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Metarepresentation and indirect complaints: a relevance-theoretic approach

1. Introduction

In the vast literature in pragmatics, complaints have been mainly considered ‘conflictive’ acts (Leech 1983) or ‘face-threatening acts’ (FTAs henceforth) (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Geluykens and Kraft 2003). However, some authors have argued that they may function as ‘face-boosting acts’ (FBAs henceforth) and, as such, they can contribute to create rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between the interlocutors. Some discourse analysts have examined the procedures and conversational devices used to achieve these effects, but have not completely explained how they are generated. Based on politeness theory, it could be contended that these speech acts may result in such effects because of their nature as FBAs or positive-politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Schneider 1988).

Nevertheless, a pragmatic account of the generation of those effects must take into consideration not only the linguistic properties of indirect complaints and the paralinguistic devices accompanying them, but also, and very importantly, the cognitive operations that interlocutors may carry out when producing and interpreting them. This paper intends to offer a cognitive-pragmatic account of their generation from a relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) standpoint. However, in doing so, it does not seek to put forward that rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity arise as an exclusive consequence of the linguistic properties of indirect complaints and the cognitive operations that interlocutors carry out in their production and interpretation, for those feelings also depend crucially on the concurrence of other social and/or psychological factors, such as the social distance existing between the interlocutors or the way they exert their power over each other (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), among many others.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it summarises some of the extant contributions on complaints from perspectives such as Speech Act theory, Conversation Analysis, interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics. Then, it reflects on the possibilities that complaints in general may behave as FTAs, and therefore have negative consequences for social interaction, and indirect complaints may act as FBAs and benefit social interaction. Additionally, it briefly reviews some of the linguistic devices that discourse analysts have found that interlocutors use in complaints sequences to achieve rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between them, and discusses the reasons given as to why they may result in those effects from politeness theory. Finally, it suggests a pragmatic explanation about the why indirect complaints can contribute to the generation of those effects based on some of the concepts and tenets of relevance theory. Such explanation looks into the linguistic properties of indirect complaints and analyses the cognitive operations taking place in their production and interpretation.

2. Contributions on complaints

From the framework of Speech Act Theory, complaints can be regarded as examples of different types of speech acts, depending on the existing classifications and the criteria on which their authors rely. Austin (1962) points out that they show a speaker’s reaction, and, quite frequently, they are considered ‘expressive’ speech acts (Searle 1969) because the speaker (normally referred to as the ‘complainer’) conveys a wide array of negative feelings, emotions or attitudes, such as frustration, discomfort, dissatisfaction, discontent, displeasure, disapproval, censure, grievance, culpability, negligence, anxiety or indignation. The speaker can project those feelings, emotions or attitudes to the hearer’s –normally alluded to as the ‘complainee’– present or past behaviour, for it fails or has failed to meet her expectations, or the speaker feels that it has violated some sociocultural norms, standards or expectations about behaviour in specific circumstances. Evidently, that violation may have negative effects or

1 Throughout this paper, I will use the term face-boosting act (FBA) proposed by Bayraktaroglu (1991), even if there are other equivalent terms such as ‘face-satisfying act’ suggested by scholars such as Hickey and Vázquez Orta (1994).
consequences for social interaction, as complaints involve a sort of moral judgement (Edmondson and House 1981; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Edwards 2000; Laforest 2002; Yoon 2007).

In their taxonomy of speech acts, Edmondson and House (1981) regard complaints as a type of ‘substantive attitudinal illocutions’2 concerning a ‘non-future event’. For Clyne (1994), they are ‘behavitives’. From another perspective, since complaints sometimes involve an assessment of the past, they can also be regarded as ‘retrospective’ speech acts because the speaker evaluates, judges or centres on either a past action by the complainee or a past event (Trosborg 1995; Edwards 2005). However, they can also be ‘prospective’ acts if the complainer intends to influence the hearer’s subsequent behaviour (Márquez-Reiter 2005, 484). In this case, they could be interpreted as examples of ‘directives’.

In many cases, complaints are ‘anti-hearer’ (House and Kasper 1981), and when they are made against him, pragmatists have often referred to them a ‘direct complaints’, thus setting a distinction with ‘indirect complaints’, which are those made against a third party. Indirect complaints express the speaker’s lamentation about such third party’s conduct in a critical way, or about situations or events that are (ir)reversible and/or beyond her own control or the hearer’s. In this type of complaints, it is not the hearer that can be attributed with the responsibility for the perceived offence, but the third party—the ‘complainable’ (Edmondson and House 1981; Boxer 1993; Trosborg 1995; Günthner 1997; Dersley and Wootton 2000; Acuña Ferreira 2002-2003, 2004; Edwards 2005; Lee 2006). Furthermore, pragmatists have also shown that complaints can be performed ‘directly’ or ‘indirectly’, depending on whether the speaker’s negative evaluation of the complainee’s behaviour or the complainable is explicitly or implicitly expressed (Edmondson and House 1981, 144-146; Trosborg 1995, 315). As can be seen, the aforementioned distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect complaints’ may be misleading, for the adjective ‘indirect’ may be understood to allude to one of the ways in which complaints can be performed. Other more explicit, clear, but long and complex, terms could be used, such as ‘complaints targeted to a third party’. However, I will retain the term ‘indirect complaints’ in this paper due to its frequency in the literature on the topic.

Numerous studies on complaints have shown that, even if in many cases illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) that allow interlocutors to assign the pragmatic force of a complaint to speech act are present, there does not seem to be prototypical or constant formulae for the performance of complaints in oral discourse, a conclusion that does not obtain in a written genre such as the letter of complaint, where there actually seem to be rather fixed structures and recurrent formulae for their realisation (e.g. Nkemleke 2004). Such a lack of formulae in oral discourse may lead to many misunderstandings and pragmatic failures (e.g. Gershenson 2003). In fact, in some contexts complaints may turn out to be very difficult to distinguish from other related speech acts, for they overlap with other acts such as disapprovals, criticisms, reprimands, insults, accusations, grumbling, gripeing, nagging and some forms of gossiping and troubles-talk which may accompany complaints and elicit rather similar reactions in many communicative circumstances (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Wyrwas 2000; Laforest 2002; Acuña Ferreira 2002-2003; Edwards 2005; Márquez-Reiter 2005).

What is clear is that a complaint is the first part of an adjacency pair, its semantic content is “I say: I feel badly about X” (Wyrwas 2000), and it has no stereotypical corresponding second part, as it can be followed by a denial, rejection, justification, apology, excuse, etc. (e.g. Dersley and Wootton 2000; Laforest 2002). Moreover, the core speech act expressing the issue of complaint can be expanded with other speech acts in which the speaker asks for repair, resolves the matter, negotiates, argues or even socialises with the complainee (e.g. Hartford and Mahboob 2004; Edwards 2005; Rubino and Bettoni 2006).

Complaints have received attention, although probably not the deserved one (Tatsuki 2000), from scholars working in the field of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Their works have analysed the influence of the interactive values, conventions, norms or principles of different sociocultural groups of individuals on their performance in various situations (e.g. House and Kasper 1981; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987, 1993; Frescura 1995; Murphy and Neu 1996; Gershenson 2003). Although these works are mainly descriptive and, in some cases, pay little attention to developmental issues that can contribute to the teaching of complaints to second- or foreign-language students and the avoidance of pragmatic failures when realising them (Sabadé Dalmau, in press), they reveal that complaints require a considerable

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2 According to Edmondson and House, the ‘substance’ of a conversation is “[…] what outcomes are aimed at, what types of conversational goals may be held by speakers” (1981, 48).

3 Boxer (1993) calls indirect complaints ‘gripes’. According to Günthner (1997) and Acuña Ferreira (2002-2003, 2004), when the complainable is an individual, s/he becomes a sort of ‘anti-hero(ine)’ or ‘antagonist’ whose conduct negatively affects the speaker.
level of pragmatic competence in any language, since for them to be satisfactorily made, individuals must be familiar with the interactive values, conventions, norms or principles operating in a specific (target) sociocultural group.

3. On the nature of complaints as FTAs or FBAs

Edwards points out that “Complaints are […] inherently negative, just as criticisms are, and take the form of morally implicative stories and descriptions of people and places” (2005, 8; emphasis in the original). Leech (1983) included them among the category of conflictive speech acts and hence regarded them as inherently impolite, as they can undermine social harmony between interlocutors and break ties of affection and co-operation. In their politeness model, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987, 66) categorised them as FTAs damaging the complainee’s positive face because they can be understood as an indication that the speaker’s wishes do not correspond to those of the hearer (see also Gelykens and Kraft 2003). Thus, when complaining the speaker “[…] potentially disputes, challenges, or bluntly denies the social competence of the complainee” who must in turn admit that “[…] he in his behaviour has damaged or denied the social standing of the complainer” (Edmondson and House 1981, 145). But direct complaints may also negatively affect the complainer’s positive and negative face, for she “[…] may not wish to be seen as a “whiner” who imposes […] her troubles on people” (Márquez-Reiter 2005, 484).

Despite the negative interactive outcomes that can be associated with direct complaints, indirect complaints about a third party or complainable have been found to function as an efficient interactive mechanism of association between the interlocutors that results in emotional reciprocity, rapport, strengthening of their links of solidarity, re-affirmation of complicity or the construction of a common identity (Günthner 1997; Drew 1998; Acuña Ferreira 2002-2003, 2004; Edwards 2005). Consequently, in some contexts complaints can be perceived as FBAs instead of FTAs.

Research on indirect complaints from a discourse-analytic perspective has examined the procedures involved in the interactional management of this activity and the conversational devices used to invite the affiliative display of the interlocutors in complaint sequences about a third party’s offences, transgressions or misconducts. Thus, discourse analysts have focused, among others, on the narratives and dramatic staging of the events or conduct which are the subject of complaints, the use of laughter and reported speech with parodic purposes, contrasts between appropriate, desirable or expectable and inappropriate conducts, or the verbal and prosodic strategies employed to achieve emotional involvement (e.g. Günthner 1997; Acuña Ferreira 2002-2003, 2004; Edwards 2005). From Gender Analysis, some authors have also compared complaints made by men and women, and analysed the differences concerning the usage of and recourse to some of those conversational devices (e.g. Acuña Ferreira 2002-2003, 2004). Obviously, those devices are fundamental to the achievement of those effects, but discourse analysts have not duly addressed other crucial factors such as the linguistic properties of indirect complaints and their strategic usage.

From a pragmatic standpoint, and following Schneider’s (1988) work on phatic communion, indirect complaints about obvious, apparently irrelevant, already known facts, conduct and events could be said to contribute to create association, emotional reciprocity, rapport, links of solidarity, complicity or common identity because they are instantiations of the first eight positive-politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987)4. More exactly, indirect complaints could be regarded as manifestations of the seventh of such strategies, which leads interlocutors to presuppose common ground and to take for granted or state the existence of affinity with hearers as regards their opinions or viewpoints about some events, objects or states of affairs. This is so because with positive politeness-strategies individuals treat others as people whose wishes and personal features they know and admire; they can express approval and interest in the hearer, indicate in-group membership, agreement and reciprocity concerning the interlocutors’ desires, intentions, features, preferences, opinions and viewpoints (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Brown 2000). Accordingly, indirect complaints about a complainable with which two interlocutors are acquainted can contribute to the effects mentioned because they indicate that both the speaker and the hearer belong to the same group of individuals who hold a particular point of view, opinion or attitude towards that complainable, may explicitly or implicitly express the speaker’s approval of the hearer’s point of view or opinion about the complainable, seek a

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4 Namely, these strategies are: “notice, attend to H[earer] (his interests, wants, needs, goods)”; “exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)”; “intensify interest to H”; “use in-group identity markers”; “seek agreement”, “avoid disagreement”, “presuppose/raise/assert common ground” and “joke” (Brown and Levinson 1987, 102).
certain (total or partial) agreement with the hearer as to what they both think about the complainable and show that both interlocutors agree with each other as regards their respective viewpoints or opinions about the events, objects or states of affairs alluded.

However, a pragmatic explanation about why indirect complaints contribute to the effects mentioned should not be exclusively based on judgements about their nature as FT As or FBAs or as a specific type of politeness strategy in a decontextualised manner. Factors such as the speaker’s intentions when verbalising them or the way in which the hearer might interpret them play a crucial role. Explanations based on the observation of certain regularities in speech behaviour are not completely satisfactory, so it would be necessary to find an alternative explanation that accounts for the communicative effects of indirect complaints. Such explanation must take into consideration the properties of these speech acts and the mental processes occurring during their production and interpretation (e.g. Levinson 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1997). Taking this into account, I attempt to develop a more complete pragmatic explanation in the next section along the same lines as a recent relevance-theoretic account of phatic utterances (Padilla Cruz 2004, 2005, 2007a).

4. Indirect complaints, rapport and metarepresentation: a relevance-theoretic proposal

As mentioned above, the explanation that I would like to suggest in this paper of how indirect complaints contribute to the generation of rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between interlocutors as a consequence of their usage in verbal interaction is based on some of the theoretical concepts and tenets of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004). As to the relevance-theoretic concepts, it is based on that of ‘mutual manifestness’, which refers to the possibility that each individual has of entertaining mental representations about some facts or assumptions, and that of ‘cognitive environment’, understood as the set of facts or assumptions of which an individual can potentially have mental representations (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995, 39).

As to the relevance-theoretic tenets on which this explanation is based, it rests on its portrayal of human communication as an ‘ostensive-inferential’ process in which the speaker overtly draws the hearer’s attention by means of a special type of intentional stimulus—an utterance—with which she intends to make manifest to the hearer a series of assumptions, which constitute her ‘informative intention’, and indicates the hearer her intention to communicate those assumptions, so she also has a ‘communicative intention’. Once the hearer recognises that intention on the part of the speaker, his task is to decode the utterance using his knowledge of a linguistic code, enrich the ‘logical form’ obtained from its decoding with contextual material and recover the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition that she communicates so as to construct the ‘explicatures’ of the utterance, and recover its possible ‘implicatures’ resorting to the necessary assumptions that he thinks that the speaker expected him to use—implicated premises—in order to draw the appropriate conclusions—implicated conclusions5.

This explanation is also based on the assumption that utterances ‘metarepresent’ the thoughts of the speaker or, in other words, they are public audible representations or other private representations. Moreover, it assumes that individuals have an ability to attribute beliefs and desires to others, so they can entertain representations of what they think other individuals believe or desire; i.e. they can entertain ‘metarepresentations’ of their beliefs and desires (e.g. Sperber 1995; Wilson 1999).

Finally, the contribution to the generation of the communicative effects attributed to indirect complaints can be accounted for in two ways, which correspond to two possible idealised situations or circumstances: one in which interlocutors may not have previously met and therefore may not know each other and/or share a certain amount of knowledge, and another situation in which interlocutors have actually already met, know each other (well) and do share a certain common knowledge. As I say, these two situations are idealised because of the knowledge that can be assumed that interlocutors possess. Regarding the first situation, it is probably naïve to think that two individuals who have not met before and do not know each other do not share any item of information because, since they may belong to the same sociocultural group, it is quite reasonable to think that they will share some of the (cultural) assumptions that are disseminated throughout the individuals of their group (Sperber 1996). As to the second situation, it may also be idealised because of the theoretical problems that the notion of shared,

5 Even if these interpretive tasks have been presented as if hearers performed them sequentially, hearers may not perform them in this order or may even perform them simultaneously (e.g. Carston 2001, 19; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 261-262).
mutual or common knowledge poses (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 18). However, as some authors have pointed out (e.g. Gerrig 1987; Gibbs 1987; Mey and Talbot 1988), it is rather reasonable to admit that some individuals do share some amount of knowledge, even if they are not completely sure about what the other(s) know, a knowledge that can be termed ‘previous shared knowledge’ (Yus Ramos 1997) or ‘previous cognition’ (Hamamoto 1998).

Concerning the first situation, indirect complaints can be said to contribute to rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between interlocutors in those cases in which their respective cognitive environments intersect. Cognitive environments are very specific of interlocutors; they are, so to say, individualistic, as they contain assumptions, already existing —of which interlocutors are aware— or potential —i.e. likely to be entertained— which can certainly vary from individual to individual, not only in content but also in strength. When making an indirect complaint, some of the assumptions that the speaker metarepresents with her utterance—which constitute her informative intention—and makes manifest to the hearer may be similar to those that the hearer may retrieve from his memory or construct on the fly during the interpretation process. This is possible because, as Sperber and Wilson point out, both individuals “[…] share physical environments and have similar cognitive abilities” (1995, 41). In effect, the fact that the interlocutors share cognitive environments provides them with “[…] direct evidence about what is manifest to them” (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 45). Thus, from the assumptions that become manifest to the hearer when processing an indirect complaint, he can derive further weaker assumptions about the assumptions that the speaker is entertaining at that moment. To put it differently, the fact that those individuals share a mutual cognitive environment can give the hearer sufficient reasons to attribute the manifestness of (some of) the assumptions that are manifest to himself to the speaker.

As a consequence of sharing that specific mutual cognitive environment and deriving those assumptions, the hearer can also sense or feel that the assumptions that become manifest to himself and those that he thinks are manifest to the speaker, and which she communicates by means of the indirect complaint, can be similar or resemble each other to some extent. Such similarity or resemblance involves the possibility of deriving from those manifest assumptions a number of logical or contextual implications, which must be mutually manifest to both interlocutors. The more logical or contextual implications the hearer can derive from them, and the more he feels or senses that the speaker can also draw similar assumptions, the more similar those assumptions will indeed be.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the utterance that the hearer is processing is an indirect complaint, and with that type of speech act, as mentioned above, the speaker expresses a particular attitude toward the propositional content of her utterance, i.e. towards the facts, events, behaviours or states of affairs complained about or, what is the same, the complainable. The manifestness of the assumptions about the complainable that the speaker communicates to the hearer with an indirect complaint may provoke in him a reaction towards it. That reaction can be an attitude towards the complainable that can be similar to, or even the same as, the attitude he observes in or attributes to the speaker. Therefore, in the mutual cognitive environment in which both individuals are interacting and the hearer processes an indirect complaint, it can also become manifest to him that the attitude expressed by the speaker is similar to or the same as the one he then has towards the facts, events, behaviours, states of affairs alluded to in the indirect complaint when processing it. What I would like to suggest in this paper is that, for an indirect complaint to contribute to create rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between two interlocutors in a situation in which they have not met before or do not know each other (well), the hearer must feel or sense that the assumptions that become manifest to himself when processing that indirect complaint are similar to those that are manifest to the complainer and that the attitude he has towards the complainable is also similar to that of the speaker’s.

Accordingly, consider the following complaints produced in a mutual cognitive environment in which it is manifest to the speaker and the hearer that there is a disgusting traffic jam in a certain place of a city (1) and there is a bike lane which, unfortunately, occupies a great part of the pavement (2):

(1) This is incredible! The same traffic jam every morning! And in the same place!
(2) Why the hell did the mayor make this damned bike lane right here?

When processing these complaints, their hearers may realise that the assumptions that their respective speakers metarepresent, which constitute their informative intentions, can be similar to those that they can retrieve or construct on the fly. The hearers may realise this after enriching some of the constituents of the logical form of each utterance in order to recover their explicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995, 78). The enrichment of the logical form of (1) would require from its hearer to determine, among other things, how surprised, frustrated, displeased or annoyed the speaker is, the kind of traffic jam she is talking about,
if the traffic jam takes place every single morning—as the speaker seems to say literally—or not that often, or the exact place of the traffic jam. In the case of (2), its hearer would have to determine which bike lane the speaker alludes to or the location ‘here’ refers to. If each of those hearers sense that the explicatures that they recover coincide with what they think their respective speakers intend to communicate, they will feel that the assumptions that those complaints make manifest to themselves and those that their interlocutors entertain and communicate with each utterance are similar.

But, as mentioned above, the similarity of those assumptions requires that the interlocutors can also derive some logical or contextual implications. The more of these implications those assumptions share, the more similar they will be. Thus, (1) may contextually imply that it will take both interlocutors longer to get to work, that they may arrive late to work or that the city council should do something to solve the traffic problems. In turn, (2) may imply that the place where the bike lane has been made is inadequate, that the person responsible for its construction could have thought about building it in a different place or that it is significantly reducing the space for pedestrians on the pavement. If these implications or similar assumptions are manifest to the complainers and their respective hearers, the similarity between the assumptions metarepresented by those indirect complaints and those that each interlocutor entertains will increase and, consequently, the feeling of rapport, solidarity, reciprocity, association or complicity may arise or increase between the interlocutors.

Finally, for the achievement of the communicative effects associated with indirect complaints it must be manifest to the hearers that both their speakers and themselves have the same attitude towards the facts, events, behaviours or states of affairs referred to in the utterances. Therefore, if the hearers realise that their interlocutors are expressing surprise, frustration, displeasure or annoyance towards the states of affairs mentioned in the complaints and feel that those states of affairs produce the same attitude in them, they will feel that they share a common attitude, which is essential for the achievement of those communicative effects.

Regarding the second possible situation in which the interlocutors may know each other to a certain extent because they have previously met, indirect complaints can contribute to the achievement of the effects attributed to them because they can refer to facts, events, conducts or states of affairs with which both the speaker and hearer are (equally) acquainted. In other words, indirect complaints can make manifest assumptions that are already manifest to each interlocutor in their cognitive environments. This means that each interlocutor can have mental representations about the facts, events, conducts or states of affairs to which an indirect complaint refers. Therefore, those complaints would be ‘phatic’ to a certain extent, in the relevance-theoretic sense given to phatic utterances by Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999). But, as in the previous situation, for indirect complaints to contribute those effects, it is essential that there also arises a certain degree of similarity between the assumptions that each interlocutor entertains and, in addition, between those assumptions and the assumptions that the indirect complaints make manifest.

In relevance-theoretic terms, indirect complaints about already known facts, events, conducts or states of affairs can be considered as ‘interpretive’ utterances (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 228-229) that metarepresent one or some of the assumptions manifest to the interlocutors interacting in a mutual cognitive environment. Using Noh’s (2000) terminology, such complaints are instances of ‘interpretive metarepresentations’. As any utterance, an indirect complaint metarepresents the speaker’s own thoughts, opinions or ideas about the facts, events, conducts or states of affairs to which it refers. However, since these can also be manifest to the hearer, when the speaker makes an indirect complaint she can also metarepresent assumptions that she thinks may be or has evidence to think that are indeed manifest to the hearer. Therefore, indirect complaints about already known facts, events, conducts or states of affairs can be considered cases of ‘attributive metarepresentations’ (Wilson 1999) because the speaker simultaneously attributes to the hearer some beliefs. In this situation, what the speaker does is to attribute to the hearer the manifestness of the assumptions that she metarepresents with her utterance and which constitute her informative intention.

Consider the following complaints produced in mutual cognitive environments in which it is already manifest to both interlocutors in each case that there are always many people at a certain disco (3), a famous and extremely expensive football player is not playing as expected (4), and prices have dramatically increased over the last months (5):

(3) There are always so many people in “Theatre”!
(4) Ronaldo’s performance this year is not just simply poor.
(5) € 1.30 for just one coffee!
In these examples, due to the fact that the interlocutors are interacting within a mutual cognitive environment and know each other to a certain extent, some of the assumptions that each speaker metarepresents with those complaints may be similar, or even almost identical, to those that are manifest to their respective hearers. As in the previous situation, when processing these complaints, their hearers will have to check that such similarity between the assumptions metarepresented by the speakers and those that they entertain arises. They will do so by pragmatically enriching some of the constituents of the logical forms of each utterance by means of reference assignment, disambiguation of ambiguous material or enrichment of some concepts in order to recover the explicature of each utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 78). Thus, as in examples (1-2) above, in (3) its hearer will have to assign a referent to 'Theatre' or determine what his interlocutor means by 'always' -- 'every single day', 'all the weekends', 'all Saturday nights (but not Saturday afternoons)', etc.-- or 'so many people' -- 'too many people for a rather small disco', 'a huge crowd', 'more than twenty people' or just 'a few people', etc. The hearer of (4) will have to check who the Ronaldo mentioned is, what he does, to what extent what he does is 'poor' or why it is so. Finally, the hearer of (5) must check the type of coffee the speaker has in mind -- just an espresso, a latte macchiato with cream and cinnamon or an Irish coffee-- or if its price is reasonable or abusive. If those hearers sense that the explicatures that they recover coincide with what their speakers intend to communicate, they will feel that the assumptions manifest to themselves are similar to those that the speakers entertain and metarepresent with each of those utterances.

Next, the complainees will have to check whether the assumptions metarepresented by those complaints and the assumptions manifest to themselves share some logical or contextual implications because the more they share, the more similar those assumptions. Thus, (3) may imply that the interlocutors will have to queue for a long time in order to get into the disco, that the disco is not going to be comfortable that night or that it will take them very long to get a drink. (4) may imply that the football player the speaker is talking about could make efforts to play in a more satisfactory way, that his play will negatively affect the results of his football club in the league or that the club could have chosen a different player. Finally, (5) may imply that the price of the coffee is so expensive that the interlocutors will not afford to order some pastry or that they should think about having coffee in a different bar. If these implications, or similar ones, are manifest to the complainers and their respective complainees, the similarity between the assumptions metarepresented by those indirect complaints and those that each interlocutor entertains will increase and this, consequently, may lead them to feel rapport, solidarity, reciprocity, association or complicity towards each other.

As stated above, with an indirect complaint a speaker expresses an attitude towards the assumptions that she metarepresents. Since in this situation the speakers attribute the manifestness of some assumptions to their hearers and also express their attitude towards those assumptions, they echo those assumptions and the complaints become ‘echoic attributive metarepresentations’ (Padilla Cruz 2004, 2005, 2007a). In the case of indirect complaints about facts, events, conducts or states of affairs already manifest to both interlocutors, as has also been seen above, the attitude that the speaker expresses may range from frustration, discomfort, dissatisfaction, discontent or anxiety to extreme indignation or disapproval and rejection of those facts, events, conducts or states of affairs. However, since those facts, events, conducts or states of affairs are already manifest to both interlocutors, it may also be manifest to the interlocutors that they have one particular attitude or some attitudes towards them, i.e. that they already feel frustration, discomfort, dissatisfaction, etc. Hence, for the speakers to generate solidarity, rapport, reciprocity or association with their hearers, they do not simply have to express one of the attitudes mentioned towards the metarepresented content, but also an attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval of that first attitude that both they and their hearers already have. This means that that second attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval is combined or blended with the first attitude that the interlocutors have. Such a combination of attitudes is essential for the speakers’ communicative purposes because with that second attitude they provide their interlocutors with strong(er) evidence that they share the same attitude(s) towards the facts, events, conducts or states of affairs against which she complains. With such a combination of attitudes the speakers show that not only their beliefs and those of their hearers are similar, but also that their feelings are similar too, and indicating shared feelings is essential for the achievement of rapport, reciprocity, association, complicity or solidarity between the interlocutors too. In this way, the speakers can seek, intensify or exaggerate agreement or sympathy with their interlocutors, notice or approve of their interlocutors’ interests or concerns, imply that they belong to the same group of individuals with a particular opinion or point of view, or presuppose, raise or assert common ground with them (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987).

To sum up, what happens in the case of indirect complaints against facts, events, conducts or states of affairs with which both interlocutors are already acquainted is that the attitude of frustration, discomfort,
dissatisfaction, discontent, anxiety, indignation, disapproval or rejection characteristic of complaints is further blended with an attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval. Such a combination of attitudes could be called ‘rejecting agreement’, ‘agreement in frustration/discomfort/dissatisfaction/discontent/anxiety/indignation/disapproval/rejection, etc.’, depending on the specific first attitude that the speaker has expressed. With such a combination of attitudes, the speaker communicates that she and the hearer indeed share the same negative viewpoint about the facts, events, conducts or states of affairs which provokes them (a) particular feeling(s). Therefore, the feelings of emotional reciprocity, rapport, solidarity, complicity or of a common identity attributed to indirect complaints may arise or increase if the complainer metarepresents assumptions that she believes or has evidence to think are similar or almost identical to those that the hearer entertains, and if she also expresses an attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval of a manifest attitude of frustration, discomfort, dissatisfaction, discontent, anxiety, indignation, disapproval or rejection.

5. Conclusion

The discussion of the use of indirect complaints in the two situations examined in this paper –one in which interlocutors have not probably met before and can therefore be assumed to have little or no shared knowledge, and another in which they have and hence do have that kind of knowledge– implies that the generation of the communicative effects associated with such speech acts requires and relies heavily on the interlocutors’ mind-reading abilities or theory of mind. Thus, in the first situation, as a result of an utterance produced by the speaker, the hearer must be able to attribute to the speaker the manifestness of a set of assumptions that he thinks are similar to those that the utterance makes manifest to himself. Additionally, he must also be able to attribute to the speaker a specific attitude towards the complainable that must coincide with the one that the assumptions made manifest about the complainable provokes in him. However, in the second situation, it is the speaker that, so to say, must anticipate to the hearer, for she must be able to foresee which assumptions about some facts, events, behaviours or states of affairs that are already manifest to herself will be manifest to him and attribute to him the manifestness of that set of assumptions so as to produce an utterance that metarepresents them. Besides, the speaker must express a specific attitude of endorsement that combines with another attitude of frustration, discomfort, dissatisfaction, etc. which she must also be able to attribute to the hearer.

In the first situation, the generation of the effects mentioned may be the result of a mere coincidence, as the hearer may sense that there is a fortuitous intersection between the speaker’s cognitive environment and his own cognitive environment. Although the human input systems are attuned and filter reality differently, so that individuals do not mentally represent it in the same way and, therefore, the content of their mental representations may vary (e.g. Cooper 1988; Kasher 1991), the hearer may have a certain intuition that such intersection can actually take place as a result of the set of mental mechanisms with which human beings are biologically endowed and which enable us to represent beliefs, plans of actions or desires and attribute these to others, i.e. what Searle (1983) calls the ‘Background’. In addition to the assumption that individuals have similar cognitive abilities, the fact that both interlocutors are interacting in a similar physical environment can also lead the hearer to feel that his cognitive environment intersects with that of the speaker’s. Therefore, thanks to these factors a hearer can realise that the assumptions that he entertains can be similar to those that he can attribute to the speaker, and check if both of them have a similar attitude towards the complainable. But the assumptions that the hearer entertains become manifest to him as a consequence of the speaker having intentionally drawn his attention towards a certain set thereof by means of an ostensive verbal stimulus. That stimulus, his Background and the fact that both individuals are interacting in a specific physical environment constitute the evidence that the hearer has in order to attribute to the speaker the manifestness of that set of assumptions he senses that are similar to those he entertains.

In the second situation, on the contrary, those effects can be sought and produced by the speaker on purpose. The speaker, as a result of having previously interacted with the hearer, is aware of the assumptions that he is rather likely to entertain at a certain moment concerning a specific event, behaviour, object, state of affairs, etc. Hence, she produces an utterance that metarepresents assumptions that she thinks are similar to those that she has reasons or evidence to think the hearer entertains. Besides, she expresses an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of the specific attitude that she also has reasons or evidence to think the hearer has towards those assumptions. That attitude blends with the attributed one and, therefore, the speaker expresses a combination of attitudes.
As has been observed, the explanation suggested in this paper is based on human mind-reading abilities. Nonetheless, the discussion of these two situations poses an intriguing question: how could the individuals be confident enough about the contextual assumptions that can be or become (more) manifest to their interlocutors without requiring too much investment of processing effort? Evidently, the answer to this question is to be found in the fact that human beings have developed an ability to predict the contexts in which hearers will interpret utterances, “[…] some natural tendency that enables us to spontaneously identify our manifestly shared cognitive environments with other people as efficiently as we do” (Assimakopoulos 2008, 140). Human beings have a tendency to align their perspectives about the world, an innate predisposition to coordinate their mental contents, especially because those contents are highly individualistic. Such tendency to align their perspectives about the world is based on the human innate predisposition to entertain metarepresentations about the intentions and beliefs of others and also to attend to our environment jointly with other individuals.

To conclude, the discussion of the second situation also has implications for the understanding of phatic communication. Although indirect complaints about already known complainables may apparently seem irrelevant because they, like any phatic utterance, make manifest assumptions that are previously manifest to the interlocutors (Žegarac 1998; Žegarac and Clark 1999), they may achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the feeling of solidarity, rapport, reciprocity or association that they can achieve. I have argued in this paper that these feelings can be generated because the complainer attributes the manifestness of assumptions about some facts, events, conducts, situations or states of affairs that are also manifest to the hearer, metarepresents those assumptions and expresses an attitude of endorsement, agreement or acceptance that blends another that is already manifest to both interlocutors. With that combination of attitudes the speaker shows the hearer that she has the same negative opinion about the complainable, which is essential for the generation of the feelings attributed to indirect complaints. In turn, for the hearer to achieve the feelings mentioned, he has to check that the assumptions manifest to himself are similar to those metarepresented by the speaker⁶. Nevertheless, in suggesting that those feelings can be achieved in the way explained here, it is not my intention to state that they are solely generated thus. As extensive research in social pragmatics has shown, the feelings of solidarity, rapport, reciprocity or association between interlocutors also depend on other social and/or psychological factors, such as the individuals’ frequency of contact, their degree of familiarity, the time they know each other, the (reciprocal) positive or negative affect they feel towards each other, a certain feeling of like-mindedness when facing specific states of affairs, a possible feeling of comradeship, the social power one of them has over the other and the way s/he exerts it, or the relative degree of imposition that their actions have upon the other, among others (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Spencer-Oatey 1993, 1996; Lorés Sanz 1997-1998). Therefore, it could be said that the linguistic properties of indirect complaints and the cognitive operations carried out by interlocutors when producing and interpreting them are some of the many indispensable factors that contribute to the generation of the feelings associated with those speech acts.

References


⁶ This analysis of indirect complaints also resembles another of phatic ironic utterances (Padilla Cruz 2007b) in that it also argues that the speaker expresses a combination of attitudes.