

A Genre-Analysis of Complaint Letters: A Case Study of English and Arabic Language

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Received 25/2/2022

Accepted 13/4/2022

Abstract:

The study purports to examine the generic structure of complaint letters among natives and non-natives of English. A corpus of 80 letters was collected from Algerian Arabic users, EFL learners as well as American and British native speakers of English. The researcher provided the participants with three complaint situations, and they were required to choose only one and write a complaint letter about it. Our analysis drew upon Swales (1990) and Bhatia's (1993) approach to genre analysis to describe the move structure of such genre. The results revealed that complaint letters in Arabic and English adhere to the same generic structure composed of seven moves and fifteen steps. It was found that several factors, particularly culture, and the correspondents' social rank significantly influence the overall structure of complaint letters.

Keywords: Discourse, complaint letters, moves, discourse analysis, Arabic, English, EFL learners, Algerian.

تحليل نوع رسائل الشكوى: دراسة حالة للغة الإنجليزية والعربية

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ملخص:

تهدف الدراسة إلى فحص الهيكل العام لرسائل الشكاوى المكتوبة من طرف ناطقي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أم ومتعلميها. تم جمع 80 رسالة شكوى مكتوبة من طرف ثلاث مجموعات وهم: جزائريون ناطقون باللغة العربية، وجزائريون يدرسون الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية فضلاً عن متحدثي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أم في أمريكا وبريطانيا. قدم الباحث للمشاركين ثلاث حالات شكوى وكانوا مطالبين باختيار واحدة فقط وكتابة خطاب شكوى بشأنها. اعتمد التحليل على نهج (Swales 1990) و (Bhatia 1993) لتحليل النوع وبنية هذا النوع من الخطاب. أظهرت النتائج أن رسائل الشكوى باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية تلتزم بالهيكل العام نفسه المكون من سبع حركات وخمس عشرة خطوة. وقد وجد أن عدة عوامل أهمها الثقافة والمرتبة الاجتماعية للمرسلين تؤثر بشكل كبير على الهيكل العام لرسائل الشكاوى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخطاب، خطابات الشكوى، التحركات، تحليل الخطاب، اللغة العربية، اللغة الإنجليزية، متعلمي الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، جزائري.

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1. Introduction

In their quest to reach successful communication, language users have to master both linguistic and pragmatic competence (Chomsky, 1965:4). One part of pragmatic competence is performing speech acts, especially in cross-cultural and intercultural communication (Cheng, 2005: 9). Despite significant research on this topic, some speech acts, like complaints, did not receive much attention as there are still grey areas to be clarified (Thumvichit and Gampper, 2019: 3).

A complaint is an “utterance or sets of utterances that identify a problem and seek remediation, either from the person responsible or from a third person who has the power to affect the situation” (Rader 1977, quoted in Boxer, 1993a: 107). The Cambridge Dictionary defines a complaint as a spoken or written statement that something is wrong or not satisfactory. Geluykens and Kraft (2008: 102) maintain that complaints are “a complex communicative event (because) they do not have clear-cut components which are discernible as the complaint proper”. This entails that complaints do not have a prototypical or recurrent set of semantic formulae. This makes it challenging for people to capture it, especially foreign language learners. Complaints are categorized as face-threatening acts to both the speaker and the hearer (Moon, 2001). The present study aims to investigate how Algerian Arabic users, EFL learners, and English native speakers approach written complaints. Using Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) framework for genre analysis, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. What is the generic structure of Arabic and English complaint letters?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Algerian Arabic users (ARB), Algerian EFL learners (EFL), and English native speakers (NA) in terms of their written complaints?

The significance of this research lies in its originality since this study, to the best knowledge of the authors, is perhaps the first to explore the generic structure of complaint letters across three groups: Arabic users, EFL learners, and English natives. Furthermore, the study aims to add to the limited literature on this topic since the majority of the works were dedicated to spoken forms of complaints.

2. Literature review

One of the earliest works on complaints dates back to a group of researchers who conducted parallel studies on oral complaints produced by non-native speakers of Japanese (Inoue, 1982), Mexican Spanish (Giddens, 1981), and American English (Schaefer, 1982). The authors were interested

in examining the syntactic and semantic formulae of spoken complaints produced by the non-natives of the languages above. Schaefer (1982: 14-15) identified nine different discourse functions of complaints, including Opener, orientation, act statement, justification of the speaker and addressee, and remedy, which consists of an utterance calling for some corrective action, threat, closing, and valuation. The studies on spoken complaints aimed mainly to investigate the strategies of complaining whether among participants from the same language/culture or across-culturally, like Trosborg (1995), Nakabachi (1996), Farnia et al. (2009), Yang and Wannaruk (2018) and Arafah (2019).

Unlike other languages, research on complaints in Arabic remains sparse as only a few studies can be retrieved. Migdadi et al. (2012) studied complaints and complaint responses during a radio show interaction in Jordan. The researchers were interested in the functions and patterns of the hosts' complaints and responses. The results showed that callers opt to show solidarity as a strategy to increase the acceptability of their complaints. The study also highlighted other strategies like praising remarks and the informal address forms used to establish a relationship between the caller and the hosts. Concerning the response, the hosts were found to encourage free speech and promise to deliver the caller's message to the authorities (see also Al-Shorman, 2016; Al-Jabali, 2018)

In a cross-linguistic context, Umar (2006) conducted a comparative study between Sudanese EFL learners and native speakers of English in terms of the pragmatic ability to use complaints. The results showed differences in the level of the components' quality produced by the Sudanese compared to their native counterparts. Furthermore, the Sudanese subjects did not demonstrate sufficient linguistic or socio-pragmatic skills that qualify them to produce appropriate complaints in English (see also Al Omari, 2008; Khawaldeh, 2014).

Concerning the written mode, Mahboob and Hartford (2004) examined the complaint letters destined for editors of English newspapers published in Pakistan and Nepal. The researchers examined models, discourse structure, types of semantic formulae used, and reference choices for the complainant and the object of complaint. The corpus of the study consisted of 185 authentic letters written in American English, Urdu, and Pakistani English. The findings showed that the actual letters share a common generic structure: introduction, praise, alerters, background, complaint, appeals to editor, request for redress, suggestion, and justification for the request. The

only difference was found in the directness level, as letters in Urdu tended to be slightly more direct. The relatively high levels of directness were mitigated lexically and syntactically. This was traced back to the possible influence of culture, which was beyond the scope of the study (see also Ho and Henry 2009; Mei 2014; Rañosa-Madrinio 2014).

Only one study can be found as far as the Arab context is concerned. Al Momani (2014) investigated the generic patterns and the persuasive strategies used in written complaints. The researcher analyzed letters of complaint by Jordanian university students. The results showed that written complaints form a unique genre with idiosyncratic moves. Using Aristotle's persuasive appeals, 'pathos' was found to be more dominant. The data analysis revealed that complaint letters as a genre reflect a specific organizational pattern, which includes moves like opening, heading, greeting, background, explanation, request, and closure (2014: 711-713). Culture seems to influence the writing of complaint letters, and this becomes clear in the opening section, where students start their letters with Quranic verses. If we consider the data used in the study, one can notice that the letters collected were not complaints but more like pleas. The letters were written by students having problems with teachers, such as being expelled from the exam, and they were aspiring for the teacher to consider such a decision. To say it differently, while a complaint should be a statement that something is unsatisfactory, the data analyzed reflected a request made urgently and emotionally.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample of the Study

The sample consisted of 120 participants divided equally into three groups: Arabic users, EFL learners, and English natives. All participants were undergraduate university students (19-25 years old) majoring in different fields. They were selected randomly regardless of their social class and gender.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Following Mei's (2014) approach, the researcher proposed three hypothetical situations where the variable of social distance was manipulated (ranging from high to low). The participants were required to choose only one situation and write a complaint about it. Using Swales' (1990) and Bhatia's (1993, 1997) approach to genre analysis, the researcher investigated the construction of complaint letters with special attention to the moves and strategies. The data collected was analyzed quantitatively by

examining the number of moves and step moves in addition to the main linguistic signals used. Furthermore, it was analyzed qualitatively by discussing the main sources of similarities and differences across the three groups.

4. Results and Discussion

Analyzing the corpus resulted in the identification of seven moves and 15 steps. As coding proceeded, two new moves called heading and subject emerged. These moves operate independently by introducing the topic and greeting the addressee. In Table 1 below, moves and steps were organized based on their locations in complaint letters along with their frequency of occurrence. The acronyms ‘ARB’ describes the Algerian Arabic users, the ‘EFL’ refers to the Algerian English foreign learners, and ‘NA’ highlights the English native speakers:

Table 1. Frequency of step moves per group

Moves	Step-Moves	Frequency (No)		
		ARB	EFL	NS
1. Heading	a. Contact information	23	17	14
	b. Address	12	11	8
	c. Date and place	18	10	12
	d. Phone / e-mail	8	5	9
2. Subject	a. Introducing the topic	29	19	18
3. Opening	a. Salutation and Greeting	27	34	34
4. Providing a background	a. Establishing credentials	9	7	11
	b. Flagging a ‘social wrong’	40	40	40
5. Expressing the complaint	a. Explaining the source of the problem	24	25	19
	b. Explaining annoyance and displeasure	15	15	20
6. Requesting a response	a. Urging for specific action	21	17	19
	b. Demanding an apology	1	3	7
	c. Demanding compensation	18	20	12
7. Closing	a. Signing off	28	35	26
	b. Signature	8	0	4

4.1. Heading

It always appears as the letter's top-most part. Often written separately, headings are all about the contact information of both the sender and receiver:

4.1.1. Contact information: it includes indices like first name, and last name as

1. من السيد: (Arabic users)
- /min assayed/
- (From Mr.:)

2. Rym Massoudi (*EFL learners*)

3. Ben Simmons (*Natives*)

This step was used significantly more by Algerian Arabic users, with (23) instances compared to EFL learners (17) and natives (14) instances. To present their contact information, almost all participants directly mentioned their name and surname, as highlighted in examples (2) and (3) above. In other instances, honorifics were used especially among Arabic users where the honorific ‘*assayed*’ (mister) preceded the complainer's name to give it a sense of formality. Such a pattern occurred namely when the complaint is addressed to a socially high-ranked individual.

4.1.2. Address: it refers to particulars of the place where someone lives or an organization is situated:

4.: العنوان (*Arabic users*)

/alʕonwan/

(The address:)

5. 124 Rue zone 8, Mascara (*EFL learners*)

6. 21st Hoover Street Baltimore (*Natives*)

Similar to the previous step move, Arabic users again outperformed the others, recording the highest rate in this category with (12) instances. The EFL learners ranked second with (11) followed by the English natives with (8) instances. The only difference was that Arabic users tend to give a title to this step ‘*alʕonwan*’ (the address) before providing their address. EFL learners and natives, however, present their addresses directly with no introductions (in this case, a title).

4.1.3. Date and place: it comprises the time and place of the letter as

7. / / ... : الجزائر في (*Arabic users*)

/aljaʕaʕer fi/

(Algiers in ; ... / ... / ...)

8. 20/12/2020

Air Algeria, Algiers, Algeria (*EFL learners*)

9. March 27th, 2021

London, UK (*Natives*)

Such a step move was used more by Algerian Arabic users, with (18) instances compared to (10) for EFL learners and (12) instances for natives. The address indicates the complainer's home address while the place refers to the state (province).

4.1.4. Phone/e-mail where the writer provides his/her contact mobile number or e-mail address as a way to make sure contact is maintained between correspondents like:

10. : هاتف (Arabic users)

/hatif/

(Phone:)

11. 07.45.02.14.23 (EFL learners)

12. 555-142-23

Mail: (Natives)

Natives used this step move slightly more than the rest of the groups with (9) instances compared to (8) for Arabic users and (5) for EFL learners. All Algerian participants preferred to provide their phone numbers at this level. Only natives added their e-mail to this step, sometimes with the phone number, and sometimes used the two elements interchangeably.

Based on the examples, we notice that all participants share the basic assumption on what to include in the heading component move. Despite variation in structure and frequency, step moves like the sender's contact information, address, date, and phone/e-mail seem to reoccur across all three groups.

4.2. Subject

It refers to a clause that is placed directly after the heading used to describe the letter's content in various forms:

4.2.1. Extended subject refers to long expressions introduced by a title

13. الموضوع: شكوى ضد موظف (Arabic users)

/almawdoʃ: shkwa dida mwadaf/

(Subject: complaint against an employee)

14. Subject: reporting problems (EFL learners)

15. Subject: Letter of complaint regarding hotel accommodation (Natives)

4.2.2. Regular subjects are usually composed of two lexical items:

16. الموضوع: شكوى (Arabic users)

/almawdoʃ: shkwa/

(Subject: complaint)

17. Subject: complaint (Both EFL learners and natives)

4.4.2.3. Reduced subject contains fewer elements (one word) like

18. شكوى (Arabic users)

/shkwa/

*(Complaint)***19. Complaint (Both EFL learners and natives)**

The subject move component was recorded across the three groups with a slight difference at the frequency level. Algerian Arabic users used significantly more subject component move with (29) instances compared to (19) for EFL learners and (18) instances for English natives. The different subjects highlighted above (extended, regular, and reduced) resulted from the context's influence. The majority of complaint letters used the regular subject move across all three situations. However, the extended version was recorded only in situation one, where the addressee has a higher social rank. The most extended instance highlighted in example (16) was recorded among English natives. The reduced subject was commonly used when addressing a neighbor (low social rank) with EFL learners and natives sometimes opting out of this move, preferring to go directly to the point (without mentioning the topic of the letter).

4.3. Opening

It is used to politely salute the target addressee, typically, through an endearment term like 'dear' plus the name/title of the receiver:

20. تحية طيبة أما بعد (Arabic users)

/tahyia taybeh ama baʿed/

(Greetings, then)

21. السلام عليكم (Arabic users)

/asslamo ʕalaykom/

(Peace be upon you)

22. Dear + name of the neighbor (EFL learners)**23. To whom it may concern (Natives)**

Openings are among the significant component moves that constitute any letter. Such assumption is based on the high frequency reflected in the participants' output since both EFL learners and native speakers recoded a similar rate of (34) instances outperforming Arabic users (27). Similarly, the context influences how participants structure their openings, particularly salutations' structure, and word choice. For instance, when addressing their neighbors, most participants opted for the smallest units. Natives and EFL learners used greeting terms like (hello) and (hi) or a combination of endearment terms like (dear) plus the addressee's name. Arabic users produced equivalent expressions like 'tahyia taybeh' (greetings).

However, when addressing the CEO of an airline company and a hotel manager, longer and more formal expressions were used, as highlighted in examples (22, 23, and 24). More often than not, several honorifics like (*mister*), (*sir*), and '*siyadatikom*' (your honor) are added to show more courtesy and respect for the position or rank of the addressee.

Cultural aspects like religion also seem to influence the way openings are shaped, especially among Algerian users of Arabic. Consider example (22), where the expression '*tahyyia taybh*' (greetings) is used to salute. Deeply rooted in the Islamic culture, such an expression is a cliché used in formal Arabic and it dates back to the Umayyad, Abbasi, and Ottoman eras (Belgasem, 2013: 96). Similarly, expressions like '*assalamu f alikum*' (Peace be upon you) are derived from Islamic culture and are widely used for salutation. Such expressions were used across the three situations by Arabic users since they are part of everyday life and are not reserved for specific contexts.

The influence of culture is also seen when the writer addresses a person not familiar to him/her. Expressions like 'to whom it may concern' are used to greet an unknown person to the writer. Such expression, used by natives, is rather polite, but it is vague. On the other hand, Arabic users use expressions like 'akhi' (brother) to address an unknown person. Such a stance expresses social solidarity, which is the main feature of the Arabic community.

4.4. Providing a background: it consists of the following step moves:

4.4.1. Establishing credentials: it includes the sender's personal information (name and status),

24. ... انا الممضي اسفله السيد ... (*Arabic users*)

/ana almomdy asfaloh assayed/

(I am the one signing below)

25. My name is, and I have a problem to report (*EFL learners*)

26. This is your neighbor from upstairs (*Natives*)

This step move is similar to the contact information found in the heading component move. All participants introduced themselves either by providing their first name or status. Natives used this step slightly more than the rest, with (11) instances followed by Arabic users (9) and EFL learners (7) instances.

4.4.2. Flagging a social wrong: it means stating the problem either explicitly or implicitly

27. اكتب هذه الرسالة للتبليغ عن مشكل حصل معي والسبب هو سوء التسيير. (Arabic users)

/aktubu hdihi arisaleh ltblighi ʕen mushkil hasal maʕi wa sabab huwa suʕ atasyir/

(I am writing this message to report that a problem has occurred and the reason is poor management)

28. My family and I had the misfortune of staying at your hotel from [...] where we encountered some unsatisfactory service. (EFL learners)

29. I don't want to have any hard feelings between us as neighbors. However, I do have an issue with you. (Natives)

This step reflects the complaint's core, where the writer highlights the problem. All participants used this step with (40) instances per group. Few differences were found primarily at the structure level. Once again, the addressee's social rank influenced the structure of the step move. For instance, most participants introduced themselves before flagging the problem in letters addressed to socially high-ranked individuals (hotel managers). On the other hand, the introductory part is often skipped, especially among natives, when addressing a socially low-ranked individual (neighbor), as highlighted in the examples below:

30. I am writing to make you aware of a recent extremely aggravating experience I had with a member of the flight crew on one of your planes.

31. I am writing this complaint regarding my recent stay in your hotel, which was not satisfactory, due to faulty information of accommodation description.

Religion was also found to influence how a problem is flagged especially among Algerian Arabic users. Since religion is an essential part of their lives, Arabic users often integrate some religious expressions in their letters as highlighted below:

32. عن أنس ابن مالك رضي الله عنهما، قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: من آذى جاره فقد آذاني ومن آذني، فقد آذى الله، ومن حارب جاره فقد حاربني، ومن حاربني فقد حارب الله. (Arabic users)

ʕan anes ibnu malik radia alahu ʕenhuma, qala rasulu alhi sala alahu ʕeleihi wasalem: men ada jarahu faqad adany wamn adany, faqd ada allh, waman haraba jarhu faqad harbany, waman harbany faqad harab allah ʕeza wawal./

(On the authority of Anas Ibn Malik, may God be pleased with them both, the Messenger of God, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, said: He who harms his neighbor has harmed me, and he who harms me has harmed God, and he who fights his neighbor has fought me, and he who has fought me has fought God Almighty.)

In the example (33) above, the complainer decided to refer to the religious teachings of Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him), 'Hadith,' to flag the wrong. The sayings of the prophet Muhammad constitute the primary source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran. In this example, the prophet prohibits hurting his/her neighbor. Using such an excerpt provides a powerful way to gain the receiver's attention and notify him/her of the severity of the problem at hand.

4.5. Expressing complaint: it represents the letter's core since it reflects the stance of the complainer towards the event through:

4.5.1. Describing the source of the problem in details,

33. اثناء اقامتي هناك لاحظت ان العمال ليسوا بهيئة معتدلة كما انهم غير مهذبين في التعامل مع الزبائن. المسبح الخاص بكم لم يكن مجهز بمدفئة للماء لتسهيل السباحة في الجو البارد.
(Arabic users)

/athnʕa iqamaty hunak lahztu ana alʕumal laysu bihaya muʕstadileh kama anahum ghayru muhadabyn fy ataʕamul maʕa azaba'en. almasbeh alkhas bikum lam yakun mujahaz bimidf'eh lilma litshyl asibaha f aljaw albard./

(During my stay there, I noticed that the workers are not in a moderate form, and they are not polite in dealing with customers. Your pool was not equipped with a water heater to facilitate swimming in cold weather.)

34. Your employees, who were **totally unprofessional** and **incredibly rude** to the extent that made me avoid contact with them. The rooms were **old** with **decayed paint** and very **old furniture**. The food was **terrible** and the transport was **extremely bad**. (EFL learners)

35. I was scheduled to fly from Houari Boumediene International Airport at 23:00 on flight 4543-KN. Shortly after arriving at the airport, **I was told that I could not fly by plane because my seat was overbooked**. (Natives)

This step is seen as a continuation of the previous step (flagging social wrongs), where the writer paints a clearer picture of the problem by providing more details. Arabic users and EFL learners scored the highest rates (24) and (25) instances compared to (19) for natives. Most participants

provided longer explanations when complaining to the CEO of an airline company and hotel manager since it involves a loss of money. Participants believed explaining the source of their problem would entitle them to compensation. Only natives were found to produce a slightly longer explanation when complaining to their neighbors.

4.5.2. Expressing the annoyance and displeasure with the situation,

36. مع انني دفعت مبلغ باهض إلا أنني لم استمتع إطلاقاً، لم احظ بإجازة ممتعة بسبب إهمالكم
(Arabic users)

/mʕa ana dafʕt mablgh bahid ila anny lam astamitʕ itlaqan, lam ahza bi ijazah mumtiʕa bisabab ihmalikum/

(Although I paid a high amount, I did not enjoy it at all, I did not have a pleasant vacation because of your negligence)

37. Thanks to their inappropriate behavior, I missed my flight which **caused me to get in serious trouble** with my employer (EFL learners)

38. I feel like I need to let it be known that some of **your employees are not treating people right**. (Natives)

Explaining how the social wrong affected the writer's emotional well-being draws compassion from the addressee and further strengthens the complaint. Natives relied heavily on such notion since they recorded the highest rate with (20) instances compared to the EFL learners and Arabic users with (15) for and (12) respectively.

4.6. Requesting a response: it involves several steps particularly:

4.6.1. Urging for a specific reaction: it usually to set things right for the complainer:

39. يرجى من سيادتكم التحقيق في الواقعة (Arabic users)

/yurja min siyadatikum atahqiq fi alwaqiʕeh/

(You are kindly requested to investigate the matter)

40. I would like to ask you to **keep the noise level down** please (EFL learners)

41. I'd appreciate it if you could possibly **keep your volume down** and mind your behaviour from now on. (Natives)

As highlighted in examples 40-42 above, participants demanded three main actions: opening an investigation, keeping calm, and soliciting direct contact. Results showed that this step was commonly used in the first and third situations. Participants demand an investigation when complaining to the airline company and hotel manager (to a lesser extent) and ask for appropriate behavior when complaining to their neighbors. The highest rate

was recorded among Arabic users with (21) instances in contrast to (19) and (17) instances for natives and EFL learners, respectively.

4.6.2. Demanding an apology

42. أحيطكم علما انه اذا لم أتلق اعتذارا لائقا منك، فسأبلغ عنك إلى الهيئات التنظيمية المناسبة

(Arabic users)

/uhitukum ſilman anahu ada lam atalaga iſtidaran la'eqan minka, faſa ubalighu ſanka alhay'at atandimiya almunasibeh/

(I inform you that if I do not receive a decent reply from you, then you will be reported to the appropriate regulatory bodies)

43. Looking forward to hearing **your apology** (EFL learners)

44. I believe that you owe me **an apology** (Natives)

Most participants demanded an apology from an establishment rather than an individual. To this extent, letters addressed to airline companies and hotels reflected higher use of demanding an apology the letters destined to a neighbor. Furthermore, natives were found to use this step significantly more than the rest of the participants with (7) instances compared to (3) for EFL learners and only (1) instance for Arabic users.

4.6.3. Asking for compensation

45. يرجى من سيادتكم تعويضى ماديا (Arabic users)

/yurja min siyadatikum taſwidi madiyan/

(Please, your honor, investigate the incident and compensate me financially)

46. I am legally entitled to be **refunded** (fully or partially) from you. Therefore, I urge you to consider my claim (EFL learners)

47. My stay there [in the hotel] was a complete rip off and I demand **compensation**. (Natives)

Such a step was exclusively used in the first and second situations since it involves a fiscal issue between the complainer and the complaine. Their demand ranged from partial to full refund depending on the severity of the problem they faced. EFL learners outperformed the rest of the participants with (20) instances compared to (18) and (12) instances for Arabic users and natives.

Despite being used by all participants, there were some differences in using the request component move across the three groups. The results showed that the receiver's social rank influences the request's politeness level. For instance, when addressing people of higher social class, Arabic

users introduce terms like 'siadatikom' (your honor) to show their respect. Similarly, natives combine their requests with politeness markers like (*kindly*) and (*would*) to express the same meaning. The politeness level, however, starts to decrease when addressing an individual of a lower social rank, like a neighbor,

48. ارجو منك اخي الكريم التوقف حالا عما تصنعه او سوف نقاضيك انا وكل من بالعمارة
(Arabic users)

/arju minka akh alkarym atawquf halaa ʕema tasnaʕue aw sawfa nuqadyk ana wakulu man bilimara/

(I ask you, dear brother, to stop immediately what you are doing, or everyone in the building will sue you)

49. Give me my money back **or else!** (Natives)

Although sweeteners like 'akh' (brother) are used before the request, a threat was introduced later 'sawf nuqadyk' (we will sue you) to strengthen the request. Such a strategy, however, is not polite since the complainer is threatening the addressee's positive face. Similarly, in example (46), we notice the same strategy being adopted by natives. The only difference is that natives were more aggressive by using direct requests with no sweeteners or politeness markers.

4.7. Closing

It marks the typical ending of a formal letter. It takes a variety of forms, namely:

4.7.1. Signing off: it is employed to show the writer's respect and/or appreciation for the reader. There is plenty of sign-offs out there, including:

50. تقبلوا مني فائق الشكر والتقدير (Arabic users)

/taqabalu mini fa'eqa ashukri watqdyri/

(Please accept my sincere thanks and appreciation)

51. Sincerely, Customer (EFL learners)

52. Yours sincerely (Natives)

Such a step was executed almost identically across the three groups with a significantly higher use rate than other step moves. The only difference was that Arabic users integrated the expression 'assalamo alaykom' (peace be upon you) as a signing-off pattern when addressing their neighbors. EFL learners were found to use this step more often with (35) instances compared to (28) and (26) for Arabic users and natives, respectively.

4.7.2. Signature: the sender usually states his/her name in addition to a signature to be used as a reference in future interactions,

53. التوقيع + الاسم (All participants)

/al ism + atawqiʕ/
(name + signature)

This move was significantly used by Arabic users with (8) instances compared to (4) instances for native. Only the Algerian EFL learners opted out of this move. Although most complaint letters had a closing component move, letters addressed to neighbors had the least instances, especially among EFL learners. Once again, we deduce how the addressee's social rank influences the complainer's output. Table 2 below summarizes the moves and step moves used by each group throughout the three situations:

Table 2. Frequency of moves and step moves according to situations

Category	Heading	Subject	Opening	Providing a Background	Expressing the complaint	Requesting a response	Closing
Situation 1							
ARB%	70	80	90	90	100	100	65
EFL %	55	75	80	95	100	100	70
NS %	60	60	70	100	100	100	75
Situation 2							
ARB%	60	75	85	100	100	100	55
EFL %	50	70	90	90	100	100	65
NS %	25	45	95	95	100	100	40
Situation 3							
ARB%	65	55	80	95	100	100	60
EFL %	30	40	75	95	100	100	70
NS %	10	25	75	100	100	100	15

Some component moves as the opening, providing a background, expressing the complaint, and requesting a response were used significantly more than other moves by all participants. Differences start to appear at the level of heading, subject, and closing component moves. The Algerian sample outperformed the natives in this aspect, highlighted in Table 4 later. As discussed previously, the context played a crucial role in structuring the complaint letter. For instance, most participants tend to include all components when addressing socially high-ranked individuals.

On the other hand, fewer elements are integrated when addressing a socially low-ranked individual. This claim can be seen when considering

how participants used the heading, subject, and closing across the three situations. The overall average percentage use of the heading across the three situations is (61%), (45%), and (35%). The percentage decreases concerning the social rank, i.e., the lower the addressee’s social rank, the less the component is used. The same phenomenon occurs for the subject and closing component move.

4.9. Typicality of moves

The aforementioned moves were classified into three categories obligatory, conventional, and optional based on their frequency as shown in Table 3 below:

Moves	Frequency rate (%)		
	ARB (%)	EFL (%)	NS (%)
Heading	65	45	32
Subject	70	62	43
Opening	85	82	80
Providing a Background	60	78	68
Expressing the complaint	100	100	100
Requesting a response	100	100	100
Closing	60	68	43

When going through the available works, we notice the lack of clear-cut boundaries that distinguish between categories as different researchers proposed different criteria (see Xiao and Cao’s 2013, Cheung 2008, and Tessuto 2015). However, the present research will adopt Thumvichit and Gampper’s (2019) framework since it was moderate. They proposed that for a move to be considered as obligatory, it should appear (90%) in the data. For the conventional moves, the cut off point was set at (70%) and anything less than that is considered optional.

To this extent, only two moves can be regarded as obligatory: expressing the complaint and requesting a response since they appear in every complaint letter with a (100%) frequency rate. Concerning the conventional moves, three component moves appear to conform to this term: subject, opening, and providing background. Participants, however, showed different preferences. Openings are conventional across all three groups since all participants averaged a frequency above (80%). On the other hand, the subject component move was found to be conventional only

among Arabic users (70%) compared to (62%) and (42%) for EFL learners and natives, respectively. Similarly, only EFL learners were found to conventionally use providing a background move (78%) in contrast to (68%) and (60%) for natives and Arabic users, respectively.

Only two moves qualify for the term optional: heading and closing. Arabic users had the highest rate of headings (65%) compared to (45%) for EFL learners and (32%) for natives. On the other hand, EFL learners used relatively more closing (68%) compared to (60%) for Arabic users and (43%) for natives. Despite the slight advantage for Algerians in terms of their use of headings and closing compared to natives, these two moves were the least used across all groups. Using the AntConc program, we analyzed the data for recurrent word combinations as highlighted in Table 4 below. Note that the signature and job title were not included since they involved personal information about the participants:

Table 4. Linguistic signs of complaint letters

Moves and step moves	Word combination		Frequency		
	English	Arabic	ARB	EFL	NS
Heading					
Contact information	From (name+surname)	من السيد (from Mr.)	11	8	2
	Name+surname	الاسم واللقب (full name)	8	3	7
	Receiver's name + job titles	اسم المتلقي (receiver's name)	4	6	5
Address	Building and street N°	رقم البناية+الشارع (building and street N°)	3	1	6
	Province	اسم المقاطعة: (province)	9	10	2
Date and place	State or province	اسم المقاطعة في: (provinde+date)	7	4	6
	Day/month/year	يوم/شهر/سنة (day/month/year)	11	6	6
Phone/e-mail	Phone/mobile:	هاتف: (mobile)	7	5	9
Subject					
Introducing the topic	Complaint	شكوى	9	10	8
	Subject: complaint letter	الموضوع: شكوى	11	0	4
	Letter of complaint	الموضوع تقديم شكوى	5	9	4
	Complaint about...	الموضوع: رسالة شكوى	3	0	1
	Complaint regarding ...	الموضوع: شكوى ضد ...	1	0	1
Opening					

Moves and step moves	Word combination		Frequency		
	English	Arabic	ARB	EFL	NS
Salutation and greeting	To whom it may concern,	تحية طيبة أما بعد،	16	1	0
	Dear + name	السلام عليكم،	7	19	7
	Dear + job title	السلام عليكم ورحمة الله تعالى وبركاته	4	14	10
	Hi,	بعد بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم،	1	0	6
	Hello,	بعد بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم والصلاة والسلام على أشرف المرسلين،	1	0	9
	Hello there,			0	2
Providing a background					
Establishing Credentials	My name is	انا الممضي اسفله السيد	4	3	3
	I am + job title			4	6
	This is + name or job title	بصفتي	2	0	2
		أنا	3		
Flagging a social 'wrong'	I am writing this letter to complain	اكتب هذه الرسالة للتبليغ عن	12	9	15
	to convey	، يؤسفني أن أتقدم بهذه الشكوى ضد حيث	22	5	11
	to make you aware of	اكتب إليكم لتقديم شكوى رسمية	10	4	7
Expressing the complaint					
Explaining the problem source	Despite of / since كان من المفترض ان	7	5	8
	Due to تدور احداث المشكل حول	6	4	11
	Because ... (I, of, we, you)	بالرغم من / حيث ان	13	10	6
Expressing annoyance	Not acceptable/satisfactory	غير لائق	4	1	7
	Bad (feeling, behaviour)	تجربة محبطة/ردينة/مزرية	6	9	2
	Terrible experience	شعرت بخيبة امل	5	3	6
Requesting a response					
Urging for specific action	Please see what you can	كتبت هذه الرسالة لأرى اذا بإمكان سيادتكم	3	0	3
	I would really appreciate it if you	يرجى من سيادتكم/ سأكون ممتنًا حقًا اذا.....	12	10	11

Moves and step moves	Word combination		Frequency		
	English	Arabic	ARB	EFL	NS
	Please (refrain, cease, stop)	/ارجو ان اطلب	6	7	5
Demanding an apology	I demand an apology	أتمنى أن تقوموا بالاعتذار	1	2	2
	we would like an apology letter			1	2
	I/we expect an apology				3
Asking for compensation	I would appreciate it if	يرجى من سيادتكم تعويضي ماديا ومعنويا.	10	6	2
	I would like to ask for	كتعويض عن أود أن	5	4	3
	I am kindly requesting ...	أتوقع أن يتم تعويضي	3	9	7
Closing					
Signing off	Regards/best regards	في انتظار ردكم	5	15	10
	Sincerely yours	تقبلوا مني جزيل الشكر والتقدير	19	12	11
	Bye	تحياتي/شكرا	9	0	5

The similarities highlighted in the discussion and Table 4 above can be traced back to the conventional aspect of letter writing. Since the complaint letters in both English and Arabic comprise, roughly, the same component moves, the same linguistic signal might reoccur. The differences captured at this level were due to the influence of different variables.

Culture significantly influenced how Algerians produced their complaints as certain expressions derived from religion were often used in moves like headings and openings. Such a preference is justified since religion occupies an important place in the everyday life of Algerians.

Similarly, the addressee’s social rank had an impact on the overall structure of the complaint letters. We noticed that, typically, more moves were used when addressing a socially high-ranked individual to show respect and gain attention. On the other hand, fewer moves were used when addressing socially low-ranked individuals as participants thought it was appropriate to be concise and precise. Our findings, thus, entail that Arabic and English complaint letters go hand in hand with the central assumption that professional genres like business letters (Kong, 1998) and job application letters (Bhatia, 1993; Connor et al., 1995) reveal cultural variations even though the members of each genre type share the same communicative purpose.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, our analysis revealed that complaint letters written in Arabic and English generally adhere to the same generic principles. Although researchers like Hartford and Mahboob (2004) and Al Momani (2014) did not point out their use, our results have identified the heading and subject as two new component moves. To this extent, we showed how moves in complaint letters are categorized into obligatory (expressing the complaint and request), conventional (subject, opening, and background), and optional (heading and closing). Similarities in structuring a particular move were traced back to the conventionality of letter writing. Differences, however, were related to cultural beliefs plus sociological and psychological factors.

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