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SPEECH ACT OF CRITICISM IN PEER FEEDBACK ON ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)**

Abstract

Using the theoretical concepts of speech act theory and politeness theory, this paper analyses the speech act of criticism, language forms and communication strategies utilised in peer feedback on argumentative essays of first-year university students of English, submitted via the Moodle platform. This was the writing assignment required in Integrated Skills classes as part of the compulsory Contemporary English Language Course (G1), during which students learned the basics of argumentative essay and academic writing. The corpus was collected during two consecutive academic years (2015-6 and 2016-7), with the participation of 122 students in total, where each student had to comment on at least one essay written by a peer, but could choose to comment on more than one. Speech act and communication strategies analysis tools were developed based on works by Nguyen (2005) and

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House and Kadar (2021), taking into account the fact that all student participants are non-native speakers of English and native speakers of Serbian.

Key words: speech act, criticism, commmunication strategies, peer feedback, computer-mediated communication, non-native speakers, university students of English.

1. Introduction

Although speech acts have been researched in Serbian literature, there has been very little work done on the subject of speech acts of criticism and compliment (praise in the context of our research), especially in an online environment. The research presented in this paper was conducted as part of the work on a doctoral dissertation focusing on these speech acts in an attempt to address the perceived knowledge gap. The paper focused on the analysis of the speech acts of criticism in the English part of the corpus, collected during two consecutive academic years (2015–6, and 2016–7), which numbered 354 in total. Research objectives were to analyse the speech acts according to their perlocutionary effects, linguistic realisations and communication strategies; to draw conclusions on a possible influence of the Serbian cultural script and any non-native phenomena observed; and to explore any implications the results presented for teaching practice. A total of 122 students participated in the research. As part of the Introduction to Academic Writing segment of the Integrated Skills classes of Contemporary English G1, the students were taught the basics of writing argumentative essays. The focus of their G1 writing was on paragraphs, main ideas and topic sentences. Prior to the Moodle task which was used for collecting the corpus in English, the students practiced writing paragraphs and full essays along with giving feedback through a series of graded activities. The teacher first modelled analysing argumentative essays with the class, then students practiced in pairs in class, giving feedback on their own homework writing. They were provided with a check list of clear criteria on essay organisation and then asked to work on the Moodle platform. The task was to write an argumentative essay on one of the topics offered, upload the essay and the plan for it to the group wiki, and comment on at least one essay written by their peers. Since the typical generation of 150–180 students is divided into six groups taught by two teachers, we felt that it would be beneficial to divide the six big groups of around 30 students each (A-F) into smaller subgroups (A1, A2…) of 4–6 students. It was supposed to increase the likelihood of everyone getting feedback

and provide a smaller reading audience for shy students. Since the students had to upload their work under their own names, the condition of anonymity could not be met, but for the purposes of this research the quoted comments were coded. For example, the first comment by Jelena Jovanović[1] from group A1 in generation 2015–6 would have been coded JJA1151, the second JJA1152, etc. After the Moodle task was completed, the teacher uploaded a table with brief comments on each of the essay but did not evaluate the comments themselves. The Moodle task was awarded points towards the overall writing segment mark, but the students could choose not to do it and consequently lose points. The task was envisaged as a final preparation stage before submitting a full individual essay on the Moodle and being graded exam-style by the teacher. The students were told to provide constructive feedback of the kind they themselves would like to receive and to be "gentle but truthful", although there were no explicit instructions given on the format of the Moodle feedback (letter form, itemised lists, etc.), or its wording.

2. Theoretical background – Speech act theory and relevant research

In order to provide an explanation of the theoretical framework for this research, we are going to provide a brief overview of the most relevant concepts of speech act theory, politeness theories of Brown & Levinson and Leech, peer feedback, and computer-mediated communication.

The founding fathers of speech act theory were John Austin and John Searle, starting with the seminal work *How to do things with words* (Austin, 1962), which was a step further from hitherto traditional preoccupation with propositional logic. Austin also introduced the concepts of locution, illocution, and perlocution (respectively, the words we say, the intended meaning of the speaker, and the effect on the hearer). In addition, he provided a somewhat tentative classification, which was later modified by Searle (1975). In this paper we are going to use Searle's classification, according to which all speech acts can be divided into representatives (sometimes also called assertives), by means of which the speaker makes a statement about the world; directives, by means of which the speaker attempts to make the hearer do something; comissives, through which the speaker undertakes an obligation to do something; expressives, through

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[1]   Made up name.

which the speaker expresses their psychological state regarding the state of the world, and declaratives (also known as performatives according to Austin), by means of which the speaker changes the world when uttering them (i.e. is doing something with words). Leech (1983, 2014) added to this nomenclature by separating rogatives into a distinct group. " 'Rogative' is a term I have pressed into service, to fill a gap in linguistic vocabulary. It means an illocution by which S [speaker] seeks to illicit from H [hearer] a reply filling a gap of information" (Leech, 2014: 63). This formulation makes it obvious that a rogative need not have the syntactic form of a question as long as it elicits the desired response, although the prototypical form of a rogative would be a question. In this paper, we will be using Searle's classification with the addition of rogatives for classifying speech acts. As remarked by Vasiljević (2015: 105), Austin and Searle's classifications form the basis of most of the papers written about speech acts, with authors modifying them to fit the needs of their particular language or research objective.

In our opinion, criticism is a high-risk speech act, given the potential to cause offence, and a complex one, since it may be considered both a representative and an expressive (a comment on the state of the world and our feelings about it). As Leech remarked, "Although "speech act" is in principle ambiguous between Austin's locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, in practice and in loose parlance "speech act" is taken to mean "illocutionary act" (Leech, 2014: 310). Therefore, all the speech acts analysed in this paper will have criticism as their final function, even though they might be classified into representatives, directives, etc. first.

Several previous studies on speech acts of criticism shed light on some attitudes to it. Tracey et al (Tracey, van Dusen & Robinson, 1987 in Nguyen, 2005: 14) researched perceptions of what made criticism good or bad. According to these authors, good criticism had to be precise enough, but also pleasant and accompanied by an offer to help. Teachers in two studies (Wajnryb, 1995 in Nguyen 2005; Hyland and Hyland, 2001) felt that criticism had to be clear, accompanied by suggestions for improvement, and also mitigated or softened. On the other hand, student participants thought that criticism should not be too indirect or too long – "a waste of time" (Wajnryb, 1995 in Nguyen, 2005: 15), or sometimes failed to understand the point of overly-softened criticism, especially if it was not accompanied by clear suggestions for improvement (Hyland & Hyland 2001, cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2012 on advice).

The most relevant study for our research was Nguyen (2005), which also studied peer feedback on argumentative essays and response to criticism, although its focus was on the development of student interlanguage or pragmatic competence. The study had three groups of participants, Vietnamese students of English, Australian English native speakers and Vietnamese native speakers, where the English proficiency of students was measured by their IELTS scores. Since it was not feasible to have a native English speaking control group equivalent to our student cohort, the native speaker data from Nguyen's study was used as a benchmark in our study.

Nguyen defined the speech act of criticism in the following way:

> …criticizing refers to an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation on the hearer's (H) actions, choice, words, and products for which he or she may be held responsible. This act is performed in hope of influencing H's future actions for the better for his or her own benefit as viewed by the speaker (S) or to communicate S's dissatisfaction/ discontent with or dislike regarding what H has done but without implying that what H has done has undesirable consequences for S). (Nguyen 2005: 7)

Nguyen also offered a classification of communication strategies for the speech act of criticism, based on earlier research of the CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). This classification suited the purposes of our research, albeit with some small modifications. According to this classification, criticism strategies can be direct, conventionally indirect, or unconventionally direct. Direct strategies include: negative evaluation (usually with an adjective with a negative connotation), disapproval, disagreement, problem identification, expressing difficulty (understanding the text), and pointing out consequences. Conventionally indirect strategies include implying there is a problem: corrections, referring to rules, demands or requests for change, advising or suggesting change (usually expressed through verbs, i.e. you must, would you, you should, I suggest/you could, etc.). Finally, unconventionally indirect strategies are not grammaticalised as typical forms of criticism, and include expressing uncertainty (about the statement), assumptions in question form, or any other hints not following the previous two patterns.

When analysing speech acts, the most important task is to define speech act boundaries, since a speech act in an online corpus might not be, and frequently is not, equivalent to a full sentence. According to the CCSARP classification, which was later adopted by Leech (2014) and House and Kadar (2021), the most important distinction is that between a head act and a supporting act. One head act can be accompanied (either pre- or post-modified) by more than one supporting act. The head act is defined as "a minimal unit which can realise the speech act" (House & Kadar, 2021: 135). However, it is important to note that "the most explicit realisation of the speech act counts as the Head Act" (House & Kadar, 2021: 117) even though we might encounter a string of speech acts of varying levels of explicitness, or even multi-headed speech acts, where the level of explicitness is the same:

1) Clean up the kitchen. Get rid of this mess. (House & Kadar: 117)

Supporting speech acts are external to the head act and can be aggravating or mitigating in their effect. Since this paper examines the speech act of criticism, which can be strong enough in itself, we focused on the mitigating supporting acts only. According to House and Kadar (2021: 125−127), they can be: Alerters (alerting Hearer that a speech act is to follow, i.e. vocatives, greetings, etc.); Preparators (suggesting the topic of the speech act and preparing grounds for it without being explicit); Grounders (i.e. giving grounds for the request in House & Kadar, 2021, although in our case they might be labelled Explicators, because they usually explain why the student made a particular comment or suggested a particular change to the essay); Disarmers/Acts of Appeasement (conflated into the Serbian term *Umirivač[2],* since in our corpus their main purpose is to express solidarity or justify a mistake, not to counter an anticipated argument); and Sweeteners (usually a compliment, to sweeten the bitter pill of criticism).

Since criticism is a speech act which normally requires some modification for politeness' sake, we also analysed pragmatic modifiers, which can be external and internal. Their classification is again based on Nugyen (2005) and House and Kadar (2021), who in turn based their classification on the CCSARP project research (House & Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka Olshtein 1986; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Eternal modification is achieved through supporting speech acts. According to this classification,

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[2]   From the verb *umiriti* – Appease, Soothe, Placate, Pacify

internal modifiers can be syntactic and lexical, and downgraders or upgraders in effect.

We also analysed speech act perspective, which according to House and Kadar (House & Kadar, 2021), can essentially mean speech act orientation to the speaker, to the hearer, a solidary orientation (we), towards a third person, or a neutral (using non-finite forms, passives, etc.) one. For the purposes of this paper, even though passive would, strictly speaking, belong to the category of syntactic downgraders, we decided to include it as a perspective, since it contributes to creating a distance between the speaker and the hearer.

3. Politeness theories – Brown & Levinson and Leech

It has been remarked in literature that the term *politeness* is very hard to define in final and all-encompassing terms, but it has become an accepted term despite this lack of a universally accepted definition. For the purposes of this paper, we will briefly present the basic principles of two politeness theories that have been both discussed and criticised for a long time, but have proved to be suitable for explaining some of the results of our corpus. Brown and Levinson (Brown & Levinson 1987) tried to formulate a universal politeness theory based on the concept of face, originally defined by Goffman as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself…by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1972: 5). According to Brown and Levinson, each participant in an interaction has a:

> 'face', the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61–62).

Another key concept is FTA, or Face Threatening Action, whereby we can threaten either the positive or the negative face of the hearer. The perceived

weight of the FTA determines our course of conduct in communication, and it can be calculated by the following formula:

$$W= P+D+R.$$

Prefers to the respective social power of the participants in the conversation, D is the social distance between them, and R is the ranking of the perceived imposition of the speech act, which is culturally and situationally determined. The greater the perceived weight of FTA, the more polite strategies need to be used.

In terms of committing the FTA, the ideal speaker-hearer of Brown and Levinson's theory has the following options in communication: 1) to go boldly on record, and commit the FTA without any redress, 2) to do the FTA, with some redressive action aimed at the hearer's positive or negative face (i.e. using positive or negative politeness strategies), 3) to go off record, and be indirect, giving hints only, or 4) not to do FTA at all, or to opt out. Brown and Levinson offered several strategies of positive, negative or indirect politeness, and we used these to explain the examples in the corpus that did not fit the normal speech act classifications.

In the instances where Brown and Levinson's theory was not a good fit, we turned to Leech's Maxims: Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim, to which he later added Maxims of Obligation, Opinion, Feeling (Leech, 1983, 2014). According to Leech, "In order to be polite, S expresses or implies meanings that associate a favorable value with what pertains to O[Other] or associates an unfavorable value with what pertains to S (S = self, speaker)" (Leech, 2014: 90).

4. Peer Feedback

While peer feedback, peer editing, or peer evaluation, as it is sometimes called, is a staple technique in Anglo-Saxon educational systems, it was very little known in Serbia before 2000. With the advent of the communicative method, it became more widespread, but the initial assumption in our teaching and research was that it would still require learner training. For the purposes of our research, we adopted the following definition: peer feedback is "the activity during which learners provide and receive feedback on their peers' writing in the written and/or oral mode in pairs or small

groups" (Yu & Lee, 2016: 1). Some early research (Zhang, 1995) indicated that in the Chinese context, students preferred teacher feedback to any other kind. In another Chinese study, which compared teacher feedback to peer feedback, 90% found teacher feedback useful, whereas only 60% thought the same about peer feedback. In addition, 90% of teacher comments were taken into account, while only 67% of peer comments were incorporated in the final versions of student essays (Yang et al, 2006). In our own context, Ljubojević (2016) studied the development of academic writing skills with the use of peer feedback and online collaboration tools. The study revealed a correlation between participating in peer feedback and the final mark for the course, indicating that the activity had contributed to the development of students' critical thinking "to a certain extent" (Ljubojević, 2016: 152). However, a study by Anđelković (2022), which compared teacher marks to peer feedback marks in ESP3 course at the Faculty of Organizational Sciences in Belgrade, found that students gave consistently higher marks, raising the issues of reliability and validity. Given that in our study the purpose of peer feedback was to provide an opportunity for students to read more essays, reflect on the best practice and criteria for writing academic essays, improve their critical thinking, and hopefully improve their academic writing as a result, the uneven quality of peer feedback was not perceived as an issue.

5. Computer-mediated communication

The definition of computer-mediated communication has been changing with the development of technology, and especially since the advent of Internet and Web 2.0. For the purposes of this research we have adopted the definition that reflects the state of technology at the time of collecting our corpus: "Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked or mobile computers, where "computers" are defined broadly to include any digital communication device" (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015: 217). However, given that the task assigned to our students involved a lot of writing/typing, it is highly likely that they did it on a desktop or laptop computer, and not on their mobile phones. When making the decision to take the peer feedback online, we assumed that our students as digital natives would have prior experience with

using email, text processing software such as Word, social networking and chatting applications (Facebook, FB Messenger), and the Moodle platform itself. Further, we assumed that this task would be engaging since they are digital natives, and that even though their prior personal experiences of online communication would inform their online politeness, their communication would be a little more formal given the institutional context of the interaction. However, we also assumed that some features of oralisation of written text (Yus, 2011) or Netspeak (Crystal, 2001) would be present. According to Yus (2011: 176–177), the oralisation of text, or deformation of text during communication in instant messaging applications has the following characteristics: orthographic errors (due to speed of communication) and phonetic orthography. Some examples of the latter include phonetic and colloquial spelling, regional dialect spelling, or prosodic spelling (e.g. capitalisation and repetition of letters to imitate sound), interlanguage spelling, and homophone spelling (e.g b4 =before). This also includes the use of abbreviations and ellipsis.

6. Discussion of results – Linguistic forms of Representatives and Directives

We have already mentioned that the total number of speech acts of criticism is 354, and the most common realisations of this act are through representatives (217), or directives (124). The most common linguistic forms in representatives are either combinations with a modal verb and a perfect infinitive (could have done, should have done), or combinations of the verb to be with adjectives. Another group of structures expresses that something is missing or lacking in the essay, and the final group comprises representatives that illustrate what was done that was considered wrong. This is not a uniform group in terms of structure. It is also the group that requires previous knowledge of criteria for writing argumentative essays and essay structure in order for the comment to be understood as criticism.
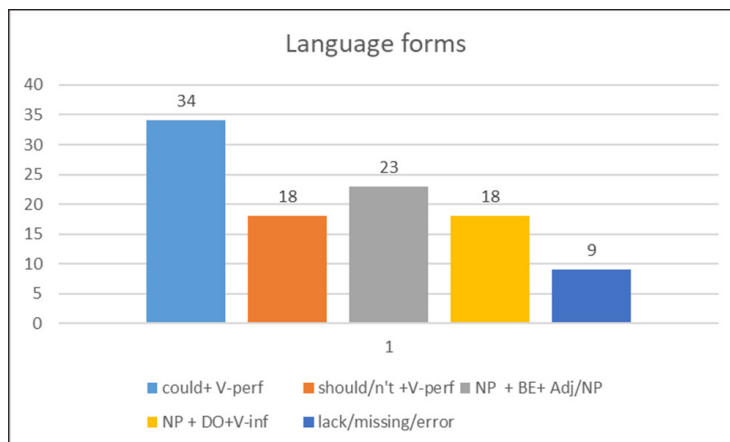
Figure 1. Forms of representatives

Here are some examples of all four groups of representative realisations:

2) "You could've added more details in second paragraph". (JAB1154)
3) "Maybe you should have talked more about the positive side of digital communication". (MZB2156)
4) "T*, I think that your essay is good, but your form is not". (IZC3153)
5) "The repetition of words such as "show", "say", and "freedom" is unnecessary as well". (MPC3153)
6) "You also seem to be missing the concluding sentence in your first paragraph". (NSC4162)
7) "A few points in the essay lack a bigger variety of examples". (APF2161)
8) "The concluding sentence […] doesn't sum up the idea, nor restates the topic sentence, hence isn't relevant to the topic". (MSA4153)
9) "However, the writer did not have a definitive topic sentence with a following explanation in each paragraph". (VNB3151)
10) "However, the usage of few convoluted sentences may interfere with the communication of those insights and ideas and therefore should be simplified". (NBD1161)

When it comes to speech acts of criticism realised through directives, their total number is 124, but only eight of those are real imperatives. Other constructions are usually considered as typical language forms for

the realisation of advice (*Should+ infinitive, If I were you, I advise you, I would*), or suggestions (*Why don't you+ infinitive?, How about + gerund?, You could +infinitive, conditionals*, etc.), while the final group (hints) are usually realised in the form of questions.
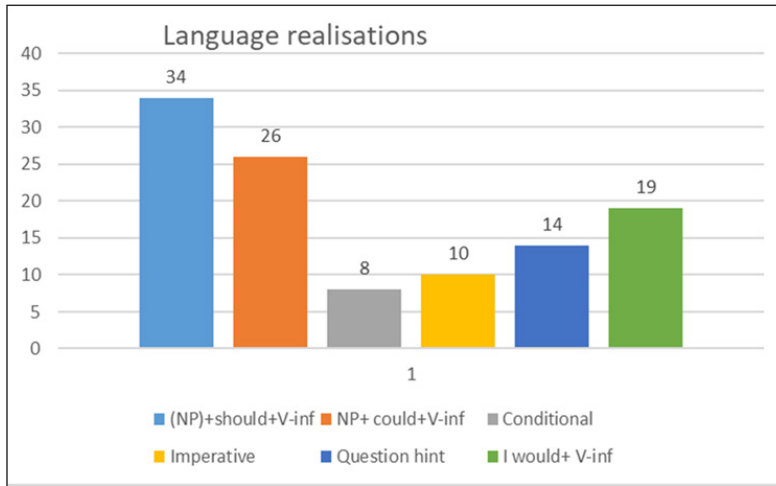

Figure 2. Forms of directives

When it comes to the language realisations of advice, the most productive construction in this part of the corpus is *should + infinitive*, most commonly with the second person pronoun (You should…), followed by *I would+ infinitive*. There are only four instances of the verb to advise, while the expected native construction "*If I were you…*" was only recorded once in the corpus.

11) "Like D* said, you should shorten it a bit because the limit is around 250 words". (NRB3161)

12) "I would only change the conclusion, wich in my opinion has to much of the writers personal thoughts on the matter". (ŽVC1162)[3]

13) "I think that T*J*'s essay is very good. But, I would advise her to put more linking words into both main paragraphs and I think that […]". (TJD3163)

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[3]   No language errors in the corpus were corrected in the analysis, and the comments are quoted in their original form.

14) "If I were you, I would have just separate into different paragraphs your introduction and your first arguments". (KJC2152)

When it comes to the language realisations of suggestions, the most common forms are constructions with the modal could and present infinitive, followed by conditionals (all three types). Questions with modals *Can* and *Could* were only found four times in the corpus, and there was only one example of a question beginning with *What about/How about…*?

15) "Maybe you could develop your idea in the second one a little bit more (how much homework? homework for holidays?, etc)". (RĆB4155)

16) "I think your essay can be great if you shorten it a bit because your ideas are very good". (AMiB2164)

17) "What about separating introduction and the first body paragraph but then making changes in the body paragraph?" (MRA3151)

Directives realised through question hints are indirect in nature, and their realisation of the speech act of criticism hinges on the addressee recognising that the question is actually a suggestion or an indication that they need to reconsider something they wrote in their essay.

18) "[…]"But not everyone can agree if it is a good idea to use emojis all the time". Have they really become a great part of our lives?" (DSA3151)

19) "Do teachers really organize prom?" (SRA3151)

7. External Modification of Speech Acts of Criticism

We will begin this section with an analysis of Alerters, which were a necessary part of the corpus, since our participants had to indicate who they were addressing/whose essay they were commenting on. This was especially important if more than one person chose a particular essay topic in the same group. The most common Alerters used (listed in order of frequency) were: Name + Surname, Essay Title, Name only (used 66, 55, and 41 times respectively). Essay number and title as an Alerter was used 17 times, and the least formal "Hi + Name!", which would have been a feature of informal communication online, was only used twice. Alerters were usually separate from the main body of the comment, with

few exceptions. In four instances, the participants wrote from the "I" perspective:

20) "The essay I particularly like is V*'s" (JPB3151)

21) "I chose to comment on the essay that is about how digital communication is destroying the English language". (VNB3151)

A couple of other exceptions were characterised by blending the Alerter in with the rest of the comment:

22) "The essay about how people in the media should be fined for using incorrect language has very clear introduction". (ARB3151).

Overall, when taken together, half of the participants chose a less formal way to address their peers -Name or Name+ Surname, instead of just formally using the essay title.

The next group of External Modifiers, Preparators, were slightly more difficult to define due to the nature of our corpus. The students could choose whether to use a more formal style of comment or use some of text oralisation strategies. This meant that there was frequent ellipsis and economy of expression in the corpus, along the lines of:

23) MP1: Good supporting sentences!

In the above example, MP1 stands for "Main Paragraph One" and clearly indicates what the comment is going to be about, and thus does the preparatory work, as do some discourse markers, such as "First of all", "As far as […] is concerned". In light of this, we chose to consider the emphatic constructions such as "The (only) thing that… to be true Preparators, numbering around 20 in the entire corpus. Here are some examples of Preparator constructions found in the corpus:

24) "The only thing I don't agree with is that the today's world is different from the one fifty years ago. Even hundred years ago, people hid their feelings in order to 'win' the place in society. You could say that people didn't change, yet the society did." (MJB2161)

25) "I would just like to add that there are some grammar mistakes and that some sentences could have been written in a better way, but I have not included that in this comment". (VMC3153)

We chose to give the alternative name of "Explicators" to the group of external modifiers that House and Kadar (2021) labelled as Grounders, since the purpose of these speech acts is different in our corpus. While

in the corpus of speech acts of request these supporting acts provide the grounds for making the request, the usual purpose of these speech acts in our corpus is to provide an explanation why the peer reviewer believes changing something might be a good idea. In addition, these speech acts can serve as an illustration/example of something just mentioned. The total number of these speech acts is 53. They mostly occur within complex sentences, although they might be found in the sentence immediately following the relevant statement. Here are some examples:

26) "'They also use many colloquial and shortened words'- I am not sure if this is clear enough, it can be understood in such a way that it refers both to native speakers and to people in general". (MSA4152)

27) "Maybe you should specify the changes you were referring to because in the following sentences you're talking about abandoning the standardized language which is not mentioned in the topic sentence". (MMA3151)

When it comes to the final group of external modifiers, Sweeteners, the primary task was to identify when a speech act that was essentially praise functioned as a sweetener, a supporting speech act, and when it was a head act in its own right. Given the nature of our corpus, which made punctuation an unreliable criterion on its own, we chose to consider it in parallel with the subject criterion. If the praise was within a complex sentence, separated by a comma, where the entire complex sentence referred to the same subject/topic, the speech act was deemed a Sweetener. In cases where the students deliberately used a full stop to separate sentences, or there was a clear change of topic, the speech act was considered a head act, and therefore Praise. Sometimes, however, the alternation of Criticism-Praise-Criticism produced what we called "the sweetener effect", since the inserted head speech act did indeed mitigate the two acts of criticism adjacent to it. What was also observed in the corpus was that sometimes there was more than one sweetener used to mitigate one act of criticism, and sweeteners could be positioned both pre- and post- criticism, although finding a final sweetener at the end of the comment was very common.

28) "Ideas of the first paragraph are well accomplished, but you might add more details about why it would be bad if English became a tool." (SSA4151) (13)

29) "The last paragraph is okay, I understand what you are saying, but I am not sure if it gives us the conclusion we need – it feels a little bit unsaid". (VMA1153)

30) "The central idea could have been kept a little more directly in focus, but all the arguments are persuasive". (AMC3153)

Finally, the conflated category of external modifiers we labelled Disarmers includes only 12 examples from the corpus. These speech acts usually attempt to excuse or downplay an error, or emphasise solidarity between the peer editor and the addressee.

31) "And obviously, the plan is missing, though I believe you just forgot to upload it". (ATB4152)

32) "All in all, I couldn't find bigger mistakes, and I really enjoyed reading your essay". (AIA2162)

The above example might be a literal translation from Serbian, since it is not clear whether the peer editor feels they were supposed to find more errors but couldn't (in which case it is almost like an apology to the teacher), or a sort of strangely worded compliment to the author of the essay.

33) "There aren't any concluding sentences although I don't feel like they are needed". (BMC3163)

34) "If I were your teacher, I'd probably warn you about keeping your essay a little more neutral (while still stating your opinion) and tell you to refrain from offending other mindsets, but I'm not, so good job!" (MMC3165)

35) "I am just saying this because of the pattern that professor Čorbić gave us. Pattern that consists of four parts: introduction, main paragraph 1, main paragraph 2 and conclusion. If it is okay to have more than 4 mentioned paragraphs, I apologize in advance". (JRA3161)

We have already mentioned that the politeness in our culture might sometimes be better described through Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, or via Leech's maxims. Our culture is a collectivist one, with a high tendency towards uncertainty avoidance and solidarity. The above strategies would fit two of Brown and Levinson's strategies of negative politeness – avoid imposition, and apologise, and one of positive politeness – emphasising similarities and friendship or belonging to the same group.
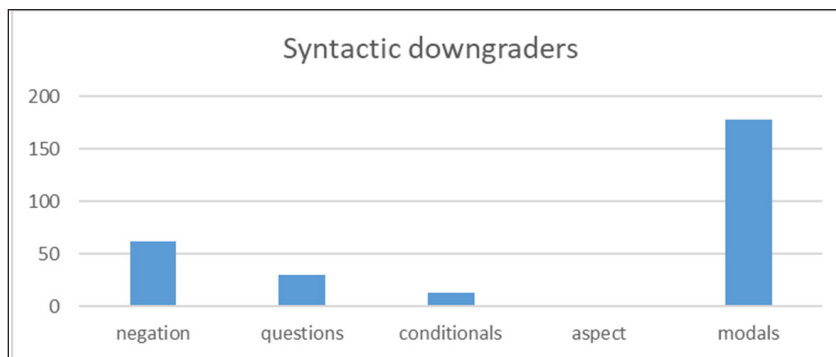
8. Internal Modification – Syntactic Downgraders

Figure 3. Syntactic downgraders

We have already given some examples for most of these language forms in the above text, and we will now make a couple of general remarks. Modals and negation are by far the most frequent means of syntactic modification/ mitigation, which might be due to the high number of representatives in the corpus. On the other hand, using aspect and tense modification, while a viable strategy for native speakers, was not represented in the corpus. Some of the tentativeness expressed through these means might have been covered by the construction *Would + present infinitive*, which was well-represented in the corpus.

36) "I don't think it would be considered a concluding sentence, but I could be wrong". (MBB1152)

When it comes to modal verbs, the verb *Should* was very frequently used, both with present and perfect infinitives, although the verb *Could*, when considered in terms of the total number of instances with both present and perfect infinitives, was the most frequently used one by far. Given that there were only two instances of using the verb *Might* in the entire corpus, it is safe to say that *Could* has in fact taken over the domain of meaning normally covered by the verb *Might*. In addition, while this might be a safe choice, overusing the verb *Should* in the working environment with native speakers of English might also prove to be problematic, despite the fact that it is widely taught in EFL textbooks as the go-to construction for advice. These findings definitely have implications for pragmatic instruction in our

classrooms, and may be considered an illustration of non-native features of our corpus.

When it comes to lexical downgraders, the most frequent Softeners (our label for mitigating adverbs and adverbial phrases) were *a little (bit), just,* and *slightly*.

37) "I like the fact that you talked a little bit about the history of the English language, however it did sort of overshadowed the main topic". (JKB2155)

There were only two instances of use of Hedges (*sort of/ kind of*) in the entire corpus, and the above example is one of them. By far the most productive mitigating devices in this group were epistemic adverbials *maybe* and *perhaps*, used as sentence modifiers, with 72 instances in the corpus. *Maybe* was used far more frequently than the more formal *perhaps* (56 and 16 times, respectively). These sentence modifiers were mostly used in sentences containing modal verbs, and there were some examples of overuse of these adverbials:

38) "the only thing I would mind is maybe the introduction: I think maybe you shouldn't have mentioned (the almost whole) title itself in the introduction and maybe rewrite this sentence […] as it is maybe already implied by the topic and this being an argumentative essay". (NKC2161-3)

It is safe to say that the meaning of the Serbian adverbial 'možda' is predominantly covered by the adverb *maybe* and the modal *Could*, even though the use of *Might* is taught in class as a perfectly natural way to express it in English.

In our nomenclature, Subjectivity Indicators are a class of downgraders that include both the verb *Think* and verbs of perception. The verb *Think* is used a total of 40 times in the corpus, and the next most frequent verbs, *Seem, See*, and *Feel,* were used 9, 6, and four times respectively. Having already given examples with the verb to *Think*, we will just briefly illustrate the usage of verbs of perception:

39) " – the one possible problem I see is your topic sentences – listing your arguments in the topic sentences seems a bit redundant to me". (AĐC2161)

40) " I also feel that you could work a little bit more on your concluding sentences". (ASA4161)

Epistemic indicators in our corpus were represented by the adjective *Sure,* largely in sentences in the first person singular (with the pronoun "I"):

41) "I'm not sure if there is an expression "to be present in mind and soul", but other than that good use of G&V". (KBC1161)

Taking into account the above results, we can now model a prototype sentence that would best represent the speech act of criticism as realised in our corpus:

42) I think that maybe you could add/have added a little more details on that.

9. Syntactic and Lexical Upgraders

Since politeness requires mitigation and not augmentation of illocutionary force when it comes to the speech act of criticism, it is no wonder that there were very few examples of upgraders, be they syntactic of lexical. The syntactic upgraders found in the corpus include emphatic constructions and cleft sentences, and instances of the emphatic use of the verb Do. The most productive construction ("The (only) thing that…) has already been illustrated above, and of the two instances of usage of emphatic Do, one was an error. The only proper example recorded is thus the following:

43) "[…] I did think it could have been stronger". (MĆC151)

When it comes to lexical upgraders, whether they are adjectives, adverbs or purely well-chosen lexical items, they were also used sparingly. *A few*, as an intensifying quantifier, was used only 7 times, for example. Here are some of the recorded instances of lexical upgraders in the corpus:

44) "I noticed quite a few spelling mistakes […]". (JKB2152)
45) "Firstly, I think, it has too many paragraphs and because of that it is a bit difficult to read". (MMD1162)
46) "There is nothing glaringly wrong with your essay, and I like it, except I think you should've written […] as one word". (MMC3161)
47) "'Punished' is a little bit harsh.". (JDC1152)

Lastly, the one instance of text oralisation strategies used for augmentation in the criticism corpus was the following comment:

48) "Are […} REALLY that relevant?" (VMC3152)

This type of strategy would naturally lend itself more to the speech act of praise/compliment and it is therefore not surprising that only one instance of it was recorded.

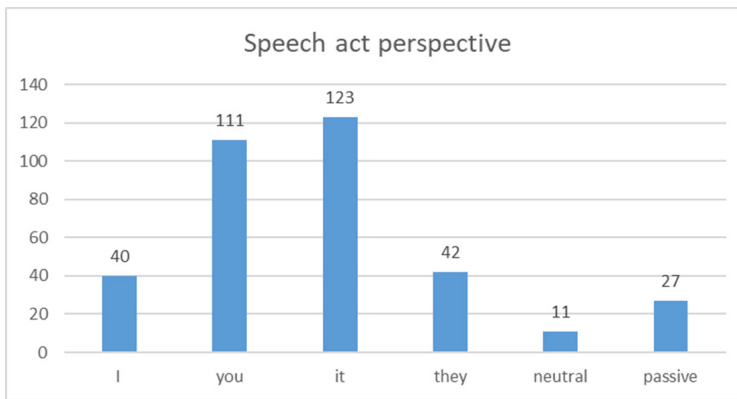## 10. Speech Act Perspective

Figure 4. Speech Act Perspective

We can see from the above figure that the most predominant perspective of the speech act of criticism was orientation towards the essay/part of the essay under discussion, closely followed by the orientation towards the addressee/ essay author. At this point we need to clarify that we considered a sentence beginning with *I think/In my opinion…* to be an instance of embedding, where the perspective was determined by the subject noun/pronoun of the following clause, while a sentence containing the advice construction *I would…* was considered to be an example of orientation towards the speaker ("I" perspective). Orientation towards the addressee creates less distance between the speaker and the addressee, as we can see from the following examples:

49) "M*, I think you needn't have written two separate paragraphs against making classes mandatory and I think your topic sentence in the first of those two is a bit off". (TMC3161)
50) "What about separating introduction and the first body paragraph but then making changes in the body paragraph?" (MRA3151)

While the above comment is a good example of a neutral perspective, achieved via the non-finite verb form, the following comment is unique in the corpus for its usage of passive and neutral structures, and the conversational distance it creates:

First of all, the paper is well-written concerning the main ideas per paragraph. Paragraphs could be improved with more examples of how the incorrect language is spread throughout the media providing the fact that the term "media" could also be associated with the internet and not just for television and reality shows. In the introductory part, a more appropriate term would be needed in order to substitute the word "commercialized" simply because a bad language and people's behaviour cannot be commercialized but perhaps globally widespread. The repetition of words such as […] is unnecessary as well, Again, in the conclusion part one can ask himself the question if the term "media" implies the usage of the internet and if it does, how can every single man be banned from it or even take a grammar test in order to be part of the media". (MPC3151)

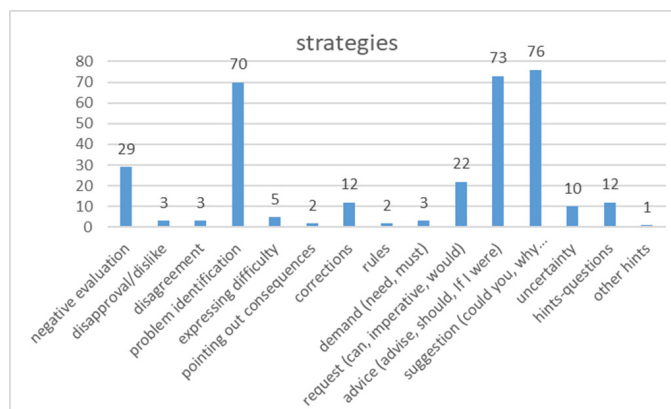## 11. Communication strategies in the realisation of speech acts of criticism

Figure 5. Communication strategies – Criticism

As we can see in the figure above, the most common conventionally direct strategies were problem identification and negative evaluation. When it

came to negative evaluation, Nguyen (2005) found that at lower levels of language competence constructions with the adjective *Bad/Good* were used very frequently. In our corpus, these specific adjectives were used once and twice, respectively, which is one of the indicators of a higher level of proficiency. Our first-year students are expected to be at B2+ level of CEFR on enrollment, and this finding is perfectly in line with such expectations.

When it comes to the problem identification strategy, in the same study by Nguyen this strategy was realized in different ways by Australian native speakers of English and by Vietnamese participants. The Australian participants tended to state what exactly the problem was, while the Vietnamese tended to indicate that there was a problem without stating what it was. The participants in our study fell somewhere in between these two groups. They mostly identified the problem precisely, although they sometimes used both of these approaches.

Regarding the conventionally indirect strategies, it is important to note that there were only four examples of the use of *Need* and one of *Have to* in the entire corpus (exemplifying demands). Explicitly stating the rules was also not very frequent. Here is one of the recorded examples:

51) "T*, I think your essay is too long. When they say 250 words, they really mean it". (AMB2161).

The most frequent strategies in this group are polite requests, advice, and suggestions. Polite requests are largely realised through imperatives, and advice and suggestions are realised through modal verbs, with perfect or present infinitives. According to the previously mentioned study by Nguyen, the use of modal verbs was one of the indicators of development of pragmalinguistic competence in her Vietnamese participants, while the absence of modals was indicative of lower proficiency levels. This finding also confirms that the participants in our study are at the expected (or at least sufficient) level of competence. The latter two strategies were also the most common strategies in the native speaker part of Nguyen's corpus (Nguyen, 2005).

12. Non-nativeness in the corpus

We have already mentioned that some linguistic features of the realisations of speech act of criticism reflect the fact that our students are non-native speakers English, even though we can be quite satisfied with their overall

level of linguistic competence demonstrated. The overuse of *Could/Should* and *Maybe,* the underuse of *Might* and *Quite* have already been mentioned, and their implications for pragmatic instruction in the classroom. Our students also exhibited the tendency to use more Grounders (unlike the native speakers in Nguyen's study (2005), who predominantly used Sweeteners as supporting speech acts), which would suggest that the Serbian cultural impulse is to justify, whereas the Anglo-Saxon is to soften the blow of criticism. Finally, while some of the structures used are not grammatically incorrect, our students also showed a marked preference towards using structures that have formal equivalents easily mapped into English.

13. Discourse phenomena

We have already mentioned that the order of speech acts of praise or criticism, especially when they create a sort of sandwich discourse structure (praise/criticism/praise), creates what we termed "the sweetener effect". The ratio of praise/sweetener in the whole corpus is about 3.5 per comment. Another phenomenon observed is what we termed "mirroring". This was most likely caused by the inherent impossibility of synchronous communication on the Moodle wikis, and the subsequent inability of students to respond to peer comments. However, we observed that, in cases where comments followed one directly after another, there was recorded usage or parallel structures, or parallel discourse organisation.

52) "J*D*: Could you give more arguments in the second paragraph?" (PIC1151)
53) "P*I*: Could you change this sentence "Why should someone be punished for something that he is paying for?" Punished is a little bit harsh and not all people are paying tuition". (JDC1151)

14. Politeness phenomena

We have already discussed the speech acts that are more readily explained through Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive and negative politeness strategies that emphasise solidarity, group membership and friendliness, in line with the Serbian collectivist culture. Another politeness phenomenon

worth mentioning is illustrated by the following comment, which is both an instance of opting out of FTA (according to Brown & Levinson), and a very clearly articulated student opinion on the peer feedback task:

This is by far the worst part of this assignment for me, evaluating someone else's work. But if it must be done, so be it. Both other essays are well-written, show a high degree of eloquence and do give arguments for both sides while remaining neutral. I am probably supposed to criticize the essays somehow, but I think that should be left to the professors. (NGF3161)

15. Conclusion

Having analysed our corpus of speech acts of criticism, we can say that our students have demonstrated a satisfactory level of pragmalinguistic competence, even though their speech act realisations show some non-native features and an influence of the solidarity and collectivist Serbian cultural patterns. Some of the non-native features (overuse of *Should* and *Maybe*) might require further language and pragmatic instruction in order that potential pitfalls in real life communication with native speakers of English might be avoided. We have also recorded an instance of text oralisation strategies according to Yus (2011), which might indicate a possible tendency towards transfer of communication strategies from the online environment into a more formal traditional educational one, although further research would be needed to verify this claim. Finally, in terms of the effectiveness of the peer feedback task, from the teaching and research perspectives we can be satisfied with the results. This highlights the importance of careful modelling and scaffolding of such tasks, and the need to be very careful when modelling politeness norms for our students in the classroom.

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