

EXPLORING DISCOURSE MARKERS IN COMPLAINTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ITALIAN SPEAKERS

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1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES³

The aim of this study is to analyse the frequency and variety of discourse markers (DMs) in the expression of complaints by L2 Italian learners and to compare the data collected with the productions of native Italian speakers. This research project also seeks to offer teachers valuable insights for designing instructional activities and methods aimed at enhancing the pragmatic competence of learners of Italian as a second language.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Discourse markers*

DMs are linguistic elements that play a key role in increasing the effectiveness of oral communication. They actively contribute to the management of interactive exchanges, facilitate the organisation and structure of discourse, and establish nuanced links between the content expressed and shared knowledge, thereby activating inferential functions. DMs are intricately linked to the specific context of communication and serve as vehicles for conveying speakers' personal characteristics and attitudes. This includes metatextual, interpersonal or epistemic meanings, which involve the expression and conceptualisation of speakers' attitudes and beliefs, and thus inherently reflect subjectivity. Furthermore, DMs are recognised as elements that promote intersubjectivity, aiming to emphasise the speaker's attention to the needs and image of the interlocutor (Traugott, 2003, 2010).

One of the main characteristics of DMs is their polyfunctionality, operating at different levels of meaning. This means that the same DM can have different functions or show the coexistence of different pragmatic values within a single discourse occurrence (Bazzanella, Borreguero Zuloaga, 2011). This paradigmatic polyfunctionality contrasts with syntagmatic polyfunctionality, where the same signal can be assigned different functions.

According to Bazzanella's (2006) classification, DMs can be grouped into three functional macro-categories: the interactional function, the metadiscursive function, and the cognitive function.

The study of DMs has attracted the attention of both foreign language teachers and textbooks authors in recent years (see Pernas *et al.*, 2011; Ferroni, Birello, 2016).

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In terms of acquisition, studies confirm an early appearance, especially of interactional functions, in the initial interlanguages of L2 Italian learners (see Jafrancesco, 2015).

2.2. *The act of complaining*

According to Searle's (1978: 183) classification, complaints fall under expressive acts, which are acts through which the speaker expresses a judgment about a given event or situation. In addition to the expressive component, complaints can also be accompanied by a request for redress (directive component) towards the interlocutor, who is considered directly or indirectly responsible for the negative event. Studies conducted from a contrastive and acquisitional perspective have highlighted the difficulties that learners have in realising this act appropriately, as they tend to be more abrupt and aggressive (Murphy, Neu, 1996) and at the same time less effective (Trosborg, 1995) than native speakers. In Nuzzo's (2007) analysis of complaints in L2 Italian learners, it appears that complaints are a challenge, even for learners with a moderate level of competence, since there are no highly conventionalised expressions in Italian for conveying complaints, especially most of the micro-acts and supportive acts that characterise them (Nuzzo, 2007: 136).

Complaining is considered a high-risk act due to its essentially evaluative nature, as it threatens both the face of the speaker and the face of the recipient (Brown, Levinson, 1987; Levinson, 2017). For the complainer, their positive face is threatened as they find themselves in a situation where they have to show little or no sensitivity towards their interlocutor. For the recipient, both their positive and negative faces are threatened: the expression of sanctioning behaviour undermines their public image, while the subsequent imposition of redress limits their freedom of action. For these reasons, the act of complaint requires a series of sub-acts or accessory acts that reduce its threatening nature and ensure peaceful interaction.

Trosborg (1995: 314) points out that complaints can be expressed at varying levels of directness, ranging from hints and mild disapprovals to severe challenges. By choosing a particular level of directness, the complainer can determine the conflict potential of the complaint. She proposes four categories of strategies with eight subcategories:

Category I: No explicit reproach

- Strategy 1: Hints

Category II: Expression of disapproval

- Strategy 2: Annoyance
- Strategy 3: Ill consequences

Category III: Accusation

- Strategy 4: Indirect accusations
- Strategy 5: Direct accusation

Category IV: Blame

- Strategy 6: Modified blame
- Strategy 7: Explicit condemnation of the accused's action
- Strategy 8: Explicit condemnation of the accused as a person

However, identifying the strategies is not always straightforward. Complaints involve complex emotions and behaviours, and a single response may include multiple strategies. Indirect accusations might be accompanied by direct accusations, and direct accusations may be succeeded by expressions of blame.

Decock and Depraetere (2018) re-evaluate the concept of (in)directness as a tool for analysing complaint strategies. Their reassessment aims to clarify the ambiguity around

(in)directness in previous complaint studies by distinguishing between “linguistic” (in)directness and perceived face-threat. For instance, a statement like “you are really mean” may not be more explicit than “you have ruined my blouse,” but it could be perceived as more face-threatening and, therefore, more “direct” (Kusevska, 2019: 79).

3. METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

This study aims to analyse the frequency and variety of discourse markers in the expression of complaints by learners of Italian as a second language. The collected data will be compared with the productions of native Italian speakers. The study seeks to provide useful insights on the teaching level for enhancing pragmatic competence in Italian as a second language.

The study involved 52 students studying abroad at the University of Calabria and attending L2 Italian courses offered by the institution. The students came from Iran, Kurdistan, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Spain, with proficiency levels ranging from A1/A2 (20 students) to B1/B2 (20 students), and their ages ranging from 19 to 34. 107 native Italian native speakers formed the comparison group.

Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) were administered to both groups to elicit data using online modules. The scenarios (adapted from Nuzzo, 2007, and Paone, 2020) presented prototypical situations aimed at eliciting complaints (see Table 1), with variations in context (formal/informal), social distance, and power relationship (symmetric/asymmetric) between the interlocutors (Brown, Levinson, 1987).

Table 1. *Scenarios eliciting complaints*

	Equal- intimate interlocutor	Equal- distant interlocutor	Superior- intimate interlocutor
Complaints	[S1] With the roommate for the mess in the kitchen	[S3] With a stranger for jumping the line at the post office	[S4] With a professor for a wrong evaluation
	[S2] With a neighbour for the loud music		

The term *equal-intimate* is used to describe a symmetrical relationship in which the participants are already acquainted with one another (see also Gesuato, 2015; De Marco, Paone, 2024). Conversely, *equal-distant* describes a symmetrical relationship with minimal mutual acquaintance between the parties involved. Finally, *superior-intimate* refers to an asymmetrical relationship where there is a minimum level of knowledge between the interlocutors. This category of relationship encompasses varying degrees of familiarity, ranging from minimal, as between a student and a professor, to high, as between siblings⁴. Furthermore, in all scenarios the negative event that arouses the complaint is non-verbal, that is, it is triggered by extra-linguistic events (Businaro, 2002).

⁴ In the equal-intimate situation, we proposed two scenarios where the level of familiarity is higher in one case (with a roommate) and minimal in another (with a neighbor).

Along with the DCTs eliciting complaints, participants were asked to fill out other online forms eliciting different speech acts (apologies and requests).

Our corpus consists of 631 DCTs. Global percentages of DMs were calculated for the three groups, as well as relative percentages of DMs according to macro- and micro-functions in their productions. Qualitative analyses are presented using examples extracted from the corpus, focusing on the structuring of the speech act.

4. RESULTS

This section will present the results of the study through a quantitative analysis of the frequency and distribution of discourse markers (§ 4.1). This will be followed by a qualitative commentary on selected examples, which will offer deeper insights into their usage (§ 4.2).

4.1. Quantitative analysis

4.1.1. DMs distribution among the three groups

The analysis of discourse marker usage across proficiency levels highlights distinct patterns in the linguistic behavior of native and non-native speakers, as detailed in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 provides the overall distribution of DMs, showing that the A1-A2 group exhibits the highest percentage (7.4%), followed by the B1-B2 group (6.2%) and native speakers (5.5%). These percentages might be also influenced by the group sizes, with native speakers forming a much larger cohort (107 participants) compared to the learner groups (20 participants each). This larger sample size introduces greater variability, potentially diluting the overall proportion of DMs despite the higher word count produced by native speakers (6035 words).

Table 2. Total number of words and percentage of DMs in the productions of the 3 groups

	A1-A2 levels	B1-B2 levels	Italian NS
Words	1639	2910	6035
% DM	7,4	6,2	5,5

A deeper understanding emerges when considering the data in Table 3, which examines the average number of words and DMs per complaint. Here, the differences align more closely with linguistic development. The A1-A2 group constructs shorter turns (66 words on average) but relies heavily on DMs (5 per complaint) probably to compensate for limited linguistic resources, often using interactional markers (see Jafrancesco, 2015) like *scusa* and *per favore* (along with other formulaic expressions) to navigate conversations and express politeness. The B1-B2 group, with longer turns (84 words on average), demonstrates more complex language use while maintaining a similar reliance on DMs (5 per complaint), reflecting their intermediate proficiency. Native speakers, in contrast, produce shorter turns (59 words on average) and use significantly fewer DMs (2 per complaint). This could be attributed to their reliance on other pragmalinguistic strategies, such as lexical or morphosyntactic modifiers, to balance politeness and efficiency without a heavy dependence on DMs.

Table 3. *Average number of words and DMs per complaint among the three groups*

	A1-A2 levels	B1-B2 levels	Italian NS
Average number of words per complaint	66	84	59
St.Dev.	28	37	29
Average number of DMS	5	5	2
St.Dev.	2,8	2,7	1,4

4.1.2. DMs functions across the three groups and per scenario

Next, we will examine how DMs functions are distributed among the three groups (Figures 1-3).

Generally, we observe that the dominant functions are those associated with politeness strategies used to mitigate the complaint and, consequently, face-threatening situations. These markers are particularly prominent among A1-A2 learners (50%, Figure 1) and native speakers (60%, Figure 3), while B1-B2 learners use them less extensively (35%, Figure 2). The second most common function across the three groups is related to marking contrast in the interactional domain, which serve to structure interaction by highlighting opposing or alternative ideas. Native speakers demonstrate the highest use of these markers (27%). Other functions, such as mitigators, modulators, and upgraders, are less represented across all three groups. Notably, native speakers exhibit a slightly lower percentage of these markers, which suggests that they may rely on alternative pragmalinguistic strategies to adjust the illocutionary force of their complaints. This could reflect a more implicit and nuanced approach to softening or intensifying communicative acts compared to learners, who may rely more explicitly on these linguistic tools.

Figure 1. *A1-A2 levels' DMs functions*

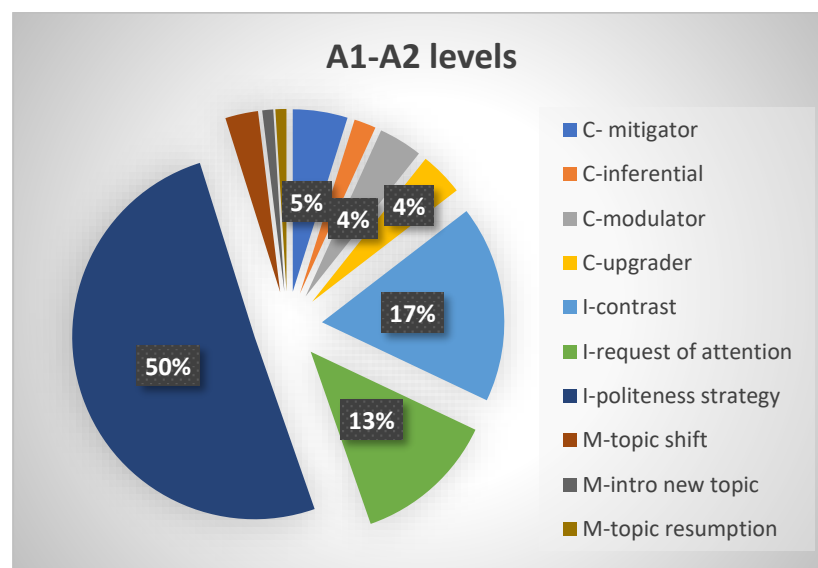


Figure 2. B1-B2 levels' DMs functions

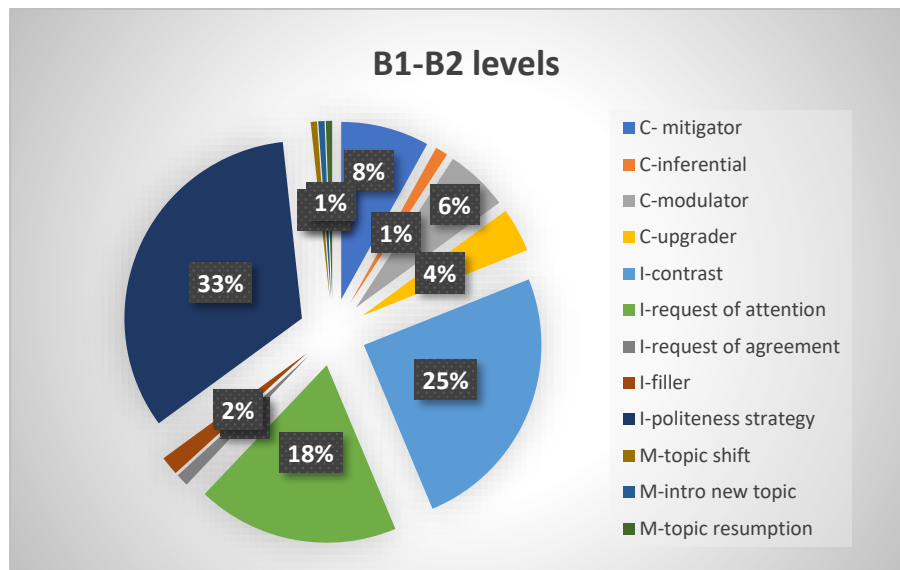
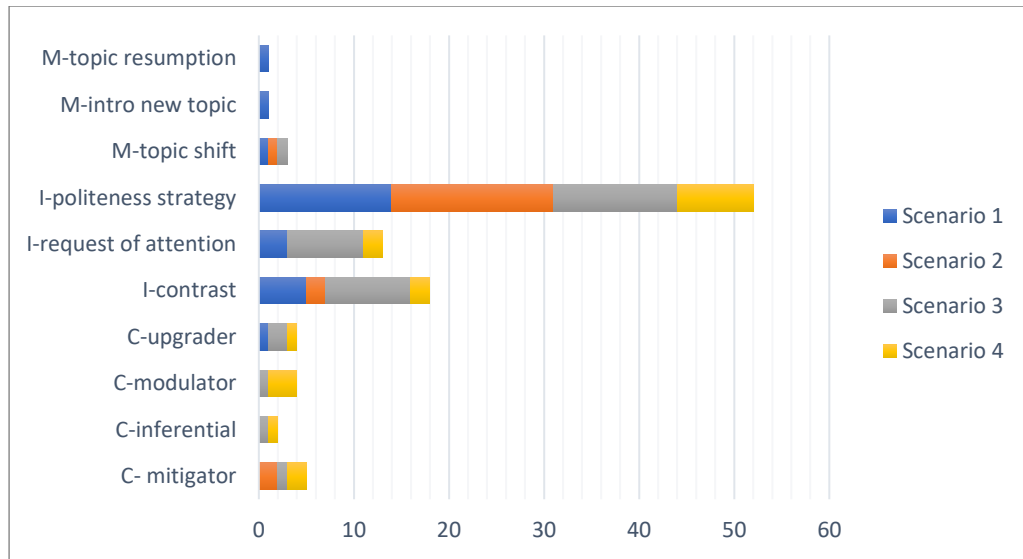


Figure 3. Italian speakers' DMs functions



Next, we will explore the distribution of the microfunctions across scenarios among the three groups. In levels A1-A2 (Figure 4), there is generally a higher usage of discourse markers in scenario 3, which concerns interactions with a stranger. In these instances, politeness strategies accompanied by contrast markers are prevalent (e.g., *per favore*, *scusa/scusi*, 'please', 'excuse me', followed by *ma* 'but'). In scenario 4, with the professor, the use of DMs is less frequently and primarily functions as politeness strategy (e.g., *per favore*, with only a few instances of contrast markers (e.g., *ma*). This pattern could be attributed to the desire to maintain a formal and respectful tone, softening the request for repair through politeness markers.

Figure 4. *A1-A2 levels: microfunctions per scenario*



At the B1-B2 proficiency level (Figure 5), learners demonstrate a nuanced approach to discourse marker usage, reflecting their intermediate linguistic competence. Politeness strategies remain a central feature across all scenarios, often supported by contrast markers such as *ma* and *però* (*but*). The selective use of upgraders, such as *veramente* (*really*), in Scenario 1 with the roommate, highlights the ability to convey emotional intensity or urgency in familiar, informal contexts. This contrasts with the use of downgraders, like *solo* (*just*) and *un po'* (*a bit*), in Scenario 2 with the neighbor, where learners appear to prioritize mitigating the impact of their complaints. In Scenario 4, where the interlocutor is a professor, the higher use of DMs compared to A-level learners demonstrates a more advanced deployment of politeness strategies. This includes a diverse range of markers such as *per favore*, *per cortesia* ('please'), and *gentilmente* ('kindly'), which signal respect and formality. Additionally, the incorporation of modulators like *forse* ('perhaps') and *mi sembra* ('it seems to me') reflects an enhanced sensitivity to the hierarchical nature of the interaction. These elements help to mitigate the directness of the complaint, softening its illocutionary force and conveying an appropriate degree of deference and uncertainty in this formal context.

Figure 5. *B1-B2 levels: microfunction per scenario*

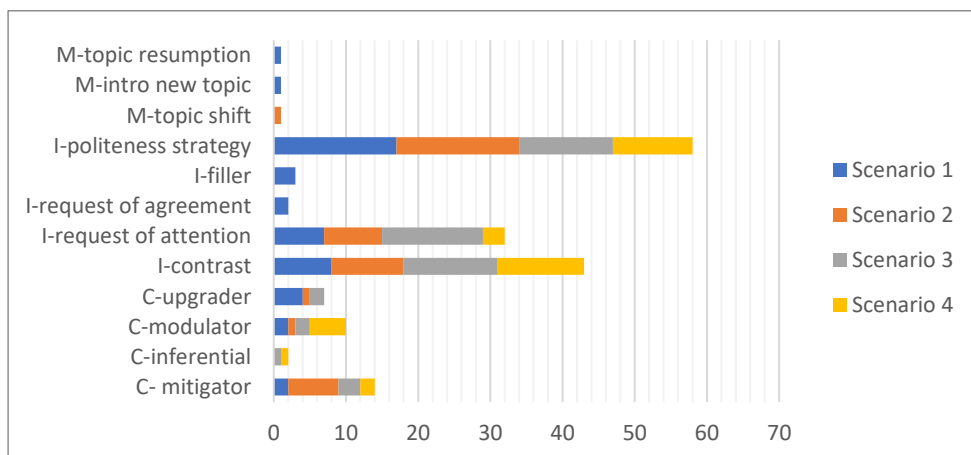
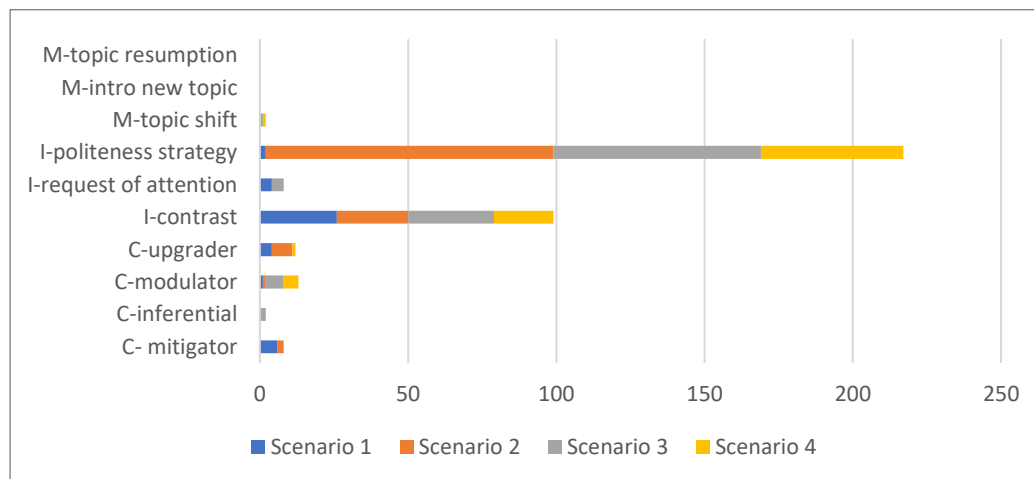


Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of discourse marker microfunctions across the four scenarios for native speakers. Politeness strategies emerge as the most frequently used type of DMs, especially in Scenario 4, where the student addresses a professor. This preference for politeness strategies signals a clear intention to maintain respectful and formal tones in hierarchical interactions. Such strategies help mitigate the force of complaints, ensuring they are framed in a manner that aligns with the social expectations of power-differentiated settings. Contrast markers, such as *ma* and *però*, are also prominently featured across all scenarios, reaching their peak in Scenario 4. Their frequent use demonstrates native speakers' ability to introduce nuanced positions, often softening statements or adding complexity to their arguments without compromising politeness. These markers serve not only to contrast ideas but also to offer alternative viewpoints, enhancing the depth of the discourse while maintaining a cordial atmosphere.

Mitigators, although less frequent, appear notably in Scenarios 2 and 4, where the interlocutors are a neighbor and a professor, respectively. The role of mitigators is to soften the directness of complaints, particularly in situations where there is a social distance or power asymmetry. Their use highlights a strategic choice to avoid overt confrontation, opting instead for a more indirect approach to expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement.

Modulators, though minimal in their overall occurrence, are most frequently found in Scenario 4, further emphasizing the speakers' ability to adjust the intensity or certainty of their complaints in formal contexts. These markers, such as *forse* ("perhaps") and *mi sembra* ("it seems to me"), provide an added layer of politeness by indicating uncertainty or hedging, thereby reducing the potential for offense.

Figure 6. *Italian speakers: microfunctions per scenario*



In order to interpret these global results, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the potential impact of the context of data collection on the frequency and functions of DMs. The use of written responses elicited through DCTs differs considerably from that observed in spontaneous oral communication. The act of writing allows respondents more time to plan, edit, and refine their utterances, which may reduce the need for DMs that would otherwise facilitate real-time conversational management. In a written task, speakers can reflect on their language choices and structure their responses more deliberately. In contrast, spontaneous oral interactions require immediate processing and production, where DMs play a crucial role in managing turn-taking, indicating hesitation, and structuring thoughts.

4.2. Qualitative analysis of L2 Italian learners' complaints

Now, we will explore the role of DMs in the participants' complaints through a qualitative analysis of some extracts.

a) A1-A2 level

The structure of the complaints and the use of discourse markers reflect the A1-A2 proficiency level, characterized by simple syntax, basic vocabulary, and frequent grammatical errors. Despite these limitations, students show an understanding of how to use DMs to manage politeness, attention, contrast, and emphasis in their complaints, as shown in the following examples, where the interlocutor is a roommate (Scenario 1).

- (1) *Buongiorno amico, io so che sei stanco ma non è possibile lasciare il cucina così sporco, per favore poi puliere il cucina.*
'Good morning, friend, I know you are tired, but it's not possible to leave the kitchen so dirty. Please, could you clean the kitchen?'
- (2) *Guarda coinquilino, perché è molto sporca la cucina? E, dov'è il mio caffè?*
'Look, roommate, why is the kitchen so dirty? And where is my coffee?'
- (3) *Buon giorno. Scusami, ma perché non hai pulito i piatti e la cucina ieri sera? E non c'è caffè!*
'Good morning. Excuse me, but why didn't you clean the dishes and the kitchen last night? And there's no coffee?'

In example 1, the complaint starts with a polite greeting (*Buongiorno, amico*) that helps to soften the complaint by emphasizing friendliness and solidarity. The contrastive marker *ma* introduces the main issue, emphasizing the discrepancy between understanding the roommate's tiredness and the expectation of cleanliness. The polite request marker *per favore* is used to soften the request of repair, i.e. to clean the kitchen (*per favore poi puliere il cucina*).

In example 2, the speaker uses *guarda* ('look') as an attention-getter and addresses the listener as *coinquilino* highlighting the shared responsibility and reinforcing the legitimacy of the complaint.

In example 3, the polite greeting *Buon giorno* is followed by *scusami, ma*. The combined use of these two markers conveys a message with a subtle degree of rudeness, as they transmit a clear threat directed towards the face of the interlocutor who is requested to provide an explanation. Consequently, the meaning of *scusa*, 'sorry', assumes the value of what is known as mock politeness (a feigned courtesy) that does not align with the semantic content and symbolic meaning conveyed by *scusa* and *scusi* (Ghezzi, Molinelli, 2019). Conversely, it suggests an implication of mock politeness. The *ma*, 'but', thus conveys the expression of negative judgement or a request for repair, qualifying as a kind of interactional contrast as highlighted by Fedriani and Molinelli (2019).

In scenario 2, with a neighbour, learners used similar markers to introduce and structure their complaint, but we may also notice the usage of DMs that reinforce the illocutionary force of the expressive component of the complaint and other DMs with consequential and inferential functions.

- (4) *Salve! Per favore sari amabile di avere la musica a meno volume, domani devo lavora*
'Hello! Please, would you be kind enough to lower the volume of the music? I have to work tomorrow.'

- (5) *Mi scusi, adesso è l'una di notte, il volume della musica è molto alto io non posso dormire. Anche devo alzare a presto domani. Allora potrebbe abbastare il volume subito a finire la festa*
'Excuse me, it's one in the morning, the music is very loud, and I can't sleep. I also have to get up early tomorrow. So, could you please lower the volume and end the party immediately?'
- (6) *Mi scusi ma è l'una di notte, Il vice è davvero alto, io non posso dormire. Potresti finire o bassa la musica*
'Excuse me, but it's one in the morning. The voice is really loud, I can't sleep. Could you finish up? Or lower the music?'

Example (4) begins with the polite greeting *Salve!* and uses the polite request marker *per favore* to soften the request (*sari amabile di avere la musica a meno volume*). The phrase *domani devo lavora* serves as a justification, reinforcing the urgency and necessity of the request by highlighting the consequence of loud music on the speaker's ability to work the next day.

In example (5), *mi scusi* introduces the expressive component of the complaint by drawing attention to the late hour (*adesso è l'una di notte*) and the impact of the loud music on the speaker's ability to sleep. The use of *anche* ('also') introduces additional information about the speaker's need to wake up early, further emphasizing the inconvenience and justifying his/her legitimacy to complain. The function of the DM *allora* is inferential, drawing a logical conclusion that the listener should lower the volume immediately to end the party, which underscores the urgency and necessity of the request.

Example (6) is structured similarly to example (5), but *mi scusi* is paired with *ma*, which serves to highlight a contrast between the current situation and what would typically be expected at such a late hour. *Davvero* ('really') is used to reinforce the negative judgment and therefore the expressive component of the complaint, justifying the speaker's request of repair *Potresti finire o bassa la musica*.

In Scenario 3, at the post office, where the interlocutor is a stranger, the complaints are mainly characterized by their expressive component, with only one example (9) including a request for repair.

- (7) *Mi sembra e. il mio posto, io ero di prima voi*
'It seems to me this is my spot, I was here before you.'
- (8) *Scusa hai una cosa orgienza ti posso capire e chiedi ti possiamo aiutare però così non è giusto.*
'Excuse me, if you have an emergency, I can understand and ask if we can help you, but this isn't fair.'
- (9) *Io ho aspettato qui da 2 ore. Scusami, signore ma adesso è il mio turno. Potete metere nella fila per favore!*
'Excuse me, sir, but it's my turn now. Could you please join the queue?'

In example (7) the use of *Mi sembra* ('it seems to me') softens the illocutionary force of the speaker's complaint (*è Il mio posto*), followed by *io ero di prima voi* to assert his/her right.

In example (8), the speaker begins with *Scusa* to get the listener's attention and follows with an empathetic statement acknowledging the other person's urgency (*hai una cosa orgienza ti posso capire*). The speaker then offers help (*e chiedi ti possiamo aiutare*) but concludes with *però così non è giusto* to express the unfairness of the situation. The use of *però* in this context emphasises the interactional contrast between the interlocutors.

In example (9), the speaker provides a detailed context by stating the length of his/her wait (*Io ho aspettato qui da 2 ore*). He/she uses *Scusami, signore ma* to introduce the complaint

and mark the contrast at the interactional level. The speaker concludes with a request for repair (*Potete metere nella fila per favore!*), mitigated by the use of *per favore*.

In Scenario 4, where the interlocutor is a professor, learners' complaints tend to be less appropriate. Indeed, we may notice that some students explicitly attribute the responsibility of the negative event to the addressee or express their disagreement with the teacher's evaluation. DMs are mainly used as politeness strategies to address the interlocutor (*scusi, mi scusi*) and to soften the request of repair (*per favore*).

- (10) *Scusi porof, tu hai alcuni errore en mia correzione.*
'Excuse me, professor, you have made some mistakes in my correction'.
- (11) *Mi scusi professore. Vorrei sapere le ragione del mio voto.*
'Excuse me, professor. I would like to know the reasons for my grade'.
- (12) *Professore, potete fare vedermi per favore quale errate ho fatto nel esame, perché io ho aspetatto un voto più alto.*
'Professor, could you please show me the mistakes I made in the exam, because I was expecting a higher grade'.

In example (10), the student begins with *Scusi porof*, to address politely the interlocutor, but the following direct accusation *tu hai alcuni errore en mia correzione* explicitly places blame on the professor.

Example (11) starts in a similar way, *Mi scusi professore*. However, the phrase *Vorrei sapere le ragione del mio voto* directly questions the professor's grading without any mitigating language, except for the use of the morphosyntactic modifier *vorrei*.

In example (12), the student addresses the professor formally with *Professore* and uses *per favore* ('please') to soften the request for repair. However, the phrase *quale errate ho fatto nel esame* followed by *io ho aspetatto un voto più alto* expresses dissatisfaction with the grade and implies that the grade was not deserved, indirectly questioning the professor's judgment.

b) B1-B2 levels

Differently from A1-A2 students, B1-B2 learners seem to have acquired more efficacy in their complaints, balancing aggressiveness and politeness, also by the use of different DMs. Additionally, the structure of their productions is more complex and the vocabulary used is richer and more varied, as shown in the following examples.

- (13) *Ciao! Scusa ma credo che la cucina è un po sporca. Ho capito che ieri notte dopo la festa non era il momento ottimo per pulire, ma ti chiedo che per favore la prossima volta provi a sporcare meno, perché adesso non c'è nemmeno una tazza dove prendere un caffè. Grazie!!*
'Hi! Sorry, but I think the kitchen is a bit dirty. I understand that last night after the party wasn't the best time to clean up, but could you please try to make less of a mess next time? Right now, there isn't even a cup to make coffee. Thanks!!'
- (14) *Buongiorno, scusa ma non mi sta bene trovare la cucina così. Per cortesia la prossima volta, dovete pulire la cucina dopo la festa.*
'Good morning, sorry but I don't like finding the kitchen like this. Please, next time, you must clean the kitchen after the party'.

- (15) *Ciao. Scusami, ma la cucina e' il nostro luogo comune e io non vorrei vederla cosi' sporca e disordinata. Se hai fatto una festa a casa, devi pulirla dopo.*
'Hi. Sorry, but the kitchen is our shared space, and I don't want to see it so dirty and messy. If you had a party at home, you need to clean it afterwards'.

In example (13), the student starts with a friendly *Ciao!* followed by the dyad *Scusa ma* to introduce the negative judgment, softened by the use of *un po'* ('a bit'). The speaker acknowledges the inconvenience of cleaning after a party with *Ho capito che ieri notte dopo la festa non era il momento ottimo per pulire*, showing empathy. However, he/she uses *ma* to introduce the request for repair, which is mitigated by *per favore* and reinforced by the use of *nemmeno*, emphasizing the speaker's legitimacy to complain.

Example (14) begins formally with *Buongiorno* and uses the DM *scusa ma* to introduce the complaint. The phrase *non mi sta bene trovare la cucina così* directly expresses dissatisfaction. The request for repair is mitigated by the use of the marker *per cortesia* ('please/kindly'), which, although polite, raises the social distance between the speakers and adds an unexpected level of formality given their intimate relationship.

In example (15), the informal greeting *Ciao* is followed by *Scusami, ma* to introduce the complaint. The statement *la cucina è il nostro luogo comune e io non vorrei vederla così sporca e disordinata* emphasises shared responsibility and personal discomfort.

In scenario 2, with a neighbour, B1-B2 learners show a balanced use of upgraders and downgraders to modify the illocutionary force of their complaint.

- (16) *Ciao scusa che ti disturbo, ma succede che domani devo svegliarmi presto e con la musica cosi' alta mi è un po' difficile dormire. Vi dispiace abbassare un po' il volume?*
'Hi there, sorry to bother you, but I have to wake up early tomorrow and with the music so loud it's a bit difficult for me to sleep. Would you mind lowering the volume a bit?'
- (17) *Salve! Scusa per la interruzione ma ti volevo chiedere se potresti abbassare la musica per favore. Abbiamo provato a dormire ma il volume è davvero alto e non riusciamo. Grazie mille.*
'Hello! Sorry for the interruption, but I wanted to ask if you could lower the music volume, please. We've tried to sleep, but the volume is really high, and we can't manage. Thank you very much'
- (18) *Buonasera ragazzi, sono la vicina di sopra. Potete cortesemente abbassare il volume dalla musica? Che devo lavorare domani dalle 8:30 am. Scusate per la interruzione, ma ho bisogno di riposarmi e godermi la serata pure io :D*
'Good evening, guys, I'm the neighbor from upstairs. Could you kindly lower the music volume? I have to work tomorrow from 8:30 am. Sorry for the interruption, but I need to rest and enjoy my evening too'.

In example (16), the learner begins with a friendly *Ciao* and an apology *scusa che ti disturbo* to soften the complaint. The use of *ma* marks a contrast, introducing the speaker's reasons to complain. The phrase *con la musica così alta mi è un po' difficile dormire* mitigates the expressive component of the complaint with *un po'*, which also attenuates the directive component in *Vi dispiace abbassare un po' il volume?*

In example (17), the student starts with *Salve!* followed by *Scusa per la interruzione* to apologize for the disruption. The request *ti volevo chiedere se potresti abbassare la musica per favore* is softened by the polite marker *per favore* and the morphosyntactic modifier *potresti*. The justification *Abbiamo provato a dormire ma il volume è davvero alto e non riusciamo*, clearly explains the problem and emphasises the difficulty faced, marked by the contrastive *ma*.

Example (18) starts formally with *Buonasera ragazzi* and introduces the speaker's identity, *sono la vicina di sopra*. The request *Potete cortesemente abbassare il volume della musica?*, includes the polite marker *cortesemente*. The explanation *Che devo lavorare domani dalle 8:30 am* provides a clear reason for the request. The use of *ma* marks a contrast between the polite greeting and the apology *scusate per la interruzione* and the speaker's personal need, *ho bisogno di riposarmi e godermi la serata pure io*.

In scenario 3, with a stranger, we may notice a greater variety of DMs with different functions. Notably, the complaints often contain an explicit accusation directed towards the interlocutor.

- (19) *Scusatemi, forse vi siete confuso ma adesso è il mio turno.*
'Excuse me, maybe there's been a misunderstanding, but now it's my turn'.
- (20) *Scusatemi signore, sicuramente non vi siete accorto di me ma ero prima io siete così gentile di aspettare il vostro turno.*
'Excuse me, sir, you surely didn't notice me, but I was ahead. Would you be so kind as to wait for your turn'.
- (21) *Signore, credo proprio che sia quello il mio turno. quindi la chiedo gentilmente di rispettare la fila.*
'Sir, I truly believe it's my turn. So, I kindly ask you to respect the line'.

In example (19), the learner uses *Scusatemi* as an attention-getter and further mitigates the accusation with *forse* ('perhaps/maybe'), implying a possible misunderstanding rather than a deliberate act. The use of *ma* to introduce a contrast serves to reinforce the speaker's right to express their complaint.

Example (20) begins with *Scusatemi signore*, and uses *sicuramente* to soften the accusation by suggesting the possibility of an oversight: *sicuramente non vi siete accorto di me ma ero prima io*. The request *siete così gentile di aspettare il vostro turno* is phrased politely, despite the underlying complaint.

In example (21), the phrase *credo proprio che sia quello il mio turno* indicates the speaker's confidence in their claim, with *proprio* ('truly/actually') reinforcing the assertion. *Quindi* expresses an argumentative inferential function and introduces the request for repair, *la chiedo gentilmente di rispettare la fila*, which is softened by *gentilmente* ('kindly'), adding a polite tone to the directive.

In Scenario 4, B1-B2 learners' complaints are generally polite, but in some cases, some statements appear somewhat abrupt and aggressive. The use of discourse markers helps to soften the requests or reduce the illocutionary force of the complaints.

- (22) *Buongiorno. Professore, posso vedere il mio esame? Penso che qualcosa non sia calcolato bene. Vorrei solo assicurarmi.*
'Good morning. Professor, may I see my exam? I think something might not have been calculated correctly. I just want to make sure'.
- (23) *Buongiorno professore. Chiedo scusa per il disturbo ma vorrei parlare con Lei in riguardo a l'esame. Io ho preso un 28 ma ero sicura de avere risposto correttamente a tutte le domande. Forse sono svegliata ma volevo chiedere perché Lei mi ha messo 28 e non 30.*
'Good morning professor. I apologize for the interruption, but I would like to speak with you about the exam. I received a grade of 28, but I was confident that I had answered all the questions correctly. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I wanted to ask why you gave me a 28 instead of a 30'.

- (24) *Buongiorno professore, scusatemi ma posso vedere la valutazione del esame scritto della settimana scorsa perché ero convinta di aver fatto di meglio del voto preso.*
'Good morning, Professor. Excuse me, but may I see the evaluation of the written exam from last week? I was convinced that I performed better than the grade I received'.

In example (22), the learner begins with a polite greeting, *Buongiorno professore*, and directly asks the professor to review the exam. This directness is softened by the justification that follows: *Penso che qualcosa non sia calcolato bene*. The use of the impersonal form avoids explicitly blaming the interlocutor. Additionally, the use of *solo* ('just') in *Vorrei solo assicurarmi* mitigates the complaint, making it clear that the student is seeking clarification rather than outright accusing the professor of a mistake.

In example (23), the student starts with an apology, *Chiedo scusa per il disturbo*. The discourse marker *ma* introduces the main issue, softening the transition to the complaint: *vorrei parlare con Lei in riguardo a l'esame*. The learner expresses doubt with *Io ho preso un 28 ma ero sicura di avere risposto correttamente a tutte le domande*, and then further softens the assertion with *Forse mi sono sbagliata* (though it appears as *forse sono svegliata*, which seems to be a typographical error). This tentative language reduces the illocutionary force, showing respect for the professor's authority while expressing concern about the grade.

In example (24), the greeting *Buongiorno professore* is followed by the dyad *scusatemi ma*. The request, *posso vedere la valutazione del esame scritto della settimana scorsa*, is clear but not softened by any lexical or morphosyntactic modifiers. The learner expresses confidence in her performance with *ero convinta di aver fatto di meglio del voto preso* without directly accusing the professor of making a mistake.

4.3. *Qualitative analysis of native speakers' complaints*

Native speakers tend to be more indirect in their complaints. In Scenario 1, where the relationship between the speakers is quite intimate and symmetrical, the person expressing the complaint often uses discourse markers that accentuate the accusatory tone of the complaint, which in general tends to be almost always indirect. In this scenario, speakers mainly use complaints or expressions of dissatisfaction. The discourse marker *ma* 'but' is used to introduce a sarcastic comment in example 25, while in examples 26 and 27 it is used to reinforce the act of reproach towards the interlocutor, in the first case in addition to *scusa*, 'excuse me', without directly attributing responsibility. This contrast is also evident in the use of *però*, which serves to rationalise the speaker's difficulty in acknowledging the call to rectify an offending behaviour. This is also confirmed by the request for repair.

- (25) *Buongiorno... Ma una pulitina in cucina no, eh?*
'Good morning...How about a little cleaning up in the kitchen, huh?'
- (26) *Scusa, ma ieri avresti anche potuto ripulire! e perché il caffè è finito?*
'Sorry, but yesterday you could have cleaned up! And why is the coffee finished?'
- (27) *Ma scusami! Hai fatto la festa però potevi pure pulire. Non si fa così. Ora pulisci tutto.*
'But excuse me! You had the party but you could have cleaned up. It's not done like this. Now clean everything up?'

Despite the sharp initial remark in example 28, through which the speaker implicitly links the mess in the kitchen to the interlocutor's pleasure as a subtle reprimand, the discourse markers *però* and *perlomeno* serve to soften the sense of annoyance experienced (see also Example 44). In Examples 28 and 29 these discourse markers function to soften the disapproval of an action for which the speaker suggests a preference for an alternative course of action that the interlocutor did not take (e.g., ...*avresti potuto dare una sistemata alla cucina però*, 'you could have tidied up the house though, at least in the kitchen...'). In addition, the discourse marker *magari*, 'perhaps', in example 30 minimises the significance of the complaint, a strategy that is further emphasised by the use of the initial conciliatory remark: *so che ieri eri stanco*, 'I know you were tired yesterday'.

- (28) *Vedo che ieri sei ti sei divertito abbastanza... avresti potuto dare una sistemata alla casa però, perlomeno in cucina...*
'I see you had quite a bit of fun yesterday... you could have tidied up the house though, at least in the kitchen...'
- (29) *Ma dov'è il caffè? E comunque potevi sistemare la cucina prima di andare a dormire...o almeno lavare i piatti.*
'But where's the coffee? And anyway, you could have tidied up the kitchen before going to bed... or at least washed the dishes'
- (30) *Buongiorno, so che ieri eri stanco ma magari dopo se puoi sistema altrimenti si accumulano cose sporche e non ne usciamo più*
'Good morning, I know you were tired yesterday, but if you could clean up later, otherwise the mess will just keep piling up and we'll never get it under control'.

In Scenario 2, the nature of the annoyance caused to the speaker often requires a directive act in the form of a request for redress. In example (31) The lexical pair *scusami tanto*, 'I'm really sorry', functions as a courtesy marker, expressing an apology that could be perceived as insincere (emphasised by the intensifier *tanto*), and sometimes conveys the exact opposite, namely a kind of introduction to the complaint through which the complainer expresses his disagreement. In this particular case, it is the explicit formulation of a request to lower the volume. However, it could also be a sincere apology for a request that may be unwelcome to the interlocutor, minimised by the use of *pochino* to reduce its impact. The interpretive uncertainty stems from the data collection methodology, as written responses do not allow the exact communicative intention of the speaker to be discerned, which would otherwise be evident from the intonational profile of the utterance in spoken conversation.

The example (32) further illustrates how the politeness markers can serve to reinforce the complaint, especially when the speaker escalates the tone of the complaint by adding the reason why the act is considered serious ('in my house we are trying to sleep') and explicitly reproaches the interlocutor for his behaviour ('You are not very considerate'). For the latter complaint, the speaker also uses the lexical intensifier *proprio*.

In example 33, the demand for redress is supported by evidence that emphasises the deplorable nature of the behaviour, namely the fact that the speaker will not be able to sleep. In this case, the intensifier *nemmeno un po'*, 'any rest at all', serves to reinforce the consequences of the interlocutor's behaviour.

- (31) *Scusami tanto, è un problema chiederti di abbassare un pochino il volume della musica?*
'I'm really sorry, is it a problem to ask you to lower the volume of the music a little?'

- (32) Scusami tanto, ma *a casa mia stiamo cercando di dormire. Potresti abbassare il volume? Non hai proprio senso civico.*
'I'm really sorry, but we're trying to sleep at my house. Could you lower the volume? You are not very considerate'.
- (33) *Ciao scusa il disturbo! Ti dispiacerebbe abbassare il volume? Tra 5 ore devo svegliarmi ma con questo rumore credo che non riuscirò nemmeno un pò a riposare!*
'Hi, sorry to bother you! Would you mind turning down the volume? I have to wake up in five hours, but with this noise, I don't think I'll be able to get any rest at all!'

In Scenario 3, the utilization of markers that elicit both a request for attention (e.g., *guardi*, 'look', *mi scusi*) and mitigating indicators that reduce the illocutionary force of the act is discernible. The formal marker *guardi* serves to capture attention, while *gentilmente* helps to make the statement more polite. However, the latter somewhat contradicts the imperative and direct nature of the request for redress (as seen in example 34), which diminishes the effectiveness of the politeness marker. Similarly, in example 35, the attention-seeking phrase *chiedo scusa* and the attenuator *forse*, which serves to render the subsequent assertion less certain, do not lessen the apparent strength of the irritation expressed. This is because the expression still highlights the contrast with the proper behaviour that should be exhibited.

In example (36), once again, the dyad *mi scusi ma* ('excuse me but') characterizes the irritated tone of the speaker, who anticipates the intensification (*un bel po'*, 'quite a bit') of the supporting act (*è un bel po' che aspetto*, 'I've been waiting quite a bit').

- (34) *No, guardi, in realtà io sto facendo la fila da due ore; quindi, gentilmente rispetti il suo turno.*
'No, *look*, I've actually been in line for two hours; so, please *kindly* respect your turn'.
- (35) *Chiedo scusa, forse non ha prestato attenzione al fatto che la fila inizia lì e tutti noi stiamo rispettando con pazienza il nostro turno!*
'*I apologize, perhaps* you didn't notice that the line starts there, and all of us are patiently waiting our turn!'
- (36) *Mi scusi ma io è da un bel pò che aspetto e avrei fretta.*
'Excuse me, but I've been waiting for quite a while, and I'm in a bit of a hurry'.

The final scenario involves speakers in a relationship characterized by asymmetry and a certain degree of social distance. Generally, native speakers' responses are significantly longer, as the length of communicative moves is proportional to the relationship between the speakers. In this context, we observe complaints that do not include direct accusations or explicit requests for redress. Instead, they feature supportive acts such as conciliatory remarks (37), justifications (38), and highly mitigated requests for explanations (37, 38).

- (37) *Buongiorno professoressa, spero di non disturbarla, desidererei chiederle qualche chiarimento in merito all'esame della scorsa settimana. Non metterei mai in dubbio il suo metodo di valutazione e la sua competenza e sono consapevole che 28 sia già un voto piuttosto alto, ma purtroppo o per fortuna sono una ragazza molto ambiziosa e tenevo particolarmente a prendere una valutazione più alta a questo esame, perciò, desidererei un chiarimento per capire ciò che ho sbagliato all'interno del compito..."*

‘Good morning, Professor. I hope I’m not bothering you, but I would like to ask for some clarification regarding last week’s exam. I would never question your grading method or your expertise, and I fully understand that a 28 is already a very good grade. However, I must admit that I am quite ambitious and was particularly aiming for a higher grade in this exam. Therefore, I would appreciate some clarification to better understand what I did wrong in the assignment’.

- (38) *Scusi professore, mi piacerebbe prendere consapevolezza della valutazione dell’esame sostenuto, in modo da poter far tesoro per i prossimi esami, perché ho studiato davvero tanto, ma forse non sono riuscita a mostrare bene la mia preparazione.*

‘Excuse me professor, I would like to gain insight into the evaluation of the exam I took, so that I can learn for future exams, because I have studied *really* hard, but *perhaps* I wasn’t able to demonstrate my preparation well’.

- (39) *Scusatemi Prof, ma vorrei sapere il motivo per il quale mi avete messo 28 non avendo fatto alcun errore. Forse avete fatto un po’ di confusione oppure avete utilizzato un criterio di correzione diverso?*

‘Excuse me, Professor, but I would like to know why I was given a 28 when I didn’t make any mistakes. Perhaps there was some confusion, or did you use a different grading criterion?’

In example 37, the DM *mai*, ‘never’ serves to reinforce an attempt to qualify the teacher’s behaviour in a positive light. In Example 38, *davvero*, ‘really’ serves to intensify the justification supporting the request for a revision. The mitigator of the illocutionary force *forse*, ‘perhaps’, in the same example, serves the speaker in questioning the negative assertion regarding her/his own preparation, thus amplifying the criticism directed at the interlocutor’s behaviour.

In certain instances, the filing of a formal complaint or grievance may not be wholly appropriate, particularly in light of the specific circumstances and the nature of the relationship with the individual with whom one is interacting. To illustrate, in Example 39, the student queries the professor’s evaluation. The DM *forse*, ‘perhaps’ serves to mitigate the direct accusation to a certain extent; however, the request for an explanation regarding the evaluation and the interlocutor’s assumption of infallibility in her/his own performance remain overall quite impolite. Furthermore, these elements demonstrate the communicative intention and negate the polite effect of the politeness marker *scusa Prof.*, ‘excuse me’.

The aforementioned examples indicate that native speakers also employ alternative pragmalinguistic strategies to convey complaints, particularly when requesting repair. In particular, they utilise morphosyntactic modifiers, such as the conditional or imperfect tense, to mitigate the directive component of the complaint, thereby demonstrating a more nuanced and implicit approach to mitigating the speech act.

5. FINAL REMARKS

The present study aimed to provide insights into the use of discourse markers in complaints elicited through discourse completion tasks among native and non-native speakers of Italian.

The quantitative analysis revealed distinct distributions of DMs across the three groups (A1-A2 levels, B1-B2 levels, and native Italian speakers), highlighting a notably higher frequency of DM usage among the less proficient A1-A2 learners. The qualitative analysis helped to contextualize this finding, showing that A1-A2 learners used a limited variety

of DMs compared to the other groups, with their usage primarily serving interactional functions such as gaining attention (e.g., *scusi*, ‘excuse me’ or ‘sorry’) and implementing basic politeness strategies (e.g., *per favore*, ‘please’). Occasionally, these DMs were also used to mitigate or intensify the force of the complaint, particularly when initiating complaints with common expressions such as *Scusi/scusa + ma*, which serves to introduce and justify the criticism.

At the B1-B2 level, learners demonstrated a broader and more sophisticated range of DMs, employing them for various functions including mitigation (e.g., *solo*, ‘only’; *un po’*, ‘a bit’; *sicuramente*, ‘surely’), expressing degrees of uncertainty (e.g., *per me*, ‘for me’; *secondo me*, ‘in my opinion’; *mi sembra*, ‘it seems to me’; *forse*, ‘maybe’), and reinforcing the expressive component of the complaint (e.g., *davvero*, ‘really’; *proprio*, ‘exactly’; *veramente*, ‘truly’; *nemmeno*, ‘not even’). This variety illustrates a growing awareness of the nuanced use of DMs to adjust the illocutionary force of complaints.

Native speakers’ complaints were generally more structured and effective than those of learners, often featuring a sophisticated use of DMs and other pragmalinguistic strategies to modulate the complaint’s tone. Native speakers employed a wide range of DMs to both soften and intensify the illocutionary force, thereby creating a balanced approach to complaining that incorporated politeness and expressive reinforcement. However, data from Scenario 4 revealed that even at advanced proficiency levels, complaints can sometimes lack certain politeness strategies, underscoring that mastery of pragmatic nuances continues to develop even among proficient speakers.

A notable finding across all groups was the consistent use of the dyad *scusa/scusi ma* in initiating complaints. This combination serves multiple pragmatic functions: it introduces the criticism with an element of mock politeness (*scusa/scusi*) and sets up a contrast with the adversative marker (*ma*), signalling the tension between the interlocutor’s behavior and the speaker’s expectations. This dyad effectively frames the complaint as both a polite gesture and a critical act, justifying the speaker’s frustration while positioning the interlocutor’s behaviour as a violation that requires redress.

Interestingly, while this dyad was prevalent among all groups, it was more nuanced and strategically employed by more advanced learners and native speakers, reflecting a deeper understanding of its dual role in mitigating and contrasting. For less proficient speakers, the dyad functioned as a simpler, formulaic approach to complaint initiation, often lacking the broader contextual modulation seen in more advanced interactions.

Overall, the study confirms that while DMs play a significant role in the pragmatic expression of complaints across proficiency levels, the variety, function, and effectiveness of their use grow with increasing language competence. Native speakers’ adept use of DMs to navigate politeness, manage conversational tone, and strategically reinforce or soften complaints highlights the complex interplay of linguistic and cultural knowledge that learners gradually acquire. This understanding provides valuable insights into the developmental trajectory of complaint strategies among Italian learners and underscores the importance of targeted pragmatic instruction to support the nuanced use of DMs in learner interlanguage.

These findings, however, must be viewed in light of the elicitation method used, as the discourse completion tasks employed in this study may have influenced the results. The DCTs, which elicit written rather than spoken responses, offer participants more time to deliberate and structure their complaints, potentially leading to more reflective and formulaic uses of DMs compared to spontaneous oral interactions. This contrasts with other methods, such as role-plays, which capture how speakers navigate the broader dynamics of interaction in real-time, highlighting a wider variety of DMs and more nuanced conversational strategies (see De Marco, Paone, 2024). Despite this limitation, DCTs enable researchers to gather a larger volume of data, offering a broader foundation

for analysis and generating valuable insights into the patterns of DM usage across different proficiency levels. By focusing on how participants construct complaints within a single turn, DCTs provide a clear view of their linguistic strategies for expressing dissatisfaction in a controlled environment.

In light of these insights, it is possible to derive practical implications for the design of instructional activities with the objective of enhancing learners' pragmatic competence. In order to address the limitations of DCTs and replicate the spontaneous dynamics of real-world interactions, it is necessary to integrate more task-based scenarios that mirror sociocultural contexts into instructional methods. For instance, learners could engage in structured tasks that require them to adapt their use of DMs based on varying levels of formality, power dynamics, or social distance, such as addressing a professor versus speaking with a peer.

Furthermore, targeted activities could concentrate on enhancing learners' awareness of the multifunctional role of particular discourse markers (DMs), such as *scusa/scusi ma*, in achieving a balance between politeness and criticism. The combination of explicit instruction and contextualised practice could assist learners in comprehending the strategic utilisation of these markers by native speakers in the navigation of face-threatening acts while maintaining conversational rapport (for a detailed examination of the impact of explicit instruction on the acquisition of discourse markers, see De Marco and Paone, 2022). Finally, learners may benefit from activities that emphasise the use of morphosyntactic modifiers (e.g., conditional or imperfect tenses) as tools for softening or intensifying complaints, particularly for advanced learners who require the refinement of their pragmalinguistic repertoire. The incorporation of cross-cultural comparisons may also prove beneficial, allowing learners to reflect on the ways in which politeness strategies vary across languages and cultural norms.

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