

# COMPLAINTS IN ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A STUDY ON (SOCIO)PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES AND PROSODIC VARIATIONS

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## 1. COMPLAINTS: (SOCIO)PRAGMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

Complaining as a linguistic act can be traced back to the expressive act by which the speaker expresses a judgement about a previous event or situation, expressing his disapproval, negative feelings, anger, etc., towards a certain state of affairs described in the proposition (what they are complaining about) and for which the listener (the person whom the complaint is made) is considered directly or indirectly responsible. The complainer believes that a behavior, an action, or even an opinion is, from their point of view, unacceptable or not in accordance with certain social rules (Nuzzo, 2007).

According to the politeness model (Brown, Levinson 1987), complaining is a communicative act that threatens the positive and negative face of the recipient: it undermines their public image and limits their freedom of action by forcing them to make amends. At the same time, it endangers the positive face of the complainer, who shows little or no sensitivity towards the interlocutor.

The core of the communicative act can include both the expression of negative judgment and the directive component. According to George (1990), the purpose of an expressive complaint would be essentially therapeutic and would be exhausted in its formulation (Nuzzo, 2007). To perform an act of complaint, speakers can formulate the act explicitly by expressing both the judgement and the request for remedy, or they can express only one of the two components explicitly. In addition, they can vary the number of sub-acts that make up each of the two components and decide to use a certain number of supportive acts. The expression of judgment includes two groups of complaints depending on whether the speaker explicitly attributes responsibility for the situation they perceive as negative to the interlocutor. In the case of judgment expression without explicit attribution of responsibility, the speaker may use different strategies. Disapproval (Nuzzo, 2007: 113) occurs when the speaker protests without mentioning the addressee, but implicitly implying that they are responsible for the unpleasant event: “When I left this morning, the kitchen was a mirror!”. Another strategy is referring to a violated norm, where the speaker points out a social rule that the interlocutor has failed to observe through their behavior: “There’s a line; I would be next” (Nuzzo, 2007, *ibid.*, see also De Marco, 2022). The request for an explanation also falls under the strategies of judgment expression without explicit attribution of responsibility (see Nuzzo, 2007, *ibid.*).

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This work represents a collaborative effort between the two authors; however, Anna De Marco is responsible for paragraphs 1, 1.1, 4, 4.1, and 4.2, while Patrizia Sorianello is the author of paragraphs 2, 5, 5.1, 5.2. Paragraphs 3 and 6 were jointly written by both authors.

When the speaker expresses judgment with explicit attribution of responsibility, he or she may opt for an accusation, describing the interlocutor's blameworthy behavior. According to Trosborg (1995: 319), the accusation can be either indirect or direct, as in: "You're the one who used my car yesterday, right?" or "Did you happen to bump into my car?". Trosborg makes a distinction between explicit blame directed at the interlocutor's behavior or towards the person themselves: "How on earth did you manage to be so stupid" vs. "Bloody fool! You've done it again!". Other examples of strategies included in the categories just discussed are in Trosborg (1995) and Nuzzo (2007).

The request for repair includes several sub-acts which Nuzzo (2007) identifies as: Confirmation, Hypothesis, Necessity, Obligation/Prohibition, Order, Performative, and Verification of Preparatory Conditions.

In order to anticipate undesirable social consequences, complainants should first adjust the level of directness in their complaints. The act of complaining requires a number of supportive acts, or mitigating devices to reduce its threat level and ensure peaceful interaction.

The act of complaining can vary in intensity depending on the harm suffered (whether it is considered more or less serious) and the relationship between the people involved, i.e., their social distance and power relations (for example, it is not the same complaint to your boss as to a friend: the intensity is usually greater in the second case). The tone and volume of the voice are also important in identifying an act of complaining: a faster rhythm and a higher tone of voice often characterise the emotional involvement (anger, wrath) of the complainer. The frequency, sequence and content of strategies are not universal, but vary according to linguistic and cultural factors (Trosborg, 1995).

Actions that serve to mitigate, prepare or support complaints are Supportive Acts. These can, for example, help the complainer to justify his act of reproach, to appear convincing or to risk losing face. Justification, for example, provides a reason why the request for repair might somehow seem justified, so that the speaker tends to present it as arising from his own need rather than the negative behaviour of the recipient.

Another Supportive Act is the Preparator, in which the speaker warns the interlocutor that a complaint is about to begin, as in the following example: "Hi, I'd like to talk for a moment about what happened yesterday". The disarmer on the other hand, emphasises the speaker's awareness of the imposing nature of the complaint and shows an avoiding of an act that is too face threatening with a benevolent attitude towards the interlocutor (Trosborg, 1995; Nuzzo, 2007: 120).

The structure of the act of protesting varies depending on the reaction of the recipient of the act, as well as on the intentions and personality of the protester. The latter might abandon the protest or adopt different strategies. The analyses presented here refer solely to the turn containing the illocutionary act of protesting Spanish.

Complaints in Italian tend to be realised mostly through the expression of a negative judgement, sometimes followed by a request for redress, as can be seen in examples 1-2:

1. *Eh scusa ascolta, ti sembra giusto quello che hai fatto?* (componente espressiva)  
'Hey sorry listen, do you think what have done is fair?' (expressive component)
2. *Bruno! Buongiorno ma i piatti lavandino sei stato tu a lasciarli sporchi?*  
*Comunque io non li lavo svegliati, sciacquati, pulisciti e lava i piatti* (componente direttiva)  
'Bruno! Good morning but the dirty dishes in the sink, was it you who left them there?  
Anyway, I won't wash them, wake up, freshen up, tidy up and wash the dishes'  
(directive component)

In 1., the speaker only expresses a negative judgement about the interlocutor, whereas in 2. the act of requesting redress is aimed at influencing the interlocutor's future behaviour according to the speaker's wishes.

When a complaint is made, a directive act may be implied or added, and in addition the request for remedy may contain a threatening act, as in the following case:

3. *Abbassa questa musica altrimenti chiamo i carabinieri!*  
'Turn down that music down, or I'll call the police!'

The internal modifiers of complaints are divided into different types: morphosyntactic (4-6), lexical (7-9), and discursive (10). Among the lexical ones, some end to weaken the act, while others strengthen the illocutionary force (Trosborg, 1995; Nuzzo, 2007).

4. *Mi scusi signore sarebbe opportuno che rispettasse la fila* (condizionale)  
'Excuse me sir, it would be appropriate if you respected the queue'  
(conditional)
5. *Mi sono resa conto che meritavo un voto in più / sì ma giusto se potevi fare qualcosa* (imperfetto)  
'I realised that I deserved a higher grade / yes but only if you could do something' (imperfect)
6. *Dovrebbe pulire* (modale epistemico)  
'You should clean up' (epistemic modal)
7. *Sì ma giusto potevi fare qualcosa* (minimizzatore)  
'Yes, but you could just do something' (minimiser)
8. *Guarda ma io non sono proprio d'accordo non accetto per me non va bene* (rafforzatore)  
'Look, but I don't fully agree, I don't accept that it's not OK for me'  
(reinforcer)
9. *Penso che sia una valutazione più alta* (soggettivizzatore)  
'I think it's a higher evaluation' (subjectiviser)
10. *Alessandro oh guarda io sto cercando di dormire* (focalizzatore dell'attenzione)  
'Alessandro oh look, I'm trying to sleep' (attention focuser)

### 1.1. Pragmatic characteristics of complaints in non-native speakers

The act of complaining has not been the subject of significant cross-linguistic research. The literature on non-native speakers reveals a tendency to complain in a more aggressive and less effective manner (Murphy, Nereu, 1996; Trosborg, 1995) and to be more explicit and direct (Kraft, Geluykens, 2002). Learners are typified as "weak complainers", exhibiting a deficiency in persuasive abilities relative to native speakers. This is attributed to their inability to utilise the requisite degree of tact and subtlety, which would facilitate the attainment of their communicative objectives.

However, Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) reach different conclusions, with intermediate and advanced learners showing a preference for milder complaints, while native speakers express themselves more harshly. Beginners tend to be less aggressive and more concerned with saving face, attempting to compensate for what they perceive as a lack of effectiveness by increasing the length and number of words.

## 2. PROSODIC MANIFESTATIONS OF COMPLAINTS

Defining the prosodic aspects of complaints is not without its challenges, as it is not possible to associate them with a single macro-speech act. First, it is necessary to distinguish acts of complaints from expressions of dissatisfaction or impolite requests<sup>3</sup>. As Mauchand and Pell (2021) posit, it is essential to differentiate between the expressions of complaint caused by a situation that evokes negative emotions such as anger, disapproval and distress, and those conveying expressions of pain and suffering. Both types of complaint are characterised by the presence of an emotional component. Consequently, they have been the subject of studies in the field of emotions and in psychology. Moreover, in these domains of inquiry, it is also customary to distinguish between direct and indirect complaints. The former are directed towards the source of the distress with the intention of resolving the issue (*Could you be a little quieter? I'm trying to sleep!*), whereas the latter are addressed to third parties and serve primarily to establish social bonds and promote empathy (*He always makes a lot of noise when I'm trying to sleep!*), (Boxer, 1993).

Despite the fundamental role that prosodic features (both linguistic and paralinguistic aspects) play in the production of complaints, studies focusing on the prosody of direct complaints are scarce. Indeed, the available research mainly concerns indirect complaints and their correlation with certain emotional indices, such as distress, pain and boredom, as well as the empathic involvement they arouse in the listeners (Mauchand, Pell, 2021, 2022).

From a prosodic perspective, the findings reported by Acuña-Ferreira (2002), Ogden (2010), Selting (2010) and Mauchand, Pell (2021) for indirect expressions indicate that complaints are characterised by a higher fundamental frequency, syllable lengthening, emphatic accentuations and soft voice. The aforementioned prosodic behaviors cannot be assumed for direct complaints, as they convey different emotional nuances and varying degrees of involvement. It seems reasonable to posit that the voice quality patterns associated with direct complaints also diverge, tending towards a harsh and noisy voice rather than a soft one. It is regrettable that there have been no experimental studies of the prosodic cues associated with direct complaints, nor any comparative studies between direct and indirect complaints.

Nevertheless, several insights can be drawn from a larger body of research devoted to the prosody of directive utterances, in particular orders, which represent one of the most common structures in complaint acts that function as a form of reparative act. From a cross-linguistic perspective, the prosody of the order is characterised by an abrupt fall in intonation contour, marked by a high prenuclear onset, an increased speech rate and voice volume, as well as an altered voice quality that is consistent with the emotional component of disappointment or anger (cf. Ogden, 2010; Robles-Puente, 2011; Frota, Prieto, 2015). With specific reference to complaints, these aspects, although influenced by cross-linguistic and cultural indices, indicate the presence of a dominant and emotionally involved speaker expressing disapproval of something or someone that has violated their expectations and therefore requires redress or resolution.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between expressions of dissatisfaction and complaints. In the former, the focus is on the individual and his/her subjective experience and perception of a particular everyday situation that has given rise to disapproval, indignation or other kinds of negative feelings. In contrast, complaints are often collective actions in which a group of people oppose a situation or practice that is perceived as socially unacceptable.

From this premise, it is evident that the number of studies investigating the prosody of complaints in a second language is limited; some observations can be found in Trosborg's book (1995) on interlanguage pragmatic strategies.

### 3. MATERIALS, METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The objective of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between prosodic cues and the socio-pragmatic strategies employed by native and non-native speakers of Italian when engaged in the act of complaint. The study was conducted with three groups: two experimental and one control. The initial experimental cohort comprised four male Arabic-speaking learners from Egypt, aged between 24 and 28. The second experimental group comprised four Spanish-speaking learners (three male, one female), two from Cuba and two from Venezuela, aged between 19 and 34. The learners demonstrated an Italian language level between B1 and B2 and were enrolled as undergraduate students at the University of Calabria. The control group consisted of four Italian native speakers (three men, one woman), aged between 20 and 30, living in Cosenza and enrolled at the same university. All participants provided written consent to participate in the research.

The learners were audio-recorded during the simulation of contextual dialogue situations designed to elicit the production of acts of complaint. Each recording session involved two participants from the same language background who performed four different oral role-plays in Italian and then in their native language. In each instance, the participants assumed the roles of both the complainer and the complaine.

The data were collected using four scenarios which were designed to evoke a complaint which included a range of social distance and power relations parameters. A total of 128 role-plays were conducted, comprising 64 in Italian as a second language (It-L2), 64 in the learners' first language (Spanish and Arabic) and 32 in Italian as a first language (It-L1). The audio recordings were made at the University of Calabria using a digital audio device with a directional microphone (wave format, sampling frequency of 44,100 Hz, 16 bit, mono). Each role-play lasted from 1 to 5 minutes. The corpus is not yet available for online consultation but will be shortly. Interactions are transcribed following the Conversational Analysis annotation.

In examining the socio-pragmatic elements, the communicative acts were identified, labelled and analysed, in accordance with the classification system proposed by Trosborg (1995) and Nuzzo (2007). This approach considered the internal modifiers of complaints, supporting acts and sociolinguistic variables, including factors such as distance and power between interlocutors (Brown, Levinson, 1987; Scollon, Scollon, 2001). The role-plays simulate a range of social distances, with the expectation that a greater distance will correlate with a higher degree of modification of the request in terms of politeness. As far as the degree of asymmetry or differentiation on the hierarchical level is concerned, the realisation of the complaint is expected to be much more mitigated than in a situation of symmetry. At this stage of the research, our attention was directed exclusively towards the production of Italian in its native form, and in the context of second language acquisition. Consequently, the analysis of Arabic and Spanish recordings was not included. The linguistic materials were orthographically transcribed, classified, and analysed from a socio-pragmatic, pragmalinguistic, and prosodic perspective.

The scenarios, adapted from the works of Nuzzo (2007) and Paone (2020; 2021), are as follows<sup>4</sup>:

S1. Dirty dishes between roommates. The complaint act is directed at a roommate for leaving the kitchen in a state of disarray. The relationship between the interlocutors is characterised by a lower level of social distance and a symmetrical dynamic [Equal – Intimate interlocutor].

S2. Dispute between neighbours over the playing of music at night. The complaint entails requesting that a neighbour desist from making noise at night, citing the disruption to sleep as the reason. This scenario also features a symmetrical relationship with lower social distance [Equal – Intimate interlocutor].

S3. Line cutting (between strangers). The complaint is directed at an individual who is not respecting their place in line. The relationship between the two individuals is characterised by a higher degree of social distance yet is symmetrical [Equal – Distant interlocutor].

S4. Incorrect evaluation (between student and professor). The student lodges a complaint with the professor about an injustice regarding a perceived injustice in the evaluation of a classroom assignment. In this case, the social distance is at its maximum, and the relationship is asymmetrical [Superior – Intimate interlocutor].

#### 4. SOCIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF COMPLAINTS IN THE CORPUS

##### 4.1. *Natives*

In our corpus, the complaints by native Italians are predominantly expressed through the articulation of negative judgement, which is sometimes followed by a request for redress.

11. *Ti sembra modo di lasciare la cucina i piatti dopo la festa che hai fatto ieri? Mo, secondo te devo pulire io lo schifo che hai fatto tu e i tuoi amici? Vai immediatamente a fare quelle cose*  
'Is this how you're leaving the kitchen, with the dishes from yesterday's party still there? Should I clean up the mess you and your friends made? Go take care of it'

It is common for individuals to express their negative judgements without explicitly attributing responsibility.

12. *Signore // signore mi scusi | c'ero prima io di lei*  
'Excuse me, sir. I was present at this location prior to your arrival'

It is also noteworthy that there is a considerable prevalence of lexical modifiers. Italian is replete with polite expressions, including: *gentilmente* ('kindly'), *ti prego* ('I beg you'), *magari* ('perhaps'), and *giusto* ('only, just'). Moreover, the Italian language makes use of the term "penso" ('I think'), which is employed to express a personal opinion or belief. Support acts are integral to the successful execution of a complaint, providing a crucial framework

<sup>4</sup> By equal-intimate, we mean a symmetrical relationship (equal) in which the interlocutors already know each other (see also Gesuato, 2015). Within this label we include different degrees of knowledge ranging from a minimal level, such as between student and professor, to a high level of familiarity such as between brothers/sisters. By equal-distant, we intend instead a symmetrical relationship in which, however, the interlocutor is a stranger; by superior-intimate, that is an asymmetrical relationship in which, however, there is a minimum level of knowledge between the interlocutors.

upon which the act itself is built (Nuzzo, 2007: 119). In the corpus of native speakers, these are present in the form of preparatory acts (13) and justificatory acts (14). This phenomenon is more prevalent in scenarios where the relationship between interlocutors is asymmetrical (Scenario 4). To illustrate, in example 14, a rationale for the redress is presented.

13. *Professore Falcone possiamo parlare per favore?*  
'Professor Falcone, may I request a brief conversation with you?'  
14. *Quindi per favore se puoi abbassare la musica perché domani mattina ci dobbiamo svegliare presto*  
'If it is not an inconvenience, could you kindly lower the volume of the music? We have an early start tomorrow morning'

With regard to sociopragmatic norms, greater distance between participants or an asymmetrical relationship is associated with a higher frequency of strategies that avoid attributing responsibility for negative events to interlocutors. In the first case, the complaint involves a deplorable situation in which the speaker describes the state of affairs he or she perceives as negative. The protester implies that the interlocutor is responsible but avoids mentioning it explicitly. In the second case, the speaker refers to a violated norm, that is, he or she invokes a social rule (this is not the appropriate place to behave that way) that the interlocutor fails to observe.

15. *Ma ma non mi sembra proprio corretto / / penso che sia una valutazione più alta* (S.4)  
'I don't think that's quite right. I think the evaluation should be higher'  
vs  
16. *Tu fai i festini la sera, ma qua dove siamo? Al circo, al mercato...* (S.1)  
'You have parties at night, but where do you think we are? At the circus, in the market...'

A reduction in the use of discursive mitigators is observed alongside an increase in the use of lexical and morphosyntactic mitigators when the distance between participants is greater. A comparable pattern is observable in the utilisation of preparatory acts, which are more frequent in interactions with unfamiliar individuals. Directive acts are deployed when participants perceive an elevated threat to their autonomy, thereby articulating the strength of their objection in a more explicit manner. In the context of Scenario 3, the speaker experiences a sense of injustice or transgression of norms due to the lack of respect for the queue. In other scenarios, directive acts are eschewed.

#### 4.2. *Non-Natives*

In examining the corpus, it can be observed that complaints among Spanish-speaking learners are predominantly expressed through negative judgement, with a lesser tendency towards request for redress. In contrast, Arabic speakers demonstrate a comparable proclivity for articulating requests for redress, alongside expressive acts. The expression of judgement is structured as follows:

1. Preference for attributing responsibility to the interlocutor:

*Mamma mia // guarda che ↑casino / / Che ↑hai fatto ieri sera*  
'Oh my! // Look at this mess // What did you do yesterday?'

2. Overuse of the vocative pronoun that accentuates the accusatory tone:

*Oh signore, ma non può passare così, io sono qua*  
'Hey, Mister, but you can't just cut in line like that, I'm here'

3. Accusatory Strategy:

*Non credo proprio perché io sono nella coda e tu sei venuto davanti a me; ma sempre tu fai festa tardi*  
'I don't think so, because I'm line and you cut in front of me'; 'but you always have parties until late at night'

With regard to head acts, Arabic speakers employ both expressive and directive acts with equal frequency. In contrast, Spanish speakers predominantly utilise expressive acts, a tendency that is comparable to that observed in Italian speakers (see Figure 1).

The Arabic-speaking group displays a greater proclivity for supportive acts, as evidenced by the greater frequency of such acts observed in their discourse (see Figure 2). The function of the disarmer is to provide reassurance and comfort: *vabbé hai fatto la festa ok ci sta eri con i tuoi amici, S2* ('You had a party, fine, it's understandable, you were with your friends'). Justification: *Siamo un po' stanchi del giorno prima no, non siamo a festa come te per dirlo, S2* ('We're a bit tired from the day before, you know; we're not out partying like you are'); *Non riuscivo a studiare per la musica alta che avete, S2* ('I couldn't study because of the loud music you have'); *Sono qui da due ore, S3* ('I've been here for two hours'). Preparatory statement: *Buongiorno, per caso hai un minuto che dobbiamo parlare; Volevo chiedere una domanda, S4* ('Good morning, do you happen to have a minute? We need to talk'), Apologies: *scusa se ti disturbo, S2* ('I apologise for disturbing you').

Additionally, modifiers are more prevalent among Arabic speakers (see Figure 3). Lexical modifiers are the most prevalent among these, occurring more frequently than other types of modifiers in both groups.

Arabic speakers also demonstrate the use of morphosyntactic modifiers, such as the imperfect tense, as evidenced by the following example: 'I wanted to ask a question'. Additionally, they employ lexical modifiers to soften judgment, as in the following examples: *practically, nothing, I think, only, maybe, and just*. Conversely, they utilize lexical modifiers to reinforce their statements, as in the following examples: *very high, not even, and so on*.

Figure 1. *Native and non-native head acts*

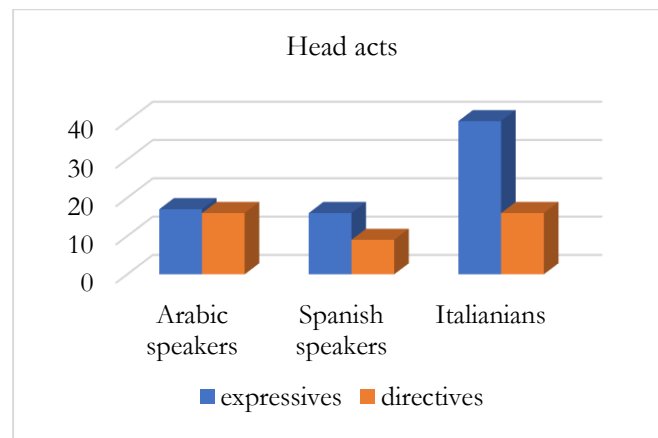


Figure 2. *Native and non-native supportive acts*

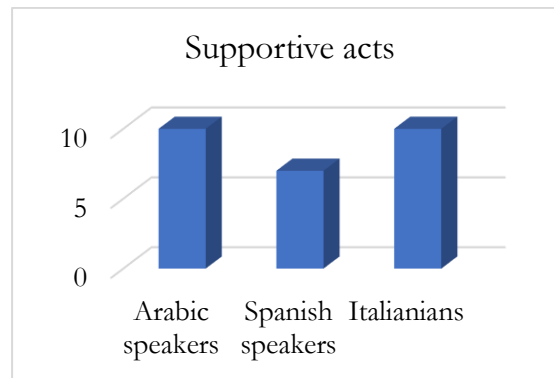
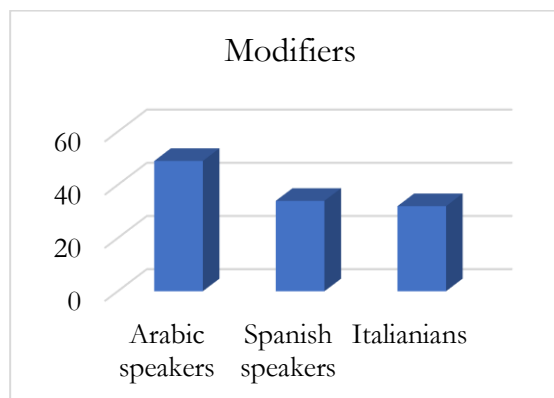


Figure 3. *Native and non-native modifiers*



Regarding directive acts, the speaker focuses on the possibilities of obtaining the desired repair from the interlocutor, including their ability, willingness, or the absence of obstacles.

In the following examples, learners (Arabic, EGI) and (Spanish, SPA) express a complaint as a conventional request for repair (17, 18), as an order (19, 20), or as a threat (21):

17. *Ciao Ranier puoi bassare un po' la musica per favore? Perché è troppo alta* (SPA)  
'Hi Ranier, can you turn down the music a bit, please? Because it's too loud'
18. *Perciò potete abbassare un pelino la musica per piacere* (EGI)  
'So, could you lower the music a little bit, please?'
19. *Debe pulire subito per favore* (SPA)  
'You must clean up immediately, please'
20. *Io sono nella fila tu devi rispettare la fila* (EGI)  
'I'm in the line, you have to respect the line'
21. *Altrimenti sarò costretto anche io a chiamare la vigilanza!* (EGI)  
'Otherwise, I'll be forced to call security as well!'

From a socio-pragmatic perspective, social distance and power do not always play a role for Spanish-speaking learners. This is evidenced by the use of mitigators, direct accusation strategies, and requests for repair.

22. *Salve professore io ho bisogno che value il mio voto di nuovo perché credo che meresco (merito) de più per altri studenti hanno preso più che io*  
'Hello, Professor. I need you to reconsider my grade because I believe I deserve more, as other students received higher grades than I did'

It would appear that Arabic-speaking learners are more attentive to the role of the interlocutor although they can on occasion display excessive aggression when the social distance is smaller (24).

23. *Buongiorno prof eh, scusi le volevo chiedere una domanda non capisco perché ho preso 27 all'esame ho risposto a tutte le domande e aspettavo sinceramente avere 30 come voto non 27*  
'Good morning, Professor, um, excuse me, I wanted to ask a question. I don't understand why I got a 27 on the exam. I answered all the questions and honestly expected to receive a 30, not a 27'
24. *Mi sa che mi devo lamentare con qualcuno del centro residenziale così risolvono il problema loro!*  
'I think I need to complain to someone at the residential center so they can solve the problem themselves!'

In Example 23, we observe the utilisation of a preparatory statement, which serves to notify the interlocutor that the speaker is about to present an observation. The use of the subjectivizer *honestly* indicates that the statement represents a personal opinion regarding the proposition itself. In example 24, the learner employs a threat without any request for repair.

In Scenario 4, the turns taken by both native and non-native speakers are longer than in other scenarios. This is likely due to the difficulty the speaker has in interacting with both the type of request and with a person in a position of power.

A comparison of the two groups reveals that Arabic speakers employ a greater number of modifiers and engage in more complaint acts than Spanish speakers. This may be a compensatory strategy to offset their perception of ineffective communication. In contrast, Spanish speakers utilise fewer internal modifiers and employ a minimal number of supportive acts. With regard to the parameters of variation (distance and power), they demonstrate contrasting behaviours. Despite their limited communicative competence, they are still able to achieve a level of appropriateness in accordance with the enunciative context.

## 5. THE PROSODIC ANALYSIS

The prosodic analysis made it possible to identify the intonation features that characterise the complaint acts performed in Italian as a second language (L2). In this initial phase of the research, the focus was on the behaviour of the pitch range and the nuclear intonation contour. The research hypothesis is that the complaint acts produced by L2 learners show a relevant change in both local and global prosodic traits, thereby substantiating the presence of a reduced illocutionary force. In order to carry out the prosodic analysis, a methodological decision had to be made regarding the speech act containing the complaints to be analysed. This choice was made on the grounds that the participants, in identifying with the situational context proposed in the role-plays, produced their utterances in a spontaneous manner. Consequently, each subject produced sentences that varied in length and syntactic structure. As a result, the complaints present

in the speech sample were produced by exploiting the expressive and often joint action of several speech acts, including directives, questions or negative assertions.

At this stage of the research, we decided to focus our attention on the directing act of the order. This decision was driven by two main considerations: the need to standardise the data and the observation that the directing act was more prevalent within the sample<sup>5</sup>. The subset under analysis comprises 37 orders produced by native participants (It-L1) and 35 orders produced by learners (It-L2). Given the limited size of the sample, this test is exploratory in nature.

Acoustic analysis was performed using the PRAAT software (Boersma, Weenink, 2016). For each directive act, the mean and standard deviation of the following parameters were measured: speech rate, defined as the number of syllables produced per second, values of  $f0_x$ ,  $f0_{mx}$ ,  $f0_{min}$ , onset, offset (in Hz), pitch range (in semitones), and duration of the nuclear stressed vowels (NV, ms). Furthermore, the analysis has been extended by calculating the parameters of  $\Delta F$  and  $f0$  slope ( $\Delta F/\Delta T$ )<sup>6</sup>. These are two partially distinct indices: the former quantifies the variation of bitonal pitch accents between targets, whereas the latter determines the magnitude of the slope with respect to the duration of the nuclear vowel. A t-test was employed to analyse the statistical differences between the groups ( $p = 0.05$ ); the limited sample size precludes a more detailed analysis.

Special attention was also paid to the analysis of the nuclear intonation configurations of the imperatives. To this end, each order was annotated using the standardised ToBI protocol developed within the autosegmental and metrical approach (Beckman, Ayers Elam, 1997); the study focused on the identification of the nuclear pitch accents and boundary tones.

### 5.1. Results: the intonation patterns

Broadly speaking, the analysis showed that native and non-native subjects differed in both the form and frequency of pitch accents. The orders within the complaint acts show several aspects of differentiation, encompassing both the phonological form of the nuclear contour and its phonetic realisation. Table 1 illustrates the range of all nuclear pitch accents, together with their respective percentages. A comparison of the data reveals that the number of nuclear pitch accents is more varied in It-L2 group than in the native speaker group. Both groups show a predominant falling pattern, characterised by a high tonal target aligned with the nuclear stressed syllable and a low target occurring on the subsequent unstressed syllable ( $H^*+L$ ). However, the representativeness of this nuclear accent differs between the two experimental groups. The pitch accent is more prevalent among native speakers (82.6%), while it is present in a much lower percentage rate among learners (41.2%), with no significant differences between Spanish and Arabic speakers. In Italian native speakers, we also found the pitch accent  $\uparrow H^*+L$ , this is a more emphatic variant characterised by a relevant scaling within the nuclear syllable, since the  $f0$  peak of the target H is particularly high<sup>7</sup>.

In the Italian L2 data set, a comparable bitonal sequence was identified, namely  $H+L^*$ , albeit with a low recurrence rate (23.5%). However, there is a discrepancy in the alignment of the two tonal targets with respect to the nuclear syllable. This is a pitch accent that was

<sup>5</sup> Complaints have both an expressive and a directive component (Searle, 1976). The recurrence of imperative sentences functions as a kind of request of reparation for something that has been evaluated as negative by the individual.

<sup>6</sup> The  $f0$  slope (semitones per second, st/s) was calculated by applying the following formula from Peters, Pfitzinger (2008: 66);  $f0\ slope = 12 / \log 2 [(\log F0100\% / \log F00\%) / (time100\% / time0\%)]$

<sup>7</sup> The symbol ( $\uparrow$ ) indicates an upstep, i.e. a nuclear peak higher than the previous one.

not found in the orders of the Italian native speakers. Similarly, the pitch accent L\* was only identified in It-L2 group, whereas the tone H\* was equally represented in both the It-L1 and It-L2 groups. It is important to highlight that some of the pitch accents exhibited by the learners do not align with any of the patterns found in the It-L1. These novel f0 patterns could be interpreted as a transfer of intonation from the learners' native languages (Spanish and Arabic). Nevertheless, the speech samples of the learners' native languages have yet to be analysed in order to confirm this assumption.

With regard to the edge tones<sup>8</sup>, it can be observed that the intonation configuration of the complaints in both groups displays a significant final fall. For further details, see Table 2. It is noteworthy however, that in It-L1 the orders were not consistently characterised by the presence of a low edge tone. In 26.6% of instances, the fall in pitch, that had already started over the nuclear stressed syllable, undergoes a form of interruption. In such cases, the intonation curve remains at a mid f0 value, without reaching a minimum value. In order to differentiate this pattern from low and high edge tones, we have decided to label them as !H%<sup>9</sup>. This contour may be interpreted as a form of maintenance of the dialogic turn, potentially influenced by the presence of additional sentences produced after the order. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of complaints elicited during the speech task were notably lengthy and encompassed a variety of diverse dialogic turns. High edge tones (H%) were observed in 17.7% of the cases<sup>10</sup>. These orders are hardly effective because the illocutionary force conveyed by the intonation fall is attenuated.

Table 1. *Percentage of nuclear pitch accents in the It-L1 and It-L2 groups*

Pitch accents	It-L1	It-L2
H*	17.4%	17.6%
L*	--	11.8%
H*+L	82.6 %	41.2%
H+L*		23.5%
L+H*	--	5.9%

Table 2. *Percentage of edge tones in the It-L1 and It-L2 groups*

Edge tones	It-L1	It-L2
L%	69.6%	82.3%
H%	4.4%	17.7%
!H%	26%	--

The nuclear configuration H\*+L L% is the typical contour already observed in commands and requests in numerous varieties of Italian, including Cosenza (Gili Fivela *et al.*, 2015: 181), and in several Romance languages (Frota, Prieto, 2015). The phonological configuration gives rise to a specific phonetic realisation, which is

<sup>8</sup> The phrase accent was only annotated if it differed from the following boundary tones.

<sup>9</sup> This final pattern is not common in commands, typically characterised by final falling patterns. However, it is one of the nuclear configurations of imperatives in Castilian Spanish (L+H\*M%), (Estebas-Vilaplana, Prieto, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The presence of high boundary tones was identified as a defining feature of imperative sentences in Canarian Spanish.

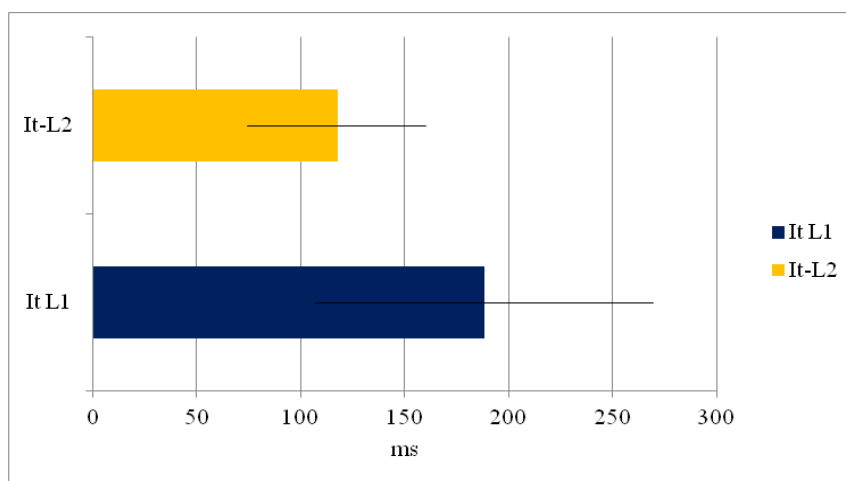
responsible for the abrupt fall. This specific feature incorporates the directive force of order, which is perceived as more abrupt the more peremptory the order is.

## 5.2. Results: phonetic aspects

The preliminary analysis indicates a notable disparity between the two groups under investigation. Notwithstanding its prevalence, the nuclear configuration  $H^*+L L^0\%$  has a different percentage weight. Moreover, a comparison between It-L1 and It-L2 reveals that the phonetic realisation is not comparable. This discrepancy can be attributed to the different durational patterns associated with the final fall, which contribute to a perceptual rendering that differs from that of native speakers.

More specifically, the first differentiating element is of a temporal order. For It-L2 learners, the falling movement occurs within a reduced segmental portion. The average duration of the nuclear vowel does not reach the same length as in native speakers, indicating a temporal reduction of approximately 40%. This difference is statistically significant (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Mean duration of NV (in ms)



This aspect, which is perceptibly discernible, assumes a certain importance, especially in view of the fact that the speech rate calculated for the orders does not show any significant variations between the two groups, as can be seen by comparing the averaged data (It-L1 = 6 syll/sec, sd: 1.2; It-L2 = 6.1 syll/sec, sd = 1.3).

The second differentiating element concerns the magnitude and speed of the pitch falling movement. In the It-L1 and It-L2 groups (Figs. 5-6), the frequency fall involved in the nuclear accent exhibits a distinct scaling pattern. To be precise, the frequency slope between the high target (H) and the low target (L) occurring within the nuclear syllable was found to be 7.9 semitones per second (st/s) in the native sample, whereas in the It-L2 sample this value was reduced to 3.3 semitones per second (st/s) (Figure 7). There are notable differences in the behaviour of the scaling and slope of the  $H^*+L$  pitch accent between the two groups. In learners, this nuclear pitch accent occurs in a compressed temporal space, determined by the shorter duration of the nuclear vowel. In addition, the scaling between the two pitch targets is reduced, resulting in a different rate of change ( $\Delta$ slope), as shown in Figures 7 and 8 for It-L1 and It-L2 respectively.

Figure 5. *It-L1*: representation of the  $\Delta F$  parameter relating to the nuclear pitch accent  $H^*+L$ ,  $\Delta F/\Delta T=0.44$ , the reported duration for the NV (188 ms) represents the mean value observed for the native group

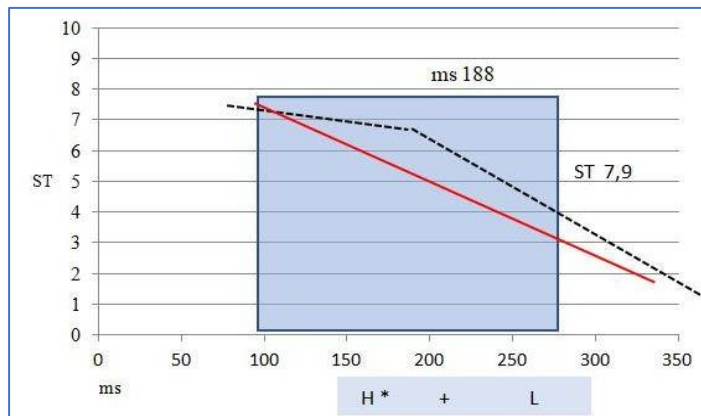


Figure 6. *It-L2*: representation of the  $\Delta F$  parameter relating to the nuclear pitch accent  $H^*+L$ ,  $\Delta F/\Delta T=0.33$ , the reported duration for the NV (117 ms) represents the mean value observed for the native group

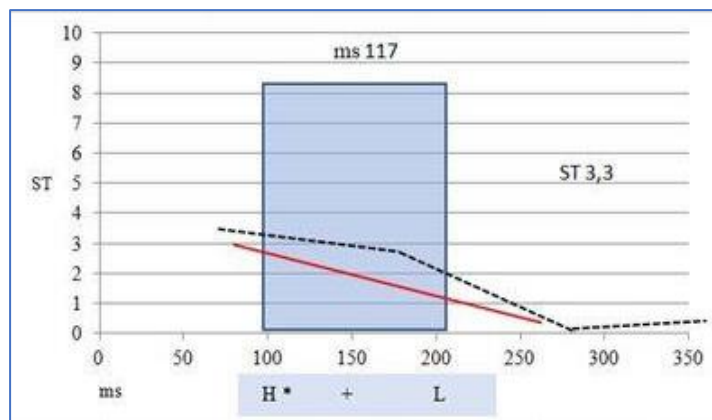
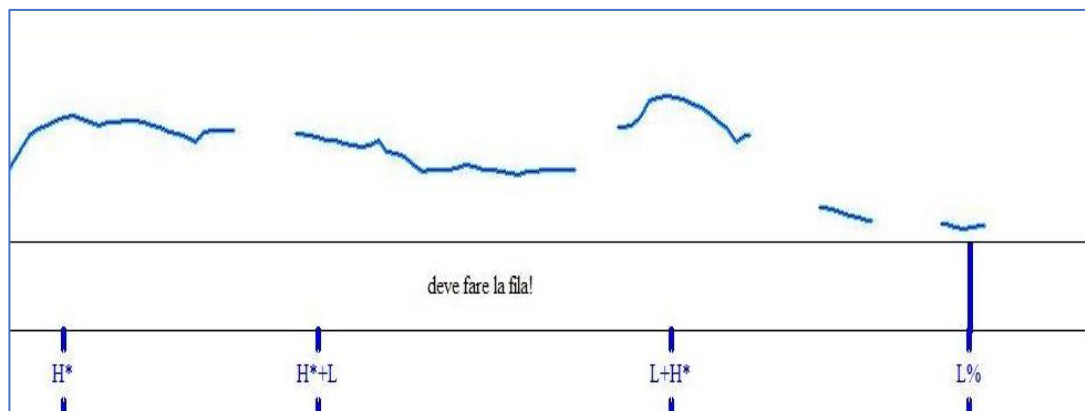


Figure 7. *Waveform and pitch curve ( $f_0$ ) of the complaint act L'abbassi 'sta musica! (Turn this music down!) produced by an Italian native male speaker (It-L1, A-p-u), global PR: 11.7 st, duration NV 194 ms,  $f_0$  slope: 3.7 st/s*



Figure 8. *Waveform and pitch curve (f0) of the complaint act Deve fare la fila! (Must queue up!) produced by a Spanish male learner of It-L2 (MR-p-u), PR: 10 st, NV: 130 ms, f0 slope: 209 st/s*



In addition to these traits, further differences are observed with respect to other variables. The first difference concerns the global pitch range of the utterance, that is the difference in semitones (st) between the maximum pitch value ( $f0_{max}$ ) and the minimum pitch value ( $f0_{min}$ ). The analysis shows that in It-L1 learners, complaints have a wider and less variable pitch range than in It-L2 learners; the difference is 4.2 st and is statistically significant ( $t = 0.05$ ) (Figure 9).

For learners, the intonation curve has a lower amplitude in terms of frequency. This includes the maximum ( $f0_{max}$ ) and minimum ( $f0_{min}$ ) values of the contour, as well as the relationship between the mean value ( $f0_x$ ) and the onset and offset of the frequency curve, respectively, which correspond to the start and end points of the  $f0$  curve.

As can be seen in Figure 10, the mean of  $f0$  and the onset shows a smaller discrepancy in learners' Italian than in the native language. This indicates that the onset of the  $f0$  contour is lower than that observed in native speakers ( $t = 0.02$ ).

At the same time, the  $f0$  offset also shows a less pronounced difference compared to the  $f0_x$  ( $t = 0.3$ ); this means that the final frequency value of the intonation curve reaches a lower frequency than in It-L1.

Figure 9. *Mean values (st) of global pitch range*

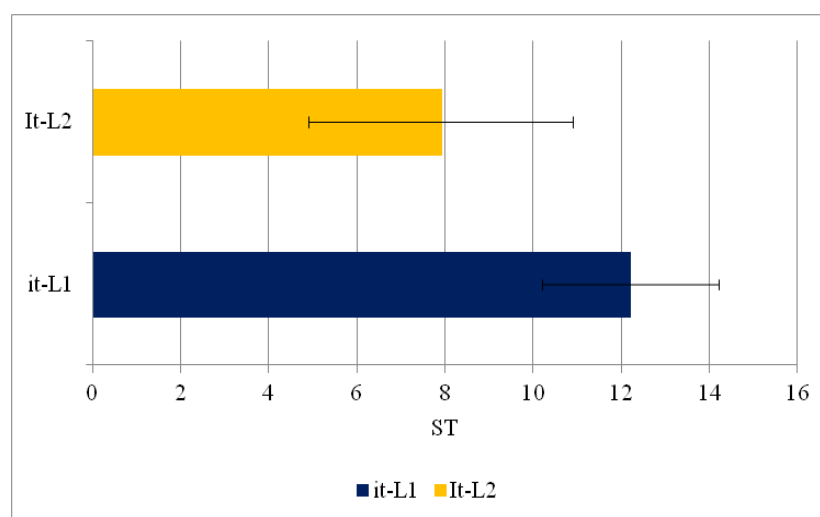
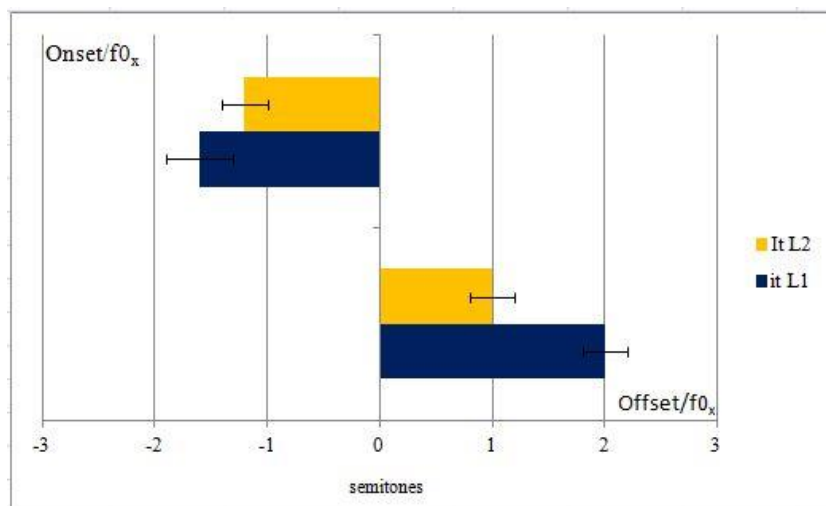


Figure 10. Mean values (st) of the ratio  $Onset/f0_x$ ,  $Offset/f0_x$ .



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the socio-pragmatic and prosodic analysis corroborate the hypothesis that learners tend to be “weak complainers”. It especially highlights the challenge, notably for Spanish learners, of using modifiers and supportive acts to make the complaint more appropriate in contexts with greater social distance. Arabic speakers employ a greater number of modifiers and engage in a higher frequency of complaint acts than Spanish speakers. This is likely a strategy to counterbalance their perceived communication challenges. Conversely, Spanish speakers rely on fewer internal modifiers with a minimal number of supportive acts. With regard to the parameters of variation, such as distance and power, their behaviours differ markedly. Nevertheless, despite their limited communicative competence, they are still able to achieve a level of appropriateness that is suited to the enunciative context.

Compared to non-native speakers, Italians tend to soften the act with a number of polite expressions and support act such as preparatory and justificatory acts especially when there is a greater distance between participants or an asymmetrical relationship. They also tend to avoid attributing responsibility for negative events to interlocutors.

In Italian, native speakers produce imperatives within complaint acts that are characterised by a high fundamental frequency, a wide tonal range and longer duration of nuclear vowels. These are specific features that guarantee an adequate realisation of the illocutionary force. Typically, orders show a strong  $f0$  drop in the nuclear pitch accent. This specific intonation fall is a crucial element in the production of imperative commands. In the learners, not only is the  $f0$  fall softer than in the native subjects, as suggested by the  $f0$  slope and  $f0$  onset/ $f0_x$  ratio values, but the entire pattern is produced over a reduced duration of the nuclear vowel. In addition, the It-L2 sample exhibits notable variability in both in the typology of the pitch accents and the edge tones. Complaints always express an emotional state, so speakers employ their vocal cues to convey a subjective feeling, such as disappointment, contrariety, disapproval or even anger. It seems reasonable to suggest that there is a significant change in voice quality indices in complaints.

The initial findings from the prosodic and pragmatic verification are promising, yet further investigation is required. A larger corpus would facilitate a more detailed

examination of the data, enabling a more precise categorisation of acts by degree of politeness and mitigation, as well as by sociolinguistic context.

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