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Speak Your Mind, but Watch Your Mouth: Complaints in CouchSurfing References

1. Introduction

CouchSurfing (CS) is a hospitality network that allows people to connect during their travels, socialise with locals and, most importantly, stay at other members' houses for free. Letting strangers into your home presents high stakes in the offline component of this community and engenders the need for a reliable trust-building mechanism. Part of this mechanism consists of references, where members detail their CS experience and broadly label it as positive, neutral or negative. Naturally, neutral and negative references are rich in accounts of grievances, i.e. complaints.

Complaints are notoriously difficult to elicit, and much research on the topic is based on data from questionnaires, discourse completion tests or role plays (Olshtain/Weinbach 1993; Trosborg 1995; Kraft/Geluykens 2002; Chen et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the Internet as a source of natural language data on complaints has been tapped only in few studies. Among the characteristic features that distinguish online complaints from their offline counterparts are the abundance of explicit complaining strategies with little or no mitigation (Meinl 2010 on eBay references) and the blurring of the

border between direct and indirect complaints (Vasquez 2011 on TripAdvisor reviews). Complaints on CS, however, differ from these patterns. CS members' credibility is based on their reputation and their network capital, which is potentially affected by every contribution to the website. Every negative reference is therefore a weighty face-threatening act (FTA) that may damage the addressee (by criticising their competence as a couchsurfer) as well as the complainant (by presenting them as a yammerer and an undesirable guest with a high risk factor for negative references). Thus, the reference writers must balance the obligation to write honest references (a tool to ensure the community's safety) against the desire to protect face.

This paper analyses complaint performance in the CS setting and investigates pragmatic strategies that the authors use to strike that balance. We specifically focus on objectification as a means to substantiate a complaint, and examine how authors highlight and manage objectivity. CS profiles provide rich demographic information, while the power of CS to cross linguistic borders enables a look into the pragmatic competence of non-native speakers of English.

2. CouchSurfing

CouchSurfing is a location-based social network that was founded in 2003 and strived to offer people a path to cheap and authentic travel. Bypassing traditional social norms, the founders agreed that it is acceptable to ask a complete stranger for accommodation based on no more shared background than CS membership. Surprisingly, the website thrived and quickly gathered popularity, reaching 4,6 million members worldwide in 2012.

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In contrast to popular social networking services (SNS) which demonstrate a strong offline-to-online trend (e.g. Ellison et al. 2007 for Facebook), CS connections have primarily online-to-offline directionality. Similarly to a typical SNS, a member creates a personal profile which may include details on age, gender, geographical location, living situation, life philosophy etc. Each member has access to two CS roles: host or 'surfer' (i.e. guest). By setting the profile indicator to 'Has couch', the member announces to travellers in his proximity that he is potentially available as a host and invites personal messages for arranging the details of the stay. Alternatively, a member can search CS for couches available at his potential destination and choose from the list of results the hosts whom he will contact.

The Mission page of the CS website highlights the communicative affordance of CS as its main purpose: "Our online and mobile platforms connect people to one another, affordably, safely and easily" (Couchsurfing 2011). CS strives to facilitate networking among strangers. The resulting network can be used to repeatedly secure free accommodation and authentic cultural experiences during travel. Construing networks as a form of social capital (Burt 2000; Wong/Salaff 1998), it is the number and quality of documented connections with other members that comprises the network capital of a couchsurfer. The quality of ties is especially important since members trade such a personal commodity as accommodation at one's own home. In other words, the network capital of a member resides primarily in trust (Feng et al. 2004; Rosen et al. 2011): higher evidenced trustworthiness raises the probability of receiving a positive answer to a couch request.

CS offers multiple mechanisms for building initial trust among members. Apart from creating a comprehensive profile, a member has the possibility to verify his address by credit card, to confirm his identity by showing a photo ID to another CS member, or to be

vouched for by a senior member. All this information features prominently in the profile. The ultimate trust-gaining channel on CS, however, is the peer referencing system (Pultar/Raubal 2009). By giving and receiving positive references one progressively accumulates network capital. The process is recursive in that a face-to-face meeting is a prerequisite to a new reference, and another member is more likely to accept a surfing request or ask to be hosted if the profile in question has many positive references.

Interpersonal trust in online communities dovetails with face. The positive self-image that an interactant tries to claim for himself (Brown/Levinson 1987) in the context of CS comprises a trustworthy, reasonable person who makes a pleasant host and surfer and is unlikely to incur loss of network capital to other members. It is therefore not surprising that a weighty FTA such as complaint exhibits different patterns in CS references than in other CMC environments. Complaints on online-based networks oriented towards exchange of information (TripAdvisor) or goods (eBay) are performed by means of explicit strategies without mitigation since both the complainant and complainees are relatively anonymous and there is little need to save face (Vasquez 2011). In turn, on CS the author of a negative reference makes himself vulnerable by invoking an image of a trigger-happy complainant who is a liability to future hosts and guests. Such an image is to be avoided at all costs; at the same time, the CS guidelines as well as sense of responsibility for fellow couchsurfers compel the member to document a negative experience. This clash commits CS members to a specific tactic of FTA performance which aims at saving the complainant's positive face with no redress for the addressee's positive or negative face. The strategies used to perform such complaints are discussed in the following section.

3. Performing a legitimate complaint: CS perspective

The communicative act of complaining involves passing moral judgement about a certain action by the complainer (Trosborg 1995). The moral judgement, which states the reprehensibility of the complainer's conduct and/or negatively evaluates the complainer as a person, places complaints into the sphere of social actions. Such actions are by definition accountable phenomena which are discursively constructed in reports about the complainable and are performed within a certain subjective stance (Drew 1998). While some strategies of complaint performance may position the complainant as a yammerer or paranoiac, others serve to substantiate the account (Edwards 2005).

The objectification strategies aim to validate the transgression as a complainable matter in the eyes of a third party, and therefore are typically used in *third-party* or *indirect* complaints. The direct/indirect complaint dichotomy describes two distinct intended audiences: in case of direct complaints, the complainer himself; and in case of indirect complaints, a third party who is neither held responsible nor capable of remedying the perceived offence (Boxer 1993). Vasquez (2011), however, notes that in online contexts, the strict binary distinction between direct and indirect complaints might be inappropriate, as CMC complaints have a potential to be simultaneously direct and indirect. This is certainly true for CS references. While they are posted on the profile page of the complainer and immediately come to his attention, the main function of references is to provide information to other CS members. Thus, the intended audience also includes prospective hosts or guests of the complainer.

As we have hypothesised in the previous section, complainants in CS references focus on maintaining their positive face in order to avoid loss, and continue accumulation, of trust. This can be achieved by constructing descriptions of the complainable as factual and by discounting any subjective reasons for complaining. In the remainder of this paper, we will be looking at complaint objectification strategies in negative and neutral CS references, i.e. various ways of ‘legitimising the complaint’ (Pomerantz 1986). 56 neutral and negative references were collected in 2011. After coding the references independently, both authors worked together to achieve complete interrater agreement. Demographic information on the reference authors can be found in Table 1.

Age		Gender		Native language		English proficiency	
20-30	23	male	24	English	24	expert	11
>30	18	female	21	German	10	intermediate	5
not indicated	7	joint	3	French	4	beginner	2
				Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, Italian, Mongolian, Norwegian, Spanish, Swedish	x 1	not indicated	6
				not indicated	2		
Total: 48 profiles ¹							

Table 1. Profile information

¹ Hereafter, profile information is coded in each example. E.g. [F28GerInt] – a female, 28 year old, German native speaker, intermediate level of English.

In the next sections we will discuss the specific ways in which CS members apply and modify objectification strategies to render their negative references as believable accounts of true events.

3.1. Empiricist discourse

One way of endorsing the complainant's positive face and lending objectivity to the complaint discourse is the construction of 'out-there-ness'. This tactic involves presenting the report as independent of the author and drawing the emphasis away from the identity of the complainant to put it on the complainable (Potter 1996: 152).

Linguistically, the desired attributes of impartiality and disinterestedness are embodied by the empiricist repertoire (Gilbert/Mul-kay 1984). While preferring passive voice in the account of own actions or feelings, the producers of discourse use active verbs for actors in the reported situation (in our context, the complainee). In order to pointedly disengage from the construction of blame, the complainant may refrain from explicitly passing moral judgement. Instead, he limits the discursive action to the statement of events and therefore leaves the legitimacy judgement to the recipient. Covert author involvement in such cases resides in the version of events presented to the recipient. All descriptions are constructions of events, and although the author does not invoke nonexistent facts, he selects one of the relevant alternatives which is in line with his agenda (Edwards/Potter 2005). In example (1), for instance, the author does not explicitly complain about the behaviour of the opposite party:

- (1) [F68Eng] I had arranged to surf with Inga but arrived very late at night, so stayed in a hotel the first night. The next morning I had a hotel clerk call and get directions to give to the taxi driver. When we arrived, there was no one there, and the hut was locked. She did

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not answer her phone when I tried to call again. However a man came and opened the hut to show the inside. There was snow on the ground, so I could not stay waiting. I had to take the taxi back to town and then stayed somewhere else. It was very expensive to take a taxi so far both ways.²

Despite her first-hand experience which must have been rather traumatic – arriving to a foreign country, travelling far outside the city to meet her host, only to find the accommodations locked – the complainant refrains from evaluative judgement. Instead, she recounts bare facts in order of their occurrence, almost as if she were not present at the scene at all. However, the facts are clearly at odds with an average person’s understanding of hospitality. The story thus unambiguously invites the recipient to the reaction that corresponds with the author’s implicit assessment.

Schrader-Kniffki (this volume) points out that polyphonic discourse is an evidentiality device that contributes to the construction of the identity of an expert in the struggle over who has the “right knowledge”. The inclusion of direct quotations is a tool that is also used in CS references to lend veracity to the account, despite the fact that the accuracy of a verbatim quote can hardly be proven.

- (2) [M23Eng] I hosted Andy after he posted in the Colorado group that he “desperately needed cool people to hangout with”. [...] Yet in one night Andy insulted my friends and my roommate and spent two hours crying at a party that he coerced me into bringing him to.

Fragment (2) opens a negative reference which proceeds with the statement of weighty complainables: the complainees “insulted (*author’s*) friends” and “coerced” the host into something. In the beginning, the author models his discursive footing on that of a

² All examples either belong to public accounts or are quoted with permission of respective CS members. All names of persons and places have been changed to preserve anonymity.

news presenter, projecting himself as an animator merely reporting words and actions of others (Goffman 1981). This strategy works toward establishing the complainant's truthfulness from the start and indirectly contributes to the positive image of an objective discourse participant.

3.2. Corroboration

Another tactic of objectifying the complaint involves constructing consensus by presenting corroborating evidence and accounts by independent witnesses (Edwards/Potter 1992; Wooffitt 1992; Potter 1996). Consensus and corroboration can be achieved in two ways: by drawing on the resources external to the current account, and by including witnesses into the report.

The first type of corroboration is a more reliable way of rendering report into a fact and occurs, for instance, in court. The author may refer to an independently produced testimony that describes similar situations or behaviour.

In CS, this tactic of *joint production* is realised by indexing existing references that cite the same complainable. Excerpts (3) and (4) both situate themselves within the larger context of CS references:

- (3) [F36Eng] I feel that you did not respect my boundaries on a number of occasions, that you are too focused on romance, you make disrespectful jokes about women, and you don't stop when a woman says stop. Even though you have many positive references, I counted 7 people on HC³ and CS who felt single women should be warned.
- (4) [M102Eng] I've 200 poz and only 1 neg refs-read his ref and decide if u want this prsn in ur house. [...] Over 1 mth later, w/o ever msging me directly to this day, Alec left me one of the most MEAN-

³ Hospitality Club

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spirited references i've read on CS, and he keeps changing it months l8r to keep this war going thats in his own head. I and the others who attended were shocked by his ref - he seems to only surf and not host; several ppl have not left feedback for him.

The author of fragment (3) refers quite explicitly to the transgression committed by the complaine: the complainable resides in the unwanted sexual advances of her male host. Such impropriety may cause serious damage to the complaine's capital of trust. The rebound from a negative reference of such consequence may blemish the author's reputation as well. To protect her positive face, the complainant corroborates her report by discursively incorporating other references into the account of the complainable. This joint production of complaint implies that the transgression occurs regularly and emphasises the possibility of something similar happening to the next female surfer.

In example (4), the negative reference itself constitutes the complainable. In addition to joint production, fragment (4) employs the second way of manufacturing consensus: building witnesses' accounts into the report. The reference to "I and the others" indicates that not only the complainant was shocked by the couchsurfer's behaviour, his friends were as well. Whereas one person's discomfort might be construed as merely ill-matched personalities or even the fault of the complainant, claiming that other people also had the same impression substantiates the complainable.

3.3. Complaint stories

A prominent place in establishing one's entitlement as a witness is held by the package of linguistic strategies that are used to construct a complaint story (Holt 2000). By borrowing from the toolbox of literary authors, a complainant endows his report with vivid realistic details that confirm its factuality. The effect can be

reached by various linguistic means. Apart from such traditional devices as narrative present, verb initial positioning, and affective semantic loading (Günthner 2000), the authors frequently resort to scrupulous detailing. The concept of defensive detailing (Drew 1998) applies to the instances of *graphic narrative description* of events that constitute the complainable or provide a background to it. Filling the chronologically arranged description of a situation with specific references to people, places or times enables the author to stage it as a realistic ‘little show’ (Goffman 1974):

- (5) [F53NorInt] My two grown up children, husband and I had arranged to couchsurf with Inga in January 2007. [...] We brought gifts and sweets for her and the children, went back to town to buy food and wine and to cook us all a meal. Still we got the impression that Inga was unsatisfied and expected to earn some money from our stay, which I felt is not in the spirit of CS. We are by no means in need of a high degree of comfort, but it was the about zero degrees and we were not equipped for sleeping in a cold, none isolated hut with a stove we had to feed all night. When we told Inga that we had decided to stay in a hostel in town instead, she did not want to eat with us, speak or say goodbye.

The complainable – the poor living conditions in the hut and the host’s mercenary intentions – could have been presented in a concise and plain reference. Instead, the complainant constructs a traditional narrative by first introducing the setting and the main actors in Past Perfect tense, then describing facts and actions in Simple Past in a chronological order and embellishing the description with colourful minutiae such as “a cold, none isolated hut with a stove we had to feed all night” or “she did not want to eat with us, speak or say goodbye”. The scenic reconstruction of the events is complete with the use of *verba sentiendi* (i.e. “we got the impression that”, “I felt”), which give the reader a glimpse into the complainant’s mind.

On the other hand, defensive detailing is a double-edged sword. Provided the opportunity to rebut the complaint, the complainees may answer with a competing account of events that recasts the original complainant as a yammerer or a liar (cf. Edwards 1999: 273-275). The competing account is substantiated through *undermining detailing* which focuses on different minutiae of the complainable. The malleability of real life situations is illustrated in the following example:

- (6) [F24Eng] Perhaps it was a conflict of interest, but Edward left my roommate and I very unsettled. He was extremely upset and cried on our couch for the majority of the time we spent with him.
- (7) [M23Eng] I must say also, her roommate and I got along nicely, and spent mutual time crying on each others shoulders, contrary I think to my reference.

The author of fragment (6) complains about the emotional disposition of her CS guest. The veracity of the report is achieved through witness corroboration (“my roommate and I”) and supportive graphic detailing (“He... cried on our couch for the majority of the time”). Edward undermines her report by contesting the witness’s account (“her roommate and I got along nicely”). In his version of the events, the complainees actually has a good time with him (“spent mutual time crying on each others shoulders”). The interplay of the initial graphic narrative description and the undermining detailing illustrates the flexibility in the production of alternative versions of the same event and highlights the ‘reconstructive’ nature of complaint stories (Bergmann/Luckmann 1995).

3.4. Script formulations

The notion of scriptedness has been borrowed by discursive psychologists from cognitive linguistics to explain how participants in discourse impose their perceived routines, pre-organisations and

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constraints on reality and therefore construe it in different ways (Edwards 1994; Drew/Heritage 1998). The central tenet of this approach is that reality always underdetermines the reports, and the author performs active social work when framing the events in his account as having a certain status.

In complaint stories, authors employ script formulations to achieve one of two effects. Firstly, the complainees' deplorable actions are presented as one instance of dangerous or antisocial behaviour typical for this person and thus function as a warning for the recipient. It allows the author to defend his positive face by presenting himself as a tolerant person who only complains about repeated offences, as opposed to an odd slip-up. 'The typicality script' may be invoked by normalising adverbials such as 'always', 'all the time', 'constantly', the use of present tenses, or the habitual 'would'. Legitimising powers of the typicality script become clear in negative reference (8), where the situation is rendered complainable only by virtue of belonging to the script 'No-show':

- (8) [M37GerBeg] Bill contacted me about one month before he wanted to stay at my home. Directly I offered accommodation, but he did not confirm his stay. Three days before the fixed date I canceled my tender. All to often I am waiting for nothing...

Secondly, the author may explicitly or implicitly refer to a script of normality *in the relevant context* to justify his perception of the event as complainable. This usage requires a shared cognitive background between the complainant and the audience and appeals to the feeling of in-group solidarity. Such scripts are usually invoked by explicitly quoting a fragment of the script ('a rule') and juxtaposing it with the complainees' actions.

Given that CS members define themselves as a community, it is unsurprising that a set of behavioural norms has developed spontaneously and has been fixed in multiple guidelines and tips avail-

able on the website. These rules of CS are often implicitly present in references and can be loosely formulated as follows:

1. Members are not to be charged for surfing or hosting.
2. Surfers try to contribute in non-monetary ways (e.g. washing dishes).
3. CS is not a dating website.
4. CS is about making friends and engaging with new cultures, not impersonal free accommodation ('spirit of CS' vs. 'freeloading').
5. Surfing and hosting must be arranged beforehand via CS messages.
6. Couch requests have to be answered, even if the answer is negative.
7. It is member's duty to leave honest references.

These rules amount to a CS script which is assumed to be shared by the community. Naturally, deviations from it are undesirable and lessen one's network capital. The violations of CS script serve as the basis for complaint in example (9):

- (9) [F53NorInt] Still we got the impression that Inga was unsatisfied and expected to earn some money from our stay, which I felt is not in the spirit of CS.

Fragment (9), which is the reproduction of reference (5) above, refers to the no-payment rule. The author marks the complainable as violating the CS script ("spirit of CS" or "couchsurfing ideals") and shows that she is aware of the existence and importance of the script. Invoking the script boosts the account by presenting the complainable action as not only diverging from the complainant's personal ideas of propriety, but also, more importantly, from the rules of the whole community.

3.5. Objectifying by mitigation

Creativity of language users is manifested in the ways they adapt established pragmatic strategies to suit their means. One stereotypical strategy involved in the performance of face-to-face complaints is mitigation. According to Trosborg (1995: 313), speakers mitigate their complaints in order to “avoid a direct confrontation with the complainees”, which is desirable in contexts where the addressee’s positive face must be appeased. However, in CS references the priority lies with the complainant’s positive face, following the tendency of internet environments towards self-oriented face work (cf. Schrader-Kniffki, this volume). An interesting consequence is that CS complainants employ mitigation as yet another objectification strategy.

Our data yielded two forms of mitigation that work as a supportive move for objectification. The first device is the juxtaposition of the complainable with a single positive element, typically introduced by the conjunction ‘but’. Coupling of an inherently face-threatening act such as disagreement, criticism or disapproval with positive politeness has been observed in offline oral and written discourse as well (cf. Thaler (this volume) for an overview of literature). But in contrast to peer reviews or refusal letters, in CS data the insertion of the positive element is geared towards self-presentation rather than reaffirming solidarity.

- (10)[J32FreExp] we were not comfortable there because we felt pressured to participate financially from the moment we arrived and we found her to have a moody character. But she is a good woman and we wish the best to her family.

By mentioning laudable actions or character traits of the complainees, the complainants demonstrate their objectivity and reject the identity of dispositional fault-finder. The authors of (10) show

their good will towards the host despite all the transgressions and project themselves as reasonable and objective.

Besides, reference writers may choose to provide a justification for the complaine. Fragment (11), for instance, mitigates the “hygienic issue” by conceding that it is difficult to be immaculate during a long backpacking trip.

(11)[F32GerExp] I dare say - there is a hygienic issue [...] I may judge him wrongly, as he is currently travelling

This tactic aims to construct an image of a tolerant person and lower the perceived risk to the network capital of future hosts or guests.

Table 2 provides a summary of the objectification strategies. As the discussion has shown, a significant amount of discursive effort in CS complaints is spent on depicting the seriousness of the offence. In contrast to face work in offline contexts, which involves redress to avoid threatening the addressee’s face, these preventive measures are oriented towards endorsing the author’s positive face and constructing an image of a reasonable, tolerant and honest couch-surfer.

1. Empiricist discourse	a. Impersonal account b. Reported talk
2. Corroboration	a. Joint production b. Report-internal witness corroboration
3. Complaint stories	a. Graphic narrative description b. Undermining detailing
4. Script formulations	a. Typicality script b. Context-specific scripts
5. Mitigation	a. But + positive b. Justifying complaine’s behaviour

Table 2. Objectifying strategies in complaints

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have been concerned with the ways in which language users navigate the treacherous terrain of negative references on a hospitality network. The emphasis on mutual trust in the successful operation of an online community makes complainants doubly careful in formulating their reports. On the one hand, the complainable needs to be legitimised as such, since reality always underdetermines the report of the complaint situation. On the other, the author must work against the image of a dispositional yammerer hosting whom may put other members' trust capital at risk.

It is doubtful whether an objective measure of a complaint success can be devised for CS. Six references in our data were answered by an apology from the perpetrator. The effect appears to be mostly idiosyncratic, as four of these were performed by the same user. That said, eliciting an apology is not the ultimate goal of complaining in CS references, since they are to a large degree indirect complaints. Alternatively, the success of a complaint on the CS website can be related to its appropriateness in the system. The website offers a set of reference guidelines, which encourage users "not to use abusive or emotional language, and stick to a specific account of your experience" (Couchsurfing 2010). A team of moderators checks the references for compliance to guidelines and may hide or delete inappropriate ones. Essentially, this is the only way in which a CS complaint may fail: as long as it is visible to CS members, a complaint continues to deduct from the addressee's trust capital.

It is to these two ends that CS members employ objectification in the performance of complaints. Objectification strategies are pervasive in our material and crop up more frequently than any other

pragmatic modification strategy. As the analysis has demonstrated, the authors manage objectivity of their report in five distinct ways. Empiricist repertoire and mitigation serve to construct 'out-there-ness', i.e. lack of personal stake in the negative portrayal of the complaine. Witness corroboration and narrative description contribute to the veracity of the report by persuading the audience that the complainable really happened. Finally, script formulations justify the FTA by framing the complaint as a concern for the well-being of other CS members. The objectification of complaints in CS is not only a matter of how a complaint may be performed most effectively; rather, it is an important element in gaining network capital and ensuring successful operation of the location-based social network.

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