



Regional Variation in English Complaint Realizations: Evidence from Cameroon, Canada, and South Africa

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Abstract

This study compares how speakers of Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English perform the speech act of complaining. Using 231 responses to a Discourse Completion Task involving peer-to-peer and student-to-professor scenarios, the analysis draws on variational and postcolonial pragmatics. The results show clear cross-varietal differences in complaint strategies, head acts, and modifiers. Peer complaints most often involve requests for behavioral change, while complaints to professors typically take the form of requests for clarification or solutions, used more frequently by Canadian and Cameroonian speakers than South Africans. External modifiers also vary: Cameroonians favor greetings, apologies, and announcements; Canadians rely more on justifications and reminders; and South Africans use more preparatory acts in asymmetrical contexts. Internal modifiers differentiate the groups as well, with Canadians using more grammatical softeners, Cameroonians relying on consultative devices, and South Africans employing a balanced mix, including collaborative markers. Intensification patterns further distinguish the varieties. Overall, the findings show that complaint behavior reflects not only situational factors like power and distance but also sociocultural norms of specific English varieties. The study underscores the importance of examining intralingual pragmatic variation across global *Englishes*.

Keywords: Complaint Strategies, Variational Pragmatics, Regional Variation, Postcolonial Englishes, Pragmatic Modifiers

Introduction

Complaints constitute a fertile line of research in pragmatics because they are inherently face-threatening and socially delicate communicative acts. As expressions of discontent or dissatisfaction, complaints challenge interpersonal rapport and require speakers to balance clarity, politeness, and social alignment. While extensive research has examined complaints across languages and cultures, comparatively little attention has been

paid to how this speech act varies across regional varieties *within* a single language. This gap is particularly notable for pluricentric languages such as English, whose global dispersion has produced distinct sociolinguistic norms and pragmatic conventions. Variational pragmatics provides a framework for investigating how speech acts are shaped by region, gender, age, etc., offering an avenue for understanding intra-lingual pragmatic variation. In postcolonial contexts, where English coexists with multiple local languages and historically rooted communicative traditions, expectations surrounding politeness, directness, and imposition may diverge significantly from one region to another. The study is based on the assumptions that:

“in any language each illocution can be performed in different ways. The different structural patterns and lexico-semantic devices conventionally available for performing a given illocution (“conventions of form” [...]) represent different strategic options for the speaker, termed “conventions of means” [...]. The strategies and forms conventionally employed to realize a given speech act differ across varieties of the same language.” (Schneider 2005: 101–102)

It explores complaint realizations in three regional varieties of English, namely Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English, using elicited data from two scenarios. By examining the strategies, head acts, and modifying devices employed by speakers across these contexts, the study aims to identify patterns of regional pragmatic variation and to highlight how linguistic and sociocultural factors shape the performance of complaints. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in variational and postcolonial pragmatics by demonstrating the extent to which complaint behavior reflects locally meaningful norms of interpersonal communication. In the following, we begin with the presentation of the theoretical background (section 2), in which we define the communicative act of complaining and briefly present variational pragmatics and postcolonial pragmatics, the frameworks used in the study. We then outline our methodology in section 3, and present our research findings in section 4, after which we discuss aspects of our findings and conclude with remarks and perspectives for future research (section 5).

Theoretical Framework The Communicative Act of Complaining

Complaining is a speech act used to express negative feelings about a situation for which the speaker holds the hearer responsible. Such acts emerge when the hearer’s behavior violates social expectations (Chen et al., 2011). Researchers distinguish between direct complaints, addressed to the offender, and indirect complaints, directed to a third party (Boxer, 1996). This study focuses on direct complaints. In speech act theory, complaints are considered expressive acts (Searle, 1986) and are inherently face

threatening (Trosborg, 1995). They challenge the addressee's positive image and their desire for autonomy. As Edmonson (1981) notes, a complaint can call the hearer's social competence into question, and Leech (1983) describes complaints as conflictive acts that disrupt social harmony. A key characteristic of complaints is the lack of a fixed linguistic form. Unlike requests or apologies, complaints can take many forms and may also serve other communicative functions (Chen et al., 2011). They may appear as a single utterance or as a sequence of moves. In multi-move complaints, the main component, the head act, may be accompanied by greetings, explanations, apologies, or other modifiers that soften or intensify the face-threat. Several coding systems have been developed to categorize complaint strategies. Trosborg's (1995) influential model describes strategies along a continuum of directness, from subtle hints to explicit blame and includes eight subtypes. More recent work by El Dakhs and Ahmed (2023) proposes a streamlined set of six categories, while Laforest (2002) identifies six strategies specific to French, ranging from mild allusions to direct criticism or behavioral demands. Complaints have been studied across many languages and contexts, including American English (Boxer, 1996), Chinese (Du, 1995), Peruvian Spanish (Garcia, 1996, 2009), and German (Günthner, 2000), as well as in cross-cultural and second language research. Together, this body of work shows that complaints are highly variable and shaped by cultural norms, linguistic resources, and interactional expectations.

Variational Pragmatics

Research on complaints has increasingly adopted the perspective of variational pragmatics, especially in pluricentric languages such as English (Rinnert & Iwai, 2003), French (Lochtman, 2022; Albert, 2016), and Arabic (El Dakhs & Ahmed, 2021). This shift responds to a limitation in traditional cross-cultural pragmatics, which has tended to treat languages as internally uniform systems (Barron, 2005). Yet, as Barron and Schneider (2009) note, speakers of the same language do not necessarily share the same cultural norms, while speakers of different languages may converge when cultural values align. These insights highlight the need to examine intra-lingual variation, not just differences across languages. Although major projects such as the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) investigated multiple languages, they did not systematically compare varieties within the same language. At the same time, dialectology, despite its long-standing focus on regional and social variation, has traditionally centered on phonology, lexicon, and grammar rather than pragmatic behavior (Schneider & Barron, 2008). As a result, cross-cultural pragmatics overlooked regional variation in language use, while dialectology paid little attention to communicative functions.

Variational pragmatics emerged to fill these gaps, positioned at the intersection of sociolinguistics and pragmatics (Schneider, 2010). Its goals are to bring regional and social

variation into pragmatic analysis and to broaden dialectology to include the pragmatic level. In this sense, the field represents both the “pragmaticisation” of dialectology and the “dialectologisation” of pragmatics. Its central focus is pragmatic variation within a single language, particularly across regional or national varieties of pluricentric languages. The field rests on three core principles (Barron & Schneider, 2009): (a) *empiricity*: studies must use authentic or systematically elicited data; (b) *contrastivity*: variety-specific features must be identified through comparison with at least one other variety; and (c) *comparability*: datasets must be socio-linguistically aligned to ensure valid contrasts. Variational pragmatics also distinguishes several levels of analysis, from linguistic forms (formal level) to speech act realizations (actional level), interactional sequencing, topic management, and turn-taking organization. Recent expansions (Schneider, 2021) incorporate stylistic, prosodic, nonverbal, and metapragmatic dimensions, reflecting the growing interest in multimodal communication. Most empirical studies focus on the actional level, comparing how varieties of the same language perform speech acts such as requests, apologies, or complaints.

Postcolonial Pragmatics

Introduced by Janney (2009) and expanded by Anchimbe and Janney (2011) and Anchimbe (2018), postcolonial pragmatics offers a valuable framework for analyzing speech acts in multilingual societies shaped by colonial histories. It is particularly relevant for contexts such as Cameroon, Canada, and South Africa, where indigenous languages, colonial languages, and contact varieties interact in complex ways. As Janney (2009) observes, these postcolonial settings produce unique blends of cultural and linguistic influences that shape everyday communication. In this framework, attention is given to how speakers in postcolonial contexts draw on diverse linguistic resources, ex-colonial languages, local languages, pidgins, and creoles, in their interactions. Anchimbe and Janney (2011) emphasize that such speakers routinely negotiate identity, power, and social alignment through hybrid pragmatic strategies that differ from those used in metropolitan (i.e., non-postcolonial) varieties of the same language. A postcolonial pragmatic approach highlights both shared features, stemming from the use of English as a postcolonial language, and local differences shaped by distinct sociolinguistic environments. In this study, it serves to explain the hybrid, innovative, and context-sensitive patterns found in the complaint strategies of speakers from Cameroon, Canada, and South Africa.

Research Questions

This study examines how complaints are produced in three regional varieties of English, Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English, across two social situations that differ in power and social distance. Drawing on variational pragmatics

and postcolonial pragmatics, it addresses the following questions:

- 1) What strategies do speakers of each variety use when complaining to a peer versus to a professor, and how do these strategies differ across the three varieties?
- 2) How do speakers employ external modifiers such as greetings, apologies, or justifications to soften or intensify their complaints, and what regional patterns emerge?
- 3) What internal modifiers such as mitigators or intensifiers characterize complaints in each variety, and how are these distributed across the two scenarios?

Methodology Data and Respondents

The data for this study come from a larger project on speech acts and politeness in English as a pluricentric language. Participants completed a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) that elicited several speech acts (e.g., refusals, complaints, thanks, advice-giving, etc.) For the present analysis, only the two complaint-eliciting scenarios were examined. The two scenarios were designed to contrast horizontal and vertical social relations:

Situation 1: Peer scenario (Friend)

Participants imagined sharing an apartment with a friend who repeatedly violated a mutually agreed-upon quiet-time rule by coming home late and making excessive noise. After several nights of tolerating the disturbance, they were asked to voice a complaint. This scenario represents a close, equal-status relationship (low social distance, equal power: $-D, =P$). It was presented as follows: *“You are sharing an apartment with your friend. Recently, s/he comes home very late almost every night and makes a lot of noise. You and your friend agreed to be quiet after 11:30 p.m. when you first decided to live together. You’ve put up with the noise for several days, but tonight you feel like you should say something. What do you say to him/her?”*

Situation 2: Power-asymmetric scenario (Professor)

Participants were asked to imagine meeting with a professor after receiving an unexpectedly low final grade despite doing well in previous assessments. They were required to express a complaint to a higher-status interlocutor, representing low social distance but power asymmetry ($-D, S < P$). It was presented as follows: *“You were shocked that your Professor gave you a C. His/her class was one of your favorites, and you studied very hard. You got an A on your report, so you don’t understand why your final grade was so low. You knock on the door of his/her office. What do you say to him/her?”*

Including both scenarios allowed for a comparison of how social distance and power relations influence complaint realizations across the three English varieties,

Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English. The participants were asked to produce responses that reflected what they would say in each scenario. The dataset includes three groups of respondents, namely speakers of Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English, providing a comparative basis for examining complaint realizations across regional varieties of English.

The Cameroon English sample consists of 50 undergraduate students from the University of Yaoundé I (12 males, 38 females), aged 21–36. The group reflects Cameroon's highly multilingual setting, where English and French coexist alongside numerous indigenous languages. Most participants (70%) reported using English most frequently in daily life, while 30% used French more often. All learned English through formal schooling. Language use patterns varied by domain. At home, respondents reported using English (40%), French (28%), Cameroon Pidgin English (18%), or indigenous languages (14%). With friends, Pidgin English was most common (38%), followed by English (36%), French (22%), and mixed English–French use (4%). Most of them (88%) had used English for over 15 years, suggesting substantial long-term exposure. This multilingual background likely shapes their pragmatic decisions when formulating complaints.

The Canadian sample includes 63 native speakers of Canadian English (21 males, 42 females), aged 18–67. The majority (over 90%) were between 18 and 24. All were university students at Cape Breton University, representing a wide range of academic disciplines. Because participants uniformly identified English as their primary language across all domains, this group is socio-linguistically far more homogeneous than the Cameroon and South African samples.

The South African group comprises 12 students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (nine female, two males, one non-binary/unspecified), aged 21–26. Despite sharing the same academic environment, the group displays notable linguistic diversity. Six participants reported isiZulu as both their home and primary daily language. Five identified English as their home language, and one listed isiXhosa but reported using English most frequently. Another participant used both Afrikaans and English at home, reflecting the multilingual nature of South Africa. These individual profiles align with broader national patterns: South Africa recognizes 12 official languages, with isiZulu being the dominant home language in KwaZulu-Natal, followed by English, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans. This rich linguistic ecology shapes how speakers engage in everyday communication.

While Canadian respondents displayed uniform English-dominant backgrounds, the Cameroonian and South African participants illustrated far more complex multilingual repertoires and contact-based language practices. These differences are crucial for interpreting cross-varietal complaint patterns, as multilingualism, exposure to multiple linguistic norms, and diverse language ecologies can strongly influence pragmatic behavior.

Data Analysis

The dataset comprises 231 complaint responses produced by 125 participants across the two DCT scenarios (friend vs. professor). Of these, 92 responses came from speakers of Cameroon English, 115 from Canadian English, and 24 from South African English. The analysis proceeded through four main steps. In the first step, each response was treated as a complaint turn (Trosborg, 1995) and segmented into: (a) *Head acts*, i.e. the core units capable of independently performing a complaint, and (b) *External modifiers*, i.e. moves that occur before or after the head act and shape its pragmatic force but cannot function as complaints on their own. This process revealed whether complaints were realized as single-move or multi-move turns. Below are two illustrative examples.

- 1) *Can you please try not to be so noisy?* [consists of single head act, namely a request for behavioral change).
- 2) *Good day ma'am, I'm sorry to disturb you... I don't think I deserve a C.* [consists of multiple moves including a greeting, an apology, an explanation, a head act (disapproval), and justifications.

In the second step, each head act was classified according to established complaint strategy taxonomies (e.g., Trosborg 1995). These categories include requests for change, expressions of disapproval, accusations, hints, threats, and others. This coding enabled comparison of preferred strategy types across varieties and situations. The third step consisted in identifying and coding external modifiers. These were grouped into (a) preparatory acts (pre-modifiers), such as greetings, apologies, attention getters, etc., which generally mitigate the complaint, and (b) supportive acts (post-modifiers), such as justifications, advice, reminders, expressions of surprise, and similar moves that may soften or reinforce the head act. Comparing these moves across varieties revealed regional tendencies in softening, aggravating, or elaborating complaint turns. The last step consisted in examining internal modifiers, i.e. lexical or grammatical elements within the head act. These were grouped into (a) mitigators (downtoners, politeness markers, conditional forms, subjectivizers, consultative devices, etc.), and (b) intensifiers (lexical intensifiers, contrast or consequence markers.) These features indicate how speakers encode directness, politeness, and emotional force, etc. across Cameroon, Canadian, and South African English.

Results And Discussion

Overall Distribution of Discursive Strategies

The analysis showed that complaints in the three English varieties occur in two formats: single-move complaints, consisting only of a head act, and multi-move

complaints, where the head act is accompanied by one or more external modifiers. Single-move realizations present the complaint directly, with little or no interpersonal cushioning, as in (3). Such responses rely entirely on the head act and tend to be more direct. Multi-move complaints include additional elements such as greetings, apologies, explanations, or justifications that appear before or after the head act. These external modifiers may soften or intensify the face threat depending on their function as in (4), where the apology, explanation, and hedged request create a more elaborate structure, reflecting sensitivity to the student–professor power difference.

3) *You are becoming a nuisance lately.*” (CamE – Friend¹)

4) *Uhm sorry Prof, I noticed that I got a C as my final mark for your module. Could you perhaps look again into my scripts, and mark them again, maybe?* (SAE – Professor)

Table 1 summarizes the frequency of head acts and external modifiers in Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English. The three varieties show different preferences for single- versus multi-move complaints, illustrating broader pragmatic tendencies discussed later. The patterns also demonstrate how social context (peer vs. professor) interacts with regional variety to shape the structural complexity of complaint realizations.

Table 1: Distribution of discursive strategies used in complaint realizations

	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Head acts	177 (54%)	168 (55.6%)	44 (45,8%)	389 (53.6%)
External modifiers	151 (46%)	134 (44.4%)	52 (54.2%)	337 (46.4%)
Total	328 (100%)	302 (100%)	96 (100%)	726 (100%)

Table 1 shows that the corpus contains 389 head acts and 337 external modifiers. overall, participants relied more on head acts than on additional modifying moves when expressing complaints. This trend is especially clear in the Canadian and Cameroonian datasets, where head acts account for 55.6% and 54% of all moves, respectively. Speakers of South African English, however, used head acts less frequently (45.8%). The opposite pattern appears for

¹ The examples used to illustrate these strategies are drawn from the present data. The examples are coded as follows: the two situations are coded as Friend or Professor. Cameroon English is coded as CamE, Canadian English is coded as CanE, and South African English is coded as SAE. For instance: (CamE-Friend) signals an example of a complaint to a friend in Cameroon English.

external modifiers. South African respondents used these moves more often than head acts, with external modifiers making up 54.2% of their total moves. In contrast, external modifiers represent 46% of the Cameroonian data and 44% of the Canadian data. These distributions suggest that speakers of Cameroon English and Canadian English tended to produce more direct, head-act-centered complaints, whereas South African English speakers more often expanded their complaint turns with additional mitigating or supportive elements. The distribution of head acts and external modifiers in the two situations across the three English varieties shows major differences, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of discursive strategies used in complaint realizations

	Cameroon		Canada		South Africa	
	S1-F	S2-P	S1-F	S2-P	S1-F	S2-P
Head acts	108	69	89	79	26	18
External modifiers	56	95	70	64	23	29
Total	164	164	159	143	49	47

Across the three varieties, the distribution of head acts and external modifiers varies clearly by scenario. In the Cameroon English data, head acts are far more frequent in the friend scenario (S1-F) (108 of 177 moves), while external modifiers dominate the professor scenario (S2-P) (95 of 151 moves). This suggests that Cameroonian speakers use more direct strategies with peers but rely on mitigating or elaborating moves when addressing a higher-status interlocutor. In the Canadian English data, head acts are also slightly more common in the friend scenario (89 of 168 moves). Notably, external modifiers are likewise more frequent in the friend scenario (70 of 134 moves). This indicates that Canadian respondents tend to elaborate their complaints even with peers, reflecting a consistent preference for politeness and relational management across contexts. The South African English data show a third pattern: head acts occur mainly in the friend scenario (26 of 44 moves), while external modifiers are more common in the professor scenario (29 of 52 moves). This distribution aligns with expectations in asymmetrical interactions, where speakers generally employ more preparatory or supportive discourse. Overall, these results show how social context and regional pragmatic norms jointly shape the structure of complaints. The friend and professor scenarios bring different power dynamics into play, and each variety reflects its own culturally grounded preferences for directness or elaboration. The next sections explore these tendencies in depth: Section 4.2

examines complaint strategies in peer interactions, and Section 4.3 analyzes strategies used when complaining to professors.

Strategies Used in the Friend Situation Complaint Strategies

This section focuses on the head-act strategies used by speakers across the three English varieties. The data reveal seven complaint strategies, each reflecting a different degree of directness or interpersonal stance: *accusation*, *disapproval*, *disbelief*, *request for change*, *threat*, *hint*, and *insult*. Together, these categories capture the range of pragmatic options speakers employ when confronting a peer who has violated a shared norm. Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of these strategies in Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English.

Table 3: Distribution of complaint strategies (Friend situation)

Complaint strategies	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Accusation	14	12	6	32 (14.3%)
Disapproval	28	4	6	38 (17%)
Disbelief	15	0	0	15 (6.7%)
Request for change	27	53	11	91 (40.8%)
Threat	7	4	0	11 (5%)
Hint	12	16	3	31 (14%)
Insult	5	0	0	5 (2.2%)
Total	108 (100%)	89 (100%)	26 (100%)	223 (100%)

Table 3 shows that Cameroon English speakers produce the largest share of head-act realizations, contributing 108 of the 223 tokens (48.3%), a higher proportion than both the Canadian and South African groups. Across all three varieties, “request for change” is the most common strategy, accounting for 91 tokens (40.8%). It is especially dominant in the Canadian English data, where it represents 53 of 91 instances (58%), and least frequent in South African English (12%). The second most frequent strategy is “expression of disapproval” (38 tokens, 17%), employed largely by Cameroonian respondents,

who produce 28 of these cases (73.7%). The strategies “accusation” (14.3%) and “hint” (14%) appear in similar overall proportions but differ regionally. Cameroonian speakers produce most accusations (14 tokens; 43.7%), while Canadian speakers favor hints (16 tokens; 51.6%), followed by Cameroonian respondents (12 tokens; 38.7%). Two strategies “disbelief” and “insult” occur *only* in the Cameroon English data, suggesting a greater tolerance for more direct or affectively marked expressions of dissatisfaction in peer interactions. Conversely, the “threat” strategy is absent from the South African English responses. The following section provides a detailed examination of each strategy type, its pragmatic function, and the linguistic forms through which it is realized.

Requests for Change

This is the most common complaint strategy across all three English varieties in the friend scenario. It includes any head act in which speakers explicitly ask their interlocutor to modify the offending behavior. The data show considerable grammatical and pragmatic variation in how this strategy is realized, ranging from highly direct forms to more mitigated or relationally sensitive ones. Imperatives constitute a substantial portion of these realizations. They present the desired behavior directly and display a high degree of assertiveness, as in: *“please slow down with the noise,” “keep it down,” “limit the late-night noise,” “make it stop,” “please control yourself,”* and more forceful versions such as *“turn that shit down”* or *“if you come home late, be quiet and go straight to your room.”* Imperatives are well suited to peer interactions, where speakers may feel socially entitled to demand compliance. Other requests appear in interrogative constructions, which soften the imposition by framing the complaint as a question. These include (a) ability questions (*“Can you please lower the volume?”*; *“Could you turn it down a bit?”*); (b) willingness questions (*“Do you mind toning it down after 11:30 p.m.?”*; *“Do you mind keeping it down a little?”*; *“We were wondering if you don’t mind being a little quieter?”*) and (c) permission questions (*“Could I ask you to keep it down?”*) Some speakers opted for suggestions, which implicitly propose a course of action rather than directly demanding it. Examples include: *“Can we respect each other?”*; *“Do you think you could be quieter when you get home?”* *“I think you could keep it down,”* and more developed versions such as *“You need to find a solution to this problem for both of us.”* Another group of realizations involves need- or desire-based statements, which foreground the speaker’s own expectations: *“You need to keep the noise down after 11:30,”* *“I want some quiet.”* These forms express dissatisfaction without issuing an overt directive. A smaller set of examples uses hope or wish constructions, softening the request by framing it as an aspiration: *“I was hoping you could be a bit quieter when you come home,”* or *“I really wish we would stick to the agreement we made when we started living together.”*

Clear regional differences emerge in how speakers formulate requests for behavioral change. The 27 requests in the Cameroon English data display the widest

structural range. Speakers use imperatives (8 tokens), elliptical imperatives (one token), and a variety of more indirect forms. These include patterns such as “*I would like you to + VP*” (one example), “*It is high/hard time you + VP*” (two instances), modal interrogatives like “*Could you + VP*” (two tokens) and “*Can you + VP*” (three instances), and politeness-oriented forms such as “*Please would you mind + VP*” (one example). Additional realizations include need/desire statements (e.g., “*I want + NP*”, “*I will want you to + VP*”), collective formulations (“*We need to VP*”), wish constructions, quasi-directives (“*You better + VP*”), explicit requesting strategies (“*I ask you to + VP*”), tentative forms (“*Maybe you will + VP*”), inclusive proposals (“*Let’s + VP*”), and conditional constructions (“*If you can + VP*”). This variety reflects a broad continuum from highly direct to strongly mitigated requests.

The 53 Canadian English requests also show considerable variation but with a notable preference for conventionally indirect, politeness-marked interrogatives. Imperatives (14 tokens) and elliptical imperatives (once) are used, but modal questions dominate: “*Can you/we (please) + VP?*” (9 tokens), “*Do you mind / Would you mind VP?*” (8 instances), “*Could/Would you (please) + VP?*” (8 tokens). Respondents also employ more hedged forms such as “*Do you think you could + VP?*” (4), “*I was wondering / I am asking if you could + VP*” (4 examples), epistemic statements (“*I think you could VP*”) and more tentative inquiries (“*Is there any way you could + VP?*”). Statements of obligation (“*You need to + VP*”) and desire-based expressions (“*I am hoping you could VP*”) appear rarely. Overall, Canadian speakers show a strong preference for polite, indirect request strategies.

The 11 South African requests display a more streamlined set of realizations. Three use imperatives, while the remaining eight rely on modal interrogatives: “*Could you + VP?*” (3), “*May you + VP?*” (2), “*Can you/we + VP?*” (2), and “*Do you mind + VP?*” (1). South African speakers thus tend to frame their complaints as polite appeals rather than strong directives, relying heavily on modal questions.

Across varieties, all groups use both direct and mitigated strategies, but with distinct profiles. Cameroon English speakers produce the widest range of request forms, from direct imperatives to highly mitigated or creative constructions. Canadian English respondents show strong preference for conventionally indirect, politeness-heavy interrogatives. South African English informants choose a streamlined pattern with a focus on modal questions and a smaller number of imperatives.

Expression of Disapproval

This is the second most frequent complaint strategy in the friend scenario. Speakers use this strategy to convey dissatisfaction, disappointment, or irritation without necessarily issuing a direct request. These realizations typically involve evaluative statements that present the interlocutor’s behavior as unacceptable or emotionally taxing. A common

pattern involves negative stance markers, particularly constructions such as *“I don’t / I don’t appreciate + NP”* or *“I am not happy with + NP”*. Examples include: *“I don’t like your recent late-night comings and the noise you make afterward.”*; *“I am not happy with the constant disturbance every night.”* Speakers also employ more emotionally charged formulations to intensify their disapproval, as in: *“I can’t take this any longer.”*; *“I really cannot condone your late comings and the noise anymore.”*; *“I am not very happy with the noise you’ve been making lately.”* Some realizations convey accumulated frustration or emotional exhaustion, for example: *“I am sick and tired of this boring noise every day.”*; *“I have had enough of all the noise you make when you return home.”*; *“I’ve had enough of your nonsense.”*; *“Enough is enough with the noise.”* These constructions foreground the speaker’s affective stance rather than specifying a desired behavioral change. While they do not explicitly direct the hearer to act, they nonetheless exert implicit pressure on the addressee to recognize the seriousness of the problem and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Expression of Disbelief

The third complaint strategy, expression of disbelief, is used to express convey shock, surprise, or incredulity at the interlocutor’s behavior. These realizations typically take the form of interrogative or exclamatory constructions that question the offender’s judgment, awareness, or intentions. Examples include: *“What is wrong with you, my friend?”*; *“What do you think you are doing?”*; *“Can’t you see you disturb me every time you come back late?”* Such formulations highlight the speaker’s inability to understand or tolerate the behavior, thereby heightening the emotional force of the complaint. Although they do not explicitly ask for a change in behavior, expressions of disbelief function as affective challenges, implicitly urging the interlocutor to reconsider or correct their actions.

Accusation

The accusation strategy is the fourth most frequent complaint type in the dataset. Speakers use it to explicitly attribute blame to the interlocutor, directly linking the problematic behavior to the person responsible. These realizations foreground responsibility and present the behavior as clearly inappropriate. Typical examples include: *“Recently you have been making too much noise.”*; *“You are disturbing me and others around.”*; *“You do not respect the rules we set when we started co-habiting.”*; *“You have been pretty loud the past few nights.”*; *“You have been awfully late lately.”* Such constructions are generally direct and unmitigated, making both the action and the actor unmistakably clear. By explicitly naming the offender, accusation-based complaints challenge the interlocutor’s conduct more forcefully than strategies that only hint at the issue or express displeasure. They therefore serve as a pointed confrontation of both behavior and responsibility.

Hint

The hint strategy involves referring indirectly to the problematic behavior rather than stating it explicitly. Instead of confronting the interlocutor or assigning blame, speakers use subtle reminders of shared expectations or previously agreed-upon rules. This allows them to express dissatisfaction while maintaining a less confrontational tone. Typical realizations include references to the noise agreement or to recent disturbances, such as: *“We had an agreement, didn’t we?”*; *“We agreed that there would be no noise after 11:30 p.m.”*; *“It has been quite loud lately.”*; *“I thought we agreed to keep the noise down after 11:30 p.m.”* These utterances encourage the hearer to infer the problem without the speaker explicitly issuing a directive or expressing displeasure. Hints therefore function as indirect complaints, relying on shared knowledge and contextual cues to communicate the speaker’s message while avoiding overt imposition.

Threat and Insult

The threat strategy represents one of the most severe and face-aggravating forms of complaint. Here, the speakers warn the interlocutors of negative consequences if the offending behavior continues. These consequences range from restricting access to shared spaces to more explicit or aggressive retaliatory actions. Examples include: *“You won’t be allowed in if you arrive that late again.”*; *“If this continues, I will have no choice but to find another place.”*; *“Otherwise, I’ll be forced to ask you to move out.”*; *“I will do something you’ll really regret.”*; *“Please be careful.”*; *“Turn the TV off before I throw you off the balcony.”* These realizations vary from cautionary warnings to overt threats, making them the most confrontational strategy in the dataset. In a small number of cases, speakers employ insults, shifting the focus from the behavior to the interlocutor’s character. Examples include: *“You are sick.”*; *“You are becoming a nuisance.”* Insults express strong emotional involvement, often anger or frustration, and leave little room for negotiation or cooperative problem-solving. They constitute the most personally aggressive form of complaint found in the friend scenario.

While the preceding analysis has examined the head-act strategies speakers use to frame their complaints in peer interactions, these strategies represent only one dimension of how dissatisfaction is conveyed. Complaints are often embedded within larger discourse structures that shape their tone, soften their force, or enhance their impact. These additional moves, occurring before or after the head act, play a key role in constructing the interpersonal meaning of a complaint. The following section therefore turns to the use of external modifiers across the three English varieties.

External Modifiers

A total of 149 external modifiers were identified in the friend-scenario data. These comprise both preparatory and supportive moves. Table 4 presents their distribution across the three English varieties.

Table 4: Distribution of external modifiers (Friend situation)

External modifier	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Preparatory acts	48	36	16	100 (67%)
Attention getters	24	22	7	53
Greetings	7	4	3	14
Disarmers and Apologies	7	4	1	12
Announcements and comments	10	6	5	21
Supportive acts	8	34	7	49 (33%)
Justifications	2	19	5	26
Advice and suggestions	2	1	0	3
Reminder	2	7	2	11
Surprise	2	0	0	2
Comments	0	4	0	4
Thanks	0	1	0	1
Questions	0	2	0	2
Total	56 (100%)	70 (100%)	23 (100%)	149 (100%)

Table 4 shows that Canadian respondents use external modifiers more frequently than the other two groups: 47% of all modifiers appear in the Canadian data, compared

with 37.6% (56 tokens) in the Cameroonian examples and only 15.4% (23 tokens) in the South African data. It also indicates that preparatory acts account for 67% of all external modifiers. These are most commonly used by Cameroonian speakers (48% of all preparatory acts) and least by South African respondents (16%). Across varieties, attention getters emerge as the most frequent type of preparatory act, though their distribution varies regionally. Supportive acts are used more often in the Canadian data than in the other two varieties combined: Canadians produced 34 supportive moves, compared with just 8 in the Cameroonian dataset and 7 in the South African one. This pattern suggests that Canadian speakers tend to elaborate their complaint turns more extensively, whereas Cameroonian and South African speakers rely more selectively on supporting material.

Preparatory Acts

As shown in Table 4, speakers employ several types of preparatory acts in the friend scenario: attention getters, greetings, apologies, announcements, and comments. Attention getters are the most frequently used type. They appear as nominal address terms such as *friend*, *dude*, *man*, *dear*, *girl*, or as interjections such as *hey* (“*Hey, can you please lower the volume?*”). Some speakers also use *please* as a politeness-based attention getter. In a number of cases, two or more forms are combined (e.g., “*Hey friend,*” “*Hey man,*” “*Please dear*”), producing a more personalized or emphatic opening. Greetings such as *Hi*, *Hi there*, or *Good evening* serve to initiate the complaint turn. These may occur alone or with an address term (e.g., “*Hi my friend*”), lending interactional smoothness and softening the transition into the complaint. Disarmers, used to pre-empt objections, were also attested. These moves, as defined by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 287), attempt to reduce potential resistance before delivering the complaint. Examples include: “*I don’t want to seem rude, but could you be a little quieter when you come in late?*” (CanE-Friend); “*Hey, don’t take it in a bad way, but lately you’ve been making a lot of noise at night...*” (SAE-Friend). Apologies function to acknowledge the imposition or the act of complaining itself (e.g., “*I am sorry, but I cannot bear your noise any longer.*”). These moves mitigate the face threat by signaling awareness of possible discomfort. Announcements and comments serve as discourse-orientation moves, helping the speaker frame the upcoming complaint without necessarily mitigating or intensifying it. For example: “*I have been meaning to talk to you about the noise you’ve been making late at night.*” Some announcements also function as pre-commitment strategies, checking the hearer’s willingness to engage before the complaint is delivered (e.g., “*Hi, can we discuss our noise agreement?*”).

Supportive Acts

Supportive acts identified in the data include justifications, advice, reminders, expressions of surprise, comments, thanks, and questions. Among these, justifications are the most frequent, and they occur overwhelmingly in the Canadian data: 19 tokens (73%),

compared with five in the South African corpus and two in the Cameroonian examples. Justifications provide reasons or explanations that accompany the complaint (e.g., *“I am very tired and I want to rest.”*). They may either soften the complaint or reinforce its urgency. The second most common supportive act is the reminder, with 11 occurrences overall, seven of which appear in the Canadian data. Reminders can function as indirect complaints on their own, but in the examples here they typically intensify a direct or indirect head act. For instance: *“Your late-night comings bother me. Remember we had agreed to return home before 11:30 p.m.”* (CamE); *“Do you think you could be a little quieter? We did agree on quiet after 11:30.”* (CanE). Other supportive acts, advice, expressions of surprise, comments, thanks, and questions, occur only sporadically across the dataset.

Internal Modifiers

Table 5 summarizes the use of internal modifiers by the three groups.

Table 5: Distribution of internal modifiers (Friend situation)

Type of internal modifier	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa
Mitigators	[n=47; 59.5%]	[n= 71; 71 %]	[n=33; 57%]
Politeness markers	22	7	5
Downtoners and Understaters / hedges	5	25	6
Conditional/modal/past tense	4	19	6
Subjectivizers	7	6	2
Supplication markers / Cost minimizers	0	1	1
Consultative devices	5	13	5
Collaboration or inclusiveness markers	2	0	5
Avoidance strategies	2	9	3
Intensifiers	[n=69; 40.5%]	[n=29; 29%]	[n=25; 43%]
Lexical intensifiers	65	25	23
Markers of consequence or contrast	4	4	2
Total	116 (100%)	100 (100%)	58 (100%)

Two types of internal modifiers which appear in the data are mitigators (softeners) and intensifiers (upgraders).

Mitigators

They reduce the face-threatening impact of the complaint. The types of mitigators attested in the data include (a) politeness markers (e.g., *please*), which serve to soften requests for behavioral change; (b) downtoners (e.g., *perhaps, just, maybe*) and understaters (e.g., *a little bit, kind of*), which lessen the perceived imposition (e.g., “*Do you mind keeping it down a little?*”); (c) conditional and past-tense modals (e.g., “*Could you please keep it down?*”; “*Would you mind being home earlier?*”), which express

hesitation; (d) subjectivizers (e.g., *I think, I thought, I feel*), which lower assertiveness (“*I think you could keep it down.*”); (e) supplication markers (e.g., *May I ask...*), which serve to request cooperation; (f) consultative devices such as *Do you think...* or *Is there any way...*, (e.g., “*Is there any way you could be a little quieter?*”), which are employed to invite the hearer’s involvement; (g), inclusiveness markers which frame the issue as shared (e.g., “*Can we be quiet after 11:30 pm?*”); and (h) avoidance strategies, which replace direct commands with gentler encouragement (e.g., “*Can you try to be more quiet?*”). Multiple mitigators frequently occur in combination, especially in Canadian English, producing highly layered politeness forms (e.g., “*Do you think maybe you could try and be a little quieter?*”).

Intensifiers

They express an emotional attitude towards the offense or the interlocutor. The intensifiers which are used are : (a) negatively evaluative adjectives (e.g., “*I am sick and tired of this noise.*”); (b) negatively loaded verbs or verb phrases (e.g., “*You are disturbing me.*”); (c) adverbs of intensity (e.g., “*I really don’t appreciate that.*”); (d) time adverbials marking endurance or fatigue (e.g., “*I can’t cope with that anymore.*”); (e) negatively loaded evaluative nouns or noun clauses (e.g., “*I have had enough of your nonsense.*”); and (f) consequence or contrast markers which emphasize the gap between expectations and behavior (e.g., “*We made a rule to be quiet after 11:30 pm and it hasn’t been happening.*”).

Mitigators and intensifiers play complementary roles in managing complaint force: mitigators lower directness and preserve rapport, especially common in the Canadian data, while intensifiers highlight emotional impact and underscore the seriousness of the problem. Together, these internal modifiers contribute to the nuanced interpersonal meaning of complaints in the friend scenario.

The analysis of the friend scenario has shown how speakers across the three English varieties construct complaints in equal-status interactions, drawing on a range of head-act strategies, external modifiers, and internal devices. However, complaint behavior is highly sensitive to social context, and the dynamics shift considerably when the interlocutor occupies a higher-status role. To capture these contrasts, the next section turns to the professor scenario, where speakers must address a power-asymmetric relationship. This setting allows us to examine how Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English speakers recalibrate their complaint strategies in response to increased social distance, institutional authority, and the face-threat associated with challenging a professor’s evaluation.

Strategies Used in the Professor Situation Complaint Strategies

The distribution of the complaint strategies across the three varieties is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Distribution of complaint strategies (Professor situation)

Complaint strategies	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Accusation	2	0	0	2 (1.2%)
Disapproval	2	3	2	7 (4.3%)
Disbelief	22	21	2	45 (27%)
Request for solution	32	36	7	75 (45.2%)
Threat	0	1	0	1 (0.6%)
Hint	11	18	7	36 (21.7%)
Total	69 (100%)	79 (100%)	18 (100%)	166 (100%)

Table 6 shows that the respondents employed six complaint strategies in the professor scenario, totaling 166 tokens. Canadian participants produced noticeably more strategies than Cameroonian speakers (79 vs. 69 tokens), while South African respondents used the fewest overall. Across the dataset, the three most frequent complaint types are, in decreasing order, *requests for solution* (75 tokens; 45.2%), *expressions of disbelief* (45 tokens; 27%), and *hints* (36 tokens; 21.7%). These strategies are unevenly distributed across the three varieties. Requests for solution occur more often in the Canadian data (36 tokens) than in the Cameroonian corpus (32 tokens). Expressions of disbelief show a relatively balanced distribution between the two varieties, whereas hints are used predominantly by Canadian respondents, who produce half of all attested instances. In all categories, South African speakers employ these strategies least frequently. The analysis further reveals a heterogeneous range of linguistic forms used to realize these strategies, highlighting notable cross-varietal differences in how speakers manage the heightened face-threat of addressing a higher-status interlocutor.

Requests for Solution

Across the three varieties, requests for solution are realized as inquiries seeking clarification, reassessment, or guidance regarding the unexpected grade. Despite this shared functional core, the linguistic patterns used to express these requests vary across the datasets. In the South African data, requests for solution are primarily framed as requests for clarification, reassessment, or guidance, often with a tentative or deferential tone. Typical realizations include:

- 5) *Understanding how the final grade was calculated would be appreciated.*
- 6) *Could we please discuss my paper?*
- 7) *I'd like some guidance on where I went wrong.*
- 8) *Could you perhaps look again into my scripts, and mark them again, maybe?*

In the Canadian corpus, requests for solution overwhelmingly take the form of requests for clarification, most frequently realized through *I was wondering*-constructions (13 tokens), such as “*I was wondering if you could explain how you came up with my final grade.*” Other recurring patterns include: (a) *Imperatives* (2 tokens); (b) *I want to know where/why...* (2 tokens); (c) *Can you +VP?* (5 tokens; e.g., “*Can you show me where I went wrong?*”); (d) *Could you +VP?* (5 tokens); (e) *I was curious as to why...* (3 tokens); (f) *I would like to know why...* (2 tokens); (g) *Is it possible for you to +VP?* (1 example); (h) *Do you mind if you +VP?* (2 instances), and (i) *I am not sure how I +VP* (1 token). Overall, Canadian speakers display a strong preference for highly conventionalized, politely hedged interrogatives, reflecting the heightened sensitivity of addressing a higher-status interlocutor.

Requests for solution in the Cameroonian data appear in three functional subtypes: requests for clarification, requests for recounting or rectification, and requests for guidance. Examples include: “*I would like to know why I made a C instead of a better grade.*”; “*Could you, please, rectify it madam?*”; “*Can you direct me on what next to do, Prof., please?*” The most frequent structural pattern consists of *I want/wish/would like to know/enquire/find out...* constructions (16 tokens). Other realizations include: (a) *Could you (please) +VP?* (3 tokens); (b) *Can you (please) +VP?* (2 tokens); (c) *I will like you to VP* (1); (d) *I wish (that) you + VP* (3 tokens); (e) *I came to find out why/what...* (2 tokens), (f) *I am out to know if...* (once), (g) *I need +NP* (once); (h) *I don't know if...* (once); (i) *Is there a possibility you +VP?* (once); and (j) *I will be thankful if you +VP* (once). Compared with the other varieties, Cameroonian speakers employ a broader range of syntactic patterns, combining both polite inquiry and explicit appeals for correction or guidance.

Expression of Disbelief

Across all three datasets, expressions of disbelief are realized in two primary ways:

(a) expressions of confusion (e.g., “*I am very confused with my final grade,*” “*So now I am confused as to what’s going on.*”) and (b) expressions of surprise or annoyance regarding the unexpected grade (e.g., “*What happened to my grade?*”; “*How come I got an A on the report and a C as the final mark?*”; “*I was very surprised and upset by my grade.*”) Cameroonian respondents frequently employ constructions introduced by stance markers such as: “*I am very astonished...*”; “*I am shocked with...*”; “*I am surprised by...*”; “*I don’t understand why...*”; “*I can’t understand why/what...*”; “*I do not know how come...*” These formulations foreground the speaker’s difficulty making sense of the grade. In the Canadian corpus, disbelief is typically expressed through evaluative frames such as: “*It surprised me...*”; “*I am/was very surprised...*”; “*I don’t understand...*”; “*I am very confused about...*” These realizations tend to combine emotional stance with epistemic uncertainty. The South African data contain fewer tokens but show similar patterns, including: “*I am confused as to what is going on.*”; “*How come I got an A on the report and a C on the final mark?*” Overall, while the three varieties share similar semantic functions—confusion, surprise, and difficulty reconciling the grade—each variety draws on its own preferred set of stance expressions to convey disbelief.

Hints

The hint strategy involves subtly pointing out a gap between the effort students put in and the grade they received (e.g., *I thought I was doing much better in this class*). Students may also express doubt about the accuracy of their results (e.g., *I think there may be a mix-up in my marks*) or suggest they deserved a higher grade (e.g., *I believe I scored more than this*). Sometimes, they simply note that their expectations were not met (e.g., *I worked very hard but only received a C*).

The remaining complaint types are expressions of disapproval (e.g., *I don’t think I deserve a C*), accusations (e.g., *I’m here because I believe the grade you gave does not reflect my performance*), and threats or insults; they appear only rarely in the data.

External Modifiers

The findings show that the discursive moves functioning as external modifiers vary across the three English varieties. Their distribution is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7: Distribution of external modifiers (Professor situation)

External modifier	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Preparatory acts	70 (73.7%)	47 (73.4%)	24 (82.8%)	141 (75%)
Attention getters	9	5	1	15
Greetings	36	29	9	74
Apologies and thanks	12	4	9	25
Announcements and comments	13	9	5	27
Supportive acts	25 (26.3%)	17 (26.6%)	5 (17.2%)	47 (25%)
Justifications	23	15	4	42
Thanks	2	0	0	2
Comments	0	2	0	2
Questions	0	0	1	1
Total	95 (100%)	64 (100%)	29 (100%)	188 (100%)

Table 7 indicates that 188 external modifiers are found in the data, with Cameroonian participants producing considerably more modifiers than the other two groups combined. Across all three English varieties, preparatory acts are used far more frequently than supportive acts. South African respondents, however, rely on preparatory acts more than their Cameroonian and Canadian counterparts.

The results further show that all three groups initiate complaints using attention getters, greetings, apologies, thanks, and brief announcements or comments. Greetings constitute 52.5% of all preparatory acts (74 of 141 tokens), occurring predominantly in the Cameroonian (39 tokens; 52.7%) and the Canadian responses (29 tokens; 39.2%). Other preparatory acts also vary in distribution, with Cameroonian informants consistently producing more tokens overall. For example, announcements and comments are more frequent in the Cameroonian (13 tokens) and Canadian examples (9 tokens), whereas apologies and thanks appear mostly in the Cameroonian (12 tokens) and South African data (9 tokens). Some examples used by the participants are: (a) Greetings (e.g., *Good day*

ma'am; Good afternoon, Prof; Greetings Professor; Hello sir; How is your day going? I hope you are good); (b) Apologies (e.g., Sorry for disturbing you; I am sorry to bother; Sorry to interrupt you, madam/prof; Excuse me, prof); (c) Attention getters (e.g., Please madam; Please sir; Hi Professor); (d) Thanks (e.g., Thanks for letting me in; Thanks for accommodating me); (e) Announcements/comments (e.g., I received a C in my final grades; I would like to discuss my grade; I am just wanting clarity on my marks; I have come to inquire about my marks.)

With respect to supportive moves, the data show that *justifications* overwhelmingly dominate this category, accounting for 42 of the 47 tokens (89.4%) used to close complaint turns. These moves occur most frequently in the Cameroonian responses (23 instances). It was also found that justifications allow students to explain why they believe their grade is too low. The reasons they provide include hard work (e.g., *I worked really hard on my assessments and exams and was confident I would perform well*), strong performance in earlier assessments and diligence (e.g., *I was a diligent and intelligent student in your class, as I got an A on my report in this course.*), and personal investment in the course (e.g., *Since this course is one of my favourites, I would like to understand why I received a C in my final grade; I have been very serious in your course and it was even my favourite course, but I'm shocked by my grade.*) The remaining supportive moves appear only sporadically in the data: two tokens of thanks (produced by Cameroonian respondents), two comments (from Canadian respondents), and one question (from a South African participant).

Internal Modifiers

The distribution of internal modifiers across the three varieties is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Distribution of internal modifiers (Professor situation)

Type of internal modifier	Cameroon	Canada	South Africa	Total
Mitigators	64 (55.7%)	84 (70%)	33 (64.7%)	181 (63.3%)
Politeness markers	15	5	3	23
Understaters and downtoners	7	22	7	36
Conditional / Past tense	8	24	9	41
Subjectivizers	6	8	5	19
Supplication markers / cost minimizers	0	2	1	3
Consultative devices	28	12	6	46
Collaboration or inclusiveness markers	0	0	2	2
Intensifiers	51 (44.3%)	36 (39%)	18 (35.3%)	105 (36.7%)
Lexical intensifiers	46	34	13	93
Markers of consequence or contrast	5	2	5	12
Total	115 (100%)	120 (100%)	51 (100%]	286 (100%)

The distribution of internal modifiers across the three groups, as shown in Table 8, reveals notable cross-cultural differences in the use of mitigation and intensification strategies when addressing a professor. Overall, the results show that mitigators are more frequently employed than intensifiers in all three national groups, although the degree of reliance on mitigating devices varies considerably. The Canada data exhibit the strongest preference for mitigation (70%), followed by the South African examples (64.7%) and the Cameroonian responses (55.7%). A closer examination of the types of internal modification device sheds light on the pragmatic tendencies driving these broader patterns.

It should be recalled that *consultative devices*, most frequent in the Cameroonian

data, serve to present the request as a shared problem-solving activity. By inviting the professor's involvement (e.g., *Would you mind...?*), they reduce imposition and align with positive-politeness, solidarity-based strategies. *Conditional* and *past tense* forms together with understaters or downtoners, prominent in the Canadian responses and notable in South Africa, serve to soften the illocutionary force by expressing tentativeness, limited commitment, or reduced imposition. *Subjectivizers* (e.g., *I think, I feel*) frame the request as contingent on the speaker's perspective rather than presented as an objective necessity, thereby mitigating potential face threat. *Politeness markers* (e.g., *please*), used comparatively more in Cameroon, provide overt cues of deference and courtesy and complement the collaborative stance established through consultative forms. *Collaboration/inclusiveness markers*, found only in the South African data, construct the request as a shared goal. By emphasizing common purpose, they help reduce hierarchical distance.

In the Cameroonian data, consultative devices (28 tokens) are the most frequent form of mitigation, accounting for nearly half of all Cameroonian mitigating moves. This preference reflects a strong orientation toward collaborative, interlocutor-involving strategies consistent with face-respecting norms in many African communicative traditions, where appealing to shared action or mutual engagement is culturally salient. Politeness markers such as *please* (15 tokens) reinforce this relationally sensitive, hearer-oriented approach. The Canadian data display a different profile. The Canadian participants rely heavily on understaters and downtoners (22 tokens) and conditional or past tense forms (24 tokens), both of which are classic markers of indirectness and hedging. These strategies help soften imposition and frame the request as negotiable, patterns that align with Western norms emphasizing autonomy, non-imposition, and negative politeness. Although less frequent, the presence of supplication markers and cost minimizers (2 tokens) underscores this tendency to reduce perceived burden. The South African informants present a more evenly distributed use of mitigators. Understaters and downtoners (7 tokens), conditional forms (9 tokens), and consultative devices (6 tokens) all occur with moderate frequency, suggesting a hybrid politeness orientation that blends relational sensitivity with respect for autonomy. Notably, collaboration/inclusiveness markers (2 tokens), which are absent in the Cameroonian and Canadian data, appear in the South African corpus, perhaps reflecting the sociocultural emphasis on *ubuntu* (communalism), albeit in low numbers.

Turning to intensification strategies, the analysis reveals that the Cameroonian respondents show the highest reliance on intensifiers (44.3%), compared to South African (35.3%) and Canadian speakers (30%). This pattern contrasts with their strong use of mitigators and suggests a greater readiness to strengthen requests, possibly to signal urgency, sincerity, or involvement. The pragmatic functions of internal intensifiers are presented as follows. *Lexical intensifiers* offer concise means of conveying emphasis or

urgency. Their widespread presence across groups reflects a shared need to signal the importance of the request while still attending to politeness norms. *Consequence/contrast markers* function as persuasive framing devices. By making potential outcomes explicit (e.g., *otherwise, if not*), they justify or strengthen the request, an effect particularly noticeable in the South African data.

Across all varieties, lexical intensifiers dominate the intensification category (90–95%), typically realized through forms such as *really, very, and so*. These items serve interpersonal and expressive functions, reinforcing emotional alignment and underscoring the importance of the request. Their prevalence across groups indicates a broadly shared tendency to enhance persuasive force, even in asymmetrical academic interactions. Markers of consequence or contrast appear less frequently but are relatively balanced in the Cameroonian and South African data (5 tokens each). These devices (e.g., *otherwise, if not*) help justify or frame the request by indicating potential outcomes, thereby heightening perceived necessity while remaining within polite bounds. Overall, the patterns point to both cross-cultural divergence and convergence in the use of internal modifiers. Although all groups rely more on mitigation than intensification when addressing professors, their preferred strategies differ: Cameroonians favor collaborative and politeness-marker-based mitigation; Canadians rely more heavily on hedging and grammatical softeners; and South Africans employ an evenly mixed set of strategies. Intensification patterns also vary culturally, with Cameroonian speakers showing a comparatively stronger inclination to boost the force of their requests.

Overall, Cameroonian complaints to professors carry the highest boosting load, South African complaints occupy the middle position, and Canadian complaints are the least intensified. This reverses the ranking seen for mitigators (where Canada led), suggesting different cultural balances between softening and boosting when managing power asymmetry.

Conclusion

This study examined how speakers of Cameroon English, Canadian English, and South African English realize complaints in two socially contrasting scenarios, providing probably one of the first systematic comparative accounts of complaint behavior across these three regional varieties. Grounded in variational and postcolonial pragmatics, the analysis shows that complaint strategies are shaped not only by contextual variables such as power and social distance but also by deeper sociolinguistic and cultural patterns distinctive to each variety.

Across the dataset, respondents relied more often on head acts than on external modifiers, although the relative balance differed across regions. Cameroon English and Canadian English speakers tended to favor structurally simple but pragmatically effective

single-move complaints in the friend scenario, while South African English speakers produced more elaborated multi-move turns, especially when addressing a professor. These contrasts point to distinct cultural orientations in managing interpersonal tension, face concerns, and norm violations. The study also revealed clear cross-varietal differences in the choice and realization of complaint strategies. Requests for behavioral change were the most frequent strategy overall, yet their linguistic forms varied markedly across the three groups. Cameroonian speakers employed the broadest structural range, whereas Canadian speakers preferred conventionally indirect, highly mitigated forms. Strategies such as expressions of disbelief, insults, and certain types of threat, found only or predominantly in specific varieties, further demonstrate how cultural norms and communicative expectations shape pragmatic behavior in contexts of interpersonal confrontation.

Patterns in the use of external and internal modifiers similarly reflected the interaction between local linguistic repertoires and broader sociocultural values. Cameroonian respondents drew heavily on elaborated preparatory and supportive acts, consistent with the multilingual and interactionally rich environment in which English operates. Canadian respondents favored grammatical softeners such as conditionals and downtoners, reflecting norms of non-imposition and negative politeness. South African respondents displayed a more even distribution of modifier types, including a noticeable use of consequence-based intensifiers suggestive of a justificatory approach to conflict management.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that complaint behavior is shaped both by the pluricentric character of English and by local sociocultural conditions rooted in postcolonial histories, multilingualism, and shared communicative norms. By showing how speakers from three distinct English varieties mobilize different pragmatic resources to handle comparable social situations, the study contributes to a better understanding of intralingual pragmatic variation and expands the scope of research within variational and postcolonial pragmatics. Future research could extend this work by incorporating naturally occurring interactional data, examining additional speech acts, or investigating speakers' perceptions of complaint strategies. Such directions would deepen our understanding of how pragmatic norms emerge, circulate, and diverge across postcolonial English-speaking communities.

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