Complaints

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Although the heading of this article features a noun, complaints, in the LSI field one recurrently refers to the social action of complaining—a verb. Broadly construed, to complain is to express suffering or discontentedness as a result of experiencing some trouble.

Complaining is one way of interactionally displaying a negative affective stance toward someone or something. When a person complains, s/he transforms what may have been a heretofore privately experienced intrapersonal or interpersonal trouble into a publicly acknowledged difficulty. Complaints often constitute the first explicit formulation of a trouble, and they tend to be made after complainants have (unsuccessfully) pursued other, more implicit means of remedying that trouble (Drew & Holt, 1988; Emerson & Messinger, 1977; Heinemann & Traverso, 2009).

Understanding the social action of complaining is critical to the study of human sociality, since complaining sequences provide a key locus for the examination of concrete, quotidian social problems (Schegloff, 2005). Complaining is one important practice through which participants to interaction manage their social relationships: Parties observably exercise great care in determining whom to complain to, what kinds of complaints to make to which kinds of recipient (Drew, 1998), and how to coconstruct the complaining activity—which includes how recipients respond. Through complaining sequences, parties can enact morality (e.g., by describing their own or others’ conduct as “right” or “wrong”) as a potent mechanism of social control.

Some of the earliest research relevant to understanding complaining in interaction circumvents the term complain/t by employing the more general term troubles talk (e.g., Jefferson, 1988). Much of the subsequent literature on this topic draws upon the vernacular sense of complain, imbricating other social actions like troubles-telling, criticizing, and accusing or blaming. What exactly constitutes a complaint and/or the action of complaining in recorded, naturally occurring talk in interaction, however, defies formal definition, because it is an interactional phenomenon that participants can manage implicitly or explicitly, concurrently with other activities, and over the course of an extended sequence of conversation.

Troubles and targets

A complainant may invoke a trouble for which there is no clear complainee or person/organization responsible for the trouble (e.g., when a person complains about bad weather, a current illness, or recent accidental self-injury). This type of complaint has
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been examined, for example, in the context of patients’ visits with primary-care physicians and as a recurrent practice that participants use when opening casual and institutional face-to-face encounters (Pillet-Shore, 2008).

Excerpt 1 shows a sequence of interaction involving such a complaint. Mom (M) is arriving at the teacher’s (T) classroom for a parent–teacher conference about her (non-present) first-grade daughter. Mom and Dad (D) are noncohabiting parents. Dad has arrived before Mom and is engaged in conversation with the teacher when Mom enters at line 1. Through his inquiry at line 5, Dad offers a candidate account for Mom’s current state, displaying that he has heard Mom’s out-of-the-ordinary vocal timbre (the prosodic features of Mom’s audible nasality and breathiness noted at lines 1 and 3). Pillet-Shore (2008) shows how arrivers use such prosodic resources as a method for tacitly eliciting a personal state inquiry from interlocutors, after which they can explicitly formulate a complaint.

(1) Pillet-Shore (2008, pp. 397–398) [PT 17]

01 M: [Good morning,= ((nasal))
02 D: [Hey,
03 M: ={h h h h!
04 T: [Mornin:...[g:
05 D: [Are you sick?
06 M: Oh: my god.=hhih huh hh=I have a sinus infection and
07 an inner ear infection.=
08 T: =Oh no_ [: :
09 M: =[I can't breathe< huh hhuh!=
10 T: =I’m sorry:

Starting at line 6 above, Mom replaces Dad’s candidate descriptor “sick” with more granular descriptors (upgrading the severity/seriousness of her sickness), lexically complaining about her current state. The teacher responds by offering a change-of-state expression of sympathy and apology (lines 8 and 10).

Alternatively, a complainant may invoke a relational trouble, expressing a grievance about some state of affairs for which responsibility can be attributed to some particular complainee. Most of the existing literature focuses upon this type of complaining, distinguishing between two rough categories: direct and indirect.

Direct complaints target currently addressed recipients, holding them morally accountable for some transgression. Excerpt 2 shows Gabe (a party guest) complaining, on arrival, about the lack of proper directions from Brad (the host).

(2) Pillet-Shore (2008, pp. 381–382) [Poker Party b-1]

01 BRAD: Oh hi. It’s: (.). Ga:be what’s his [name.
02 GABE: [You know,
03 GABE: [%You didn’t tell me they put up new ho:uses? an’
04 changed thuh way i'n. So .hh I kept driving around*
05 (/*stops talk because he drops soda bottle))...
06 GLENDA: Who wants soda,=
07 DICK: =heh heh
08 GABE: Yeah. .hhh! Um >I so I< kept driving ar:round on
09 ro:ads.=I went- (.). places I didn’t know.
Starting at line 2, Gabe delivers a direct complaint to Brad by formulating Brad’s failure to provide him with helpful directions to the site of this party, using his high pitch at lines 2–3 to enact a display of negative affective stance toward “driving around.” Participants can treat direct complaints as more or less serious or egregious, depending in part upon whether or not they occur within the local context of antagonistic argument (Dersley & Wootton, 2000). Speakers may also deliver direct complaints so they are hearable as initially serious, and then, through subsequent laughter, they can qualify them as “joking” (see Schegloff, 1988, pp. 126–127).

Indirect complaints, on the other hand, target third parties (those who are not the currently addressed recipients) who may either be nonpresent or copresent as a potential overhearer.

In making a complaint about a nonpresent third party, a complainant offers the recipient an opportunity to display affiliation (with the complainant) against that third party (e.g., Drew, 1998). Excerpt 3 shows M delivering, on arrival, an indirect complaint about her nonpresent husband (starting at lines 2 and 4), to which T responds by displaying affiliation with M (e.g., through expressions of sympathy at lines 11, 15–16, and 20) against M’s husband.

(3) [Pillet-Shore PT 10]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>T: Come on in:.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>M: Cin you believe my babysitter didn’t showhh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>T: She didn’t?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>M: [.No. It’s my husband.thh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>T: .hh! huh huh huh huh [hih hih hih hih hih hih hih hih hih</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>M: [hhh hhh hhh hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>T: .hhhh!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>T: What did he&lt; just {}fergeet? Or[,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>M: []Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M: [.hh He’s like out n’ met his uncle, an’ jus’ totally=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>T: [Oh no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M: =fergot. {M’s hands hitting table})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M: pt! [He’s like out in um: [nhh .hh like pa- hhh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>T: [Oh my go2’d.&gt;What- Okay.Is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>he gonna be groud.inded? [er what’s=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>M: [.hhh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>T: =gonna ha(h)p{pe(h)n.hm hm hm hm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 19   | M: [Oh. "I was going off"
| 20   | T: I’d be so upse_t. |

In multiparty conversations (involving at least three persons), however, when one person delivers an indirect complaint about a copresent party, complaint recipients must display a public stance toward the complaint by deciding whether to affiliate with the complainant or with the target of the complaint (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009).

The literature on complaints/complaining generally accepts this direct/indirect dichotomy, with the caveat that some cases cannot be clearly categorized as direct or
indirect (e.g., when a diner in a restaurant complains about the food to fellow diners, this action potentially targets not only the chef, but also the fellow diner who selected the restaurant).

**Explicit devices for making complaints**

Some explicit devices that speakers use for making complaints are negative observations, extreme-case formulations, and idiomatic expressions.

Schegloff (1988) discusses how a negative observation that formulates a failure and/or registers something that did not happen accomplishes the work of complaining (e.g., Excerpt 2, lines 2–4; Excerpt 3, line 2). Pomerantz (1986) observes how extreme-case formulations (e.g., “forever,” “everyone,” “all day”) can be used as part of forming a complaint. For example, Pomerantz discusses a case in which a wife complains about her husband sleeping with another woman on the evening before Mother’s Day and then spending “all day Sunday” with her (pp. 220–221). By specifying the “extreme case” of how long her husband was away, she provides for the recognizability of her husband’s wrongdoings. In addition, Drew and Holt (1988) show how complainants use idiomatic expressions—utterances that are recognizably formulaic and figurative (e.g., “I’m so mad I can’t see straight”)—after recipients have withheld an affiliative response. They show that use of idiom helps summarize the complaint in a way that enhances its legitimacy and moves to bring the complaining to a close.

**Complainability and direct-complaint sequences**

Rather than referring to complaints, Schegloff (2005) argues for referring to “complainability” to highlight the fact that the possibility of complaining can inform interaction without an overt complaint ever becoming manifest in participants’ conduct. “Virtually any situation, any current state or history of a relationship—indeed, virtually anything—can be treated as a complainable” (p. 464).

One regular site of complainability—involve potential direct complaints—is the opening of a telephone conversation: Callers can orient to the possibility that they may have intruded upon those whom they have called (e.g., by waking up the call’s answerer, or by interrupting another activity, such as eating a meal or hosting guests). For example, Schegloff shows the following excerpt in which 14-year-old Bonnie calls her father Norm (with whom she does not live, due to his remarriage). At lines 9–10, Norm mentions something complainable: that Bonnie has called after he was already “in bed.” At line 11, Bonnie apologizes for the complainable timing of her call, after which Norm accepts her apology and mitigates complainability.

(4) Schegloff, 2005, p. 456 and p. 465 (truncated)

01 NORM: Hello:
02 BONNIE: H’lo Daddy?
03 NORM: How’re you doin’.
Excerpt 4 exemplifies the canonical trajectory for a direct-complaint sequence: (1) the aggrieved party’s complaint or mention of a complainable (lines 9–10), followed by (2) some fitted response (line 11), after which there is (3) some uptake of that response (lines 12–13). In conversation-analytic terms, this trajectory begins with an adjacency-pair sequence: a normative framework for actions wherein one speaker’s production of a first pair-part that initiates some course of action (in this case, the action of complaining or of mentioning a complainable) selects a next speaker, who should immediately produce an appropriate second pair-part (in this case, a complaint response). Recurrent second pair-part responses to direct complaints include apology, remedy or offer of remedy, rejection, account/excuse, and/or denial (within complaint sequences of antagonistic arguments, initial replies predominantly consist of “didn’t do it” and “not at fault” denials; Dersley & Wootton, 2000). (Though not a case of a direct complaint, Excerpt 1 shows a similar complaint-sequence structure.)

To illustrate how the possibility of complaining can inform interaction without a potentially aggrieved party articulating an overt complaint, Schegloff also analyzes complaint preemptions during telephone call openings, which recurrently take the form of “Did I wake you?”-type utterances. This phenomenon is exemplified in Excerpt 5, in which the caller and possible complainee takes the initiative at line 3 by inquiring about the possibility that he has interrupted his wife’s sleep, which is based upon hearing her sleepy-sounding voice in her first utterance (at line 2).

(5) Schegloff, 2005, p. 465

((telephone rings))
01 Ms. W: Hello-o? ((sleepy voice))
02 Mr. W: Yeh did I wake yih up?
03 Ms. W: Yea:h.
04 Mr. W: Sorry gal.
05 Ms. W: That’s- [(O.K. Doll),

Rather than waiting for his wife to complain or mention the complainable, Mr. W. formulates the complainability he has inferred from her first utterance, thereby relieving her of the alternative of complaining. His “did I wake yih up?” moves “the introduction of ‘the trouble’ from her mouth to his: hence, ‘complaint preemption’” (Schegloff, 2005, p. 466).
Indirect-complaint sequences

Drew (1998) outlines three general features of indirect-complaint sequences: (1) they exhibit a bounded character—the complaint is often a distinct topic, beginning with a story introduction or announcement and ending with the introduction of a different topic; (2) complainants explicitly formulate a nonpresent party's behavior as being at fault; and (3) complainants overtly display their condemnation of the nonpresent party's behavior through expressions of indignation.

Rather than exhibiting a simple adjacency-pair structure, indirect complaints often emerge over the course of extended sequences of talk. The participant who emerges as the complainant may initiate the sequence cautiously, by only alluding to or mentioning a complainable matter. This action allows the recipient to display his/her own stance or position toward that matter before the complainant makes an overt complaint, enhancing the likelihood that the recipient will affiliate with the complainant.

Thus a complainant's action of topicalizing a complainable makes an affiliative response from the recipient the next relevant action. Affiliative responses include matching assessments, second stories about similar events or experiences, expressions of sympathy, commiseration, cocomplaints, agreements, and apologies. Affiliative responses tend to extend the complaint sequence and may lead to a blurring of the complainant/recipient roles (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009).

Recipients may also disaffiliate with complaints by disattending them in some way. For example, after a complainant introduces a complainable matter, a recipient may ask a factual question or minimize the seriousness of the trouble, thereby challenging its complainability. Because complaining is an activity that typically requires an extended sequence and thus can depart from the general turn-by-turn allocation of talk in interaction, recipients may disregard an incipient complaint in order to prevent the sequence from expanding and the complainant from occupying the conversational floor for a longer stretch of time.

SEE ALSO: Accusatory Discourse; Agreement and Disagreement; Conversation Analysis, Overview; Extreme-Case Formulations; Stance-Taking

References


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