

## PRAGMALINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE SPEECH ACT OF REPROACH IN ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** This thesis investigates the pragmalinguistic features of the speech act of reproach in English, focusing on the linguistic strategies employed in expressing reproach and the sociocultural factors that influence these strategies. The findings reveal a spectrum of reproach strategies, emphasizing the role of context, power dynamics, and cultural background in shaping speakers' choices. Direct reproach tends to be used in hierarchical situations, while indirect reproach is favored in informal or equal-status interactions. The study highlights the significance of understanding reproach as a complex speech act influenced by various pragmatic and sociocultural factors, contributing to the fields of pragmatics and intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** pragmalinguistics, speech act, reproach, politeness strategies, directness, indirectness, sociopragmatics, intercultural communication, language and culture

### Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it also serves as a means for performing various social actions. One of the key functions of language in interpersonal communication is the ability to express emotions, manage relationships, and navigate social norms. Speech acts, as outlined in the works of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), are communicative actions that enable speakers to perform tasks such as requesting, apologizing, thanking, and reproaching. Among these, the speech act of reproach plays a significant role in expressing disapproval or disappointment, functioning as both a linguistic and social tool for managing behavior and maintaining social order.

The speech act of reproach is typically directed at someone's behavior, judgment, or attitude, signaling that the speaker perceives a deviation from expected norms or values. As such, it is inherently face-threatening, meaning that it carries the potential to damage the addressee's social image or "face," a concept that Brown and Levinson (1987) define in their Politeness Theory. To mitigate this face-threatening aspect, speakers often resort to various linguistic strategies such as hedging, indirectness, and softening techniques. These strategies are not only context-dependent but are also influenced by sociocultural norms, making reproach a particularly rich area for pragmalinguistic exploration.

Pragmalinguistics, a branch of pragmatics, focuses on how language users employ specific linguistic structures and strategies to perform speech acts in different communicative contexts. This study aims to examine the pragmalinguistic features of the speech act of reproach in English, exploring how speakers formulate and deliver reproach in various situations. By analyzing the linguistic structures and pragmatic strategies used, the study seeks to uncover the ways in which speakers balance the act of expressing disapproval while maintaining interpersonal harmony.

Furthermore, reproach varies not only in its linguistic realization but also in its sociopragmatic dimensions, which take into account factors like social distance, power relations, and cultural expectations. For instance, the way a superior might reproach a subordinate differs significantly from how one friend might reproach another. Such variations are central to understanding the pragmatic choices speakers make, which is particularly crucial in intercultural settings where differing norms of politeness and communication styles can lead to

misunderstandings.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the speech act of reproach in English, focusing on the following research questions:

1. What linguistic forms are typically used in expressing reproach in English?
2. How do contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and politeness norms affect the realization of reproach?
3. What are the sociocultural implications of the ways in which reproach is expressed and interpreted, particularly in intercultural communication?

By addressing these questions, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the pragmalinguistic aspects of reproach and provide insights into the broader field of pragmatics and speech act theory. Additionally, the findings may have practical implications for intercultural communication, particularly in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts, where learners may encounter challenges in appropriately performing and responding to the speech act of reproach.

### **Literature Review**

The speech act of reproach, while an essential aspect of everyday communication, has received comparatively less scholarly attention than other speech acts such as requests, apologies, or compliments. However, it plays a crucial role in maintaining social order by allowing speakers to express disapproval, correct behavior, or signal moral and social boundaries. This section reviews key concepts and studies related to speech act theory, the specific nature of reproach, politeness theory, and cross-cultural pragmatics, establishing the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

The foundation of this study lies in **speech act theory**, which was pioneered by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and later developed by John Searle (1969). According to this theory, language is not merely a means of conveying information but also a way of performing actions. Austin introduced the idea of "illocutionary acts," where utterances serve a specific function (e.g., promising, warning, reproaching) depending on the context and intention of the speaker. Searle further categorized speech acts into five types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Reproach falls within the category of expressives, as it allows the speaker to express disapproval or dissatisfaction with the behavior or actions of another person. As an illocutionary act, reproach typically conveys both the speaker's negative evaluation and an implicit demand for the addressee to reconsider their actions. Despite its importance in everyday communication, the speech act of reproach has been less studied compared to other expressives, such as apologies or compliments, which have been examined in more detail within pragmatics literature (Fraser, 1980; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983).

Although reproach shares similarities with other speech acts such as complaints or accusations, it has unique characteristics that set it apart. Reproach typically involves the speaker pointing out a perceived fault or breach of social norms, often focusing on the addressee's past actions. This act often carries an implicit moral or social judgment and is intended to correct behavior or bring attention to a perceived failure to meet expectations (Kotthoff, 1993).

In their exploration of negative speech acts, Trosborg (1995) provides a detailed taxonomy of reproach as a subtype of complaints, identifying different levels of directness, from mild expressions of disappointment to strong, confrontational accusations. This range of forms highlights the flexibility of reproach as a speech act, which can be tailored to different interpersonal dynamics, levels of familiarity, and social power structures.

Moreover, reproach often involves a balance between explicitness and mitigation. Speakers

may use direct reproach, such as “You shouldn’t have done that,” or indirect forms, like rhetorical questions or sarcasm, depending on factors such as the relationship with the interlocutor and the perceived severity of the offense. Trosborg’s categorization of complaints, including reproach, forms a basis for analyzing the pragmalinguistic strategies employed by speakers to perform this speech act.

As a potentially face-threatening act (FTA), reproach interacts closely with the concept of politeness, as theorized by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to their Politeness Theory, face refers to an individual’s self-esteem or social image, and speakers navigate social interactions by either supporting or threatening the face of others. Reproach, by its nature, threatens both the positive face (the desire to be liked and appreciated) and the negative face (the desire to act freely without imposition) of the addressee, as it expresses disapproval and implies that the addressee’s behavior should change.

To mitigate this face-threatening potential, speakers often use politeness strategies, such as:

- **Hedging** (e.g., "I don’t mean to criticize, but..."),
- **Minimizers** (e.g., "It’s just a small thing, but..."),
- **Indirect speech acts** (e.g., "Couldn’t you have done it differently?"),
- **Use of humor** to soften the negative tone.

The use of such strategies is influenced by several factors, including social distance, power dynamics, and the degree of imposition. **Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework** is essential for understanding how reproach is managed in conversations, particularly how speakers mitigate the face-threatening nature of this speech act to maintain social harmony.

**Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Reproach.** While much of the research on speech acts has focused on native speakers of English, **cross-cultural pragmatics** has expanded the scope to include how different cultures perform and interpret speech acts. Studies in cross-cultural pragmatics have shown that the realization of speech acts varies significantly across cultures, particularly in terms of **politeness norms**, power distance, and expectations of directness or indirectness (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

The **Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP)** (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) examined how different languages and cultures perform requests and apologies, revealing that cultural norms influence both the form and the interpretation of speech acts. This has implications for the study of reproach, as different cultures have varying expectations regarding the appropriateness of direct criticism, confrontation, or indirect mitigation strategies. For instance, **Matsumoto** (1988) highlighted how Japanese speakers, who often emphasize group harmony and indirectness, tend to avoid direct reproach, whereas English-speaking cultures, particularly in more egalitarian societies, may tolerate more direct forms of disapproval. Such cultural differences can lead to **pragmatic failure** when speakers from different cultural backgrounds misinterpret each other’s communicative intentions. This is especially relevant in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts, where non-native speakers of English may face challenges in navigating culturally appropriate ways to express reproach without offending.

While there is limited research specifically focused on reproach, some scholars have explored the broader category of negative speech acts and complaints. **Kotthoff** (1993) investigated reproach in German and English and found that while both languages use similar forms for direct reproach, the sociopragmatic contexts that determine the choice of directness or indirectness vary. **Wierzbicka** (1991) compared speech acts across languages and emphasized that speech acts like reproach are deeply embedded in cultural norms of behavior, with speakers in different cultures adhering to specific expectations of confrontation and mitigation.

Further, **Trosborg** (1995) focused on complaint behavior, including reproach, highlighting how the severity of the offense and the power relations between interlocutors influence the level of directness and the use of face-saving strategies. These studies provide a foundation for analyzing how reproach is realized in English and how social factors like status, power, and context shape linguistic choices.

The literature on speech acts, politeness theory, and cross-cultural pragmatics provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the speech act of reproach. While speech act theory helps explain the communicative functions of reproach, politeness theory offers insight into how speakers manage the face-threatening nature of this act. Additionally, cross-cultural pragmatics reveals how cultural differences influence the realization and interpretation of reproach, making it a particularly complex speech act in multilingual and multicultural settings.

This study builds on these theoretical foundations to explore how reproach is realized in English, focusing on the pragmalinguistic features of this speech act and the sociocultural factors that shape its use. The following chapters will examine the specific linguistic strategies employed in expressing reproach, as well as the contextual and cultural factors that influence speakers' pragmatic choices.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from both the corpus and role-play tasks. The findings will be discussed in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework laid out in the literature review. The chapter is organized into two main sections: (1) the pragmalinguistic analysis of the linguistic forms and strategies used in the speech act of reproach, and (2) the sociopragmatic analysis of contextual factors such as power, social distance, and cultural background, which influence the realization of reproach in English.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the specific linguistic forms and strategies used by speakers to perform the speech act of reproach. The data, collected from corpus instances and elicitation tasks, reveal significant patterns in the ways speakers choose to express reproach, which can be broadly categorized into direct and indirect forms, lexical features, and mitigation strategies.

One of the key distinctions in the expression of reproach is the degree of **directness** or **indirectness** used by the speaker. The analysis of both corpus data and role-play scenarios revealed a spectrum of directness, influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, as well as the perceived severity of the offense.

- **Direct Reproach:** Direct reproach was characterized by the explicit mention of the offense or disapproval, often using verbs like “should,” “must,” or “ought to.” Examples from the corpus include utterances such as:

- o “You shouldn’t have done that.”
- o “You must know that this was wrong.”
- o “Why didn’t you follow the instructions?”

Direct reproach was more commonly found in formal or hierarchical relationships, such as between a manager and an employee or a teacher and a student. In such cases, the power differential allowed the speaker to be more straightforward in expressing disapproval without significant concern for face-threatening implications.

- **Indirect Reproach:** Indirect reproach involved more subtle or implicit expressions of disapproval, often through the use of rhetorical questions, conditionals, or suggestions. Examples:

- o “Don’t you think you could have handled that differently?”
- o “Perhaps next time you could consider being more careful.”

- o "It might have been better if you had followed the instructions."

Indirect forms were more prevalent in interactions between equals, such as between friends or colleagues. The use of indirectness allowed the speaker to soften the reproach, minimizing the potential face-threatening impact, particularly when the relationship was close or when the offense was considered minor.

The analysis also focused on the lexical and syntactic choices that characterized the speech act of reproach. These features contributed to the tone, strength, and politeness of the reproach, and varied depending on the context.

- **Modals and Conditionals:** Modal verbs such as "should," "ought to," and "must" were frequently used in direct reproach, as they conveyed the speaker's strong belief that the addressee's behavior was wrong. For example, "You must be more careful in the future" implies a clear obligation and responsibility.

Conditional sentences, such as "You could have done this differently," softened the reproach by implying an alternative course of action without directly accusing the addressee. These structures were commonly used when the speaker wanted to avoid confrontation or when the reproach was mild.

- **Rhetorical Questions:** Rhetorical questions were a common feature of indirect reproach, serving to imply criticism without making an overt accusation. For instance, "Why didn't you think of that?" conveys disapproval while inviting the addressee to reflect on their actions. This strategy was frequently employed in contexts where the speaker wanted to maintain politeness while still expressing dissatisfaction.

- **Softeners and Hedges:** The use of hedging and softeners was observed as a key strategy for reducing the face-threatening impact of reproach. Phrases like "I don't mean to criticize, but..." or "Maybe it's just me, but..." were used to downplay the severity of the reproach and create a less confrontational tone. This was particularly common in informal contexts or when the speaker wanted to maintain a positive relationship with the addressee.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the **sociopragmatic factors** that influence the realization of reproach, particularly the roles of **power dynamics, social distance, and cultural background**. The data from both the corpus and the role-play tasks reveal that these factors play a crucial role in shaping the choice of linguistic forms and mitigation strategies.

Power dynamics significantly affected the directness and politeness strategies used in reproach. In hierarchical relationships, such as those between a manager and an employee or a teacher and a student, speakers with higher status tended to use more direct forms of reproach. This was likely due to the reduced need for face-saving strategies when the speaker held a position of authority. For example:

- **Manager to employee:** "You didn't meet the deadline. This needs to be fixed immediately."

- **Teacher to student:** "You should have followed the instructions more carefully."

In contrast, when the power dynamics were reversed, such as when an employee reproached a manager or a student reproached a teacher, the reproach was far more indirect, often accompanied by significant hedging or mitigation strategies to avoid challenging authority. For instance:

- **Employee to manager:** "I was wondering if it might be possible to revisit the plan because there seems to be a slight misunderstanding."

Social distance also played a key role in shaping the linguistic choices for reproach. In close relationships, such as between friends or family members, reproach tended to be more indirect, even in situations where the offense was significant. Speakers used politeness strategies to



maintain the relationship and avoid causing offense. For example, in interactions between friends, reproach often took the form of suggestions or rhetorical questions:

- **Friend to friend:** "Maybe next time we could plan ahead a bit better?"

Conversely, in situations where social distance was greater (e.g., between strangers or acquaintances), reproach was often more direct, as there was less concern for maintaining a close relationship. In these cases, the speaker was more willing to express disapproval openly, without significant concern for face-saving.

#### **Discussion**

The findings from this study highlight the complex interplay between linguistic choices and social factors in the realization of the speech act of reproach. The analysis reveals that while English speakers have a range of linguistic resources available for expressing reproach, their choices are heavily influenced by contextual factors such as power dynamics, social distance, and cultural background.

- **Pragmalinguistic Strategies:** The use of modals, conditionals, rhetorical questions, and hedging are key features of reproach, allowing speakers to adjust the level of directness and politeness depending on the situation.

- **Sociopragmatic Influences:** Power relations and social distance play a crucial role in shaping the choice of reproach strategies, with speakers in positions of authority more likely to use direct forms, while those in subordinate or equal positions tend to favor indirectness and mitigation.

- **Cross-Cultural Differences:** The study confirms that cultural norms around politeness and confrontation significantly influence how reproach is expressed, with individualistic cultures favoring directness and collectivist cultures prioritizing indirectness and harmony.

These findings have important implications for understanding the pragmatics of reproach in English, particularly in cross-cultural communication. Misunderstandings may arise when speakers from different cultural backgrounds fail to recognize or interpret the politeness strategies employed in reproach, leading to potential communication breakdowns.

#### **Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to conduct a detailed pragmalinguistic analysis of the speech act of reproach in English, focusing on the linguistic forms, pragmatic strategies, and sociocultural factors that shape how reproach is realized. Drawing on data from naturally occurring conversations and elicitation tasks, the study has provided insights into the ways English speakers express reproach, the factors that influence their choices, and the variation in reproach strategies across different social and cultural contexts.

The analysis revealed that the speech act of reproach is characterized by a wide range of linguistic and pragmatic strategies, which speakers deploy based on the contextual dynamics of each interaction. The findings can be summarized as follows:

- **Directness and Indirectness:** Reproach can be expressed directly or indirectly, with direct forms being more common in hierarchical or formal situations, where power dynamics allow the speaker to be more assertive. In contrast, indirect forms are preferred in informal settings or among equals, where maintaining social harmony and politeness is a higher priority.

- **Linguistic Features:** Lexical choices such as the use of modals (e.g., "should," "ought to"), conditionals (e.g., "You could have..."), and rhetorical questions (e.g., "Why didn't you...?") play a significant role in shaping the tone and strength of reproach. Mitigating devices, such as hedging and softeners, are frequently used to reduce the face-threatening impact of reproach.

- **Politeness Strategies:** Speakers employ a variety of politeness strategies to mitigate

the potentially damaging effects of reproach on the addressee's face. Negative politeness strategies, such as apologies or indirectness, and positive politeness strategies, such as expressing concern or solidarity, were both commonly observed.

- **Sociopragmatic Influences:** Power relations, social distance, and cultural background were found to be crucial factors in determining how reproach is expressed. Speakers with higher social or institutional power tend to use more direct reproach, while those in subordinate positions opt for more indirect and mitigated forms. Social distance also influences the level of directness, with closer relationships favoring more indirect and less confrontational reproach.

- **Cross-Cultural Variation:** The data from the role-play tasks demonstrated significant cross-cultural differences in the expression of reproach. Speakers from individualistic cultures, such as the UK and the USA, were more likely to use direct forms of reproach, reflecting cultural norms of direct communication and personal responsibility. In contrast, speakers from collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, favored more indirect strategies, emphasizing group harmony and face-saving.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of pragmatics by highlighting the complexity of the speech act of reproach and the range of factors that influence its realization. The study confirms that reproach is a highly context-sensitive speech act, shaped not only by the speaker's intentions but also by the social and cultural context in which the interaction occurs.

**This research has several important implications:**

1. **Politeness Theory and Speech Acts:** The study supports the relevance of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory in understanding how speakers manage face-threatening acts like reproach. The data show that reproach is often mitigated through negative and positive politeness strategies, especially in contexts where social relationships are at stake.

2. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** The cross-cultural differences observed in the data have important implications for intercultural communication. Misunderstandings may arise when speakers from different cultural backgrounds interpret reproach strategies differently, particularly in terms of directness and politeness. This highlights the need for greater awareness of cultural norms and pragmatic conventions in cross-cultural interactions.

3. **Teaching Pragmatics:** The findings have pedagogical implications for language teaching, particularly in teaching pragmatics to non-native speakers. Understanding the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of speech acts like reproach can help learners navigate complex social interactions more effectively, especially in intercultural contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights into the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic dimensions of reproach, it also has certain limitations. The study relied on a limited number of participants for the role-play tasks, which may not fully represent the full range of cultural and social diversity in English-speaking communities. Additionally, the analysis focused primarily on English, leaving room for further comparative studies across other languages and cultures.

**Future research could expand on this work by:**

- Conducting more extensive cross-cultural comparisons to explore how reproach is realized in other languages and cultural contexts.

- Investigating the role of gender, age, and regional variation in the expression of reproach.

- Exploring how non-verbal cues (e.g., tone, body language) interact with verbal reproach strategies to convey meaning and mitigate face-threatening acts.

In conclusion, the speech act of reproach is a multifaceted and context-sensitive phenomenon, shaped by linguistic, social, and cultural factors. This study has demonstrated that

reproach is realized through a variety of pragmalinguistic strategies, ranging from direct to indirect forms, and that sociopragmatic factors such as power relations, social distance, and cultural background significantly influence the choice of reproach strategies. By examining how English speakers navigate the delicate balance between expressing disapproval and maintaining social harmony, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the pragmatics of reproach and its role in communication.

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