

# A sequential study of female complaint speech acts in *Desperate Housewives*

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**Abstract:** In daily life, face is the thing that people pay much attention to and they employ quite a few strategies to avoid the face-threatening acts of the interlocutors. However, complaint is a speech act that may cause potential threats to the hearer's face. This paper takes the first season of *Desperate Housewives* as the research data, and analyzes the complex sequences of complaints uttered by the female characters in the television drama. Three groups of "pre-root sequence", "pre-root-post sequence" and "root-post sequence" are identified. The present study provides insights into the comprehension of female complaints, as well as the characteristics of female interactive styles and coping strategies.

**Keywords:** Complaint; discourse analysis; sequence organization; pragmatics; television drama.

## 1. Introduction

Speech act theory was proposed by Austin in the UK, who proposed that language is a specific way of human behavior and people cannot live without speech acts in actual interactions. Searl (1969) developed Austin's work and classified speech acts into five categories, which are declaratives, directives, representation, commissives and expressives. Complaint refers to the speaker expressing his or her dissatisfaction with the present situation and then displaying the dissatisfaction in words (Yuan & Chen, 2015). Searl (1969) argues that complaint belongs to the category of commissives in the speech act theory, because it expresses the psychological state of the aggrieved party.

Currently, the previous studies on complaint are mainly from three perspectives, that is, complaints in a single language (e.g., Xu, 2006; Yuan, 2012; Kurtyka, 2019); comparative studies of complaints between different languages (e.g., Zhu, 2008; Yuan & Fang, 2010; Chen & Chen & Chang, 2013) and complaints in interlanguage (e.g., Wang, 2009; Jiao, 2017; Wei, 2017).

*Desperate Housewives* takes place in Belleville, a fictional town in the United States. It tells the story of five families from the perspective of Mary Alice Young, a suicidal housewife. Young introduces the desperate life of herself and the other four women in her neighborhood. This American drama contains a large number of females complaining acts, which provides abundant research data for examining the speech act of complaint. Therefore, in order to explore the sequences of the female complaint speech act, this paper collects the female complaint acts in the first season of *Desperate Housewives* as a research corpus to explore the complaint sequences that appear in it. Besides, this study also provides suggestions for future research directions so as to expand the research horizon of the speech act of complaint and adds references to analyze the language of complaints.

## 2. Literature review on complaint

Overall, the previous research on the speech act of complaint can be divided into three branches, viz., studies of complaint in a single language; comparative studies of complaint between different languages; studies of complaint in interlanguage. The following three sub-sections will introduce these studies.

## 2.1 Studies of complaint in a single language

Studies of complaints in a single language refer to the pragmatic implementation of complaint speech acts in a single language in terms of syntax, vocabulary, etc. For example, Xu (2006) took the direct complaint speech act and indirect complaint speech act in Russian as the research object and analyzed the mode of realization, politeness strategies, and responses to the speech act of complaint. It was found that there were three kinds of responses of the direct complaint speech act, including receiving complaint, partially receiving complaint and refuting complaint. And there were four kinds of responses to the indirect complaint speech act, consisting of expressing consent or sympathy, offering suggestions, expressing refutation, and deliberately avoiding or bypassing the topic. Yuan (2012) analyzed the differences between the complaints made by two groups of students in terms of semantic components, syntactic level, and discourse organization mode. The experiment took the complaints of junior and senior English majors as the corpus and used the discourse completion test (DCT, henceforth) to collect data. The research showed that there was no significant difference in the output of semantic components of complaints between the two groups of students. However, the differences between the two groups on syntactic lexical means and conversation organization mode reached a significant level. Specifically, senior students showed high pragmatic linguistic and sociopragmatic competence in producing complaint speech acts. Kurtyka (2019) took the voice samples collected in southern Poland from 2015 to 2017 as the research corpus. Focusing on the language characteristics of indirect third-party complaints and the impact of emotional expression, the research showed that indirect complaints were deliberately used in Polish. Interlocutors chose specific linguistic and paralinguistic means to strengthen complaints and emphasized the strong emotions related to them. Besides, indirect complaints in Polish had major subsidiary functions. They strengthened social connections because they allowed the interactor to vent negative emotions and provide (expected) understanding of the negative evaluations contained in the proposition, rather than advice, as this might be seen as a threat.

## 2.2 Comparative studies of complaint between different languages

Comparative studies of complaint between different languages refer to the researcher's investigations of two or more languages in order to explore the similarities and differences in the way speakers produce complain acts in different languages, etc. For example, Zhu (2008) investigated the attitudes toward the speech act of complaint of three experimental groups, who were native-speaker students in the United States, English major students in China, and non-English major students in China. Using an open-ended questionnaire as the survey instrument, the study revealed that non-English major students in China differed slightly from the group of American students in terms of topics of complaint, while the group of English major students and American students showed many similarities. This study also suggested that English major students' attitudes towards the speech act of complaint were influenced by language and culture. Yuan & Fang (2010) examined the differences between English and Chinese expressions of complaints by selecting 117 direct complaints from 21 English novels and 117 direct complaints from 18 Chinese novels. It was found that the speech act of complaint in English and Chinese differs in terms of patterns, expressions, syntactic vocabulary, etc. Chen, et al. (2013) identified and analyzed six complaint strategies (opting-out, dissatisfaction, interrogation, accusation, request for repair, and threat). The study took 40 American and Taiwanese college students as the research subjects and used the DCT as the instrument to collect data, which involves eight complaint-triggering scenarios. The study showed that American and Chinese participants had similar distributions of overall strategy, with differences in the choice of linguistic forms and expressions of semantic content. This study also suggested that American culture emphasizes social equality and exerts less importance on social power. In contrast, the contents expressed by Chinese participants varied by the interlocutor, with social power being the primary factor in Chinese society.

### 2.3 Comparative studies of complaints in interlanguage

The study of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP, henceforth) focuses on how the non-native speakers and native speakers differ concerning their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge and ability in different social contexts. The previous studies of interlanguage complaints concern the differences between native speakers and non-native speakers or the language-learning groups with proficiency levels in terms of their language use of the speech act of complaint. For example, Wang (2009) took 20 Chinese advanced English learners and 20 native English learners as the research subjects, and used the DCT as an instrument to collect the data and explore the similarities and differences in the use of complaint speech act between Chinese advanced English learners and native English learners. The study summarized and analyzed complaining speech acts used by the two language groups, and concluded that the two groups of learners were basically the same in terms of speech acts, but differed in specific situations. Similarly, Jiao (2017) took 30 native Chinese speakers, 30 native English speakers from the United States, and 110 Chinese English learners as three groups of respondents, using an open-ended DCT as an instrument to analyze Chinese English learners' use of complaint strategies and the presence or absence of pragmatic transfer in complaint speech act. It was found that there were differences and similarities in the choice of strategies, frequency of occurrence, and composition of discourse components among the three groups of participants. The study also pointed out that social power, social distance, cultural differences, and language differences influence the discourse transfer. Wei (2017) took 154 non-English major English learners and 147 English major learners as subjects and used DCT. Using social power and social distance as independent variables, the study analyzed the similarities and differences in the expression patterns of English learners from different majors and analyzed these differences in depth from the perspective of language ability and pragmatic competence. The study found that social status and social distance influence Chinese students' complaining speech behavior. A comparative analysis of different groups' complaining speech behaviors was conducted at the lexical and grammatical levels. The study showed that despite the higher pragmatic competence in the English major group than in the non-English major group, they still had difficulties in using various types of internal modifiers and showed an inclination towards native English speakers.

## 3. Study of the sequence of complaint speech acts

The sequences of the speech act of complaint can be classified into simple and complex sequences. In the simple sequence, since speakers already know the context of the event, they express their complaints directly, and thus the complaint process is short. In the first season of *Desperate Housewives*, the women complained about the complex context with high emotion, and the housewives did not use simple sequences, so the present study focuses on the complex sequences in *Desperate Housewives*. According to the number of complainers' interactions, the complaint discourse is in most cases composed of two or more sequence groups, whose constituents include pre-sequences, root sequences, and post-sequences. There are three combinations of sequence groups, including "pre-root sequence", "root-post sequence", and "pre-root-post sequence" (He, 2020).

### 3.1 Pre-root Sequence

The "pre-root sequence" begins with the background of the complaint and then continues with the core part of the complaint. The pre-sequence is closely connected to the root sequence and basically reflects the reason for the complaint and the specific contents of the complaint. However, without the complainant's active concession or the intervention of a third party, the entire complaint process comes to an abrupt end.

**Example 1:** -LYNETTE: Stop it, stop it, stop it. Stop it.

住手!

-PRESTON: But Mom!

但是，妈妈！

**-LYNETTE:** No, you are going to behave today.

不，你们今天乖一点。

I am not going to be humiliated in front of the entire neighborhood.

我不想在大家面前丢脸。

Example 1 is a pre-root sequence complaint structure. Lynette's children were making a lot of noise at the funeral of Lynette's neighbor, Mary Alice Young. In the pre-sequence, Lynette told her children to behave themselves, claiming that the children's disruptive and noisy behavior should stop at the funeral. The children questioned their mother's direct request, but Lynette refused the children's questions and became more firm in her tone. Lynette issued a complaint that she did not want to get embarrassed at the funeral. In the root sequence, Lynette expressed the core of the complaint in a so strong tone that she brooked no refusal. Since there is no active backing down by the complainers and no third-party intervention, the entire complaint process culminates.

**Example 2: -BREE:** So. How's the osso bucco?

那么...炖小牛胗怎么样？

**-ANDREW:** It's OK.

可以。

**-BREE:** It's OK? Andrew, I spent 3 hours cooking this meal.

spend: 花费

可以？Andrew,我花了3个小时准备晚餐。

How do you think it makes me feel when you say it's OK, in that sullen tone?

你觉得如果我听到有人用那种闷闷的口气跟我说"可以"我是什么感觉？

**-ANDREW:** Who asked you to spend 3 hours on dinner?

没人让你花3个小时做晚餐？

**-BREE:** Excuse me?

什么？

**-ANDREW:** Tim Harper's mom gets home from work,

Tim Harper的妈妈下班后才回家，

pops open a can of pork and beans, and boom, they're eating, everyone's happy.

开一罐猪肉大豆罐头，他们就这么吃，每个人都吃得很开心。

**-BREE:** You'd rather I serve pork and beans?

你情愿我给你们做大豆或是猪肉？

**-DANIELLE:** Apologize now, I am begging.

现在给我道歉。

**-ANDREW:** I'm just saying, do you always have to serve cuisine?

我是说，你干嘛总要弄这些来显示你的厨艺呢？

Can't we ever just have food?

难道我们不能就是吃饭而已？

**-BREE:** Are you doing drugs?

你磕药了么？

**-ANDREW:** What!?

什么？

**-BREE:** Change in behaviour is one of the warning signs, and you have been as fresh as paint for the last 6 months.

怪异的行为是一种信号，之前半年都很正常。

Example 2 is a pre-root sequence complaint structure. Bree asked her son if he was satisfied with her meal, but her son Andrew thought that Bree's meal was just "OK", which upset Bree. Bree complained about Andrew's mean words, but Andrew not only refused to comfort Bree. He also

accused Brew of continuously showing off her cooking skills. As a result, Brew's anger reached its peak. Bree stimulated the intensity of the conversation by accusing Andrew of being addicted to drugs. However, neither side backed down, nor did a third party intervene, so the entire whining discourse was not prolonged.

**Example 3: -Susan:** You know what?

你知道么？

I don't need an apology.

我不需要一个道歉。

I don't need anything from you.

我不想从你那儿得到任何东西。

**-Karl:** You're humiliating yourself.

你在羞辱你自己。

**-Susan:** No, you're the one who's been humiliated, Karl.

不，被羞辱的人是你，Karl。

Why don't you see that?

为什么你不明白呢？

You walked out on your family.

你抛下了自己的妻女。

People think you're scum, not me,

人们会认为你是渣子，而不是我。

so worry about yourself. I'm okay with me.

所以担心担心你自己吧，我可很好。

I can walk down the street and hold my head high.

我能昂首挺胸地走在街上。

Example 3 is a pre-root sequence structure. The pre-sequence explains that Susan wanted to get an apology for Karl's cheating in marriage, but Karl refused. Furthermore, Karl said that it was a kind of self-humiliation for Susan. In the root sequence, Susan was irritated by Karl's words and then complained that she would not be humiliated. Instead, she expressed her dissatisfaction and resentment towards Karl in a strong tone. Because the two sides rejected to give in, the whole complaining atmosphere reached its peak.

### 3.2 Pre-root-post Sequence

The “root-post sequence” model includes three parts: the beginning, the implementation and the end of the complaint, which forms a complete speech process of the complaint. It reflects the background of the complaint, the core of the complaint, and the result of the complaint.

**Example 4: -CARLOS:** Gabrielle...

Gabrielle...

**-GABRIELLE:** No. No, no, no, I'm not going.

不,不,不,不,我不去。

**-GABRIELLE:** I really hate the way you talk to me.

我实在很讨厌你跟我说话的态度。

**-CARLOS:** And I really hate that I spent \$15,000 on your diamond necklace that you couldn't live without.

我也很讨厌我花了\$15,000给你买了那条你没有就不能活的钻石项链。

But I'm learning to deal with it.

但是我试着搞定了，

So. Can I tell Tanaka we'll be there tomorrow night?

那么我可以告诉Tanaka明晚我们都会去？

Example 4 is a pre-root-post sequence complaint structure. The pre-sequence introduces the premise that Carlos' wish for his wife Gabrielle to attend the party with him was rejected. Gabrielle expressed her dissatisfaction with Carlos' manner of speaking in the root sequence, and the atmosphere became more anxious. In the root sequence, Carlos used the expensive necklace he bought for Gabrielle as compensation to express his wish for Gabrielle to attend the party with him. Due to Carlos' active concession, the complaining process tended to end, thus avoiding the increase of the complaining level and conflicts. The atmosphere became amicable and all the procedures formed a complete complaining process.

**Example 5:** -GABRIELLE: You know, Carlos, I didn't marry you so I could have dinner by myself 6 nights a week.

Carlos, 你知道, 我嫁给你, 并不是为了一周有六天都独自吃晚饭。

You know how bored I was today? I came this close to actually cleaning the house.

你知道今天我有多闷? 我闷到居然彻彻底底的打扫了一次房子。

-CARLOS: Don't be that way. I got you a gift.

别这样, 我给你买了份礼物。

-GABRIELLE: Nope. No, no, no, no. you're not gonna buy your way outta this one.

不行, 不行。你别指望这就把我给打发了。

-CARLOS: It's a good gift.

很棒的礼物。

-GABRIELLE: Is that white gold?

是白金的吗?

-CARLOS: Yeah. Put it on.

是的, 戴上它

Example 5 is a pre-root-post sequence complaint structure. Gabrielle was unhappy with Carlos' behavior and complained about it. In this case, Carlos tried to get Gabrielle's understanding by buying her a gift as an excuse to compensate. However, in the root sequence, Gabrielle thought that Carlos was dismissing her. The tone of her voice increases, the level of complaint deepens, and the atmosphere became tenser. In the post-sequence, Carlos stated that he bought a wonderful gift for Gabrielle -- a platinum necklace. Due to Carlos' active compromise and compensation, the whole complaining process ended directly and the tense atmosphere was eased to some extent.

**Example 6:** -LYNETTE: Okay, lady, that's it!

好吧, 夫人, 我受够了。

-MAISY: I beg your pardon?

你说什么?

-LYNETTE: Maisy, we have kids the same age,

我们的孩子都差不多大,

which means there are years ahead of us, having to deal with each other.

所以我们要相处好几年。

So instead of playing all these petty games, why don't we put an end to this right now.

为什么我们不面对面的说清楚玩这些小把戏算什么?

-MAISY: What are you saying?

你在说什么?

-LYNETTE: Let's take it outside.

让我们摆到桌面上来说。

-MAISY: Let's take what outside?

什么摆到桌面上?

-LYNETTE: Your sorry ass. We're throwing down.

你故意刁难我的做法。

-MAISY: You are crazy!

你疯了！

-LYNETTE: Just being practical. Isn't it better to settle this once and for all,

我说得很实际。我们现在把问题说清楚，

rather than endure all this alpha mom crap until our kids graduate?

省得到孩子毕业的时候还在暗斗。

Hmmm? Come on! I'll even let you take the first shot.

快点，看看谁先来？

Example 6 is a pre-root-post sequence complaint structure. In the pre-sequence, Maisy, the mother of another child in Lynette's child's kindergarten, kept torturing Lynette. Lynette wanted to come straight to Maisy's behavior, while Maisy says she did not understand what Lynette means, which angers Lynette. In the root sequence, Lynette complained that Maisy was deliberately getting her in trouble. Lynette's complaint intensified. However, Maisy continued to refuse and accuses Lynette of her crazy acts. In the post-sequence, Lynette insisted on her initiative to solve the problem, which was a sign of Lynette's compromise. As a result, the complaint process did not deepen, thus avoiding a deeper conflict, and all the procedures comprised a complete complaint process.

### 3.3 Post-root Sequence

In the "pre-root-post sequence", the speaker starts the conversation at the core part of the complaint, and the complainant willingly backs off or a third party intervenes in the sequence. The complaint process thus ends to avoid deepening the conflict.

**Example 7:** -LYNETTE: You saying I'm a bad mother?

你是说我是个失败的母亲？

-OFFICER: Ma'am, you need to get back in your car, please.

夫人，请回到车里。

-LYNETTE: I have no help, my husband's always away on business.

没有人帮我，我丈夫总是在外忙生意。

-OFFICER: I'm gonna hafta ask you to step back now.

我必须警告你立刻回到车上。

-LYNETTE: My babysitter joined the witness relocation program.

我的管家换工作了，

I haven't slept through the night in 6 years.

六年来我晚上从没好好睡过觉。

-OFFICER: Ma'am..?

女士？

-LYNETTE: And for you to stand there, and judge me.

而你却站在这儿，对我评头论足。

-OFFICER: Okay. I'm not gonna give you a ticket. I'm just gonna let you off with a warning.

我不给你开罚单了，只是给你个警告。

-LYNETTE: I accept your apology.

我接受你的道歉。

Example 7 is a post-root complaint structure. Lynette's children did not wear seat belts and kept yelling in the car, and the police officer wanted to issue a ticket. In the root sequence, Lynette complained directly about the police officer's behavior, arguing that the police officer's behavior offended her. With a strong tone and a high level of complaint, Lynette made it difficult for the police officer to intervene. In this case, the police officer chose to back off and not give Lynette a ticket. In the post-sequence, Lynette forgave the police officer and stopped complaining, making the overall process of the complaining discourse shorter.

**Example 8:** -Susan: You can afford a cabin, but you can't scrape up child support?

你有钱去住林间小屋，却攒不够孩子的赡养费？

-Karl: The check is in the mail.

支票已经邮寄了。

-Susan: Oh. No, it's not.

哦，不，还没。

-Julie: I found my dental guard. I'm ready.

我找到我的护齿了，可以走了。

Stop fighting.

别吵架了。

Example 8 is a post-root complaint structure. In the root sequence, Susan wanted her ex-husband Karl to take care of their daughter, but Karl said he was going to a cabin in the woods with his new girlfriend. In the root sequence, Susan complained directly that Karl had money to go to the cabin but never paid the child's upkeep. When the tensions were intensified, Susan and Karl's daughter Julie interrupted the conversation, explaining that she has found a mouthguard and admonished Susan and Karl to stop complaining. The whole complaint process was not further intensified and the conflict was reconciled due to the intervention of Julie, a third party.

**Example 9:** -Gabrielle: My life. It hasn't turned out like I thought it would.

我的生活并不我像我想的那样。

-Nurse: Oh, honey!

噢，亲爱的。

-Gabrielle: Oh, I know I shouldn't complain.

噢，不，我知道我不该抱怨。

Example 9 is a "post-root" complaint structure. Gabrielle's mother-in-law encountered a car accident and is unconscious. In the root sequence, Gabrielle was meditating on the hospital bed and she complained that her life was not that satisfactory. The nurse asked her not to worry about her mother-in-law's health. In the post sequence, Gabrielle explained that she was not worried about her mother-in-law. She reflected that she should not complain. Although this conversation starts with complaint, the whole complaint process is very short and the degree of complaint is relatively light due to the active concession of the complainant.

## 4. Conclusion

*Desperate Housewives* is television series from a predominantly female perspective. The drama contains a large number of female complaint acts. This paper analyzes the sequence organization of several heroines' complaint speech acts in *Desperate Housewives*, using the women's complaints in the first season of *Desperate Housewives* as the research corpus. It is found that there are three sequence patterns in the complaint speech acts of the *Desperate Housewives*, which are pre-root sequence, pre-root-post sequence and post-root sequence. The analysis of the study allows for a better understanding of the verbal components of women's complaints, which is of research value in dealing with the speech acts of complaints in everyday communication. The study of the speech act of complaint in analyzing the sequence organization of heroines' speeches, which has been of a new research perspective, has taken on a new dimension in the new era and is of great significance in expanding the field of academic research on the speech act of complaint. However, there are still some limitations to this paper. Firstly, this paper is a qualitative study, and the corpus is relatively small. Only the complaint speech in the first season of *Desperate Housewives* was analyzed, and the number of each sequence was not counted. Secondly, this paper is a study of female complaint speech in *Desperate Housewives*. The future study may further enrich the types of the corpus and conduct a comparative study of different gender in *Desperate Housewives* to summarize the differences between male and female complaint speech behaviors.



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