An Exploratory Study of Genuine Criticism Realization and Mitigation Strategies a Case of Movie Interactants

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Abstract

Genuine Criticism (GC) is an evaluative expression of annoyance with an attribute in the interlocutor, whose realization may threaten the positive image of both interlocutors. The current study investigates facework and politeness in performing GCs in different contexts and for interlocutors with low social distance and high status in terms of GC realization strategies and mitigation devices that the speakers employ to soften their criticisms. Data were collected from 70 situations from movies in which GCs arise between interactants. The interactants deal with topics that happen in their daily life. The data were transcribed, categorized and analyzed based on the adapted version of criticizing categorization developed by Nguyen (2005, 2013). The results indicate that interactants with low social distance between them and the speakers who possess higher status employ direct strategies more than indirect strategies when they carry out criticism. Besides, the speakers with higher social distance utilize direct criticizing strategies more often. With regard to mitigation strategies, both groups tend to mitigate their criticisms less often. Exploring the strategies that English NSs employ can help EFL material developers realize and depict a better picture of the strategies in learning materials so that potential learning problems are prevented.

Keywords: Genuine Criticism, Mitigation, Politeness, Interactants

Received: March 2015; Accepted: April 2016

1. Introduction

Speech act of criticizing by its nature is threatening to both the hearer and speaker, thus it is indispensable to use strategies to save the face of both interlocutors and to mitigate its face-damaging effect. The interlocutors might perform some facework to avoid being too direct or impolite. Consider the following example:

You are at war with yourself.

I can't help you but you seem a little at war with yourself and I don't know why.

Genuine Criticism is an evaluative expression of annoyance with an attribute in the interlocutor that is present; it may result in contempt. The point of GC may be for the betterment of the hearer as well as the speaker. GC is different from complaint in that the addressee is not held responsible for the act, but it may imply blaming.

Literature on criticizing in both L1 and L2 is quite scarce. Since 2008, there have been few studies on the face-damaging speech act of criticizing (Nguyen 2005a, 2008, 2013). This neglected speech act has already been the focus of studies in a restricted way in terms of type and realizing strategies. L2 criticism has been studied with respect to giving feedback on the learner' peer correction of written papers in writing courses (Nguyen, 2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b). More biting type of criticism such as criticizing one's appearance or behavior which goes beyond institutional contexts is necessary. Speech act of criticizing along with another speech act of complaint have been considered offensive (Nguyen, 2013).

This study investigates speech act of genuine criticism by analyzing conversations that occurs between interactants in movie excerpts from 12 American movies. The study aims at exploring pragmalinguistic properties of GCs and modification devices that emerge in conversations between

interactants in movie excerpts. For this, the researchers transcribed and analyzed the criticizing situations in terms of the pragmalinguistic and mitigation strategies that the interactants employed according to their interlocutor's social distance and status. Due to the fact that teaching materials do not depict a true and complete picture of speech acts and designers are using merely language intuition rather than empirical data on NS discourse as their source, studies on speech act realizations are of significance (Nguyen, 2013). Especially in an EFL context, exploring the strategies that English NSs employ can help EFL material developers realize and depict the authentic strategies in teaching and learning materials in order to prevent potential learning problems.

A good form of pragmatic input that can provide genuine useful language resource for the learners is the provision of video sequences for the learners. Fernández-Guerra (2008), for instance, employed requesting behavior in TV series to compare the occurrences of request head acts and peripheral modification devices. Alcón (2007) and Martínez-Flor (2007) examined the effect of pragmatic instruction of requests through video sequences as well. The results of the above-mentioned studies confirm the positive effects of using video sequences in the instruction of pragmatics. It is not the purpose of this study to investigate the impact of instruction through movie excerpts; the researchers plan to take advantage of the richness of movies is to explore the strategies that the interactants utilize to carry out criticisms in everyday life.

Studies in communicative situations of family and friends are illuminating with respect to facework and politeness in the field of pragmatics. In communicative situations, the physical setting, the objective of interaction, the interlocutor's role and the communicative event are but few of the interacting factors that affect the communicative event. Studying politeness and facework

in different contexts is important since both vary from context to context. How different contexts may affect the meaning of politeness and facework and how people do facework to modify the consequences of their acts are interesting questions in the field of pragmatics.

Our main purpose in the current study is to investigate facework and politeness in performing GCs in different contexts and for interlocutors with low social distance and high status. The study aims to explore how these two factors may affect facework and politeness. Following questions guided the study:

1. What are the criticizing and its related mitigation strategies that the NS interactants with low social distance and higher status in the movies use?
2. How do these strategies vary according to the social distance and power status of the interactants?

2. Materials

2.1. Movies

The data for the current study have been collected from 50 NS interactants in movies. These movies are selected on account of the fact that the interactants deal with some daily issues in some everyday situations. The interactants are from contexts with low social distance and higher status toward their interlocutors. Data were collected from movie episodes that included GC situations. The rational for using movie episodes is the richness of movies in giving a fairly clear picture of cultural aspects of people's daily life. Gender is not a variable in this study. All the movies and situations were randomly selected.

2.2. The Coding Scheme

Besides, the coding framework designed by Nguyen (2005, 2013) for studying criticizing and mitigation strategies that the interactants in the study employed was adapted. Nguyen (2001) developed a coding framework based on her study on L2 New Zealand English criticisms and criticism responses (Nguyen, 2003). She developed coding categories based on data in her study because there were no coding categorizations available in the literature. Her coding scheme includes direct and indirect criticisms with subdivisions for each such as disapproval, negative evaluation, etc.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from 70 situations in which criticizing occurred in movies. First, the movies were watched carefully in order to identify the criticizing situations according to the definition in the present study. The situations were then studied carefully for identifying the social distance and status of the interlocutors. Next, each situation was analyzed in terms of the pragmalinguistic and mitigation strategies in each situation. All the stages were carried out accompanied by another interested researcher for the purpose of reliability and validity of the data.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data on GCs collected through situations from movie episodes were transcribed, categorized, and analyzed based on the adapted version of criticizing categorization developed by Nguyen (2005, 2013). To obtain inter-rater reliability, an independent interested researcher was recruited to repeat

the process of coding. Besides, to establish intra-rater reliability, the researchers repeated the coding process after a month interval. The agreement rates were 90 and 92 percent respectively. The raw frequency of each criticizing strategy employed by the interactants was calculated and computed. After examining the criticizing situations, the following features emerged.

Explicit criticism of the interlocutor through disagreeing, disapproving, disliking, challenging, or threatening the interlocutor.

1. *Direct* expression of the problem
2. *Disagreeing:* argument against something/somebody that the Hearer appreciates
3. *Disapproval:* expressing the Speaker's attitude about a quality noticed in the H which the S considers unsuitable
4. *Disliking:* expression of dislike toward a quality in the hearer
5. *Challenging:* S's expression of a challenge to criticize a quality in the H
6. *Threatening*/consequences: warning about negative results of the H's quality
7. *Negative evaluation*: negative appraisal of a quality noticed in the H via negation or judgmental adjectives
8. *Cursing:* showing anger through criticizing by saying bad things to the H

Implicit mentioning of the point of criticism via offering changes through giving suggestion, recommendation, persuasion, advice, giving hints, insisting, sarcasm, or teasing the interlocutor

9. *Indirect Criticism*: Demand for change through….
   a. *Suggestion/recommendation*
   b. *Advice*
   c. *Persuasion*
   d. *Insistence*

10. Hints

a. *Presupposition*: the S's assumption that the H is supposed to do/have something but s/he does not

b. *Teasing*: making the H feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by criticizing him/her

c. *Sarcasm*: showing annoyance by saying the opposite of what the S means

Table 1. Categorization of Criticism Strategies and Formulas

Type	Example
11. Direct Criticism: Expression of ….	
a. Problem	You talk more than enough, you're talkative. You're too proud, Mr. Darcy! You are unwelcome in my house. Mike, stop being a Sullivan and start being you.
b. Disagreement	Who is J.J.? My name is Tarzan. Indifferent? That's because she's shy!
c. Disapproval	Oh! Mr. Bennet, how can you tease me so? Have you no compassion for my poor nerves? Might I ask why with so little inadvertent civility I'm thus repulsed? And might I as well enquire why with so evidence a design of insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your better judgment? You are so scary and why haven't any of you ever had a dream? Because I think all people should have a dream.

d. Cursing

You know what, I hope you can't sleep at night. You crusher of little girls' dreams!

You know, I'm just about damn with you. The way you behave is not understandable.

e. Challenge

Do you think you are a better driver than me?

Are you…..are you laughing at me?

This is your reply?

Are you rejecting me?

I mean, have you ever seen a guardian?

f. Consequences

Have you lost your mind? We are gonna work for Dino Brewster.

g. Reminder

Liddy, kitty, what have I told you about listening at the door?

Stop this! He's one of our protectors.

h. Reprimand

Do you think that anything might tempt me to accept the man who has ruined perhaps forever the happiness of most beloved sister?

Do you deny it, Mr. Darcy, that you separated a young couple who loved each other? How could you do that?

Are you listening? You never listen.

Miss Elizabeth I had to see you, I fought against my better judgment, my family's expectations, my rank, the circumstances, ….

i. Downgrading

That's the difference between us. I have mine when I'm asleep.

You heard him; this is party for score students.

Scariness is the true measure of a monster. If you are not scary, what kind of monster are you?

k. Negative evaluation

Mr. Wazowski, what you lack is something that cannot be taught, you are not scary.

Why are you mumbling? You know I don't like it.

I can't help you but you seem a little at war with yourself and I don't know why.

Okay, this is bogus! I don't know who you people think you are, but…

You never should have ripped that thing out of the rock.

l. Addressing

You're too proud, Mr. Darcy!

Mr. Bennet, how can you tease me so?

2. Indirect Criticism

A. Demand for change through….

m. Suggestion

If you want to see the lanterns so badly, why haven't you gone before? Because you should do that.

n. Advice

If you wanna fly with the eagles, you need bigger wings, son!

o. Insistence

You must visit papa!

You know, you really should announce your weapons before you fire them, Mr. Gru, for example, lipstick taser!

p. Confirmation

Enough! Have I not increase our share tenfold since Marcus and the Media are taking their sleep?

He had just saved my life. Was it not you who told me to show a little gratitude? And yourself, have you not gratitude for the one who saved your daughter's life?

2. Hints

q. Presupposition

He wasn't to be harmed. Place him in my charge as we agreed or you will pay for your deceit.

You would disobey. I told you to stay within these walls. You risk too much for a father to ignore! You would lead the wolves to the death dealers.

Hey, I told you guys to get to bed.

r. Teasing

-You heard him; this is party for score students.

- I am a sore student

-I mean for score students who actually, you know, have a chance.

s. Sarcasm

All the world is good and agreeable in your eyes, Jane!

Oh, attitude! That's right. So thanks, but no thanks. And there is a tip. Instead of teasing people and kidnapping them, maybe you should just give them a call.

After analyzing criticizing strategies, the corpus was analyzed for modification devices that the interactants employed to mitigate their criticisms.

2.5. Modification Devices

Because criticizing others might be damaging to both interlocutors, the speakers may intend to use specific strategies in order to soften their criticism. The speaker might also feel at ease if s/he does not employ mitigating devices for criticize the hearer. In any case, the speaker's decision depends on the aim of interaction, the distance between the interlocutors, and the status of them. Mitigation devices in the present study develop after collecting, transcribing, and analyzing the data. In general, the following mitigating devices emerged from the data. After analyzing the data, mitigation devices are categorized as pre-mitigators, post-mitigators, and no mitigators. Pre-/post-mitigators may be internal or external. Mitigators may also be structural or lexical. In what follows, there is a description of these mitigation devices.

Mitigators are devices speakers employ to soften the face of criticizing. Pre-/post-mitigators are mitigation devices that are utilized before or after the head act. These are external to the head act and actually are the same as Nguyen's supportive moves (2013).

Steers are implicit utterances that the S employs to introduce criticizing into her speech.

1. *Nobody appreciates you so why do you work hard for them?*
2. *That's the difference between us. I have mine when I'm asleep*
3. *Mr. Wazowski, what you lack is something that cannot be taught, you are not scary.*

Sweeteners are remarks that the S utilizes to mitigate the offensive effect of the criticizing act.

4. *I can't help you but you seem a little at war with yourself and I don't know why.*

Grounders are the utterances that the S uses to justify her/his criticism.

5. *Have you lost your mind? We are gonna work for Dino Brewster.*
6. *Rapunzel, what a ridiculous person you are because you always ask ridiculous questions.*

By using *disarmers,* the S shows her/his feeling about criticizing the H by "forewarning, apologizing/showing appreciation of the H's effort or self-basing" (Nguyen, 2013, p.113)

7. *Whatever you think of me, I'm sure is wrong.*
8. *If you wanna fly with the eagles, you need bigger wings, son!*

Internal mitigators are modifiers that the Ss use as an integral part of the head act. They are part of the criticism and can be syntactic or lexical. Interrogatives, past tense, or sentences that include modal verbs are regarded as structurally mitigated.

Interrogatives

9. *Why would you ask such a ridiculous question?*
10. *Why are you mumbling? You know I don't like it.*
11. *Do you think you are a better driver than me?*

Lexical mitigators include:

Hedges, phrases that are used to protect the H from the damaging effect of criticizing like *kind of, sort of.*

12. *You're kind of crazy!*

Understaters, phrases that are used to reduce the seriousness of criticizing such as adverbial modifiers such as *a bit, a little, somehow, slightly, rather,* etc.

13. I can't help you but you seem a little at war with yourself and I don't know why.

14. He had just saved my life. Was it not you who told me to show a gratitude?

Downtoners include sentence modifies such as *maybe, possibly, probably.*

15. *Maybe it's that I find it hard to forgive the follies and vices of others.*

Subjectivisers are utterances like *I feel, I think, in my* opinion that the S employs to show his/her general impression.

16. Whatever you think of me, I'm sure is wrong.

17. I know the guardian win.

18. You have a soft head, Seren. I think Da has filled it with stories and dreams.

Consultatives are expressions the S uses to give advice or suggestion to the H like

Why haven't you…?

19. If you want to see the lanterns so badly, why haven't you gone before? Because you should do that.

Cajolers are utterances that are used to persuade the S to listen to the criticism as *I mean, you see, you know.*

20. You know what I hope you can't sleep at night. You crusher of little girls' dreams!

21. You know you really should announce your weapons after you fire them, Mr. Gru, for example, lipstick taser!

22. Okay, this is bogus! I don't know who you people think you are, but…

23. I mean, have you ever seen a guardian?

24. I mean, have you ever seen a guardian? Indirect, NE, intention words I mean,

25. Why are you mumbling? You know I don't like it.

Appealers are the words that indicate urgent attention on the part of the H such as *Okay? Right? Yeah? (Nguyen, 2005, 2013).*

26. Whoa! Whoa, Okay! All right. That's enough of the magic show.

27. Hey, I told you guys to get to bed.

28. How come you are so fat!

29. Come on, that's enough fun. Time to eat. Come on J.J.

This, definitely, is not a comprehensive listing of the strategies and modifiers employed to realize and soften criticizing. Critics might employ a variety of other strategies to realize or mitigate their criticisms in different social contexts according to their culture. Moreover, speakers might intend not to mitigate their critic, and the speech act remains face-damaging deliberately. The next section presents the impact of social distance and status on the way criticism is realized and what mitigation devices are applied to soften the act of criticizing.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Social Distance and Power Status

In this study, social distance refers to the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in terms of "familiarity and solidarity" (Nguyen, 2005, p. 23).And power status implies the amount of imposition from speaker on addressee. Power status might be symmetrical or asymmetrical (Nguyen, 2005).The overall frequency of the criticizing strategies employed by interactants that fluctuate based on the social distance and power status has been presented in table 1. The findings in the study demonstrate that the overall choice of direct strategies along with the no mitigation policy appears to depend on the interactants' neutral social distance (e.g., friends). It can also be the result of

their unequal power status (e.g., boss and employee). The speaker might plan to point out criticism explicitly and to express his/her negative evaluation because s/he holds power. Consider the following examples:

1. *You can't judge a girl by her heels (friends).*
2. *You talk more than enough; you're talkative (rivals).*
3. *Who is J.J.? My name is Tarzan (child -mother).*
4. *You never should have ripped that thing out of the rock (coworkers).*
5. *Are you listening? You never listen. (wife -husband)*
6. *You must visit papa!(daughter-father)*
7. *Enough stories about guardians. (son-father)*
8. *There's nothing wrong with dreams.(brothers)*
9. *You're too proud, Mr. Darcy! (lovers)*

The examples above are criticisms arisen between interlocutors with neutral social distance. Speakers may also intend to mitigate their criticism less due to their higher status compared to the hearer.

10. *You are unwelcome in my house (owner-guest)*
11. *Out of way, Wazowski! You don't belong on the scare floor(monster-a man)*
12. *You heard him; this is a party for score students (group leader/group member)*
13. *This is not gonna work.(coach/trainee)*

Table 2. Frequency of Use of Criticizing Strategies by the Interactants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	problem	2	2.9	2.9	2.9
	downgrade	1	1.4	1.4	4.3
	suggestion	1	1.4	1.4	5.8
	sarcasm	2	2.9	2.9	8.7
	presupposition	1	1.4	1.4	10.1
	confirmation	2	2.9	2.9	13.0
	insistence	1	1.4	1.4	14.5
	disapproval	28	40.6	40.6	55.1
	disagreement	7	10.1	10.1	65.2
	N evaluation	15	21.7	21.7	87.0
	cursing	2	2.9	2.9	89.9
	challenging	2	2.9	2.9	92.8
	reminding	2	2.9	2.9	95.7
	consequences	2	2.9	2.9	98.6
	reprimand	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Figure1. Frequency of Use of Criticizing Strategies by the Interactants

The acts of criticism taken from movies do not vary much in terms of the realization and mitigation strategies. As you notice from table 1, interlocutors with neutral social distance made use of 'direct criticism' most frequently. For instance, they tended to rely more predominantly on 'disapproval' and 'negative evaluation', and to a lesser extend 'disagreement'.

An important fact in the case of criticizing is its complexity in terms of different strategies of which a criticism may be composed. Nguyen (2005) has already mentioned this point. For instance, a criticism may be composed of an expression of 'reprimand', 'reminding', and 'disapproval'. This makes categorization of the strategies even more difficult. Consider the following examples:

1. *Mr. Wazowski, what you lack is something that cannot be taught, you are not scary.* (addressing the H, steering, statement of the problem)
2. *He wasn't to be harmed. Place him in my charge as we agreed or you will pay for your deceit.* (presupposition, consequence)
3. *Do you think that anything might tempt me to accept the man who has ruined perhaps forever the happiness of most beloved sister? Do you deny it, Mr. Darcy, that you separated a young couple who loved each other?* (reprimand, reminding, disapproval)

Moreover, the S may also draw on other speech acts such as requests, refusals, and compliments sarcastically to convey criticism.

4. *Stop this! He's one of our protectors.*
5. *Out of way, Wazowski! You don't belong on the scare floor.*

More importantly, it is difficult to categorize some strategies on account of the fact that they are the same on the face of it while they imply different strategy types. Take the following question uttered by an interactant:

6. *Do you think you are a better driver than me?*

Does it convey a challenge or is it consultative? It is the speech set that is the criticism and criticism response that help determine the intended meaning and criticizing strategy. Finally, the mitigation strategies that were determined from this corpus are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Use of Criticizing Strategies by the Interactants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	steer	12	17.1	17.1	17.1
	disarmer	12	17.1	17.1	34.3
	grounder	2	2.9	2.9	37.1
	consultative	2	2.9	2.9	40.0
	cajoler	5	7.1	7.1	47.1
	appealer	8	11.4	11.4	58.6
	addressing	8	11.4	11.4	70.0
	No mitigators	21	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

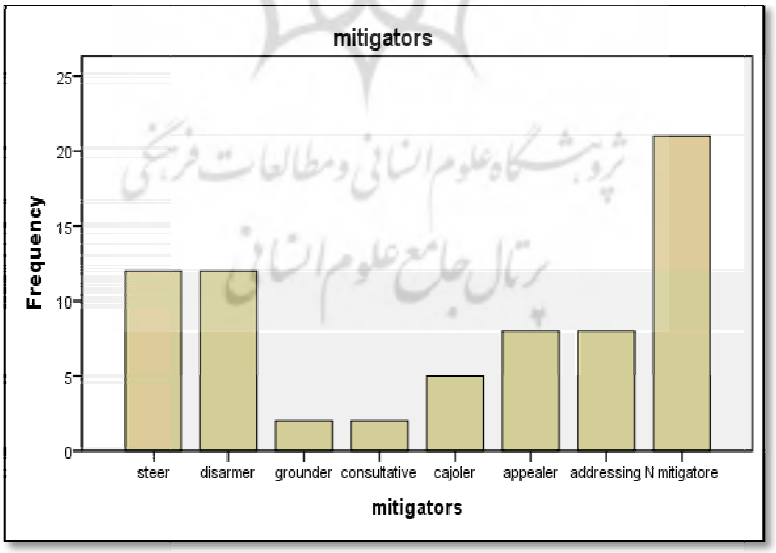

Figure 2. Frequency of Use of Mitigators by the Interactants

Table 3 demonstrates how frequently interactants avoid mitigating their criticisms. This finding is in line with the results achieved from investigating the strategies the interactants employ to realize criticizing. Explanation for this phenomenon is that for interaction with neutral social distance and Ss with higher power status 'no mitigation' strategy seems more appropriate i.e. interlocutors with low social distance and higher status criticize their Hs directly and they employ mitigation strategies less often. The interactants do not seem to be concerned with saving face of their addressees. Most of their criticisms are not grounded or disarmed. 'No mitigation' strategy seems more preferable. However the results for realization and modification strategies are the same for both groups (neutral social distance and higher power status), the explanations for this phenomenon are different. One possible explanation is that 'direct criticism' and 'no mitigation' strategies occur more frequently for the interlocutors with neutral social distance due to their familiarity and solidarity with the H. It seems to the Ss in this group that direct criticism without modification is not imposing. Contrary to the first group, givers of criticism who hold higher status in the second group most likely prefer an imposition through direct criticism and no mitigation, and the S inclines to indicate the point of criticism explicitly. This is in line with Nguyen's finding that "the speaker might have also felt less hesitant to explicitly indicate the problem or express his or her disapproval because he or she holds higher power status than the unpunctual co-worker" (2013, p. 120).

4. Conclusion, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

Daily discourse is the outcome of the relationship between a number of contextual factors. Interactants adapt themselves to the situations with respect to the object of the interaction, the social distance between them and their status, to mention but a few, and decide what to say and how to express it. The study concerns speech act of Genuine Criticism in the field of pragmatics. In the first look, it might seem impossible to distinguish GC from the speech act of complaint; however, this study indicates that GC is different from complaint in terms of purpose and the interaction that goes on between the interactants. Yet, in some cases, GC blurs the boundary between the two. The impact of social variables of power status and social distance between interlocutors on how they perform criticism was the concern of this study. The results demonstrate that interactants with neutral social distance on the one hand, and interlocutors with higher status on the other, prefer to criticize their recipients directly without using modifications. The findings of the study also adds to the very few studies which have been dealt with the neglected speech act of GC in terms of coding scheme for measuring it.

The coding framework presented in the study has great implications for studying GC with the same social variables in different social contexts. The results of the study also contribute to developing EFL materials in terms of presenting criticizing strategies and modification devices that the learners require to learn for communicating criticisms correctly and appropriately.

However, further research is required on other varieties of social distance like when the social distance between the interlocutors is greater i.e., between acquaintances and strangers. Future research is also needed to take the contexts in which the speaker holds lower power status than the hearer and

manages to criticize a higher-status recipient into consideration. Finally, yet importantly, future studies are required to take broader contexts of workplace, home and family, school, university into consideration to achieve more information about facework and politeness on GC realization and mitigation strategies.

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