Politeness strategies in complaints in Italian:
A study on IFL learners and Italian native speakers

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ABSTRACT

EN This paper reports on an ongoing study of Dutch native speakers learning Italian as a foreign language in a guided learning context. The study compares native and non-native realization patterns of complaints, both in terms of the type of expression of judgment and the request for reparation performed (following the classifications suggested by Nuzzo, 2007), and of the use of modifiers. Special attention is given to the potential effects of learners' language proficiency levels on the native-likeness of their realization patterns and of the quantity and variety of modifiers they used. Methods consisted of a sociolinguistic questionnaire, a written discourse completion test, and a conditional inference trees analysis of the production of 23 learners attending a B1 level course, 19 learners attending a B2 level course, and 23 native Italian speakers.

Key words: ITALIAN, DUTCH, PRAGMATICS, SPEECH ACTS, POLITENESS, MODIFIERS

ES El presente trabajo documenta un estudio en curso relativo a hablantes nativos de holandés que aprenden italiano como lengua extranjera en un contexto de enseñanza guiada. El estudio compara patrones de realización de quejas en habla nativa y no nativa, tanto en términos de realización de expresión de juicio como en petición de compensación (siguiendo las clasificaciones sugeridas por Nuzzo, 2007), sin olvidar el uso de modificadores. Se ha prestado especial atención a los niveles de dominio del idioma de los estudiantes y a sus potenciales efectos en la semejanza que muestran sus patrones de realización con el habla nativa, así como en la cantidad y variedad de modificadores utilizados. Los métodos consistieron en un cuestionario sociolingüístico, un test para completar el discurso y un árbol de inferencia condicional sobre la producción de veintitrés estudiantes que asisten a un curso de nivel B1, diecinueve que asisten a un curso de nivel B2 y veintitrés hablantes nativos de italiano.

Palabras clave: ITALIANO, HOLANDÉS, PRAGMÁTICA, ACTOS DE HABLA, CORTESÍA, MODIFICADORES

IT Questo articolo tratta di uno studio in corso su soggetti di madre lingua olandese che studiano italiano in un contesto di apprendimento guidato. Lo studio confronta la realizzazione di formule di protesta da parte di madrelingua e non, prendendo in esame sia il tipo di espressione di giudizio che il tipo di richiesta di scuse (in base alle classificazioni suggerite da Nuzzo, 2007), nonché l'uso di modificatori. Particolare attenzione è stata dedicata agli effetti potenziali del livello di padronanza linguistica degli apprendenti sui loro modelli (patterns di realizzazione) linguistici simili a quelli nativi e sulla quantità e varietà dei modificatori usati. La metodologia utilizzata è consistita in un questionario sociolinguistico, un test di completamento (DCT- written discourse completion test) e un'analisi CTree della produzione di 23 apprendenti di un corso di livello B1, 19 apprendenti di un corso di livello B2 e 23 di madrelingua italiana.

Parole chiave: ITALIANO, OLANDESE, PRAGMATICA, ATTI LINGUISTICI, CORTESIA, MODIFICATORI

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1. Introduction

The present paper reports on an ongoing study of how native Italian speakers and learners of Italian as a foreign language (IFL) perform complaints. The study was conducted with native Dutch speakers learning IFL in a guided learning context in Belgium.

Grounded in the field of acquisitional pragmatics of Italian as a second or a foreign language (Giacalone-Ramat, Chini, & Andorno, 2013), this paper focuses on pragmatic competence, considered here as the ability to perform specific communicative acts in a native-like way. The paper analyzes pragmatic competence of IFL learners by looking at patterns of realization of certain speech acts, especially face-threatening ones (see Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61), like complaints, and analyzing modification techniques, both in terms of quantity and variety of modifiers used, in order to understand learners' preferred politeness strategies.

The results of observation and analysis are then compared with the native speakers' linguistic behaviour and evaluated in terms of native-likeness. These results provide a first step for developing specific didactic methods, advancing recommendations on input to provide to learners, and studying whether didactic approaches have any significant effect on the cultivation of pragmatic competence.

1.1. Literature review
1.1.1. Complaints

Research on speech acts dates back to Austin's work on philosophy of language (Austin, 1961; 1962) where he provided a classification of these acts, introducing ideas that remain central to modern pragmatics such as a speaker's intentions, and the felicity conditions and illocutionary force of his/her utterances (see Austin, 1962). These and other ideas were discussed and implemented by Searle (see Searle, 1969, 1975, 1976, 1979), who created another detailed classification of speech acts: complaints were classified here as expressive acts, since the speaker performing a complaint communicates his reaction to a negative (verbal or nonverbal) action (Searle, 1976).

Further research, though, has identified complaints as more complex speech acts because the speaker usually tries to influence the behavior of the actor of the negative action so that the action is fixed or, at the least, not repeated. For instance, George (1990) identifies two kinds of complaints: expressive and directive. Expressive complaints (according to George) can either address the actor of an annoying act or not: in fact, the speaker performing them reports on an annoying act without asking for reparation. Directive complaints, instead, are performed when the speaker tries to convince the actor of the annoying act not to repeat the act. This distinction is not far from Boxer's more recent idea that complaints can either be indirect or direct (Boxer, 2010, pp. 163-168). For Boxer, indirect complaints only address someone who is not the actor of the action triggering the complaint. This means that only direct complaints are face-threatening in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms. The problem with this dualism is that a direct complaint is not infrequently performed along with an indirect one. These two types of complaints can therefore instead be seen as two *parts* of a complaint, which can be termed, following Nuzzo (2007, p. 108), an "expression of judgment" and a "request for reparation". These two components can occur simultaneously or individually. Rubino and Bettoni (2006) even consider a third part of a complaint, namely the "resolution of the matter", which is usually shared between the speaker and the addressee.

Complaint realization patterns have been widely studied in English as a second language (see Boxer, 1993, pp. 280-281 for a short review and Trosborg, 1995 in detail), but they remain understudied in Italian. Some relevant exceptions include studies conducted by George (1990) and Rubino and Bettoni (1993; though their point of view was more cross-cultural than acquisitional), Nuzzo (2006, 2007), Rastelli and Nuzzo (2009), and Gauci (2012, 2015).

Nuzzo (2007) examined pragmatic competence in Italian as a second language, studying specific and delicate face-threatening speech acts like requests, complaints, and apologies. The researcher classified data collected from three learners of Italian as a second language studying in Milan and identified: three types of expression of judgment where the speaker makes clear that the addressee is responsible for the act triggering the complaint, five types of expression of judgment where the speaker does not explicitly specify anyone's responsibility, and seven types of requests for reparation (Nuzzo, 2007, pp. 112-115).

In addition to proposing this fine-grained classification, Nuzzo's work also finds that native speakers prefer to "underline the negativity of the event itself" (Nuzzo, 2007, p. 153), rather than explicitly state that the addressee is responsible for the negative event and explicitly request reparations: 65,4% of the

complaints collected in the study corpus of Italian L1 only contained an expression of judgment, 25,9% involved a judgment and a request for reparation and only 8,7% of them displayed a request for reparation with no expression of judgment. In contrast, learners were seen to use requests for reparation more often and to explicitly blame the addressee for the negative event (pp. 121-122). Nuzzo's data will be compared to that collected for the present study, though with some adjustments; since her data were collected longitudinally, and from only three learners, they are not perfectly comparable to the data presented here.

Realization patterns that are less direct are perceived by native Italian speakers as more polite: politeness norms compel the speaker to soften face-threatening acts through indirect formulations and modification devices (that will be defined in the next section) in order to be perceived as less imperative and demanding (see Nuzzo & Gauci, 2012, p. 18). The use of certain realization patterns and modifiers can therefore be seen as a set of politeness strategies. Not all of these strategies are universal (see Brown & Levinson, 1987) and native speakers of Italian appear to use them more naturally.

1.1.2. Modifiers

Even if native speakers (NSs) tend to employ more indirect expressions of judgment than explicit requests for reparation, complaints are difficult to produce without attacking one's relationship with the actor of the complaint-triggering action. For this reason, as stated earlier, modification is often used to mitigate the offensive nature of the judgments. Trosborg (1995, pp. 209-219) defines internal modifiers as morphosyntactical and lexical devices used by speakers to decrease ("downgraders") or enhance ("upgraders") the impact an utterance may have on the hearer (p. 209). She defines external modifiers as any supporting utterances used to attract the attention of the addressee and prepare, persuade, and disarm the addressee of a face-threatening speech act (p. 215).

Modifiers can therefore be deployed in speech acts in order to modify the social impact of one's reaction, communicate a specific pragmatic force, and downgrade or upgrade the level of coerciveness; for this reason Blum-Kulka defines them "multifunctional in two distinct ways" (1985, p. 213). Modification devices are a widely-used category of analysis for all the studies examining pragmatic competence among language learners (see for instance Forsberg, Lundell, & Erman, 2012, for English and French; Martínez-Flor, 2008 for English; Gauci, 2015, and Nuzzo, 2013 for Italian; Salazar Campillo, 2008, for English). These devices were studied by Nuzzo (2007) and Gauci (2015), who, with a specific focus on morphosyntactic and lexical modifiers, analyzed the realization patterns of complaints in Italian as a second language in order to develop a clear picture of politeness strategies used by nonnative speakers (NNSs) and NSs of Italian.

1.1.3. Politeness strategies in Dutch

Given that all of the learners in the present study were native Dutch speakers, a comparison with politeness strategies in Dutch is needed. According to a study by Van Mulken (1996), based on a corpus of parallel Dutch and French requests (collected from 20 French participants and 16 Dutch participants), Dutch NSs tend to use more lexical than syntactic and external modifiers in Dutch. Comparing their politeness strategies to those of French native speakers, Van Mulken found that the French participants used external modification more, while the Dutch participants tended to mitigate their requests with internal modifiers (this tendency was observed in previous research too, as can be seen in Stalpers, 1993, p. 91).

In fact, there were no significant differences between the Dutch and French participants in Van Mulken's study in terms of their performance of head acts (in line with previous research on this topic, such as Van der Wijst, 1991), but French participants produced longer requests because of their use of external modification (Van Mulken, 1996, p. 693).

Van Mulken states that if a Dutch native speaker with a low proficiency in French tried to be as polite as he was in Dutch he would fail due to a lack of a literal translation for the politeness markers that he would use in Dutch. He would find it difficult to use a supportive move, instead of choosing a politeness marker and keeping the head act alone, and his requests would therefore come across as impolite and unconvincing (p. 701). Van Mulken's observations can also be compared with findings from research where negotiation techniques in French and Dutch are studied and confronted: even when the subject of the interactions in question was specific and limited to business matters, Dutch study participants seemed less concerned with politeness than their French interlocutors (see Merk, 1987) and tended to be more direct in their negotiations. These studies seem to align with Van Mulken's findings, also with regards to the fact that observed directness resulted in unconvincing requests, since it appeared to negatively influence the outcome of the negotiations (see Van der Wijst & Ulijn, 1991).

2. Methodology
2.1. Research questions
Former studies in the field have attended to two main research questions: first, whether it is possible to profile a path of progressive convergence between non-native speakers' (NNSs) linguistic behavior and that of native speakers (NSs), and secondly what the relationship is between the acquisition of linguistic forms and their pragmatic use (Nuzzo, 2007, p. 39).

It is known that learners tend to develop advanced grammatical competence more easily than pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; 1993) and that this is even more true for learners of a foreign language than learners of a second language. For instance, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörney (1998, p. 258) found that ESL learners tended to recognize and consider pragmatic errors that were as serious as grammatical errors, while EFL learners had difficulty even recognizing them. On the other hand, there is evidence that some learners try to follow pragmatic rules of the target language before they have developed the grammatical competence needed to follow them correctly (Nuzzo, 2007, p. 32). Kasper and Rose (2002, p. 185) therefore hypothesize that L2 learners rely on pragmatic competence from their L1 when grammatical knowledge in their L2 is not high enough (pragmatic over grammatical competence), and that they use the new grammatical forms that they learn only with their literal meaning, learning to use their pragmatic values only at a later time (grammatical over pragmatic competence). These issues can be addressed in different ways as smaller, practical questions that may be easier to answer. This paper will address the following, focusing on the realization patterns of complaints:

RQ1: What are the most common ways NSs and NNSs of Italian express their judgment for a negative action that they find annoying? (Do they ask for reparation of the negative action with the same frequency and illocutionary force? That is, are there substantial differences between NSs and NNSs in terms of the selection of the complaint type to perform?)

RQ2: Are there substantial differences between NSs and NNSs in terms of the distribution of morphosyntactical, lexical and external modifiers used in performing a complaint?

RQ3: Do NNSs with higher linguistic proficiency exhibit more native-likeness in their performance of complaints than NNSs with lower linguistic proficiency?

And finally, following Van Mulken's (1996, p. 701) observation:

RQ4: Do Dutch NSs who are IFL learners tend to use more internal than external modifiers when trying to be polite in Italian?

2.2. Participants
The participants were students of Italian as a foreign language from two different classrooms at the Centrum voor Levende Talen (CLT) in Leuven, Belgium. Courses at the CLT are taught by Italian native speakers and based on materials selected from various sources of native production, namely newspapers, excerpts of movies, and TV shows. The participants were all native Dutch speakers, enrolled in course 5 and course 7 according to the Belgian system, where they were placed after a grammatical and lexical computer-based language assessment. Twenty-three were from course 5, which is approximately B1-level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001), and 19 were from course 7, approximately B2-level. Additional data were collected with the same methods from a control group of 23 Italian NSs, born and living in Italy with Italian parents and no significant periods of stay abroad.

There was a high proportion of women among the participants: 15 out of 23 in the B1-group, 10 out of 19 in the B2-group and 17 out of 23 in the NSs group. The Belgian participants were generally older than the Italian participants, although the participants came from mixed-age classrooms: the mean age was 44.08 (SD: 12.60) in the B-1 group and 47.57 (SD: 12.15) in the B2-group, while it was 28.56 (SD: 10.15) in the NSs group. All participants completed a sociolinguistic questionnaire, through which information was gathered about their personal data, their self-rated level of proficiency in any of their known languages, and their sources for Italian learning (courses attended, additional materials used during and outside the courses, contacts with Italian native speakers, and trips to Italy). All of the Dutch participants except for one declared knowledge of French and English, and all self-evaluated level of proficiency in these languages as "C1" or "+++". They all knew at least two languages other than their L1, most of them (36 out of 43) listed more than two additional languages, and all of them graduated from university. In order to ensure comparability between Dutch participants and the control group, the selected NSs of Italian were chosen among college graduates who knew at least two languages other than Italian (except for 5 out of 23).

2.2.1. Grammatical correctness

To determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the B1- and the B2-level groups in terms of grammatical competence, grammatical correctness was set as the response variable for a *ctree* (conditional inference tree) plot in R. In other words, this was done to see whether participants' stated level of proficiency in Italian (according to the computer-based test on the basis of which they were placed in their classes) had a significant effect on the grammatical correctness of their responses. Answers containing typographical or small lexicon-related mistakes were not considered ungrammatical. The randomly selected sample on which the analysis was carried out consisted of 200 answers per group.

As a non-parametric method for data classification, *ctrees* evaluate the relationship between several possible outcomes and a set of predictors, by binary recursive partitioning, and identify the predictor that is most strongly associated with the data partitions as the basis of the split. Specifically, the algorithm:

1) tests the global null hypothesis of independence between the input variables and the response variable, and chooses the input variable that is most strongly associated to the response variable if the null hypothesis actually is rejected: the measure for the association is a p-value determined by a test for the partial null hypothesis of a single input variable. If the global null hypothesis cannot be rejected, the algorithm stops;
2) develops a binary split in the individuated input variable;
3) repeats 1) and 2) recursively (see Hothorn, Hornik, & Zeileis, 2006, p. 653).

Grammatical correctness was therefore set as the response variable, and *proficiency level* was set as a predictor for the *ctree.* The generated plot reported in Figure 1 clearly shows that a higher proficiency level unsurprisingly correlates with a higher number of grammatically correct answers (p = .004), as *ctrees* do not show any split for the values of the predictor variable that did not prove significant. The two groups of learners can therefore be considered as well divided in terms of grammatical competence.
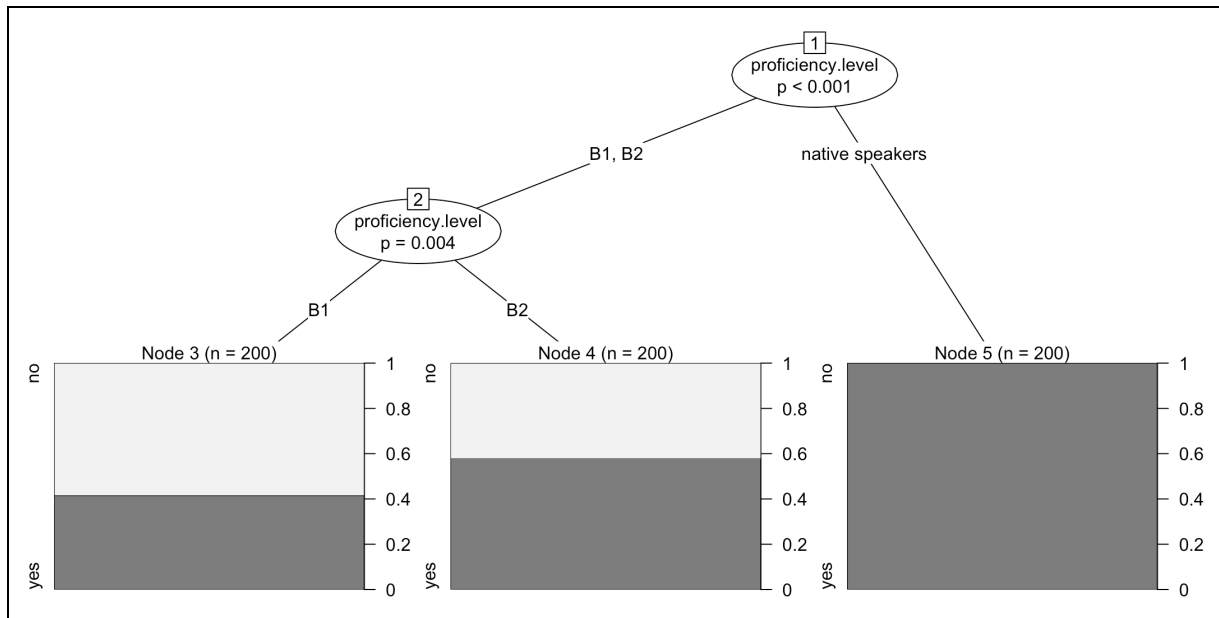

Figure 1. Conditional inference tree for grammatical correctness in a random sample of answers (n = 600) from the DCT.

2.3. Methods and units of analysis

The data were collected separately in the two classrooms, using a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which was explained orally immediately after all of the participants completed the sociolinguistic questionnaire mentioned in the previous section. The DCT outcome was used to build a dataset in Excel where each answer was given an ID and annotated for several variables: the types of expressions of judgment and requests for reparation used (as described below in Table 1 and 2), the subtypes of modifiers used (as

classified in Table 3) and the grammatical correctness of the answers. The grammatical correctness variable was used, as stated earlier, to check that the participants belonging to the three different groups (B1, B2 and Italian NSs) were in fact comparable in terms of grammatical competence.

The decision to employ a written DCT is complex and debatable, as each research method presents different advantages and shortcomings. Naturalistic observational data are more informative in terms of spontaneous language use and shed more light on the development of specific pragmatic behaviors performed by NNS, if the participants are followed long enough and their productions are well-analyzed. In longitudinal studies, however, it is difficult for the researcher to gather and analyze large quantities of data and it consequently becomes necessary for him/her to repeatedly test and observe the learners (which could be considered a bias, or cause the learners to leave before the study is concluded). Cross-sectional studies, on the other hand, allow the researcher to control for more variables (such as gender, age, proficiency level, education), include more participants, and create a large corpus of data in a short time. The main disadvantage is the non-spontaneous nature of these data, usually elicited through specifically designed tests, that may not correspond with learners' natural language use (Ellis, 2008, pp. 167-168).

The tests that are most frequently employed by researchers in this field are Role-Plays (RPs) and Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs). RPs share some of the disadvantages mentioned for longitudinal studies: gathering a large amount of data with RPs is not easy and takes time. Consequently, DCTs are widely preferred, in two main versions: multiple-choice, useful for examining the learners' knowledge through their choices, without the fluency bias (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 61), and written, addressing both offline knowledge of pragmatics and (written) fluency (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Gauci, 2015). Written DCTs have been criticised for their distance from spontaneous speech. Yuan (2001) suggests mitigating these disadvantages by explaining the situations orally: since orally elicited data are usually closer to natural speech, DCTs may be more accurate, even if written. This is the reasoning behind the choice of an orally explained, written DCT for the present study.

The DCT is comprised of 21 scripted situations in which a specific speech act should be performed: 7 requests, 7 complaints, and 7 apologies. The present paper analyzes the data for complaints. The situations were formulated in such a way that the participants had to verbalize complaints to different people, with different levels of social distance (as defined in Brown & Levinson, 1987) and intimacy with the subject. Out of the 7 situations formulated for complaints (found in the Appendix), 3 simulated a dialogue with an addressee with whom the speaker was intimate (an acquaintance, a friend, and a relative) and 4 with an addressee with whom the speaker was not intimate (two with a worker: a waiter and a cashier; two with a professional: a teacher and a hotel receptionist). The situations were meant to resemble as much as possible the range of potential relationships with an addressee that can be found in everyday life, so that the participants' choices in terms of type of complaints and modifiers were not biased by an imbalanced structure in the test with regard to this variable.

The situations were described orally, explained in detail by a native speaker, in light of Yuan's (2001) findings on how orally elicited data appear closer to natural speech. Participants were then asked to write down what they would have said had they found themselves in the situations in question. Several variables were considered for building the answer dataset:

1) proficiency level (of the individual who wrote each answer): NS, B1 or B2;
2) identity of the addressee: the addressee could be a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, a worker or a professional (see Appendix);
3) intimacy: the speaker and the addressee could know (+) each other or not (-) (see Appendix);
4) type and subtype of complaint as defined in the following sections: each complaint could be performed as an expression of judgment, a request for reparation, or a combination of the two (each expression of judgment and request for reparation can also be performed in several different ways that will be defined and explained with specific examples - see Tables 1 and 2);
5) number and type of morphosyntactic, lexical and external modifiers used (see Table 3).

2.3.1. Units of analysis

The unit of analysis for the complaints analyzed in this paper is the set of utterances provided by the participants while responding to the DCT. Although all of them are considered part of the realization patterns of the speech act, most of the sequences can be divided into portions with different functions.

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The nucleus of the speech act, which is usually referred to as the "head act" in the literature, is what is needed in order for the speech act to be realized. As previously mentioned, complaints can be performed with an expression of judgment and/or a request for reparation: when either one of them is presented alone, that represents the head act and the other portions of the answers should be considered external modifiers (they will be defined and illustrated through examples in section 2.3.3).

It is not infrequent that expressions of judgment and requests for reparation occur together as a head act. In such cases, both of them have been analyzed separately in order to define the type of expression of judgment or request for reparation that they represent (see Table 4 for the findings). Yet, as far as the definition of the head act is concerned, while expressions of judgment and requests for reparation can be considered as equally important components of the complaint as a whole, the expression of judgment seems to be the part explicitly signaling that a complaint is being performed (unless the request for reparation is presented alone and the judgment is somehow implicit).

The head act alone was also analyzed in terms of the number of modifiers used, for a better comparison with previous studies providing their results in terms of the head act alone (e.g. Gauci, 2015: p. 116) when counting the mean number of modifiers (that can be found in Table 4). For the reasons expressed previously, when the complaint was expressed by a combination of an expression of judgment and a request for reparation, the expression of judgment has been considered here as the head act.

2.3.2. Criteria for analysis: complaints

In order to analyze the realization patterns for complaints found in the data, it is necessary to define the types of complaints to be used as categories of analysis. The taxonomy provided in the following short summary is mostly based on Nuzzo (2007), and therefore classifies types of expressions of judgment and requests for reparation separately. These subtypes reflect Nuzzo's classification but have been streamlined in order to underscore some similarities between certain types of expression of judgment, rather than stressing every difference between them (which can undoubtedly be identified in the data, but could overcomplicate the analysis), and to make the continuum from the least direct to the most direct type clearer. This classification is consequently less fine-grained than Nuzzo's. The examples provided in Table 1 are taken from the present study's NS data.

Table 1
Classification of types of expression of judgment found in complaints of NSs, from the least (1) to the most direct (5)

	Type	Description	Example
1.	Mention of the Negative Action	The negative action is mentioned, and disapproved of, but not aggressively criticized. No specific reference to the action or the actor is made.	"Mi scusi, in realtà avrei ordinato un primo diverso da questo." *Excuse me, actually I had ordered a different first course.*
2.	Indirect Charge	The accusation clearly addresses the interlocutor but it is not explicit.	"Scusi mi sa che c'è qualcosa di sbagliato nel resto che mi ha dato." *Excuse me, I feel like there is something wrong with the change you gave me.*
3.	Direct Charge	It is clear that the interlocutor is to be charged of the negative action.	"Mi scusi, ho notato che non avete cambiato le lenzuola in questo giorno." *Excuse me, I noticed that you have not changed the sheets today.*
4.	Act Reproach	It is usually clear that the interlocutor has done the negative action, but the focus of the reproach is on the action itself - and it can be violent.	"Hanno dimenticato di cambiare le lenzuola della nostra camera! È inaccettabile!" *They forgot to change the sheets of our room! This is unacceptable!*
5.	Actor Reproach	The reproach clearly addresses the interlocutor and it can be fierce. Sometimes it takes an ironical form.	"Siete davvero attenti alle ordinazioni, in questo ristorante!" *You really pay attention to the orders in this restaurant!*

The expression of judgment (if present) therefore has five possible values, namely "mention of the negative action", "indirect charge", "direct charge", "act reproach", and "actor reproach". These are presented as a continuum, from the least direct (mention of the negative action) to the most direct (actor reproach).

This classification was based on the researcher's introspection and on the examples provided by Nuzzo (2007) for the types where the classification matches (i.e., 2., 3., and 5.); another researcher's judgment was used in order to resolve cases of ambiguity in categorizing an answer (each ambiguous answer was discussed until the researchers reached consensus). In those cases where the answer could fall into more than one category, it was counted as representing the more direct possibility.

As previously stated, the expression of judgment can (but need not) be followed by a request for reparation, usually expressed in one of the following ways. In fact, Nuzzo (2007) found that requests for reparation usually occur in combination with an expression of judgment and are rarely present alone. Again, the examples in Table 2 are taken from the NSs data.

Table 2
Proposed classification of types of requests for reparation found in complaints by NSs, from the least (1) to the most direct (5)

Types	Description	Examples
1. Verification of the Preparatory Conditions	The speaker asks something 'verifying' that conditions for the request to be met are present. This can include modal verbs, conditionals, and negative interrogative forms.	*"Potrebbe mandare qualcuno a cambiarle?"* Could you send somebody to change them?
2. Negotiation	It usually takes the form of a question, sometimes a first-person plural is present to include the speaker and the interlocutor in a communal attempt of reparation.	*"Scusi, quando riesce a riportarmi il mio quaderno?"* Excuse me, when can you bring my exercise book back to me?
3. Suggestion	This is a particularly circumlocutory type of request, where the speaker gives the interlocutor a hint as to how to repair the negative action.	*"Provi a controllare, io ho ordinato un risotto."* Try and check, I have ordered a risotto.
4. Demand	The speaker firmly demands reparation.	*"Si deve cambiare le lenzuola!"* The sheets have to be changed!
5. Threat	The speaker (sometimes violently) threatens a consequence for the interlocutor should there be no reparation for the negative action.	*"Sbrigati, ancora cinque minuti e me ne vado."* Hurry up, five more minutes and I'm gone.

The request for reparation (if present) can also have five possible values, namely "verification of the preparatory conditions", "negotiation", "suggestion", "claim" and "threat". These are presented as on a continuum, from the least direct (verification of the preparatory conditions) to the most direct (threat).

As stated for the expressions of judgment, this classification was based on the researcher's introspection and on the examples provided by Nuzzo (2007) for the types where the classification matches (i.e., 1., 2., and 3.); another researcher's judgment was used in order to resolve cases of ambiguity in categorizing an answer (each ambiguous answer was discussed until the researchers reached consensus). In those cases where the impression was that the answer could fall into more than one category, it was counted as representing the more direct type.

2.3.3. Criteria for analysis: modifiers

Following previous explanations concerning the need for modification to mitigate face-threatening acts like complaints, modifiers were also used as a category of analysis. The following classification of the types of modifiers used for the analysis in the present paper was based on the researcher's introspection and on the examples provided by Gauci (2012, 2015), Nuzzo (2007), and Trosborg (1995), with these same labels. The examples are taken from the present study's NS data.

Table 3
Types of modifiers considered

Type of modifiers	Subtype of modifiers	Examples
Lexical	politeness markers	*per favore, per piacere, per cortesia (*please*), mi scusi (*excuse me*)*
	appellatives	*signore* (Sir), *signora* (Madam)
	subjectivizers	*secondo me* (in my opinion), *credo* (I think), *immagino* (I imagine)
	intensifiers	*proprio* (definitely), *davvero* (really)
	discourse markers	*cioè, tipo* (like), *senti* (listen), *guarda* (look)
	softeners	*un attimo* (a moment), *un pochino* (a little bit)
	commitment markers	*sono sicuro* (I am sure), *ti assicuro* (I can assure you), *giuro* (I swear)
	greetings	*ciao (hello,* informal*), salve (hello,* formal*),* *buongiorno (good morning), buonasera (good evening)*
	doubters	*forse (*maybe*), probabilmente* (probably)
Morphosyntactic	continuous aspects	*mi stavo chiedendo...* (I was wondering...)
	imperatives	*cambiatele!* (do change them!), *muoviti*! (hurry up!)
	consultative devices	*ti dispiace se...* (would you mind if...)
	past tenses	*volevo...* (I wanted), *pensavo...* (I thought)
	embedding	*mi chiedo se non possiate cambiarle* (I was wondering whether you could change them), *sarebbe bello se mi portaste il mio* (it would be great if you brought me mine)
	conditionals	*potresti...?* (could you...?), *desidererei...* (I would like)
	modal verbs	*puoi* (can you), *voglio* (I want), *dovete* (you have to)
External	alerts	*mi spiace doverglielo dire* (I am sorry but i have to tell you), *scusi ma devo fare una lamentela* (I am sorry but I have to make a complaint)
	grounders	*deve esserci stato uno scambio di tavolo* (there must have been a confusion with another table), *ho controllato il compito e ho visto...* (I checked the assignment and I saw...)
	supportive reasons	*c'è qualcosa che non mi torna nel calcolo degli errori e vorrei capire dove sbaglio* (there is something that doesn't add up to me in the evaluation of the errors and I would like to understand where I am mistaken)
	sweeteners	*mi fido molto di lei, quindi...* (I trust you a lot, so...)

The annotation of these types of modifiers was carried out manually for each answer on a randomly selected sample of 300 observations, 100 for each of the three groups of participants.

Another researcher's judgment was used to resolve cases of ambiguity in categorizing a modifier (each ambiguous modifier was discussed until the researchers reached consensus).

3. Findings

3.1. Type of complaints

As previously noted, complaints can be performed as an expression of judgment, a request for reparation, or a combination of the two, following the classification proposed by Nuzzo (2007). The present study found that, for all three groups of participants, expressions of judgment (of the act or the actor) were almost always present, either alone or in combination with a request for reparation. On the other hand, it was very rare to find a request for reparation with no judgment mentioned.

As shown in Table 4, expressions of judgment are almost always used, both by learners and NSs, while requests for reparation alone only constitute 2% of the answers provided by NSs and B2-level learners. B1-level learners, however, used a higher percentage (12%) of requests for reparation alone. Based on prior research, Italian NSs would view a request for reparation without an attempt to decrease the impact of the request (with the use of downgraders as impolite (see Nuzzo & Gauci, 2012, p. 18).

Table 4
Realization patterns for complaints: types of complaint

Proficiency level	Type of complaint	Expression of judgment	Request for reparation
Learners - B1	Judgment: 52% Judgment and Request: 36% Request: 12%	Mention: 26% Indirect Charge: 18% Direct Charge: 40% Act Reproach: 2% Actor Reproach: 2% None: 12%	None: 52% Verification: 40% Negotiation: 4% Demand: 4%
Learners - B2	Judgment: 50% Judgment and Request: 48% Request: 2%	Mention: 46% Indirect Charge: 14% Direct Charge: 38% None: 2%	None: 50% Verification: 22% Negotiation: 12% Demand: 14% Threat: 2%
Native Speakers	Judgment: 64% Judgment and Request: 34% Request: 2%	Mention: 22% Indirect Charge: 52% Direct Charge: 24% None: 2%	None: 64% Verification: 32% Suggestion: 4%

Note: types of expressions of judgment: from the least direct, *Mention of the Negative Action*, to the most direct, *Actor Reproach*; and types of requests for reparation: from the least direct, *Verification of the Preparatory Conditions*, to the most direct, *Threat*.

The most significant difference, however, is that, while NSs use indirect forms of expressions of judgement, such as the Mention and the Indirect Charge type, NNSs tend to use more direct forms, e.g. the Direct Charge type and the Act or Actor Reproach types. For learners, the most common expression of judgement is the Direct Charge type, in which the speaker makes it clear that it is the addressee who has done something annoying, as in this example by a B1-level learner:

(1) Scusi   signora,   è sbagliato.   Non ha dato   il resto corretto.
     Excuse me   Madame,   it's wrong.   You have not given   the right change.

B1 learners were also the only group to use a very direct form, i.e. the Act Reproach type, where the speaker makes it clear that the interlocutor is responsible for the negative action, but the focus of the reproach is on the action itself. There were, though, only a few occurrences of this type:

(2) Scusi, ma   hanno dimenticato   di cambiare le lenzuola   della nostra camera!   È inaccettabile!
     Excuse me, but   they forgot   to change the sheets   of our room!   It's intolerable!

In the NSs data, expressions of judgement still make it clear that the addressee is to blame, but these are more frequently carried out through indirect formulations, as in the following example (Indirect Charge type):

(3) Mi scusi,   abbia pazienza,   ho paura che   ci sia un errore   nel resto...
     Excuse me,   be patient,   I'm afraid that   there is a mistake   in the change...

When NSs choose to perform an expression of judgment as a Direct Charge, they usually add a kind request for reparation and make extensive use of modifiers:

4) Mi scusi,   penso che abbia sbagliato   a darmi   il resto.   Potrebbe verificare?
    Excuse me,   I think that you made a mistake   while giving me   the change.   Could you verify?
                              Expression of judgment | Request for reparation

B2-level learners participating in this study tended to use the Direct Charge type of complaint as much as B1-learners, but they favored Mention of the Act they were complaining about (which is a less direct type) over Reproach, and made use of a higher number of downgraders, which made the complaints less face-threatening, as in this example:

(5) Scusi,   ho ordinato qualcos'altro.   Può darmi le penne all'arrabbiata,   prego?
    Excuse me,   I have ordered something else.   Can you give me the penne all'arrabbiata,   *please?*
    | Expression of judgment | Request for reparation |

While NSs showed a clear preference for indirect expressions of judgement and NNSs for direct approaches, some exceptions could be found. The data show that B1-level learners are also able to perform more indirect complaints (Indirect Charge type), although even when they do so (18% of the expressions of judgment performed by B1-level learners) they tend not to use many downgraders. This is well exemplified with this complaint to a cashier who has mistakenly given the wrong change:

(6) Scusa   signora,   penso che   manchino qualche dinari.
    Excuse me,   madame,   I think that   some money is missing.

Although the example evidences some confusion in forms of address (an Italian native speaker would definitely say *scusi* to a *signora,* using a second-person polite/honorific form), appropriate lexical choices, and grammatical agreement, it is clear that the focus of the complaint is on the missing money and not the cashier who has committed the mistake.

For all three groups, requests for reparation are almost always expressed through the Verification of the Preparatory Conditions pattern. As the name implies, the speaker "verifies" that conditions are present for the request for reparation to be met. This pattern usually includes the use of modal verbs, conditionals, and (sometimes) negative interrogative forms. In general, most of the participants (even B1-level learners) used modals when performing requests for reparation, as can be seen in example (5). Conditionals were less frequent among learners, even those at B2-level, while NSs tended to use them more, as can be seen in example (4), where the pattern is clearly recognizable.

Some NNSs, though, performed a few requests for reparation of the Demand type, as in example 7, where a B1-level learner insists that the teacher change the mark that she has given him because the number of mistakes was miscalculated.

(7) Scusa Maria,   ma questo non è un errore.   Ti prego   di correggere il mio voto.
    Sorry Maria,   but this is not a mistake.   I beg you   to correct my mark.

The learner likely thought that use of the verb *pregare* (to beg) was sufficient to mitigate the request, unaware that the directness of the request was probably too strong to be performed with a teacher. It should be noted, however, that the situation is complicated for a novice language learner, and can be potentially difficult for NSs alike.

Lastly, less direct and more complicated patterns like *Negotiation* (where the speaker and the interlocutor are presented together - usually via a first-person plural - in a communal attempt of reparation) and particularly *Suggestion* (where the speaker gives the interlocutor a hint as to how to repair the negative action) seem to be too difficult for NNSs: *Negotiation* is used slightly more by B2-level learners (12% of their answers as opposed to the 4% of B1-level learners' answers), while *Suggestion* is only used by NSs.

All of these results seem to support Trosborg's (1995) findings, in which ESL learners overused a type of complaint that she labelled "Accusation" (p. 348), essentially a combination of *Direct Charge, Act Reproach*, and *Actor Reproach*. In her work, Trosborg argued that NNSs generally come across as more straightforward (and therefore less polite) than NSs. Nuzzo (2007, p. 153) also came to this conclusion in her longitudinal study of three learners. The data from the present study concerning the frequent use of the Verification pattern in requests for reparation also align with Nuzzo's (2007) data; her learners used the Verification pattern 50% of the time (p. 123).

3.2. Modifiers

In addition to examining types of complaints, modifiers (both internal and external) have been considered and counted following the classification described in Table 3. The analysis was carried out manually for each answer on a randomly selected sample of 300 observations, 100 for each one of the three groups of participants. The overall mean number of modifiers is reported in Table 5. In analyzing modifiers, in addition to considering the whole utterance, the head act was also examined separately, and the mean number of modifiers per head act can be found in the last column of Table 5.

Table 5
Use of modifiers in the three groups of participants.

Proficiency level	Overall mean number of modifiers	Mean number of morphosyntactic modifiers	Mean number of lexical modifiers	Mean number of external modifiers	Mean number of modifiers per head act
Learners - B1	3.4 (SD: 1.14)	0.78 (SD: 0.93)	2.12 (SD: 0.68)	2.36 (SD: 0.96)	1.06 (SD: 0.65)
Learners - B2	4.34 (SD: 1.71)	1.02 (SD: 1.13)	2.56 (SD: 0.92)	3.18 (SD: 1.63)	1.12 (SD: 0.87)
Native Speakers	4.92 (SD: 2.58)	1.82 (SD: 1.50)	2.4 (SD: 1.08)	3.24 (SD: 2.09)	1.66 (SD: 1.02)

Note: All of these measures are calculated per answer except for the mean number of modifiers per head act in the last column.

All of these quantitative measures showed a correlation between a higher proficiency level and the usage of a higher number of modifiers per answer, i.e., a progressive convergence between the NNSs' behavior and that of NSs. This table also shows that all three groups were observed to use more lexical and external modifiers than morphosyntactic modifiers, and that NNSs, even if they were highly proficient in their L2, consistently employed a lower number of modifiers than NSs, who generally used more modifiers of any kind.

The B2-group, however, performed better than the B1-group (as can be seen both in Table 5 and in the following figures) in terms of number and also variety of modifiers used. In terms of number, Table 5 shows that they even used more lexical modifiers than NSs. In terms of variety, the following charts illustrate their use.
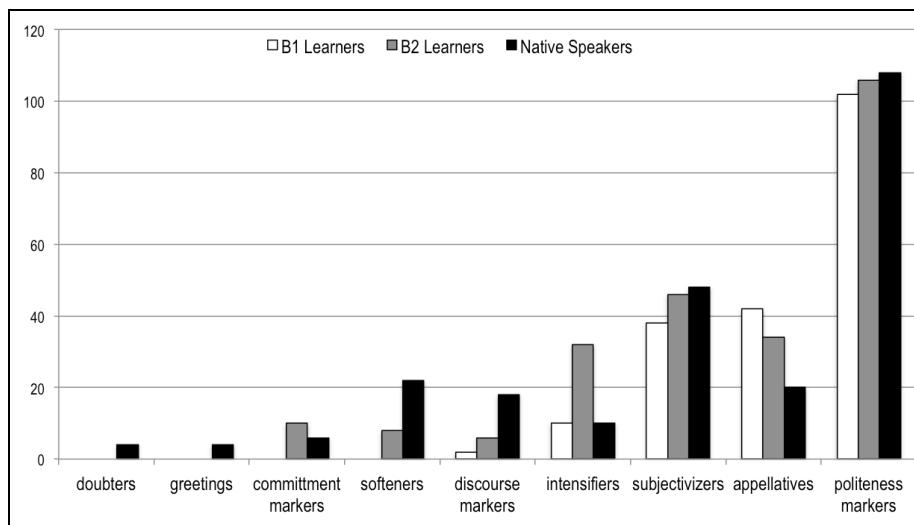

Figure 2. Distribution of lexical modifiers in a random sample of complaints by the three groups (n = 100 each).

As previously noted, there is a general tendency among NNSs to perform more direct complaints, which can be perceived as impolite by Italian NSs: their observed selection of modifiers was consistent with this tendency. It can be seen from Figure 2 that NNSs tended not to mitigate the impact of their complaints: they used hardly any softener (some B2-level learners did employ some), no doubters, and a lower number of subjectivizers than NSs. Although the B2-group performed better than the B1-group in terms of number and variety of lexical modifiers, they also complained in a more direct way than NSs. Yet, the B2-group tended to address the interlocutor softly, by explaining the reasons for their complaint by means of intensifiers and commitment markers. This behavior was largely present among NSs as well but tended to be exaggerated by B2-level learners:

(8) Scusa,   penso che si sia sbagliata,   sono veramente sicura che questo è giusto!
     POLITENESS.MARKER   SUBJECTIVIZER   COMMITMENT.MARKER
     Excuse me,   *I think you were wrong,*   *I really am sure that this is correct!*

All groups also tended to employ fewer morphosyntactic than lexical modifiers in performing complaints. Yet, even at a morphosyntactic level, where the numbers are lower for every group, the B2-group performed more natively than the B1-level learners in terms of modal verbs and conditionals used to reduce the impact of the request for reparation. This can be seen in Figure 3.
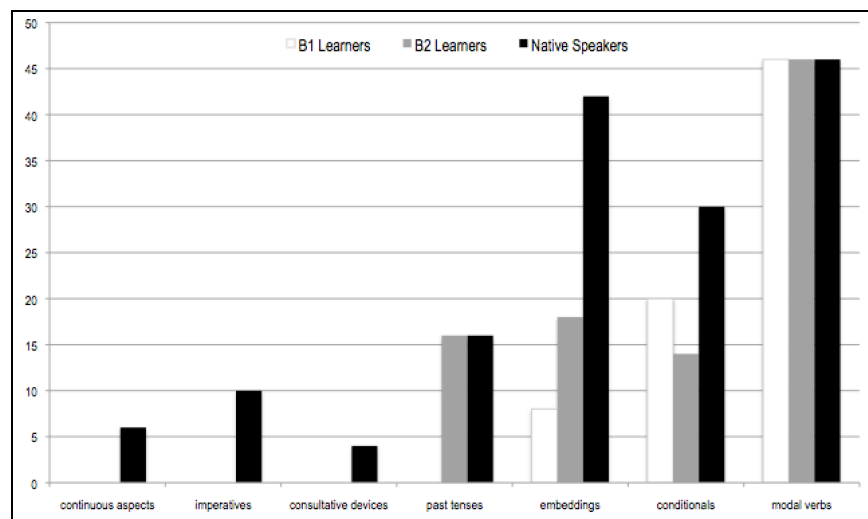

Figure 3. Distribution of morphosyntactic modifiers in a random sample of complaints by the three groups (n = 100 each).

In comparing Figure 3 to Figure 2, we can infer that the tendency for all speakers was to soften the illocutionary force of the complaints with the modifiers that are easiest to learn: politeness markers. The increased use of discourse markers, softeners and, more than anything, subjectivizers, accounts for most of the perceived politeness in the NSs' and the B2-learners' realizations of this speech act. The following example from the NS data illustrates how Italian NSs tended to use indirect strategies for complaints, along with downgraders, especially when talking with a professional. Even when charging the addressee directly in their actual expression of judgment, the NSs used lexical modifiers to make the complaint sound less threatening.

(9) Professoressa   mi scusi,   credo   ci sia stato   un   nel
                                                                                      errore   conteggio

	POLITENESS.MARKER	SUBJECTIVIZER	PAST.TENSE		
Professor	*excuse me,*	*I believe*	*there has been*	*a mistake*	*in the calculation*

degli errori   del mio compito,   potrebbe   ricontrollare?

		MODAL.VERB|CONDITIONAL	
of the errors	*of my homework,*	*could you*	*check again?*

Additionally, there were differences in the types of complaints for which speakers used modification. NSs generally used modification the most in Direct Charge complaints, while NNSs tended to employ the same number of modifiers, regardless of the type of complaint they were performing. B2-level learners, on the other hand, seemed to be more conscious of the need to be polite while complaining, at least if we consider cases of overperformance such as example 8. This tendency can be seen in the distribution of external modifiers, too. Looking at the three groups' behavior (Figure 4), it is immediately striking that the B1-level learners do not employ any sweeteners in their answers, while the B2-level group uses them even more frequently than NSs. This can be interpreted as learners' overuse of known forms as compensation for the politeness strategies that they lack the grammatical competence to perform.
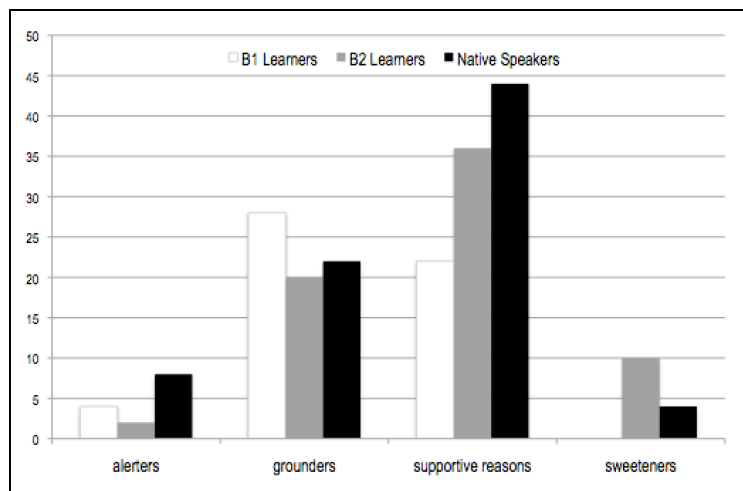

Figure 4. Distribution of external modifiers in a random sample of complaints by the three groups (n = 100 each).

B2-level learners seem to use alerters more rarely (to prepare the addressee for an impending complaint) than B1-level learners. B1 learners overuse grounders as well. The following examples illustrate the relative simplicity of B1 learners' grammar: Because they do not use many lexical and morphosyntactic modifiers (shown in brackets), they may compensate with external modifiers instead.

(10)   Scusi,   ho un problema nella mia camera   non ci hanno cambiato   le lenzuole.

(POLITENESS.MARKER)	ALERTER		GROUNDER	
Excuse me,	*I have a problem*	*in my room:*	*they did not change*	*the sheets.*

       Può   risolvere   questo problema   per favore?

(MODAL.VERB)		HEAD ACT	(POLITENESS.MARKER)
Can you	*solve*	*this problem*	*please?*

(11) Scusa   cameriere,   non è il piatto giusto,   avevo ordinato un altro
      (POLITENESS.MARKER)   ALERTER   HEAD ACT   (PAST.TENSE)   GROUNDER
      Excuse me   waiter,   it's not the right course,   I had ordered something else.

These findings are in line with previous research on Italian (Gauci, 2015; Nuzzo, 2007) and other languages as a L2 (Faerch & Kasper, 2001; Trosborg, 1995): NNSs showed a tendency to use a lower number of modifiers than NSs, irrespective of their proficiency.

The differences in use of modifiers by Italian NSs and NNSs found in these data also seem to mirror the pattern observed in Trosborg's (1995) study of English NSs' and NNSs' performance of complaints: NSSs tended to use a combination of downgraders to decrease the impact of the utterance on the addressee and upgraders to strengthen the force of the complaint; NNSs, on the other hand, intensified their complaints less and used fewer downgraders, thus producing less polite complaints on the whole (p. 358).

4. Discussion

The present study reveals a tendency for NNSs to perform similar types of complaints, which are generally more direct, in terms of expressions of judgment and requests for reparation, when compared to NSs (as shown in section 3.1).

The percentages of judgment-only (around 50% for NNSs and 64% for NSs), request-only (2% for B2-level learners as well as for NSs) and judgment-and-request (around 35% for B1-level learners and NSs) complaints were similar across the three groups. In 12% of B1-level learners' utterances, however, a complaint was performed only through a request for reparation with no expression of judgment. B2-level learners used the judgment-and-request type 48% of the time, more than either NSs or B1-level learners.

In expressions of judgment, both groups of NNSs chose to use the Direct Charge type in around 40% of the cases (40% for B1-learners, 38% for B2-learners). This contrasts sharply with NSs' use of Direct Charge (just 24% of cases) and their preference for Indirect Charges (52%), a strategy that was chosen by B2-learners in 14% of cases and by B1-learners in just 18% (see Table 4). These data can be interpreted as evidence that NNSs are more direct than NSs in their complaints. This is also true for their use of modification, as can be seen in the analysis provided in section 3.1. In comparing B1- and B2-level learners, though, B2 learners present a higher percentage of Mentions of the Negative Action (46%), considered a less aggressive form of judgement than Direct Charges. In fact this was the most used expression of judgement among B2 learners. It may therefore be suggested that indirectness progresses according to learners' level of grammatical competence.

Together, these results seem to suggest that it is easier for NNSs to be native-like when choosing the type of complaint to perform than when deciding how to express judgement and how to downgrade complaints through modification.

These results are in line with previous studies on speech act realization patterns in Italian L2: In Nuzzo's (2007) data, NSs preferred to state that a certain event was negative, but they avoided harsh or direct judgement of the addressee to which the complaint was directed. This trend is in line with Trosborg's (1995) data, too: Her learners overused "Accusation" (p. 348), a type of complaint corresponding to Direct Charge, Act Reproach, and Actor Reproach (types that were present in the B1-learner data here).

The correlation between indirectness and proficiency seemed present among Nuzzo's (2007) learners as well: Learners' complaints shifted from "excessively aggressive" to "slightly more aggressive" to "rather aggressive" (p. 153) with their increasing level of grammatical competence.

The relative native-likeness of NNSs' choices in terms of requests for reparation and types of complaints observed in this study seems to confirm Nuzzo's (2007) statement that strategies for performing head acts are acquired earlier than techniques of using internal modifiers.

The tendency among NSs to prefer the judgment-only type of complaint also confirms Nuzzo's (2007) analysis of a corpus of Italian L1, where 65,4% of complaints were judgment-only, as opposed to 25,9% judgment-and-request cases, and just a 8,7% request-only cases (p. 121), which in this study were used even less (in favor of the combined form).

The results of this study show that NNSs are less native-like in terms of their employment of modifications than they are in their choice of complaint types: It appears that most of them have yet to learn to use doubters, continuous aspects, and consultative devices. Additionally, commitment markers, softeners, discourse markers, and past tenses were only used at the B2-level.

On the one hand, as the B2 group performed significantly better than the B1, this finding suggests that the amount and variety of lexical and morphosyntactic modifiers in the realization of complaints (shown in Figures 2 and 3) reveal a progression in terms of native-likeness in the quantitative and qualitative use of modification, which follows an increase in proficiency level. On the other hand, only a small quantity of discourse markers and softeners (seen in Figure 2) were found in the answers provided by the NNSs, regardless of their proficiency level. When we asked the teachers at the language center about these findings, they recognized that they hardly ever teach or discuss discourse markers in class, due to the difficulty of translating them into other languages and because of the small amount of time students spend in spontaneous conversation with NSs: The only spontaneous speech that they analyzed in class was that of the learners attending the course (e.g. during role plays or in class discussions on a given topic), which rarely included any discourse markers.

When discourse markers and softeners were present in learners' data, they shared with the NSs a moderate but intelligent use of subjectivizers, although less frequent in the B1-group data. Learners also showed an overuse of intensifiers, especially at a B2-level. The B2-level learners participating in the present study were probably at an intermediate stage where, paradoxically, an increased use of intensifiers coincides with the first appearance of various downgraders, namely, subjectivizers, discourse markers, and softeners. The distribution of these modifiers among the different situations described in the DCT shows how, even when strategies and types of modifiers to be used are varied and essentially learned (as in the case of the B2-level group), insufficient attention may be paid to the situations and contexts in which communication takes place. Although the methods for this study and a written DCT in particular could be seen as contributing to this lack of attention to context and interlocutors, the situational data were clearly explained in person, so it would have been possible to fine-tune strategies and modification devices with the described context. Instead, NNSs seem unable to account for the identity of the addressee and the presence or absence of intimacy between them, and they used, on average, the same number of modifiers in almost all situations.

On a more general level, learners also tended to use more lexical than syntactic modifiers: B1-level learners employed an average of 2.12 lexical modifiers per answer but only 0.78 morphosyntactic modifiers, and B2-level learners used 2.56 lexical modifiers per answer but only 1,02 morphosyntactic modifiers, as shown in Table 5. This may be due to higher offline pragmatic knowledge that the learners were unable to encode grammatically.

These data also confirm the theoretical framework proposed by Nuzzo (2007, p. 154). First, the presence of such a small number of discourse markers can be explained by their particular complexity in terms of comprehension and acquisition; this can probably be said of downgraders, too (two of the learners in Nuzzo's study "rarely [used] mitigation devices in their expressions of judgment", p. 153). Secondly, the presence of intensifiers in the answers provided by the B2 group may plausibly be explained by Nuzzo's idea that, for learners with an intermediate level of interlanguage, intensifiers are the most accessible tools in their linguistic repertoire for gaining "stronger effectiveness". Only later on will they learn how to balance, in general, the use of upgraders and downgraders, "gradually reducing the aggressiveness of their complaints" (Nuzzo, 2007, p. 154). The overuse of politeness markers by NNSs has already been observed and studied as well: It seems that learners use them both as indicators of illocutionary force of their sentences and as downgraders (Gauci, 2012, p. 100, p. 106). The same can be said for the little attention paid by learners to contexts in which communication takes place, as noted by Gauci (2015, p. 118) as well.

4.1. Cross-linguistic influence and potential transfer from L1 or other known languages

The present data also confirm (some) results from the study by Van Mulken (1996) mentioned previously. Van Mulken stated that Dutch NSs tend to mitigate their requests for reparation with lexical rather than syntactic and external modifiers, not only in their native language. In this study, it seems to be true that, as Van Mulken (1996, p. 701) observed for French NSs, Dutch NSs learning Italian as a foreign language commonly chose a politeness marker and kept the head act alone. External modifiers, though, are proportionally more present in the NNSs data than internal modifiers (both morphosyntactic and lexical) overall.

Since most of the participants knew French as well (for most of them it was their second language), some forms that can be found in the NNSs data, like *scusate* ('excuse me', second-person plural/second-person singular honorific/polite form), which they had probably never heard in class and were not present at all in the NS data, were most likely used by the NNSs due to cross-linguistic influence from *vous* (the polite form in French). Transfer from French may also be seen in the persistent use of the form **è possibile di…?* instead of the correct Italian form *è possibile…?* with no *di* following, since the same form in French would be *est-il possible de…?*.

5. Conclusion

The present paper analyzes initial data from on an ongoing study in two classrooms of Dutch NSs learning Italian as a foreign language in a language center in Belgium, 23 at a B1 level, 19 at a B2 level. The study follows an existing line of research that examines the ability of learners of a second or foreign language to perform specific, face-threatening (see Brown & Levinson, 1987), communicative acts (here, complaints) as a native speaker would. For this reason, the data produced by the NNs have been compared with data from a group of (23) Italian NSs responding to the same written DCT.

The answers were analyzed both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective, following the classifications suggested by Nuzzo (2007) for the types of complaints—either composed by an expression of judgment or a request for reparation, or by a combination of the two—, and by Nuzzo (2007) and Trosborg (1995) for the types of internal (morphosyntactic and lexical) and external modifiers.

In response to our first research question (**RQ1**) about the most common ways NSs and NNSs of Italian express their judgment for a negative action that has annoyed them, the learners performed in native-like ways in terms of complaint types: all three groups tended to prefer the judgment-only type of complaint, although the B1-level learners used more request-only complaints (still just 12% of the answers provided to the DCT) and B2-level learners tended to generally use more indirect types of expressions of judgment.

In regards to the second research question (**RQ2**), though, which asked whether there are substantial differences between NSs and NNSs in terms of their distribution of morphosyntactical, lexical and external modifiers, NNSs systematically used a lower number of modifiers than native speakers. This was even true for the B2-level learners, who proved to be highly proficient in their L2.

Nevertheless, the fact that the B2-level learners exhibited more native-like performance than the B1-level learners, both in terms of the number and variety of modifiers used, seems to suggest that it could be possible to define a developmental path whereby a higher proficiency level in the language means smaller differences between non-native and native linguistic behavior. A slight preference for lexical over syntactic modifiers both among B1-level learners and B2-level learners may be interpreted as substantial evidence that a relationship between the acquisition and the use of linguistic forms exists (a question previously raised by Nuzzo, 2007, p. 39) in terms of consequentiality: Most of the B2-level learners displayed knowledge of the majority of the morphosyntactic modifiers analyzed in this study, and yet they did not employ them as pragmatic modification devices. These observations partially respond to the third research question (**RQ3**), which asked whether NNSs with higher linguistic proficiency show more native-like behavior in performing complaints than NNSs with lower linguistic proficiency. The use of external modifiers could be explained as proof of a higher level of awareness, even among the B1-level learners, that a native speaker's utterances in the situations presented would be more varied. With this awareness, learners would the need to use more words than they currently employ. Cases of overuse of external modification and a lack of internal modification, though, combined with the frequent selection of direct expressions of judgment, reflect early strategies..

The findings regarding the fourth and final research question (**RQ4**) — Do Dutch NSs who are IFL learners tend to use more internal than external modifiers when trying to be polite in Italian? — seem to confirm part of what Van Mulken observed about Dutch NSs speaking in French (Van Mulken, 1996, p. 701): for Dutch NSs learning Italian as a foreign language one of the most common strategies seems to be the decision to use a politeness marker and keep the head act alone. However, external modifiers are proportionally more present in the NNSs data than internal modifiers in general (both morphosyntactic and lexical).

These results strongly confirm previous studies on Italian (Gauci, 2012; 2015; Nuzzo, 2006; 2007; Rastelli & Nuzzo, 2009) and other languages (Faerch & Kasper, 2001; Trosborg, 1995), as the findings show that learners, even those with high L2 proficiency, systematically use fewer modifiers than native speakers.

The developmental path outlined by these data was also highlighted by Gauci (2012) and Nuzzo (2006, 2007). The same can also be said about B1 and B2 learners' displayed preference for lexical over syntactical modifiers (although this preference was more significant in previous studies, at least more than the results from B1-level learners here suggest).

As far as potential improvement for pedagogy, a study conducted by Gauci (2015) on complaints and requests, which employed more varied methods than the present study (i.e., a role-play and a multiple choice DCT in addition to the written DCT), revealed that after six weeks of instruction (one hour per week) on pragmalinguistic forms and detailed lessons on sociopragmatic rules, the mean number of internal modifiers used per head act increased significantly in the experimental group compared to a control group (who had no training between the two tests), and the variety of modifiers was also greater in the former group (p. 116). Although it was beyond the scope of the present study to examine the potential effects of instruction, lessons would likely prove useful if they focused on specific modifiers, with overt explanations of their functions and importance.

Instruction on less direct expressions of judgment could also be useful. The data produced by NSs participating in this study could be manipulated and learners could be exposed to short audio- or video-recordings of NSs' production of and reaction to complaints. Some of the sequences could be used for role-plays. In fact, Gauci (2015, p. 123) highlights the importance of using varied teaching methods, since no one method has been shown to be more useful than another in the previous literature.

On a side note, as part of their usual course activities, the learners from the B2-level classroom followed a curriculum that involved role-play of certain speech acts (requests in particular). However, the kinds of pragmatic abilities that learners would try and stimulate were only implicitly communicated. The teacher proposed them as side exercises to break up strongly theoretical lessons, and although the repetition of similar tasks could result in a conscious approach to the tasks as being, for instance, all related to the performance of complaints, it would be difficult to reach a real understanding of how to produce a native-like speech act in this way. Following Takahashi (2010, p. 138), who states that explicit and implicit forms of intervention (with reference to the definition by Housen & Pierrard, 2005) may be better conceptualized on a continuum rather than as separate, binary concepts, it would be interesting to explore whether a more explicit teaching intervention on the sociopragmatic variables, especially in terms of the social distance and the identity of the interlocutor (as suggested by Gauci, 2015, p. 123), may be useful, after implicit training with the mentioned audiovisual materials.

In conclusion, the analysis offered by this paper may have useful pedagogical implications, as DCTs provide a lot of information on the forms that need to be used as a target of specific training. Unfortunately, only a few of the teachers at the language center had a background in pragmatics and would have been able to provide instruction without first receiving specific training themselves. Therefore, in addition to carrying out more instructional studies, there is a need to make acquisitional pragmatics known to teachers in the first place.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Test

Some questions slightly varied in the two versions of this test: anytime a professor or a classmate was mentioned, the course was described as the Italian course at CLT in the version tailored for NNSs, whilst it was described as a generic evening course in the version tailored for the NSs.

These differences are marked in this Appendix with a slash separating the two versions, in brackets.

	Identity of the addressee	Situations	Intimacy
1.	Professional	L'albergo in cui soggiorni non ha provveduto a cambiare le lenzuola usate dai clienti precedenti. Fallo presente in reception. The hotel you're staying in did not change the sheets used by the previous costumers. Go tell the receptionists.	**LOWER**
2.	Friend	Il tuo amico Giuseppe ha preso in prestito un tuo libro ma te l'ha riportato senza copertina. Faglielo presente. Your friend Giuseppe borrowed a book from you and he's giving it back to you without its cover. Tell him.	**HIGHER**
3.	Worker	La cassiera del supermercato ha sbagliato a darti il resto. Faglielo presente. You were given the wrong change by the cashier at the supermarket. Tell her.	**LOWER**
4.	Worker	Hai ordinato un primo piatto al ristorante, ma te ne hanno portato uno sbagliato. Dillo al cameriere. You have ordered a first course at a restaurant, but the waiter brings you a wrong one. Tell him.	**LOWER**
5.	Professional	La professoressa del [CLT/corso che frequenti] ha sbagliato a conteggiare gli errori nel tuo ultimo compito. Faglielo presente. Your teacher at [CLT/a course you are enrolled at] made some errors in counting your mistakes in your last Italian test. Let her know.	**LOWER**
6.	Relative	Tua sorella ti ha chiesto di accompagnarla a comprare un vestito ma ci sta impiegando ore per scegliere. Faglielo presente. Your sister asked you to come with her to buy a dress, but it's taking hours for her to choose. Tell her.	**HIGHER**
7.	Acquaintance	Hai prestato il tuo quaderno a un signore che [studia italiano con te al CLT/segue con te un corso che frequenti], ma dopo due settimane non te l'ha ancora riportato. Faglielo presente. You've lent your notebook to a gentleman who [studies Italian with you at CLT/studies with you at a course], but two weeks have passed without him giving it back to you. Tell him.	**HIGHER**

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