Experiments into the influence of linguistic (in)directness on perceived face-threat in Twitter complaints

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To appear in the *Journal of Politeness Research* (Accepted on 22/08/2021)

Abstract

To date, how the content of online complaints shape their perception remains unexplored. We present two experiments in which we test the impact of the degree of linguistic (in)directness and the formal realization of complaint components on complaint perception. Our experimental stimuli are designed on the basis of French-language authentic Twitter complaints which have been coded in terms of the presence of four constitutive complaint components: the complainable, the negative evaluation of the complainable, the person/company responsible for the complainable, and a wish for compensation. In our experiments, participants are asked to read Twitter complaints, and they are invited to assess them in terms of perceived strength, dissatisfaction, (im)politeness, and offensiveness. Our results indicate that not only the number, but also the type of component that is formally realized shape complaint perception. We also find a positive correlation between perceived complaint strength and impoliteness. In addition, different formal realizations of the negative evaluation of the complainable have a different effect on complaint perception; in particular, negative emoji make the complaints softer and more polite. We also discuss methodological issues that have arisen while designing the experiments and that have to do with the operationalization of face-threat.

Keywords: customer dissatisfaction, (im)politeness, (in)directness, complaints, Twitter.

1 Introduction

Complaints have been studied using discourse-pragmatic and conversation-analytic approaches, with attention for the (para-)linguistic realizations of complaints as well as for the interactional dynamics of complaint interactions. On the one hand, discursive strategies relating to, for instance, (in)directness, objectification, and audience involvement in complaints, have been examined in a variety of contexts (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Chen et al., 2011; Vásquez, 2011; Dayter and Rüdiger, 2014; Decock and Spiessens, 2017; Decock and Depraetere 2018). On the other hand, several studies have addressed complaints in both private and professional conversational settings (e.g., Drew and Walker, 2009; Heinemann, 2009; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011; Ekström and Lundström, 2014; Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). However, there has been little attention for the ways in which the language used and the content of complaints shape people's perception of face-threat and (im)politeness. This gap is somewhat surprising, as (im)politeness in online interaction has been addressed by computer-mediated communication specialists and politeness scholars (Graham and Hardaker 2017, Haugh 2010). This paper offers an empirical contribution to (im)politeness research by addressing the issue of how different realizations of complaints – in terms of

linguistic indirectness/directness or implicitness/explicitness and in terms of the particular realizations of dissatisfaction in complaints – shape complaint perception.

The operationalization of (in)directness in complaints in our experiments is based on Decock and Depraetere's (2018) study. They critically assessed previous classifications of complaint strategies which involve an indirectness-directness continuum (e.g., House and Kasper 1981, Trosborg 1995), the lowest level being labelled as the most indirect, and the highest level as the most direct. According to this view, "direct" and "indirect" refer to the extremes of a scale of (in)directness, with complaints realized by voicing an insult being the most direct complaint strategy, and hints the most indirect one. A closer examination of these levels of directness shows that what differentiates the examples used by these authors is not only the degree of explicitness, but also the assumed degree of face-threat. For example, in House and Kasper (1981), *you have ruined my blouse* is considered to be less direct compared to *you are really mean*. As the two sentences make a different aspect of the complaint explicit, they cannot be said to differ in terms of degree of explicitness. However, they do seem to differ in terms of the relative degree of offence that they may cause to the addressee: saying *you are really mean* to someone is more likely to hurt the addressee than *you have ruined my blouse.* In other words, the concept of (in)directness in these studies conflates the degree of explicitness, on the one hand, and the degree of face-threat, on the other. In order to disentangle the realization of a complaint with its emotional effect, these two facets are clearly set apart in Decock and Depraetere's (2018) approach. They make the distinction between *linguistic (in)directness*, which refers to the researcher's assessment of how explicit the (para-)linguistic realization of a complaint is, and *perceived (im)politeness*, which refers to people's affective evaluation of complaints. Decock and Depraetere (2018) conceptualize *linguistic (in)directness* in terms of the number of constitutive components of a complaint situation that are (para-)linguistically realized. They argue that a complaint situation consists of four constitutive components which can be made explicit; these four components are derived from House and Kasper's (1981) and Trosborg's (1995) work on complaints:

- Component A refers to the situation or event about which the customer is complaining ("complainable").
- Component B is the expression by the complaining customer (henceforth the "complainer") of some degree of dissatisfaction.
- Component C refers to the person or institution that is considered by the complainer to be responsible for the complainable.
- Component D concerns the complainer's wish for the complainable to be remedied.

Decock and Depraetere's (2018) conceptualization of linguistic (in)directness allows for a distinction between implicit and explicit complaints. A complaint is considered to be implicit if none of the constitutive components is (para-)linguistically realized, in which case the complaint is inferred in context and is in principle cancellable. By contrast, a complaint is explicit if one or several of the constitutive components is/are (para-)linguistically realized. In

addition, all components can be realized in different ways. For instance, in written language, dissatisfaction (component B) can be expressed by using negative evaluative adjectives, verbs, nouns or expressions, through emoji which convey negative emotions, through exclamation marks, etc. In this paper, the focus is exclusively on "explicit" complaints, as implicit complaints were extremely rare in Depraetere et al.'s (2021) corpus data. Following Decock and Depraetere (2018), in our experiments, we consider (in)directness only at the macro level of the speech act set of complaining (e.g., Tanck 2002; Vásquez 2011). It follows that our operationalization of this notion departs from Searle's (1975) traditional speech act theoretic definition of (in)directness at the micro level, that is, at the level of the utterance. We are also interested in the different formal realizations of the individual components of complaints and in how these different realizations possibly influence the perception of complaints. In the present study, we focus on component B for two reasons: it is the second most frequently expressed component in the corpus analyzed by Depraetere et al. (2021), and there is a larger range of realizations of this component compared to components C and D.

The design of the experiments that will answer our research questions requires the following methodological issues to be addressed:

1. How to operationalize the independent variables, that is how to draft the stimuli that can experimentally probe into these relationships.
2. How to operationalize perceptions of face-threat and (im)politeness as dependent variables.

We addressed the first challenge by compiling a small corpus of complaint tweets published on the Twitter pages of the French (SNCF) and French-speaking Belgian (SNCB) railway companies (Depraetere et al. 2021). In a first step, we checked if constitutive components A, B, C, and D of a complaint situation were realized in the tweets and coded them accordingly. We operationalized linguistic (in)directness in terms of the presence (or absence) of each of the four constitutive components of a complaint situation: in the most direct (explicit) complaint strategy, all four constitutive components are expressed; in the least direct (explicit) strategy, only one such component is realized, i.e., component A (the complainable). A complaint is implicit if none of the constitutive components is realized. In a second step, we coded the type of formal realization of each of the components that is explicitly realized in the tweets. When it comes to the formal realization of component B (dissatisfaction), three features caught our attention: differences in formality, strength, and processing effort. For instance, we assume that a negative evaluation expressed by an emoji is more informal than other types of negative evaluations, and that double exclamation marks make a negative evaluation stronger than a single exclamation mark. Likewise, we consider that formal realizations of component B such as negative evaluative adjectives, adverbs, and expressions require less processing effort than sarcasm (see, e.g., Dews and Winner 1999). In the latter case, the negative evaluation is less easily accessible in that it requires the attribution of an intention to convey the opposite of what is said. We used the corpus annotation implemented by Depraetere et al. (2021) to create experimental stimuli. These

stimuli are naturalistic as they only minimally depart from the original, authentic Twitter complaints annotated by Depraetere et al. (2021).

The second challenge concerned the operationalization of perceptions of face-threat and (im)politeness as dependent variables. We wanted participants to assess more than just the lay notion of "politeness", also called "first order politeness" or "politeness1" in the literature (Watts et al. 1992; Eelen 2001). By including other face-related concepts we hoped to gain a deeper understanding of face-threat. The other concepts we chose were complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, and offensiveness. Complaints impact on the addressee's positive face (the company's wish to be approved of) and the addressee's negative face (customers ask the company for compensation, thereby restricting their freedom of action) (see also Meinl 2010). We hypothesize that the stronger a complaint is, the more unpleasant it will be and hence the more impact it will have on the addressee's face. In a similar way, customer dissatisfaction affects the complainer's and the addressee's positive face. Finally, the notion of offensiveness enables us to measure the effect of a complaint on the addressee's positive face. In our experiments, we asked native speakers to indicate how they perceived Twitter complaints along these dimensions, and we designed 7-point Likert scales, with labels at the left and right ends of the scales that corresponded to the notion under investigation. For instance, in the (im)politeness scale, the adjective *impoli* (*rude*) was presented at the left end, and *poli* (*polite*) at the right end of the scale. We also inquired into informants' views of each of the concepts they had to make judgments about – this enabled us to check if our operationalization of perceived face-threat and (im)politeness was adequate.

Our investigation is inspired by the observation that, in the current era of digitalization, consumers tend to interact with each other and voice negative and positive feedback publicly to organizations on online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Booking.com, etc. As is often observed, online written negative comments, including complaints, seem to be more offensive than F2F interactions in comparable contexts, a phenomenon often attributed to the anonymity provided by the Internet (Klempka and Stimson 2014; Santana 2013). It is plausible, however, that the likelihood of efficient complaint handling negatively correlates with the offence caused by the complaint. Against this background, it is crucial to know how language use in online complaints is perceived by others, because these perceptions are likely to influence how customer service employees respond to complaints.

The first experiment measures the impact of the presence/absence of one (or several) of the complaint components A, B, C, D on complaint perception (Section 2). The second experiment tests the effect of the different formal realizations of component B on complaint perception and compares participants' representations of complaint strength, dissatisfaction, politeness and offensiveness (Section 3). The final section, Section 4, contains a general discussion of our results and their implications for politeness theories.

2 Experiment 1: Number and type of complaint components

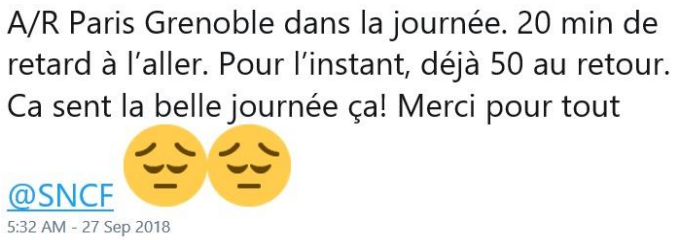
The aim of our first experiment is to explore how the number and the nature of the constitutive components that are realized in a complaint determine complaint perception in terms of strength, customer dissatisfaction, and (im)politeness.

2.1 Materials

The experimental stimuli used in the present research are directly based on our corpus study (Depraetere et al. 2021, see also Decock and Depraetere 2018).

For example, (1) is the original complaint tweet that corresponds to the experimental stimuli in (2a-b-c).

(1)



"Return trip Paris Grenoble today. 20 minutes' delay on outward journey. For the moment, already 50 on the way back. Looks like it'll be a nice day! Thanks for everything @SNCF"

(2a)

A/R Paris Grenoble dans la journée. 20 min de retard à l'aller. Pour l'instant, déjà 50 au retour. Ça sent la belle journée ça, @SNCF!! A quand le respect des horaires?

"Return trip Paris Grenoble today. 20 minutes' delay on outward journey. For the moment, already 50 on the way back. Looks like it'll be a nice day, @SNCF!! When will the timetables be observed?"

- Component A (complainable): "20 minutes' delay on outward journey. For the moment, already 50 on the way back."
- Component B (customer dissatisfaction): "Looks like it'll be a nice day" and "!!".
- Component C (entity/person responsible for the complainable): "@SNCF".
- Component D (wish for compensation): "When will the timetables be observed?"

(2b)

A/R Paris Grenoble dans la journée. 20 min de retard à l'aller. Pour l'instant, déjà 50 au retour. Ça sent la belle journée, ça !! @SNCF

"Return trip Paris Grenoble today. 20 minutes' delay on outward journey. For the moment, already 50 on the way back. Looks like it'll be a nice day!! @SNCF"

(2c)

A/R Paris Grenoble dans la journée. 20 min de retard à l'aller. Pour l'instant, déjà 50 au retour. @SNCF

"Return Paris Grenoble today. 20 minutes delay this morning. For the moment, already 50 for the return. @SNCF"

While the original tweet contained only components A, B and C, the stimulus in (2a) also includes component D (request for a solution), (2b) only contains components A and B (the SNCF is not addressed by the customer, @SNCF is merely a formal requirement to publish the tweet), and (2c) consists of component A alone, the negative evaluation of the complainable having been removed. A list of all the experimental stimuli for our experiments is available here (https://osf.io/qu6jd).

A Latin square design was used, based on 8 original Twitter complaints from the SNCF sample.[1] These complaints were manipulated, resulting in 8 different conditions corresponding to the complaint component combinations attested in the corpus, i.e., A, AB, ABC, ABCD, ABD, AC, ACD, and AD. In order to control for the possible effect of the complaint reason on participants' responses, all the situations related to train delays. We also tried to control for the length of the delays, but this task proved difficult, as the delays in the original complaints ranged from 20 minutes to one and a half hour (to be precise: 20, 20, 30, 50, 60 and 90 minutes in the tweets in which the exact delay was mentioned). Five original complaint tweets were of the ABCD type, and the remaining three of the ABC type, which means that they were manipulated mostly by removing one or several components while ensuring that the message would still be coherent, grammatical and understandable as a complaint. The BC combination was not retained in our stimuli, because it occurred only once in our corpus. When a constitutive component had to be added (e.g., when turning and AB complaint into an ABD complaint), we selected the most frequent types of realization of the relevant component. In all our stimuli, punctuation and contracted forms were revised to avoid some tweets being perceived as too informal (e.g., negation *nan* was replaced by *non*). No training or control items were included.

2.1.1 Ethical considerations

Due to their public nature, tweets are available to virtually everyone who has access to the Internet. However, the use of Twitter data for research purposes raises several issues (such as traceability of the tweets (Zimmer 2010), consent to use tweets) that have to be acknowledged and dealt with appropriately (Webb et al. 2017). We have made sure to anonymize the data in the experiments. Moreover, the tweets used contain non-sensitive data. So overall, given the non-invasiveness of our study, we can conclude that no one will be morally harmed by our use of the tweets in our experiments.

[1] See Depraetere et al. (2021) for a detailed description of the SNCF corpus.

2.2 Participants and procedure

80 participants were recruited on Prolific (30 female, mean age = 28.1 years, standard deviation = 7.1 years, range = 18–60 years). To access the questionnaire, participants had to meet the following criteria: be native speakers of French and be of French or Belgian nationality. All the participants had France or Belgium as country of residence. None of them had had previous experience with the experimental design. They participated in this, and two other small experiments, for which they were paid 4£.[2] An informed consent was obtained from each participant before the onset of the three experiments.

The experiment took the form of a short questionnaire designed using Psytoolkit (Stoet 2010; 2017) and presented to the participants on Prolific. Before participating, subjects were told that the experiment consisted of an online questionnaire containing Twitter messages in which travellers complain about situations they find themselves in. Before entering the experimental part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked a few questions about their age and gender. We also added questions about their previous experience with Twitter (the degree to which they were used to reading/posting tweets) and with the SNCF and SNCB railway companies, about their subjective perception of these two companies, and about the likelihood with which they would make an online complaint themselves.[3] Then they were told that, in our study, they would be exposed to tweets in which travellers complain about the SNCF. We asked them to read each tweet, and then to answer a few questions.

Eight different versions of the script for this questionnaire were created, corresponding to the 8 lists of stimuli, with 10 new participants being recruited for each list. The order in which the stimuli were displayed did not vary across participants: the stimulus corresponding to the 1st complaint situation was presented first, the one corresponding to the 2nd situation second, and so forth. The participants were not allowed to return to earlier questions in the questionnaire.

For each complaint tweet, the participants had to answer four questions about the complaint (each stimulus and the four questions were displayed simultaneously, with the questions just below the tweet). To make sure all our tweets were clearly identifiable as complaints, we asked them a first question concerning the degree of certainty with which they considered that the tweets displayed actually were “complaints”:

(3) Avec quel degré de certitude estimez-vous qu’il s’agit d’une plainte ?

“How certain are you that this is a complaint?”

[2] Only the first experiment (Experiment 1a, which will be referred to as Experiment 1 for the sake of clarity) from this questionnaire is reported on in the present article. The remaining two experiments (Experiments 1b-c) that we do not describe here investigated the effect of upgraders and pictures on complaint perception, and are part of another, ongoing study.

[3] These questions were meant to control for inter-participant variables that could affect our results. They were also used, as part of a larger project, to collect information about the relationship between complaint perception and complaining behavior.

The second question was about perceived strength of the complaint, and it was formulated as follows:

(4) Quelle est l'intensité de la plainte exprimée par le voyageur ?

"How strong is the traveller's complaint?"

Third, we asked to what extent the informants considered the traveller's message to be polite.

(5) A quel point le message du voyageur est-il poli ?

"How polite is the traveller's message?"

The fourth question probed into perceived traveler's dissatisfaction.

(6) Quel est le degré de mécontentement du voyageur ?

"How dissatisfied is the traveller?"

Four different 7-point Likert scales were used to elicit the participants' responses to these questions. For each item, they had to choose a point on the scale, ranging from "1" on the left, to "7" on the right of the scale, and they did so by clicking on the selected point of the scale. The labels at the left-right ends of the scales were, respectively, "not at all certain" (1) and "completely certain" (7) for the scale of un/certainty, "very weak" (1) and "very strong" (7) for the scales of perceived strength and dissatisfaction, and "very rude" (1) and "very polite" (7) for the (im)politeness scale. After each response, the next item was automatically displayed. Before leaving the experiment, the participants received a final question asking whether there was any comment that they wanted to make.

2.3 Predictions

Our main hypotheses relate to the effect of explicitness/linguistic directness on the dependent variables. First, building on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, one would expect, in the context of customer complaints on Twitter, a higher degree of explicitness to positively correlate with a higher degree of face-threat for the addressee. Indeed, Brown and Levinson's main stance is that there is a positive correlation between explicitness and face-threat across a variety of contexts (but see e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987: 142, Culpeper 2011: 100-103, Ogiermann 2009, Wierzbicka 1985): the more explicit the speech act is, the more face-threatening it is. Accordingly, if one assumes that the higher the number of complaint components realized in a message, the higher the likelihood that the message will be understood as a complaint, then complaint explicitness should also positively correlate with perceived strength. Second, and as an important 'correction' of the first hypothesis, we believe that, building on the negativity bias according to which negative information weighs more on our perceptions (of complaints) than neutral or positive information does (see, e.g., Baumeister et al. 2001, Liebrecht et al. 2019 for experimental evidence, and Jing-Schmidt 2007 for an overview of previous research on the negativity bias), component B, i.e., the explicit expression of a negative evaluation, plays a key role with regard to perceived (im)politeness. More specifically, complaints including B should give rise to stronger judgments about

complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, and impoliteness in comparison with complaints in which B is absent. This view implies that we predict that higher explicitness will often, but not always, lead to higher face-threat, as component B can overrule this effect in certain conditions. For instance, we expect that a complaint only realized by component B can be stronger in terms of face-threat than a complaint realized by components A and C, although the latter complaint realization is more explicit. Finally, we also expect positive correlations between the dependent variables, i.e., between perceived customer dissatisfaction, perceived complaint strength, and perceived impoliteness.

We therefore predict that participants' judgments on the scales of customer dissatisfaction and complaint strength will be stronger for more explicit complaints, i.e., complaints consisting of 3-4 constitutive components in comparison with less explicit ones with 1-2 components. However, bearing in mind a negativity bias, we also expect the presence of component B (negative evaluation) to moderate the effect of the number of components on complaint perception: complaints including component B should give rise to stronger judgments than those without it, regardless of the number of components expressed. We also predict more explicit complaints to be perceived as more rude and as entailing stronger dissatisfaction, and, accordingly, we predict a positive correlation between judgments on the scales of complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, and impoliteness.

2.4 Results

All the reported analyses were carried out with R software, version 3.2.2 for Windows (R development core team, 2015). The data generated by experiments 1 and 2 reported on below are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/qu6jd). All mixed regression models were fitted using the lme4 package (Bates et al. 2015).

The participants' judgments in terms of un/certainty that a complaint is voiced indicate that more explicit complaints, in which ABCD are expressed (M=5.75; SD=1.91), are more readily recognized as complaints than less explicit ones, i.e., those of the A type (M=5; SD=1.97). Certainty judgments were significantly higher for ABCD complaints in comparison with A complaints ($t(560)= 3.09$, $p = .01$). Other complaints, involving different combinations of complaint components, were rated in-between.

Concerning perceived *complaint strength*, it is mainly complaints including component B that gave rise to higher scores (see Fig. 1 below). In comparison with A complaints (M=3.66; SD=1.53), AB complaints (M=4.67; SD=1.64) were perceived as stronger $t(560)= 4.49$, $p < .001$). The same type of result was found for ABC complaints (M=4.68; SD=1.55; $t(560)= 4.55$, $p < .001$), for ABCD complaints (M=4.26; SD=1.62) ($t(560)= 2.66$, $p = .004$), for ABD complaints (M=4.8 ; SD=1.6 ; $t(560)= 5.05$, $p< .001$), for ACD complaints (M=4.21 ; SD=1.75 ; $t(560)= 2.44$, $p< .05$), and for AD complaints (M=4.10; SD=1.64; ($t(560)= 1.94$, $p = .026$). No (significant) difference in perceived strength was observed between A complaints and AC complaints ($t(560)= 1$, $p = .159$).

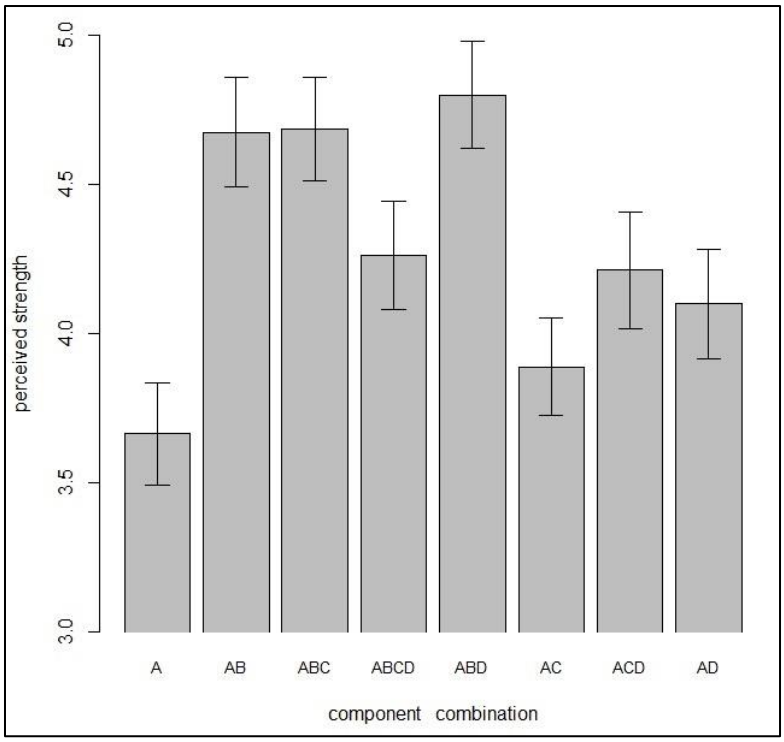


Figure 1: Impact of component combination on perceived complaint strength

On the whole, the results for *perceived customer dissatisfaction* follow the same trend as those for perceived complaint strength (Fig. 2). Compared to A complaints (M=4.07; SD=1.6), perceived customer dissatisfaction was stronger in AB complaints (M=5.09; SD=1.54; $t(560)= 4.51$, $p < .001$), ABC complaints (M=5.07; SD=1.46; $t(560)= 4.45$, $p < .001$), ABCD complaints (M=4.92; SD=1.53; $t(560)= 3.79$, $p < .001$), and ABD complaints (M=5.04 ; SD=1.54; $t(560)= 4.29$, $p < .001$). No significant difference in perceived customer dissatisfaction was observed between A complaints and more explicit complaints which did not include component B, i.e., AC complaints (M= 3.86; SD=1.67; $t(560)= -0.95$, $p = .171$), ACD complaints (M= 4.5; SD=1.85; $t(560)= -1.89$, $p = .059$), and AD complaints (M=4.37; SD=1.67; $t(560)= 1.34$, $p = .091$). Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, we found a positive correlation of .79 between judgments on the perceived strength and customer dissatisfaction scales ($p < .001$).

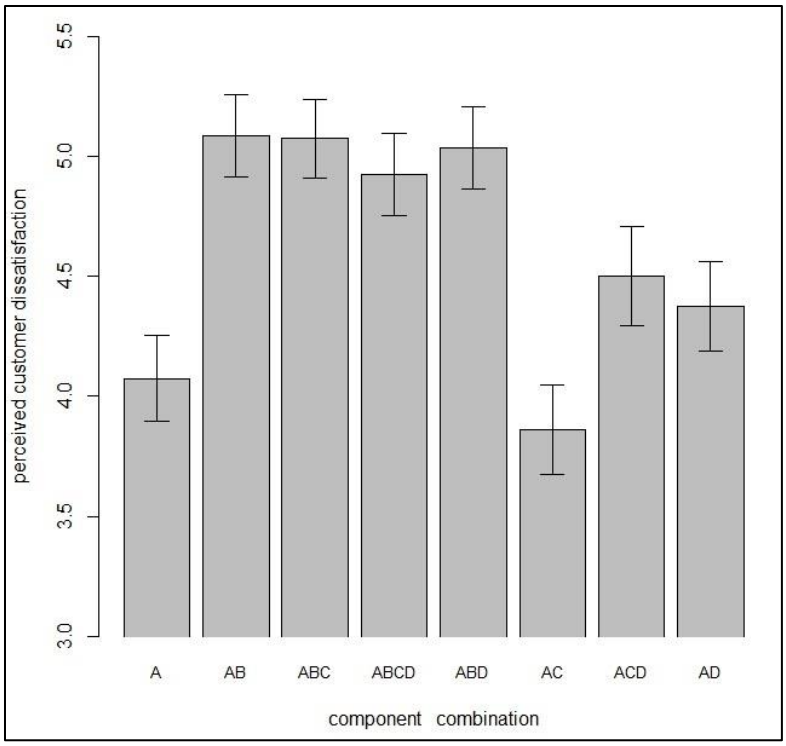


Figure 2: Impact of component combination on perceived customer dissatisfaction

Concerning *politeness judgments* (Fig. 3), mean scores on the scale reflect a general tendency according to which the Twitter complaints were perceived as being polite (M=5.39; SD=1.46; "7" corresponds to "very polite, and "1" to "very rude"). In comparison with A complaints (M=5.81; SD=1.4), mainly complaints including component B were rated as less polite. AB complaints (M=5.35; SD=1.36) were perceived as less polite than A complaints (t(560)= -2.47, p= .007). The same difference was found for ABC complaints (M=5.07; SD=1.46; t(560)= -3.81, p < .001), for ABCD complaints (M=4.74; SD=1.57; t(560)= -5.75, p < .001), for ABD complaints (M=5.26 ; SD=1.44 ; t(560)= -2.94, p = .0017), and for AD complaints (M=5.34; SD=1.46) (t(560)= -2.54, p = .0057). No such difference was observed between A complaints and AC complaints (M=6; SD=1.14; t(560)= 1, p = .158) or ACD complaints (M=5.51; SD=1.57 ; t(560)= -1.61, p = .109). We found a small negative correlation of -0.10 between judgments on the perceived strength and politeness scales (p < .01), which is in line with the view that stronger complaints are perceived as less polite. We also found a small negative correlation of -0.14 between judgments on the customer dissatisfaction and politeness scales (p < .001).

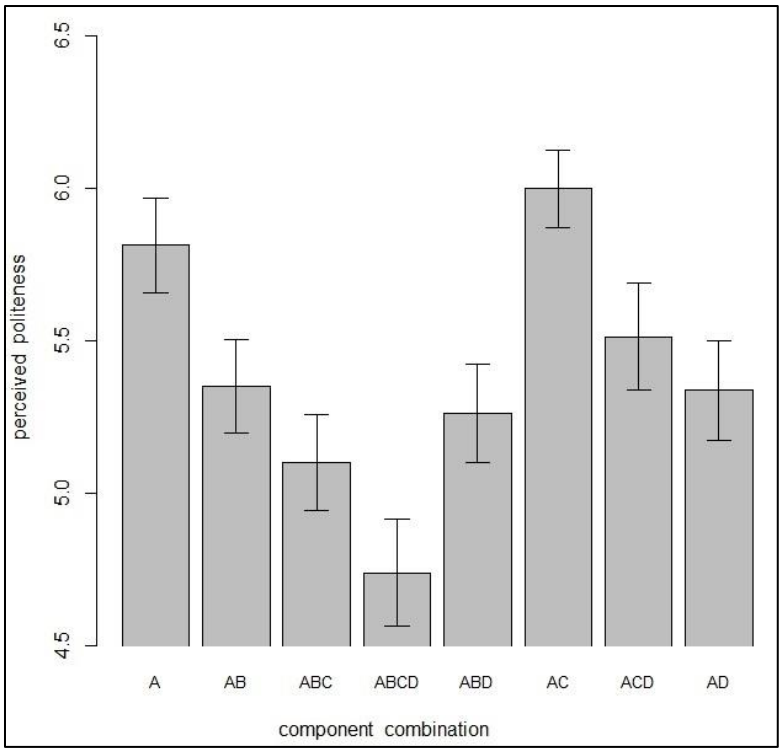


Figure 3: Impact of component combination on perceived politeness

Finally, we included, in our statistical models, information about the participants' previous experience with Twitter and with the SNCF and SNCB railway companies, about their subjective perception of these two companies, and about the likelihood with which they would complain on the Internet. Controlling for these variables did not affect the results described above.

2.5 Discussion

The results of this experiment confirm our predictions about the effects of explicitness and the negativity bias on complaint perception. First, generally speaking, complaints including a larger number of components were perceived as stronger, as expressing higher customer dissatisfaction, and as more rude than complaints with fewer components. More specifically, complaints were judged to be stronger when they included component B (a negative evaluation of the complainable). In contrast, we did not find strong evidence for a similar effect of component C (reference to the agent) and component D (wish for the complainable to be remedied) on complaint perception. In other words, it is not only the number of components (degree of linguistic explicitness), but especially the nature of the complaint components realized that shape complaint perception. Second, a strong positive correlation was observed between judgments on the scales of complaint strength and customer dissatisfaction, which suggests that these two notions are related. Third, we found small negative correlations between perceived strength and politeness, and between perceived dissatisfaction and politeness.

3 Experiment 2: Realization of component B (dissatisfaction)

3.1 Materials

The second experiment examined the effect of the realization of component B on complaint perception. The data set consisted of tweets reporting on nine different complaint situations about train delays. Among the original tweets taken from the corpus, three were of the ABCD type, four of the ABC type, and two of the AB type. A few linguistic and stylistic changes were necessary, depending on the nature of the realization of component B.

Six types of formal realization were taken into account, corresponding to the most frequent realization of component B in our SNCF sample (Depraetere et al. 2021): negative evaluative expressions such as *J'en ai marre* (*I'm sick of this*), *sans commentaire* (*no comment*), emoji depicting negative emotions (e.g., thumbs down, angry, sad, desperate, anxious, swearing), adjectives/adverbs with a negative meaning, such as *insupportable* (*unbearable*), *déprimant* (*depressing*), sarcasm (*la cerise sur le gâteau*/*the cherry on the cake*), a single exclamation mark, and two exclamations marks. We considered single and double exclamation marks as two different realizations of component B; our hypothesis was that the latter are stronger than the former. In each complaint stimulus, component B was realized using two different expressions of one and the same type of realization (e.g., two negative adjectives), with the exception of exclamation marks, which was the sole realization of component B in the relevant tweets (so either one exclamation mark or a double exclamation mark). We decided to use, in each stimulus, two different formal realizations of component B in order to be certain that the participants would notice the presence of this component. Our decision was also based on the observation that specific realizations of component B occurred more than once in the SNCF and SNCB corpus of tweets that we had compiled and coded. Examples of stimuli used in this experiment are available here: https://osf.io/qu6jd.

3.2 Participants and procedure

A total of 79 participants were recruited on Prolific. They had to meet the following criteria: be native speakers of French and be of French or Belgian nationality. The participants (32 female, mean age = 27.1 years, standard deviation = 8.1 years, range = 18–60 years) were paid 2£ for this experiment. All the participants had France or Belgium as country of residence. An informed consent was obtained from each participant before the onset of the experiment.

The procedure was identical to that used for Experiment 1, with the exception that the final part of this experiment consisted of questions about the key notions used in the questionnaire. As explained in the introduction, we wanted to measure face-threat, and not only the lay notion of "politeness", i.e., first-order politeness (or "politeness 1"). Therefore, in addition to asking informants to assess complaints in Experiments 1-2, we probed into their understanding of the terms associated with face-threat that we used to collect these assessments: (im)politeness, complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, and offensiveness.

Six different versions of the script were created, corresponding to six lists of stimuli; 13 different participants were recruited for each list (one extra participant was recruited for

one list because one of the original participants did not complete the whole questionnaire due to a technical problem).

For each complaint stimulus, the participants had to answer four questions about the complaint (each stimulus and the four questions were displayed simultaneously, with the questions just below the stimulus). The first three questions were, as in Experiment 1, about complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, and perceived (im)politeness. A fourth question was added in order to probe into the notion of offensiveness, i.e., face-threat from the recipient's perspective:

(7) A quel point la personne de la SNCF qui traitera cette plainte sera-t-elle offensée ?

"To what extent will the SNCF person handling this complaint be offended?"

The label at the left end of the 7-point Likert scale used to collect the participants' responses to this fourth question was "not at all offended" (1) and "very offended" (7) at the right end of the scale. Before leaving the experiment, the participants were asked whether they had any remarks they wanted to share, and whether they had any guesses about the underlying hypotheses of the study.[4]

3.3 Predictions

We hypothesize that a realization of B which requires less processing effort should increase the perceived strength of a complaint, as well as perceived customer dissatisfaction and perceived impoliteness. These predictions match the view endorsed by Gibbs (2002), and more recently by Sztencel (2018), who puts forward a pragmatic notion of explicitness/implicitness based on considerations of the respondents' processing effort. Bearing in mind their views, we predict that the higher the processing effort, the lower the perceived strength, dissatisfaction and impoliteness. We also predict that negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs and negative expressions (in comparison with sarcasm) will result in stronger perceptions of strength, dissatisfaction, and impoliteness. We also consider double exclamation marks to be more intense than single ones, and we therefore predict that, compared to the latter, the former will give rise to stronger perceptions of strength, dissatisfaction, offensiveness, and to weaker perceptions of impoliteness. Concerning emoji, the literature shows that the use of positive emoji increases intimacy (Ganster et al. 2012). This effect may be due to human-like features inherent in emoji, which possibly reinforce the complainer's perceived sincerity. In the absence of other relevant evidence, we expect that, despite their negative valence, emoji expressing negative emotions will counterbalance the negative effect of a customer complaint, thus softening complaint perception. We also predict positive correlations between (perceived) strength, dissatisfaction, and offensiveness. In addition, we expect negative correlations between strength and politeness, between dissatisfaction and politeness, and between politeness and offensiveness.

[4] Only 9 out of 79 participants came close to identifying one of our hypotheses; five guessed that we were examining if there is a positive correlation between customer dissatisfaction and impoliteness.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Impact of formal realization of component B

In comparison with negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs (the reference level for the variable of formal realization in our linear mixed-effects model) (M=5.29; SD=1.45), complaints with sarcasm gave rise to weaker assessments of strength (M= 4.43; SD=1.62; $t(702)= -4.85$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 4 below). In addition, double exclamation marks (M=4.8; SD=1.51) had a weaker effect on perceived strength than negative adjectives/adverbs ($t(702)= -2.99$, $p = .0014$). The same type of result was found for emoji (M=4.35; SD=1.54) ($t(702)= -5.73$, $p < .001$) and for single exclamation marks (M=4.61; SD=1.5) compared to negative adjectives/adverbs ($t(702)= -4.08$, $p < .001$). No significant difference in perceived strength was observed between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with other negative expressions (M=5.02; SD=1.43; $t(702)= -1.21$, $p = .113$).

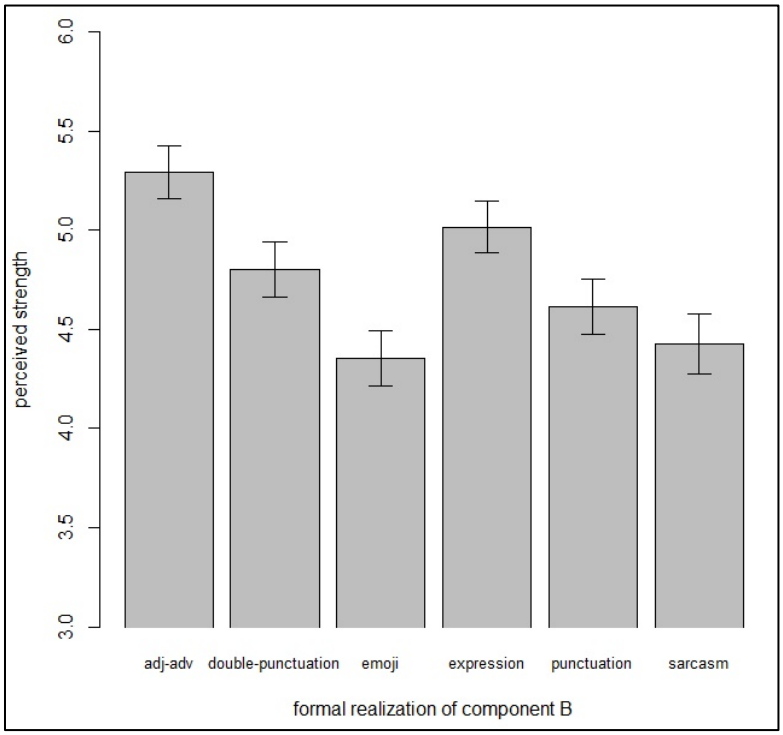


Figure 4: Impact of the formal realization of component B on perceived complaint strength

The judgments on the scale of customer dissatisfaction were similar to those on the scale of strength (Fig. 5). Compared to complaints with negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs (M=5.62; SD=1.4), complaints with sarcasm gave rise to weaker scores (M= 4.92; SD=1.44; $t(702)= -3.63$, $p < .001$). The same type of result was found for emoji (M=4.98; SD=1.52) ($t(702)= -3.95$, $p < .001$) and for single exclamation marks (M=5.07; SD=1.5) compared to negative adjectives/adverbs ($t(702)= -3.31$, $p < .001$). No difference in perceived strength was observed between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with other negative expressions (M=5.4; SD=1.5; $t(702)= -0.82$, $p = .206$), or between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with double exclamation marks (M=5.36; SD=1.5; $t(702)= -1.35$, $p = .089$). Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, we found a positive correlation

of .73 between scores on the scales of perceived strength and customer dissatisfaction (p < .001).

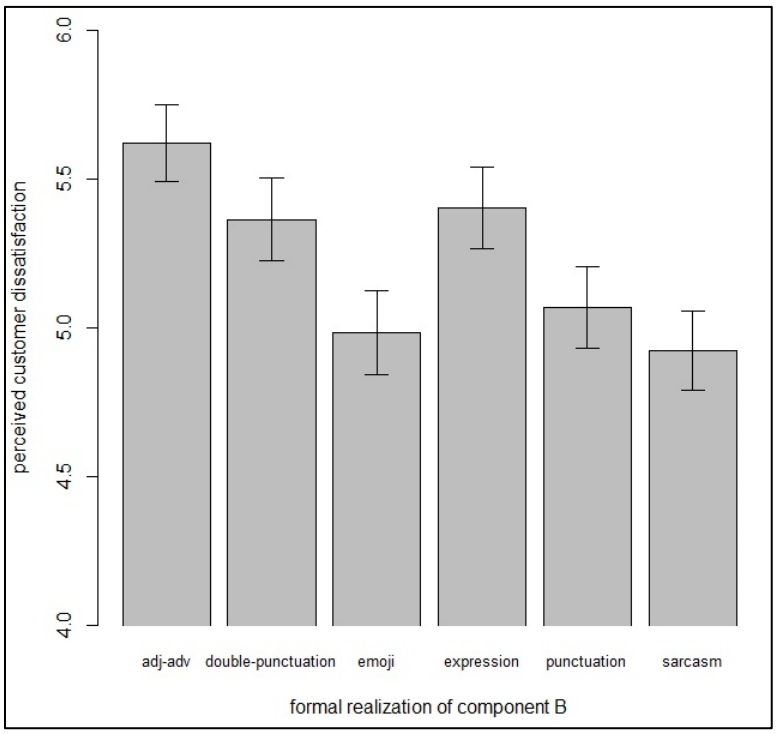


Figure 5: Impact of the formal realization of component B on perceived customer dissatisfaction

As in Experiment 1, mean scores on the politeness scale reflect a general tendency according to which the complaints were perceived as "quite polite, but not very polite" (M=5.07; SD=1.53) (Fig. 6). Compared to negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs (M=4.77; SD=1.63), complaints with sarcasm were rated as more polite (M= 5.3; SD=1.39; t(702)= 3.48, p < .001). The same type of result was found for emoji (M=5.25; SD=1.5) (t(702)= 2.85, p = .0022), and for single exclamation marks (M=5.38; SD=1.4) compared to negative adjectives/adverbs (t(702)= 3.96, p < .001). No difference in perceived politeness was observed between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with other negative expressions (M=4.84; SD=1.7; t(702)= 0.49, p = .312), as well as complaints with double exclamation marks (M=4.89; SD=1.44; t(702)= 1.05, p = .147). Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, we found no correlation between the scores on the perceived strength and politeness scales (p = .57), and no correlation between the scores on the dissatisfaction and politeness scales (p = .53).

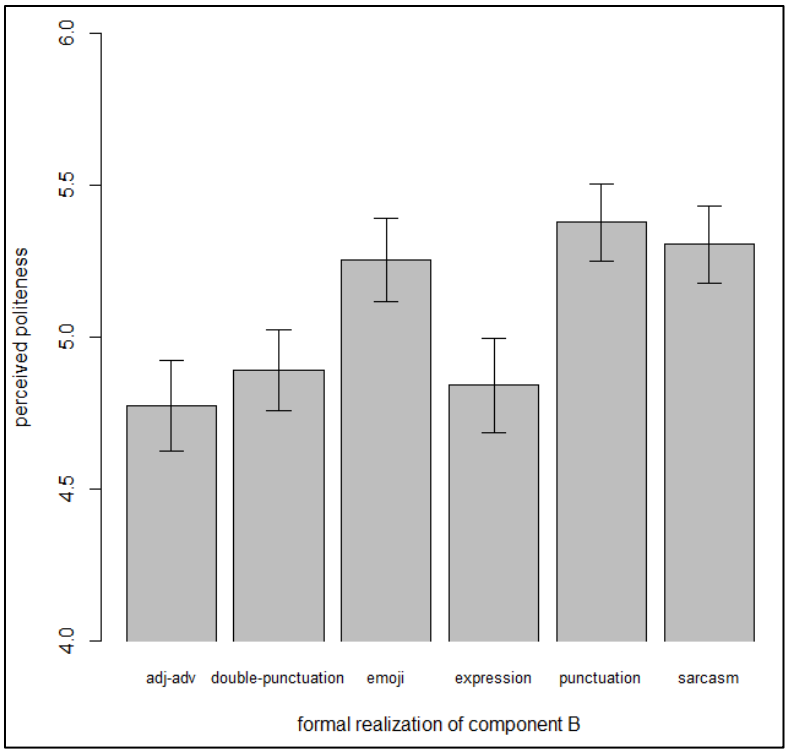


Figure 6: Impact of the formal realization of component B on perceived politeness

On the whole, judgments on the offensiveness scale were markedly low (M=1.95; SD=1.22; "1" corresponds to "not at all offensive"; see Fig. 7), and much lower than those on the other scales (Fig. 4, and Fig. 5). Compared to complaints with negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs (M=2.16; SD=1.29), complaints with sarcasm were associated with a weaker degree of offensiveness (M=1.94; SD=1.19; $t(702)= -2.5$, $p < .01$). The same type of result was found for emoji (M=1.52; SD=0.79) ($t(702)= -5.7$, $p < .001$), and for single exclamation marks (M=1.97; SD=1.3) compared to negative adjectives/adverbs ($t(702)= -2.18$, $p < .05$). No difference in perceived offensiveness was observed between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with other negative expressions (M=2.04; SD=1.35; $t(702)= -0.96$, $p = .169$), or between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and complaints with double exclamation marks (M=2.08; SD=1.21; $t(702)= -1.48$, $p = .07$).

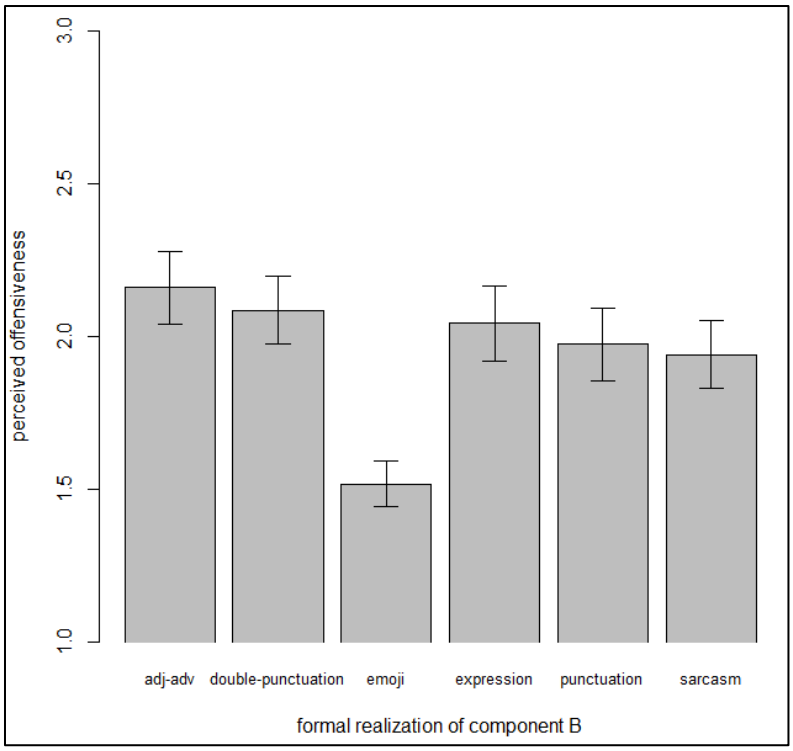


Figure 7: Impact of the formal realization of component B on perceived offensiveness

Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, we found a small negative correlation of -0.26 between judgments on the politeness and offensiveness scales ($p < .001$). We also found a small positive correlation of 0.30 between judgments on the perceived strength and offensiveness scales ($p < .001$) and of 0.28 between judgments on the dissatisfaction and offensiveness scales ($p < .001$).

3.4.2 Participants' understanding of face-threat

A large variety of descriptions were provided by the participants when they explained the notions of complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, (im)politeness and offensiveness. The following table lists the most frequent descriptors.

Strength	Dissatisfaction	Politeness	Offensiveness
Mécontentement (15)	**Colère (11)**	**Insulte (31)**	Le prendre personnellement (21)
Gravité (8)	Insatisfaction (9)	Ir/respectueux (10)	**Insultes/se sentir insulté** (19)
Force (7)	Déception (9)	Courtoisie (10)	Attaque (15)
Importance (5)	Frustration (8)	Sarcasme (7)	Être/se sentir blessé (6)
Énervement (5)	**Énervement (8)**	Formulation (7)	Choqué (5)
Émotions (5)	Agacement (6)	Grossièreté (6)	
Colère (5)		Formules de politesse (5)	
Puissance (3)		Agression (5)	

Insatisfaction (2)		Vulgarité (5)	

Table 1: Most frequent descriptors for strength, dissatisfaction, politeness, and offensiveness.

For "complaint strength" (French *intensité* "intensity"), the most frequent words in the participants' explanations were: *mécontentement* (dissatisfaction) (15), *gravité* (gravity) (8), *force* (force) (7), *importance* (importance) (5), *énervement* (irritation) (5), *émotions* (emotions) (5), *colère* (anger) (5), and *puissance* (power) (3).

For "customer dissatisfaction" (French *mécontentement*), *colère* (anger) was the most frequent keyword (11), followed by *insatisfaction* (dissatisfaction) (9), *déception* (disappointment) (9), *frustration* (frustration) (8), *énervement* (irritation) (8), and *agacement* (annoyance) (6). Remarkably, *colère* and *énervement* (and also, to a minor extent, *insatisfaction*) appeared in response to questions both about strength and dissatisfaction.

Concerning participants' understanding of politeness (French *poli* "polite"), the most frequent keywords were *insulte(s)* (insult(s)) (31), *ir/respectueux* (dis/respectful) (10), *courtoisie* (civility) (10), *sarcasme* (sarcasm) (7), *formulation* (phrasing, i.e., choice of words, communicative style) (7), *grossièreté* (rudeness) (6), *formules de politesse* (politeness formulae) (5), aggression (aggression) (5) and *vulgarité* (profanity) (5). These keywords were also mentioned in reference to situations when there are absent, i.e., lack of insults/sarcasm/rudeness/profanity etc.

Offensiveness was captured in terms of *le prendre personnellement* (taking the message personally) (21), *insultes/se sentir insulté* (insults/feeling insulted) (19), *attaque personnelle* (personal attack) (15), *être/se sentir blessé* (being/feeling hurt) (6), *choqué* (shocked) (5); some descriptions referred to the fact that the addressee would feel bad when reading the message. The only keyword that featured several times both in the description of politeness and in that of offensiveness is *insulte(s)*. In addition, the most frequent keywords for offensiveness did not feature in the list of keywords of (im)politeness and vice versa. *Se sentir blessé, choqué*, and the adjective *personnel* (as in *attaque personnelle* "personal attack") are associated with offensiveness only. *Attack* was mentioned only once for (im)politeness. The converse was also true: the term *vulgarité* was never associated with offensiveness even though it featured in the keywords associated with (im)politeness. This suggests that these two notions, although they are related, were clearly differentiated by the participants: impoliteness does not necessarily constitute offensive behavior. Our results for the concepts of (*im*)*politeness* and *offensiveness* are in line with Culpeper (2011: 71-112), who found that, in English, *aggressive*, *inappropriate*, and *hurtful* were among the five most frequent impoliteness metalinguistic keywords in his informants' accounts of 'impoliteness events'.

3.5 Discussion

The results of this second experiment confirm our predictions about the effects of different formal realizations of component B (customer dissatisfaction) on complaint perception. First, they indicate that complaints are perceived as stronger when component B is voiced through negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs and expressions, in comparison with a single/double

exclamation mark(s), sarcasm or emoji. Similar results were found for the judgments on the dissatisfaction scale, except that there was no significant difference between complaints with negative adjectives/adverbs and double exclamation marks. Second, higher politeness scores were found for complaints including emoji compared to e.g., complaints including negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs. This is in line with our hypotheses, yet rather surprising because the emoji that feature in the tweets convey negative emotions. Quite strikingly, in our study, these emoji do not make the complaint tweets more impolite in comparison with other realizations. On the contrary, they may have a beneficial effect on perceived politeness and on perceived offensiveness. Third, we found a strong positive correlation between strength and customer dissatisfaction assessments, and also a small negative correlation between politeness and offensiveness assessments. The latter result suggests that impoliteness contributes, at least to a small extent, to perceived offensiveness. We also found small positive correlations between strength and offensiveness assessments and between dissatisfaction and offensiveness assessments.

In addition, the participants' answers to the questions about the concepts used in Experiments 1 and 2 matched our predictions. In line with the finding that complaint strength positively correlates with customer dissatisfaction (Experiment 1), *mécontentement* (dissatisfaction) was frequently found in respondents' explanations about strength. This suggests that dissatisfaction partially determines strength, and not the other way round. Our results also show that impoliteness and offensiveness are both associated with face-threat for the addressee, which is in line with our prediction that impoliteness and offensiveness positively correlate. These two notions remain, however, clearly distinct in that several terms, such as *vulgarité*, were used to describe impoliteness but not offensiveness; *le prendre personnellement* and *attaque personnelle* ("taking it personally/personal attack") was only elicited by the latter concept. This is not unexpected given the low values we found for judgments on the offensiveness scale: unless they include some sort of personal attack or insults, complaints are unlikely to be perceived as offensive. These results suggest that, in the context of online complaints, it is perfectly acceptable and appropriate to complain by expressing dissatisfaction explicitly and quite strongly, without being considered as an offensive customer.

4 Summary and conclusions

In this paper, we have investigated the relationship between complaint realization and perceived (im)politeness or perceived face-threat. To do this, in line with Decock and Depraetere's (2018) distinction, we operationalized the notion of *linguistic (in)directness* as the (para-)linguistic expression of one or several of the four constitutive components of a complaint situation. We wanted to put to the test the general hypothesis that complaint perception is primarily shaped by two variables: linguistic (in)directness and the formal realization of the constitutive components of a complaint situation. We postulated that higher complaint explicitness would cause the complaints to be perceived as more face-threatening, resulting in higher scores on the scales of perceived strength, dissatisfaction, impoliteness,

and offensiveness. We also hypothesized a negativity bias, according to which, regardless of the number of components expressed, complaints including component B would be perceived as more face-threatening. We also predicted that expressions of negative attitudes by the customer (component B) which are more intense (double vs. single exclamation marks) or which require less processing effort, would increase the perception of strength, of dissatisfaction, of impoliteness, and of offensiveness. Finally, we predicted a positive correlation between complaint strength, dissatisfaction, offensiveness, and negative correlations between strength and politeness, dissatisfaction and politeness, and politeness and offensiveness.

To test these hypotheses, we carried out two experiments that took the form of an online questionnaire. The experiments enabled us to examine the relationship between the notions of complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, (im)politeness, and offensive behavior. In Experiment 1, we explored the effect of the number and type of constitutive components of complaints on how these messages are perceived. We conducted Experiment 2 in order to investigate, on the one hand, how different formal realizations of component B shape complaint perception, and, on the other hand, to investigate if our operationalization of perceived face-threat in terms of strength, dissatisfaction, (im)politeness, and offensiveness received support from respondents' descriptions of each of these notions.

The results of Experiment 1 revealed that not only the number, but also the nature of the complaint components that are realized (para-)linguistically in a tweet shape the interpreters' assessments about customers' emotional states and complaining behavior. That is, complaint strength and customer dissatisfaction were perceived as higher—and politeness as lower— when the complaints included component B. By contrast, the data do not allow us to conclude that either component C (person or institution responsible for the complainable) or component D (request for compensation) has a significant effect on complaint perception.

Experiment 2 showed that, compared to negative evaluative adjectives, adverbs, and other negative expressions, emoji have a weaker effect on perceived strength of the complaints and on perceived customer dissatisfaction. We also found that single exclamation marks, sarcasm and emoji increase politeness and decrease offensiveness compared to double exclamation marks, negative evaluative adjectives/adverbs and other negative expressions. Our results for emoji are in line with previous findings by Ganster et al. (2012), in the sense that, as in the case of emoji depicting positive emotions, the presence of emoji depicting negative emotions likewise has a beneficial effect on complaint perception. Because negative emoji index informal online discourse and increase intimacy between the writer and the recipient, they soften complaint perception, lowering the perceptual threshold for what counts as impolite or offensive.

In order to test if the concepts we chose to operationalize face-threat were adequate, we asked participants, at the end of Experiment 2, how they understood the meaning of each of the four concepts used in the experiment: complaint strength, customer dissatisfaction, (im)politeness, and offensiveness. Based on the participants' responses, we can conclude that

our choice of concepts was justified in the sense that they are clearly related without being identical to each other. There were commonalities but also notable differences in the participants' understandings of these notions. In addition, the participants' responses to our questions about these concepts enabled us to ground the notion of face-threat in native speakers' intuitions and perceptions. These results, together with the correlations we found between the concepts in the experiments themselves, thus confirm the appropriateness of the concepts we used to operationalize perceived face-threat.

We also found that there may be a higher threshold for the identification of offensive behavior in the context of customer-company interactions, where explicit complaints with clear negative evaluations are not considered to be offensive or impolite as long as they are not targeting a person via ad hominem attacks. However, while both notions are associated with face-threat for the target of the complaint, impoliteness, which is associated with profanity, is not perceived in terms of taking things personally by the respondents. In the literature on impoliteness, impolite/rude and offensive are often considered together (see e.g., Culpeper & Hardaker 2017). Our findings demonstrate that, for native speakers of French, impoliteness and offensiveness are well delineated notions. They confirm, in addition, that definitions of impoliteness that include the speaker's intention to offend, such as Tracy & Tracy's (1998: 227), according to whom impolite speech acts are "communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive'', are inaccurate. Indeed, in line with the emergence of approaches taking primarily into account the recipient's point of view, such as Culpeper's (2011) and Terkourafi's (2001), the speaker's intention to offend – or the recipient's belief that the speaker has such an intention – is merely seen as a factor that can exacerbate impoliteness perceptions (for a discussion, see e.g., O'Driscoll 2020). To quote Culpeper (2011: 23), behaviours that give rise to impoliteness assessments "always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant; that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not."

It might therefore prove interesting to address, in future research, the effect of linguistic expressions that are more strongly associated either with impoliteness or with offensiveness—such as insults, which explicitly encode an intention to offend—on the perception of the complaining behavior of online customers. Another interesting topic for further research concerns the impact of differences in (para-)linguistic realizations of component A (complainable), component C (reference to agent) and component D (wish for the offense to be remedied) on complaint perception, as well as the interaction between the different components that are used to voice the complaint.

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