speaker's contradictory evaluation of her situation interacts with linguistic politeness (i.e., the need to mitigate a "face-threatening act") in the situated telling of this narrative. Finally, in the spirit of recent work on narrative, which calls for increased attention to context in narrative activities, this paper highlights the importance of considering the interrelationships among factors such as face work, recipient design, production circumstances, and institutional roles and relationships among speakers, in the analysis of institutional narratives.

Keywords: complaint stories, face work, institutional discourse, linguistic politeness, workplace narratives

The last two decades have seen a growing interest in research centering on oral discourse in institutional settings. Since the publication of Drew and Heritage's edited volume, *Talk at Work* (1992), this area of inquiry has expanded beyond conversation analytic accounts of interactions in courtrooms, therapists' offices,

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mediation sessions, and classrooms, to include an ever-growing variety of institutional contexts, speech activities, and methodological approaches. Two recent trends in research on institutional discourse are investigations of the linguistic expression of politeness (particularly as it interacts with power) in institutional settings (e.g., Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Locher, 2004; Thornborrow, 2002; Vine, 2004), and a somewhat smaller body of work examining narratives told by individuals in the workplace (e.g., Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000; Holmes, 2005, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2005). By focusing on issues of linguistic politeness (or “face work”), and the ways in which they contribute in shaping one workplace narrative, the present study forges a link between these two lines of inquiry into institutional discourse.

In the present study, the teller of the narrative is a novice language teacher and her narrative is told to her supervisor during a post-observation meeting. The post-observation meeting, or post-observation conference, is a feedback session that takes place after a supervisor has observed a teacher’s lesson, and it provides an opportunity for the two participants to debrief about the class observed. Because the institutional identities of both participants (teacher and supervisor) are made relevant in this interaction, and because the focus of the talk is on what happens at work, the post-observation meeting clearly represents a type of institutional discourse.

Whether a narrative is told as part of casual conversational interaction, or whether it is told in a more formal institutional setting, discourse analysts have observed that telling a narrative can serve a number of important social functions. Individuals may tell narratives in order to entertain, to resolve tensions, to justify or explain their actions, to demystify and make sense of life events, to complain, to instruct, and so forth. Often, a single narrative may realize many of these functions simultaneously (Marra & Holmes, 2004). In the present study, the primary narrative function in the example analyzed is that of complaint. Because of the “face-threatening” nature of complaints (explained in more detail in the following section), a complaint story presents an ideal case in which to examine the intersection between narrative and linguistic politeness. Before further describing the interaction that is the focus of this investigation, I begin by summarizing concepts central to understanding “linguistic politeness.” Next, I discuss recent work on complaints and “complaint stories,” situating complaints within a framework of linguistic politeness. Finally, I provide an overview of research which has examined linguistic politeness and the post-observation meeting.

Linguistic politeness and face work

Central to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of linguistic politeness is the notion of "face" (or public self-image), which is derived from the work of Goffman (1967). Brown and Levinson argue that all "competent adult members of society" want to claim for themselves both "positive face" and "negative face" (p.62). To speak of an individual's positive face wants refers to the person's desire to be understood and approved of, whereas negative face wants refers to an individual's desire not to be impeded upon. Both aspects of face, Brown and Levinson maintain, are simultaneously relevant in our interactions with others. Certain categories of speech acts (e.g., complaints, requests, threats, warnings) are identified by Brown and Levinson as inherently face-threatening acts (or "FTAs"). Therefore, in order to perform one of these face-threatening speech acts — and, at the same time, to avoid potentially damaging one's social relationships with others — speakers have at their disposal an array of linguistic resources with which they can mitigate, or soften, an FTA. The relational work accomplished through this type of mitigation, or management of an FTA, is one example of "face work." More broadly, however, face work can refer to any discursive work that serves to negotiate speakers' relationships with others.¹

Complaints

As mentioned above, complaints are a type of FTA. Although complaining may seem like a relatively common activity and one that is easily recognizable it is surprisingly difficult to define the speech act of complaining in purely formal terms. Because complaints are not associated with particular speech act verbs (it is quite rare to encounter a spoken complaint delivered as "I hereby complain..."), or with other characteristic linguistic forms, complaints remain a more vernacular rather than technical category (Edwards, 2005). By invoking Sacks' characterization of a complaint — i.e., "routinely a piece of praise plus 'but' plus something else tells you that something is a complaint," (1992, p.358) — Edwards draws attention to the contextually-sensitive and contextually-embedded nature of complaints. That is, a particular utterance removed from its context of production might not appear as a complaint; rather, its interpretation and recognition as complaint are very much contingent on its discourse context.

In spite of the fact that they may be difficult to define in more precise terms, complaints can be described in terms of sharing certain characteristics. Complaints are negative, and usually involve a grievance of some sort (Edwards, 2005). Brown and Levinson (1987) also note that, as FTAs, complaints are often articulated indirectly. When someone complains, according to Brown and Levinson, we recognize

the complaint "...not so much by what they overtly claim to be doing as in the fine linguistic detail of their utterances" (p. 57). Edwards goes even further, by explaining that a speaker can obscure the illocutionary force of a complaint, and by stating that, at times, "speakers may even work against the notion that what they are doing is complaining rather than simply reporting some observations" (p. 7).

The following sets of distinctions about complaints have been proposed. Complaints can be either "safe" or "unsafe." Safe complaints are those in which teller and recipient are co-members of some category (Sacks, 1992), and conversely, unsafe complaints are those in which there is some difference in category membership, or status, between teller and recipient. Complaints can also vary in terms of being direct rather than indirect. Direct complaints are those lodged at the recipient of the complainant's talk, whereas indirect complaints are made about something or someone other than the recipient of talk (Dersley & Wooton, 2000; Drew, 1998). Rather than being viewed as strict dichotomies, both of these sets of distinctions are perhaps best construed as opposing poles on a continuum.

Another distinctive feature of complaints that has been discussed is their constitutive nature. Complaints play a crucial role "in the process of transforming the initially privately experienced and sustained nature of personal troubles into openly acknowledged interpersonal difficulties" (Drew & Holt, 1988, p. 399). In other words, complaints are often the means through which troubles or problems are talked into being. Furthermore, complaints are interactively negotiated and produced. Complainants may need to take special care in designing their accounts to be convincing (Drew & Holt), or — in some cases — to not offend the recipient of their complaint. Previous work in this area has shown that complainants monitor and respond to how their complaint is being received by their interlocutor. Moreover, the recipient's response to a complaint considerably impacts the ways in which the ongoing discourse unfolds. As Drew and Holt explain, "...formulating a version of the trouble in a complaint is shaped by interactional contingencies, such as the responses of the complaint recipient, especially the extent to which the recipient affiliates with the complainant" (pp. 399–400). Therefore, depending on the recipient's response, a complainant may feel the need to make conversational adjustments in his/her subsequent turns at talk.

Shifting emphasis from the teller of the complaint to its recipient, it has been noted that where complaints are concerned, "situated recipient orientation remains a topic in need of investigation" (Edwards, 2005 p. 25). Similar calls for the need to address recipient orientation or audience design have been made in recent work on narrative analysis (e.g., Bamberg, 2007; De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006). Just as complaints are highly context-sensitive, so too are narratives. Therefore, narrative analysts must carefully consider "the situated and contextual nature of narrating as activities, activities that are functionally embedded in sociocultural

practices” (Bamberg, 2007, p. 167). De Fina (2007) has recently stressed that how a narrative develops depends crucially on what preceded the story, as well as on the relationship among interlocutors. She argues that greater consideration of the interactional dynamics and conditions of production is important for future narrative studies. Although De Fina’s observations were made with respect to narratives elicited in research interviews, her observations are certainly no less relevant when considering workplace narratives. Therefore, the present study highlights the role relationships among teller and recipient, the politeness demands of the situation, as well as the institutional context of telling: the post-observation meeting.

The post-observation meeting

Occurring in many educational contexts, the post-observation meeting, or feedback conference, represents a type of institutional interaction: this is due to its setting, the social roles of its participants, and its goal orientation. In it, a teacher and a typically more expert, or experienced, individual meet to discuss a lesson that was the focus of the observation. Because there is usually some element of evaluation or assessment of the teacher’s performance involved (this may be either an explicitly stated goal, or it may be more of an implicit expectation on the part of one, or both, participants), the post-observation meeting has often been characterized as a type of speech activity associated with face-threat (Phillips, 1999; Roberts, 1992; Vásquez, 2004; Waite, 1992; Wajnryb, 1998). Drawing on Brown and Levinson’s notion of face threatening acts (FTAs), a number of authors have identified various FTAs that can, and do, take place during such interactions. For example, Waite (1992) identifies various types of threats to face that the teacher may potentially experience during post-observation meetings, which include speech acts such as orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings, expressions of disapproval, complaints, reprimands, contradictions, disagreements, or challenges.

Several empirical studies of post-observation meetings (e.g., Roberts, 1992; Vásquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998) have focused on the delivery of feedback, and more specifically, on how supervisors perform those FTAs that are most associated with giving feedback. For example, Roberts (1992) investigated the FTAs performed during several supervisor-teacher interactions, which included post-observation meetings. In her examination of numerous meetings, Roberts identified 155 instances of FTAs (i.e., requests, suggestions, orders, demands) performed by seven different supervisors. Although the supervisor’s job may be to provide feedback to teachers during these meetings, there remains an underlying tension: supervisors must balance the competing demands of providing guidance and direction, while attending to teachers’ positive and negative face wants (Vásquez, 2004). Therefore,

in spite of the fact that supervisors occupy a position of expert power in these interactions, they may nevertheless recognize the potential for threats to face, and may work to mitigate any FTAs (Phillips, 1999).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the emphasis in empirical studies of post-observation interactions has been on the kinds of FTAs performed by the supervisor and directed to the teacher. And the ways in which those FTAs are realized linguistically. And while this emphasis is clearly justified (in fact, supervisors *do* perform a good deal of face work in delivering advice and suggestions, as has been discussed by Vásquez, 2004, for example), very little is known about the face work that *teachers* engage in, as they participate in these interactions. In the analysis that follows, I illustrate how one teacher negotiates the performance of a FTA in such a meeting: the act of complaining within an oral narrative of personal experience.

Methods: Data source, setting, and participants

This narrative was one of 15 naturally-occurring (i.e., unelicited) narratives identified in a corpus of 19 post-observation meetings, which were audio-recorded over a two year period. On average, meetings were between 20–25 minutes in length. The educational context in which the meetings were recorded was a small Intensive English Program (IEP) at a university in the southwestern United States. The program offers an English for Academic Purposes curriculum for international students who wish or need to take university-level ESL (English as a Second Language) courses.

The corpus of meetings consists of primarily dyadic interactions between two supervisors, and nine different teachers. In this particular program, the teachers work concurrently toward a graduate degree in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) — so they simultaneously study and teach. In this group, most of the teachers were female, North American, in their late 20s or early 30s, and had, on average, 2 years of some type of (usually unrelated) prior teaching experience. Most of the teachers had done some type of previous teaching, but with different subjects, different populations and/or in very different contexts; all were new to teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to international university students in the U.S.

Michelle, the narrator in this study, was, in many respects, typical of the teachers represented in the corpus: she was female, 28 years of age, and had taught physical education for 2 years in a secondary school. However, Michelle was also atypical in other respects, in that she tended to be more voluble and outspoken than other teachers.² Rachel, the observer/supervisor in this interaction — and the recipient of Michelle's complaint — was also the director of the IEP at the time. It is

well-known that institutions commonly produce asymmetrical role relationships (Agar, 1985), such as that of Rachel and Michelle (i.e., expert/novice; supervisor/subordinate). Yet despite the widespread recognition of such status asymmetries in the literature on institutional discourse, to date, workplace narrative research has not concentrated on the implications of such asymmetries for narrative teller-ship (Ochs & Capps, 2001) or on recipient orientation (De Fina, 2007).

Contextualizing the narrative

Although Michelle tended to produce more talk than the other teachers in her group, this narrative comes from what was, in all other respects, a fairly typical post-observation meeting. Consistent with the literature on workplace narratives (Marra & Holmes, 2004), the narrative happens at a discourse boundary, just as the meeting is beginning to draw to a close. As can be seen in the excerpt below, Rachel, the supervisor, asks Michelle, the teacher, if there is anything that she would like to have addressed in a future observation — or if, on the contrary, she feels good about her Reading class, which has been the topic of the meeting up to this point. Rachel's question is a common supervisor pre-closing move, which serves to open up the conversational floor to the teacher before the meeting ends. However, instead of staying on the topic of the Reading class (i.e., the class that was observed by Rachel) Michelle uses this opportunity to launch her narrative, which is about the other class she is currently teaching: her Pronunciation class. The following excerpt is comprised of the turns that immediately precede Michelle's narrative:

- Rachel: Yeah that was interesting. And then um let's see- I thought that your questionings like you know [unclear] 'Do you remember the words? What other- you know- What do you think? What else?' you know. You really had a lot of good elicitation devices.
- Michelle: mhm
- Rachel: Good. If I were to watch you again would you- um would you have something that you would want me to focus on? Or do you feel pretty good about that class, or...

Michelle's complaint narrative³ immediately follows this inquiry from Rachel. In her narrative, which provides a response to Rachel's question, Michelle changes the topic from her Reading class to her Pronunciation class. In her ensuing narrative, she makes reference to the following situation: Another graduate student-teacher (referred to as "Helen") had been placed by the IEP administration into Michelle's Pronunciation class. With Michelle's consent, Helen was placed in Michelle's class a few weeks after the semester had begun, so that she (Helen) could teach a special

sub-unit on pragmatics, and, in the process, collect some preliminary data for her dissertation. It is this unusual situation — i.e., of one teacher joining another teacher's existing class after the semester was already underway — that constitutes the topic of Michelle's narrative.

It is worth pointing out that Michelle's narrative includes some features of a classic Labovian narrative, such as a conflict, a series of narrative clauses, a past-time orientation, and evaluation; however, there are other features of the Labovian model (e.g., orientation, resolution) that are missing from Michelle's complaint narrative. As Georgakopoulou explains in her recent (2007) work, it has been shown repeatedly that, in terms of their structure, unelicited narratives told in conversational settings tend to “depart significantly” from Labov's original model, which was based on relatively decontextualized monologic narratives elicited during research interviews. As a result, Georgakopoulou — drawing on Bamberg's (2004) notion of “small stories” — proposes the following core criteria for defining small stories, or “non-canonical” narratives: temporality, disruption, and consciousness.⁴ According to these three essential criteria, Michelle's narrative may be considered a “small story.”

Furthermore, because Michelle's narrative occurs within the broader institutional activity of the post-observation meeting (and is relatively embedded in the surrounding discourse),⁵ there are some turns within this overall narrative sequence (reproduced in its entirety as Appendix B) that clearly form part of the narrative, while there are others that do not. As is reflected in the discussion below, both participants' orientation to the story-world versus their real-time interaction is quite fluid. Although within the larger interactional sequence, both participants do, at points, go “in and out of” narrative mode, the analysis below emphasizes the narrative portions of this interaction.

In the following analysis and discussion, I have divided the larger narrative sequence into five segments, for ease of reference. This division is chronologically consistent: each segment is presented and discussed in the order in which it occurred during the original interaction.

Analysis of Michelle's narrative

It has been observed that before elaborating a complaint, speakers may formulate how they are affected (Edwards, 2005) through the use of a first person feeling statement (Drew, 1998), which is exactly what Michelle does here: she begins her complaint narrative by describing her affective state, in her opening statement in lines 1–4: “I feel... really uncomfortable with my Pronunciation class right now.”⁶ Recalling the earlier-mentioned characterization of a complaint by Sacks (as “a

piece of praise” + “but” + “something else”), here the complaint’s contrast of positive + negative comes from the *and*-coordinated “pretty good about Reading” (line 1) juxtaposed with “really uncomfortable with Pronunciation” (line 4).

- 1 Michelle: You know it’s interesting ‘cause I feel pretty good about Reading class,
 2 Rachel: {mhm, and you
 3 should!
 4 Michelle: {and really uncomfortable about- with my Pronunciation class right now.
 5 Rachel: {Oh and
 6 I’ll see that this afternoon!
 7 Michelle: yeah
 8 Rachel: OK
 9 Michelle: And I don’t really know why like- and I talked to Helen about it even.
 10 Rachel: {mhm
 11 Michelle: But
 12 somehow I just feel like I’m not doing a good job with that class. And maybe
 13 it’s more an issue of continuity between
 14 Rachel: {yeah
 15 Michelle: each class, and so that may not- you
 16 may not be able to comment on that so much.
 17 Rachel: {yeah- Yeah but I can look and see.
 18 Michelle: It’s weird though because I think you know I felt really good.
 19 Rachel: {mhm
 20 Michelle: And then Helen
 21 came to the class. And I’m really happy that Helen was there.
 22 Rachel: right right
 23 Michelle: But I also kind of think that I began to feel like I didn’t have ownership over
 24 the class any more.
 25 Rachel: {mhm mhm
 26 Michelle: {and so that I feel- I feel kind of weird now like maybe..
 27 Rachel: Well you had a disjunct.

In terms of its structure, Michelle’s narrative is quite minimal: the main narrative clauses occur between lines 18 and 26. At this point, the actions comprising the essential structure of the story are, in summary:

1. Michelle felt pretty good.
2. Then Helen came to Michelle’s class.
3. As a result, Michelle began to feel like she didn’t have ownership of her class.
4. And now Michelle feels kind of weird.

This rather minimal plot provides the structure for a great deal of surrounding evaluation: before, in the middle, and at the end of the narrative. Evaluation is, of course, a standard component of all narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Labov, 1972; Polanyi, 1989). Yet the abundance of explicit evaluation suggests that the topic of this narrative is one of considerable import for Michelle. In this opening

segment of the narrative, most of the evaluation is communicated in Michelle's descriptions of her feelings: "I feel...really uncomfortable" (lines 1–4), "I just feel like I'm not doing a good job" (line 12), and "I feel kind of weird now" (line 26).

Michelle actually expresses two important contrasts in this opening segment of the narrative. First, in contrast to feeling "pretty good" about her Reading class (line 1), she indicates that she feels "really uncomfortable" (line 4) with the Pronunciation class now. This contrast provides a way for Michelle to introduce a new topic (i.e., the Pronunciation class) into the conversation, and at the same time, the contrast establishes that whatever the problem is with the Pronunciation class, it must not reside with her as a teacher, since her other class appears to be going well. The second contrast is that although Michelle admits to feeling "really uncomfortable" with Pronunciation class right now (line 4), later, in line 18, she indicates that, at some earlier point, she felt "really good" about the same class. This contrast marks the change of state that serves as the main point of Michelle's story.

Besides functioning as the narrative's skeleton, this first set of narrative clauses also contains the beginning of Michelle's complaint, which is that her sense of order has been disrupted by the introduction of Helen into her classroom. Yet Michelle approaches this topic — and her complaint — cautiously. While the source of the shift in Michelle's feelings (i.e., from feeling "really good" to "really uncomfortable") is directly related to Helen's arrival in the class, Michelle inserts a positive comment ("And I'm really happy that Helen was there" line 21) into her implicit complaint. The insertion of this positive comment in the midst of her numerous less-than-positive feeling statements may express her genuine ambivalence about this troubling state of affairs. At the same time, however, this comment may also indicate Michelle's understanding of the need to treat delicately the reporting of her discomfort to her supervisor. In other words, Michelle's "I'm really happy" utterance helps to mitigate the force of her embedded complaint, by balancing a series of negative statements with a positive statement.

From line 1 to line 26, most of Rachel, the supervisor's, contributions consist of minimal responses to Michelle's utterances. After introducing her problem, the end of line 26 is the first point at which Michelle pauses for a few seconds, allowing Rachel to produce a response. Line 27, then, represents Rachel's assessment of Michelle's situation. Rachel adopts an empathetic stance, as she offers her own evaluation ("Well you had a disjunct"). Rachel's evaluation in line 27, can also be regarded as a possible way to end Michelle's story. As Drew and Holt (1988) have pointed out, a teller of a complaint may expect a sympathetic response, and when the recipient ultimately does align with the complainant by providing such a response, this often brings closure to the topic of the complaint. Therefore, at this point, Michelle could have agreed with Rachel's assessment, and then simply moved on to another topic.

However, as can be seen in the next segment, Michelle does not choose to end her narrative here. Instead, she continues with the topic of the narrative by offering possible reasons for her feelings (i.e., maybe the students like Helen better, or perhaps Helen is a better teacher than Michelle is), and by producing more evaluative first-person feeling statements (line 31, “I feel really strange...”; line 33, “I hate feeling that way”) about the situation.

- 28 Michelle: Yeah maybe the students like her better, maybe
 29 Rachel: {laughing}
 30 Michelle: she's better at explaining some
 31 things. And so now I feel really strange about the class in general,
 32 Rachel: huh!
 33 Michelle: {you know and I hate feeling that way.
 34 Rachel: {Yeah I bet- you know but I think that with
 35 time it'll change.
 36 Michelle: Yeah and it's probably more my perception than anything else. I mean there's
 37 only
 38 Rachel: {[unclear]'s true.
 39 Michelle: nine classes left anyway.
 40 Rachel: {yeah
 41 Michelle: And I think Helen wants to do a
 42 couple more things before we end, so we're gonna
 43 Rachel: {oh!
 44 Michelle: probably combine it all.
 45 Rachel: {OK
 46 Michelle: Like
 47 Rachel: {yeah
 48 Michelle: split up the classes
 49 Rachel: {good
 50 Michelle: in thirds. I don't know.

Rachel responds to Michelle's statement about her current feelings about her class (line 31), first with a vocalization of surprise (line 32), and then in lines 34–35, with the (somewhat cliché) prediction that the situation “with time...will change.” The initiation of this response by Rachel (“yeah...but”) is formulated as a standard disagreement structure (Dersley & Wooton, 2000). In recognition of the opposing force of Rachel's utterance, Michelle, in line 36, first agrees with Rachel's prediction, and then downgrades her previous feeling statements by conceding, “it's probably more my perception than anything else.” Although this comment, in its self-reflexivity, is consistent with the subjectivity of Michelle's earlier “I feel” statements, it goes further in attributing the source of the problem more precisely — i.e., presented here as Michelle's *reaction* to a set of external circumstances, rather than to the circumstances themselves.

point, had been listening to Michelle's narrative and offering general assessments, reacts in line 51 to the complaint-level of Michelle's story, by ostensibly proposing a solution to Michelle's troubles. Rachel's reaction in line 51 indicates to Michelle that her complaint has registered as a complaint. But rather than take Rachel up on her offer, Michelle now retreats, by contradicting her previous comments, and revising her assessment of the situation as "fine." To do otherwise would require Michelle to go "on record" as making a complaint. Thus, it is at this point that Michelle must attend to the face needs of her interlocutor, as she formulates her response to Rachel.

In the next segment, in an effort to further explain her position, Michelle shifts from her present-tense evaluation back to past tense, and once again resumes her narrative in line 57. In referring back to the original complicating action of her narrative (i.e., Helen coming to her class), Michelle provides a rationale for her feelings by engaging in what Ochs and Capps (2001) have called "side shadowing," or exploring other possible, hypothetical, versions of experience in a narrative: "if it had been more that we were kind of switching off...maybe it wouldn't have felt so much that way" (lines 57–67). Michelle uses this device to imagine other possible courses of action and their related outcomes.

- 57 Michelle: I just think for some reason like- maybe because she came in part way through.
 58 Rachel: mhm
 59 Michelle: It was li- and then she was teaching these full classes. Like
 60 Rachel: {mhm
 61 Michelle: if it had been more
 62 that we were kind of switching off
 63 Rachel: {yeah
 64 Michelle: during the class
 65 Rachel: {yeah
 66 Michelle: maybe it wouldn't have
 67 felt so much that way.
 68 Rachel: yeah

In the final segment below, we see that following another expression of uncertainty (lines 69–71), Michelle reinforces her earlier "it's fine" statement (line 55), by saying "I'm not so worried about it" in line 71. This utterance pulls Michelle back from the past of the storyworld and places her once again into the present-time world of the interaction with her supervisor. By maintaining her ambivalent stance with her "I'm not so worried about it" utterance, Michelle once again minimizes the face threat of her complaint. After claiming that she is "not so worried about it," Michelle deviates from the narrative — and the complaint — for a moment, by describing how fun the Pronunciation course actually is to teach, and the challenges she faces in trying to determine what content to cover in the course. She concedes

in line 83 that those challenges may also have contributed somewhat to the feelings of discomfort and unease that she described earlier.

In line 85, Michelle returns one final time to the theme of her narrative, to the theme of Helen (referred to indirectly as “this pragmatics thing”), and thus, to the topic of her complaint.

- 69 Michelle: I don- I don't
 70 Rachel: {yeah
 71 Michelle: really know. And I'm not so worried about it I mean- I think
 72 Pronunciation class is a really fun class.
 73 Rachel: mhm
 74 Michelle: And I think there's a LOT of things you can do in it.
 75 Rachel: right
 76 Michelle: I think the hard thing is trying to decide ok how- 'cause you can- I mean
 77 there's SO much
 78 Rachel: {mhm
 79 Michelle: that you can do.
 80 Rachel: yeah
 81 Michelle: And at the same time like you can get off track so easily.
 82 Rachel: right right
 83 Michelle: So I think that those are kinda some issues that have entered in and
 84 Rachel: yeah
 85 Michelle: then breaking it up with this pragmatics thing, which was really good, but
 86 maybe you know right in the middle, I don't know, just kinda strange how it
 87 Rachel: {yeah
 88 Michelle: all worked out. I just feel disjointed.
 89 Rachel: {Yeah and we can talk about that this afternoon.
 90 Michelle: {yeah

Michelle's lexical choice of “breaking it up,” indicates that there has been a rupture in continuity of her class. Indeed, “breaking it up” is Michelle's most explicit formulation of the complaint, and it is noteworthy that it appears at this very delayed point in the narrative sequence. In spite of its clearly negative connotations, Michelle immediately qualifies “breaking it up with this Pragmatics thing” as being “really good.” This negative + positive sequence parallels how, earlier in the narrative, Michelle qualified the complicating action of her narrative (“and then Helen came to the class,” lines 20–21), by adding immediately that she was “really happy that Helen was there” (in line 21). Once again, by inserting a positive statement after a negative evaluation, Michelle softens the negative force of her complaint.

Michelle follows up this return to her narrative with more negative evaluations (“kinda strange,” “feel disjointed”), which are similar to her feeling statements at the beginning of the narrative. The narrative finally ends as Rachel overlaps and, referring to a staff meeting later in the day, makes a move that brings closure to their conversation (line 89). Rachel's turn indicates to Michelle that the topic is

closed for now, and may be resumed later that day. Although it is Michelle's story, Rachel, as the institutional authority, has the power to ultimately decide when it is time to end the narrative sequence, as she does in line 89.

Conclusion

In essence, Michelle uses the oral narrative of personal experience as a discursive resource to explore and explain her feelings, and, in so doing, to indirectly complain about the situation in which she finds herself with her Pronunciation class. The problematic situation takes place in the story world (i.e., the world of the classroom), yet Michelle must balance her complaint story with the politeness demands of the present, real-time world of the post-observation interaction with her supervisor. The length and the ongoing nature of the narrative sequence, as well as the abundance of evaluative devices throughout the narrative, suggests that something about Helen's presence in Michelle's class has been, and remains, a source of concern for Michelle. And yet, in a few instances she claims that this is not the case. In her statements of "it's fine" and "I'm not so worried about it" — which follow the response from Rachel that most clearly orients to the narrative as a complaint — Michelle constructs a contradictory stance.

It turns out that the construction of a contradictory stance may not be so unusual in the expression of a complaint: Edwards (2005), for example, points out that "speakers may work against" creating the impression that they complaining... even when that is exactly what they are doing. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) also note that complaints may involve contradictions. They explain that by making two contradictory claims, it becomes evident that a speaker cannot be telling the truth. And, in this manner, the speaker prompts the hearer "to look for an interpretation that reconciles the two contradictory propositions" (p.221). In this sense then, contradiction may be viewed as an extreme type of indirectness: one in which the speaker leaves all of the inferential work that is necessary for interpreting the speaker's actual position, completely up to the hearer. What is significant in Michelle's narrative is how her most contradictory claims ("it's fine" and "I'm not so worried about it") occur only after Rachel has oriented — and responded — to Michelle's narrative as a complaint. In a similar fashion, Edwards (2005) has demonstrated how speakers (the ones making a complaint) tend to downgrade their evaluations when they receive less-than-enthusiastic responses from their listeners.

As is true of all complaints, Michelle's complaint is inherently negative, as well as face-threatening. Moreover, Michelle's complaint is a particularly unsafe one, given that Rachel, her supervisor, is in a position of expert power and institutional

authority with respect to Michelle. As a result, Michelle's contradictory statements are what make it possible for her to complain to her supervisor, without going completely on-record as doing so. These contradictory statements, then, assist in the delicate face work that Michelle must perform in telling her supervisor something that the supervisor would probably rather not hear: i.e., that she has been adversely affected by a decision made by the program administration. It should also be noted that Michelle is indirect about the precise nature of her problem: Is it "all in her head," as she suggests in line 36? Or is it simply Helen's presence in her class, which makes her question her own teaching abilities (lines 28–31)? Or is it, more specifically, the manner in which Helen's presence in the classroom was established and implemented (lines 57–67, 85–86)? Michelle's ambiguity about the exact source of her troubles — as well as the actual target of her complaint — represents another strategy of indirectness, and another means by which she is able to mitigate her complaint.

Drew (1998) has pointed out that "we do not complain to just anyone: We choose who to complain to, and what kinds of complaints might appropriately be made to which kinds of recipients" (p. 323). The reconstructed versions of past events in a complaint story, as well as the ways in which evaluation is expressed, must simultaneously accomplish important face work with respect to the relationship between the narrator/complainant and the listener/recipient. The primary reason for what appears to be a highly contradictory stance in this particular narrative is a tension between the function of Michelle's narrative (which is to complain) and her awareness of, and responsiveness to, the politeness demands of the situation. Michelle's use of indirectness and contradictory claims represent politeness strategies, which enable her to register a complaint, without going explicitly on record as doing so. Such strategies may be especially useful — and perhaps even necessary — when participants are not status equals: a situation that is typical in many institutional interactions.

In conclusion, this close analysis of one institutional narrative has demonstrated how face work interacts with the telling of narratives in the workplace. More specifically, the analysis has highlighted how the telling of a complaint narrative was shaped by interactional contingencies such as: 1) the need for face work (i.e., mitigation of an FTA); 2) participants' roles and asymmetrical relationship; and 3) the situated responses of the listener/complaint recipient. Consistent with recent trends in narrative analysis, this study evinces the significance and impact of such contextual parameters on the production of narratives. These contextual features play a particularly powerful role in workplace narratives, where discursive rights and responsibilities are rarely neutral, and where individuals' roles and relationships constrain what stories may be told, to whom, and how.

Notes

1. Although Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) has been critiqued for its anglo-centricism, and for being more a theory of face as opposed to politeness (see Watts, 2005 for a review), their elaboration of "face threat" and "face work" have remained highly productive in studies of discourse and interaction.
2. Comparisons of Michelle's proportions of talk with those of other teachers during the same semester are provided in Vásquez (2004).
3. Oral narratives of personal experience can serve as a vehicle for expressing complaints. In fact, a genre of "complaint narratives" has been described by some authors (e.g., Günthner, 1997; Haakana, 2007; also mentioned in Drew, 1998). According to Günthner (1997), complaint narratives typically include the following three features: 1) the narrator/complainant is on the receiving end of some trouble, problem, or wrongdoing in the story world 2) the recipient of the narrative was not a part of the story world; and 3) the individual who is the source of the complainable actions is typically not present during the telling of the narrative.
4. To briefly elaborate on these characteristics, temporality is roughly analogous to Labov's temporal ordering of narrative events, disruption can be thought of along similar lines to Labov's "complicating action, and "consciousness" is related to "evaluation." A far more thorough discussion can be found in Chapter 2 of Georgakopoulou (2007).
5. Georgakopoulou (2007) explains that small stories are often "part of a trajectory of interactions" (as opposed to a "free standing, finished and self-contained unit") and that they are usually "heavily embedded in their immediate discourse surroundings" (p.40).
6. At the same time, it should be noted that Michelle's *feel*-statement also orients to Rachel's preceding turn: "...do you feel pretty good about that [i.e., Reading] class?"

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Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

.	pause of one second
..	two second pause, etc.
,	phrase final intonation
-	cutting off of sound
!	exclamatory intonation
{	overlapping speech
CAPS	emphatic stress

Appendix B: Michelle's Narrative

[minute 12:09]

- 1 Michelle: You know it's interesting 'cause I feel pretty good about Reading class,
 2 Rachel: {mhm, and you
 3 should!
 4 Michelle: {and really uncomfortable about- with my Pronunciation class right now.
 5 Rachel: {Oh and
 6 I'll see that this afternoon!
 7 Michelle: yeah
 8 Rachel: OK
 9 Michelle: And I don't really know why like- and I talked to Helen about it even.
 10 Rachel: {mhm
 11 Michelle: But
 12 somehow I just feel like I'm not doing a good job with that class. And maybe
 13 it's more an issue of continuity between
 14 Rachel: {yeah
 15 Michelle: each class, and so that may not- you
 16 may not be able to comment on that so much.
 17 Rachel: {yeah- Yeah but I can look and see.
 18 Michelle: It's weird though because I think you know I felt really good.
 19 Rachel: {mhm
 20 Michelle: And then Helen
 21 came to the class. And I'm really happy that Helen was there.
 22 Rachel: right right
 23 Michelle: But I also kind of think that I began to feel like I didn't have ownership over
 24 the class any more.
 25 Rachel: {mhm mhm

- 26 Michelle: {and so that I feel- I feel kind of weird now like maybe..
- 27 Rachel: Well you had a disjunct.
- 28 Michelle: Yeah maybe the students like her better, maybe
- 29 Rachel: {[[laughing]
- 30 Michelle: she's better at explaining some
- 31 things. And so now I feel really strange about the class in general,
- 32 Rachel: huh!
- 33 Michelle: {you know and I hate feeling that way.
- 34 Rachel: {Yeah I bet- you know but I think that with
- 35 time it'll change.
- 36 Michelle: Yeah and it's probably more my perception than anything else. I mean there's
- 37 only
- 38 Rachel: {[unclear]'s true.
- 39 Michelle: nine classes left anyway.
- 40 Rachel: {yeah
- 41 Michelle: And I think Helen wants to do a
- 42 couple more things before we end, so we're gonna
- 43 Rachel: {oh!
- 44 Michelle: probably combine it all.
- 45 Rachel: {OK
- 46 Michelle: Like
- 47 Rachel: {yeah
- 48 Michelle: split up the classes
- 49 Rachel: {good
- 50 Michelle: in thirds. I don't know.
- 51 Rachel: Yeah and if it's not something that's comfortable or you feel affected then we
- 52 won't do it
- 53 Michelle: yeah
- 54 Rachel: {I mean
- 55 Michelle: {Well I- I think it's fine.
- 56 Rachel: {mhm
- 57 Michelle: I just think for some reason like- maybe because she came in part way through.
- 58 Rachel: mhm
- 59 Michelle: It was li- and then she was teaching these full classes. Like
- 60 Rachel: {mhm
- 61 Michelle: if it had been more
- 62 that we were kind of switching off
- 63 Rachel: {yeah
- 64 Michelle: during the class
- 65 Rachel: {yeah
- 66 Michelle: maybe it wouldn't have
- 67 felt so much that way.
- 68 Rachel: yeah
- 69 Michelle: I don- I don't
- 70 Rachel: {yeah
- 71 Michelle: really know. And I'm not so worried about it I mean- I think
- 72 Pronunciation class is a really fun class.

