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Indice

STUDI

RECENSIONI

"WE'RE SORRY FOR ANY INCONVENIENCE CAUSED"
Pragmatic aspects of handling complaints
in customer-airline company tweets

SILVIA CAVALIERI, SARA CORRIZZATO
UNIVERSITY OF VERONA

Abstract – In the relationship between customers and companies, the Web has radically changed the communicative context in which they daily interact, as computer-based technology includes many possibilities to express opinions and to exchange information freely. Therefore, customers have become familiar with leaving feedback through dedicated reviews sites, especially through social media, generating a powerful word of mouth. While complaints are now exposed to a wider audience because thousands of other potential customers can read all the interactions, airline companies have more opportunities to listen to travellers and engage with them. The digital revolution has thus had a profound influence on complaint management, which is becoming a priority in order to win back the complaint and shape the reputation of the company.

The present paper offers a discourse-pragmatic analysis of complaints negotiation tweets written by native/non-native travellers and four European airlines companies (British Airways, Lufthansa, Ryanair and EasyJet) in summer 2021. The analysis aims at examining the use of directness/indirectness, politeness strategies and upgraders/downgraders in customer-airline company online interactions. Preliminary findings demonstrate that, depending on the different discursive strategies adopted by customers (from neutral to more confrontational formulations), airline companies apologies tend to mitigate conflicts showing empathy and promoting a traveller-oriented approach.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; complaints; tweets; airlines online communication; apology strategies.

1. Introduction[1]

The digital revolution has brought immeasurable and unpredictable changes to people's everyday lives, giving them the possibility to stay permanently connected in a world that is perpetually online. Instant messaging apps and social media networks have become vital channels for individuals' daily interactions. Users rely on these platforms for a wide variety of reasons, i.e. keeping in touch with family and friends, gathering information and posting their opinions, points of views and experiences. As a result, the internet is an integral part of the lives of people of all ages who are online all the time. As shown by data published by Statista, the number of smartphone users in the world today is 6,648 billion, which means that more than 80% of the world's population owns a smartphone[2]. This is not hard to believe: for example, it has been calculated that in Italy in 2020 the number of smartphones exceeded the number of Italian inhabitants: around 80 million mobile devices for a population of 60 million[3]. Recent studies also confirm an analogous

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[1] The article has been jointly planned by the two authors: Silvia Cavalieri has dealt with sections 3, 4 (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4) and 5; while Sara Corrizzato with sections 1, 2 and 4 (4.5, 4.6, 4.7).

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide/ (3.7.2022).

[3] https://www.ansa.it/pressrelease/lifestyle/2020/11/30/italia-piu-smartphone-che-abitanti-il-panorama-digitale-2020_f8f9d1a2-3895-4f87-b9fc-6af8ddaf5c48.html (30.6.2022).

trend overseas: during the first months of 2021, internet users in the USA spent about three hours and 30 minutes using the internet on their mobile phones per day. Users in the Philippines, Thailand and Brazil ranked first, spending more than five hours online per day, whilst the world average of time spent online on mobile phones in the same period was around three hours and 40 minutes[4].

Replacing newspapers with information platforms, converting traditional lessons into webinars and face-to-face interactions into virtual meetings, people are online at any time. The consequences flowing from the development of this new means of communication have also affected the way(s) in which customers appreciate goods and services and select their favourite brands (Mattiacci, Partore 2014, p. 57). The internet has deeply changed the relationship between sellers and consumers, as companies' traditional marketing was based on top-down and one-to-many relationships with their consumers. Companies' messages were mass-produced and customers passively received them; with the advent of digital marketing, customer-seller relationships have become multidirectional, as the one-to-one approach decreases the distance between the seller and the customer (Mattiacci, Partore 2014, p. 61).

In contrast to traditional internet websites, where users can only read through the site, Web 2.0 is a highly interactive environment, which aims at promoting communication and collaboration among users (Charlesworth 2014). Increasing market visibility and enhancing retail opportunities for companies go hand in hand with greater freedom for customers to interact directly on the web, thus becoming content creators themselves: in a nutshell, enterprises can no longer remain inside their impregnable Camelot castle, as they can hardly control content posted by customers on the web. Users are not only active participants in the web content creation process, but are also ready to add real-time reactions to everything that happens around them; in this sense, some eye-opening examples are the comments below each public and/or private post on Facebook and Instagram or the crowd-sourced reviews shared on specialized platforms, such as TripAdvisor, Foursquare or Yelp!. Within this dynamic and interactive online structure, companies have opted to interact directly with customers, who, by leaving comments at any time and in any place in the world, can influence the company's reputation: word of mouth can help to enhance the corporate image, but it can also seriously damage it.

The present study aims at investigating the linguistic strategies used by the customer service of four European airline companies (British Airways, Lufthansa, Ryanair and EasyJet) to handle the complaints customers share on Twitter and avoid conflict-related situations.

2. Theoretical framework

As the internet has progressively revolutionized the users' interactional environment and given them an increasingly complex and fascinating relational profile, there has been a large number of linguistic studies in the field analysing the resulting human linguistic behavior from different angles (Dayter, Rüdiger 2020; Hoffmann, Bublitz 2017; Scott 2022; Seargeant, Tagg 2014; Zappavigna 2012). As suggested in the previous paragraph, the customer-seller relationship has also attracted the linguists' interest, promoting an explosion of research publications on the use of English in business-related situations on

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[4] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1288783/daily-time-spent-online-via-mobile/ (28.5.2022).

the web (Ahearne *et al.* 2022; Cenni, Goethals 2017; Delos Reyes *et al.* 2018; Nurhantoro, Wulandari 2017; Nwala, Tamunobelema 2019) focusing on the multifaceted ways in which users as well as companies use online communication on social media.

A closer look at the studies in the field of pragmatics shows that the interactional context of the web has been also investigated by pragmaticians, who address central features of online human communication from different angles (Rüdiger, Mühleisen 2022; Scott 2022; Xie *et al.* 2021; Yus 2018). In this area too, the relationship between customers and companies has been placed in the spotlight to better understand how language choices affect their interaction (Flores-Salgado, Castineira-Benitez 2018; Virtanen, Lee 2022), as much of a company's reputation and success depends on customer satisfaction. It is worth considering that the ease with which customers can post their judgements and thoughts online and the speed with which the rest of the world can read them can modify other readers' perception quickly and irreversibly.

Recognition of the central role of complaints within the representation of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and the resulting reverberations that such statements can have on the online audience has led to a new surge in linguistic studies of complaints and how they are handled. Based on the assumption that "asynchronous communication media such as online opinion forums [are] particularly suited to complaint communication seeing that the sender is in full control over the point of time, content and subsequent extent of exchange of his/her complaint behaviour" (Breitsohl *et al.* 2010, p. 653), the analyses have provided an overview of the use of complaints on social media, such as Facebook (Einwiller, Steilen 2015), Instagram (Marpurdianto 2021) and Twitter (Depraeterea *et al.* 2021; Fuoli *et al.* 2021; Page 2014; Vladimiroua *et al.* 2021), and on specialised website forums, such as travel websites (Ho 2018; Vásquez 2011;).

Complaining, which has been identified as an expressive speech act (Searle 1979), means declaring the speaker's disapproval of behaviours or events mentioned with the communicative act. Thus, a complaint is "an illocutionary act in which the speaker expresses his/her disapproval and negative feeling towards the state of affairs described in the proposition and for which s/he holds the hearer responsible, either directly or indirectly" (Trosborg 1995, p. 311). Given their complexity, Trosborg (1995) inscribes complaints into a second category of speech acts, called directives, as they carry specific consequences influencing the listeners' behaviour: the complainee, responsible for something he has already done or failed to do, is usually committed to repairing or preventing a repetition of the act in the future. Complaints are by their nature designed to cause offence and therefore they threaten the social relationship between speaker and hearer. The complainer is breaking the principle of cooperation, as s/he challenges the interlocutor, who is supposed to have already done something wrong. The study of this complex speech act has produced different taxonomies (Decock, Depraetere 2018; Drew, Walker 2009; House, Kasper 1981; Trosborg 1995; Vasquez 2011) which aims at classifying the wide range of interactional dynamics that are involved in the communicative exchange and the discursive strategies used by speakers.

To facilitate data processing, Decock and Depraetere's (2018) new categorization has been taken into consideration, recognizing that a complaint situation includes four constitutive components: a) a past or ongoing action or occurrence (the complainable); b) the disapproval or negative evaluation of the complainable; c) the assumed agentive involvement of the complainee; d) the wish for the offence to be remedied (Decock, Depraetere 2018, p. 10). Thus, according to them, complaints can have different degrees of explicitness according to the number of components that are explicitly mentioned: a) implicit complaint; b) explicit reference to the speech act; c) one component is explicitly

expressed; d) two components are explicitly expressed; e) three components are explicitly expressed; f) four components are explicitly expressed.

Although the present analysis is concerned with investigating how airlines respond to complaints - and does not analyse the communication strategies of those who complain - such a clarification is crucial, as the threads included in the corpus consist of complaints which make explicit all four components listed above, i.e. the complainable, complainer's disapproval, complainee's involvement and quest for repair (see section 3.2).

As far as responses to complaints are concerned, only answers which include apologies have been taken into account in the corpus. In Schwarz's words (1999, p. 5), an apology "belongs to the post-event-acts, i.e. it signals that a certain type of event has already taken place. The speaker recognizes the fact that a violation of the social norm has been committed and that the speaker is at least partially involved. The involvement means a loss of face for the speaker and is [generally] hearer-supportive". From a practical point of view, this means that whenever the customer service team receives a complaint about something the traveller is dissatisfied with, they introduce the response with an apology, considered the face-saving act *par excellence*. The apology on the social media is then generally followed by other details (see section 4).

The expressive speech act of apology has been studied and categorised several times over the last forty years (Benoit 1995; Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989; Norrick 1978; Spencer-Oatey 2008; Trosborg 1995): although scholars have tried to identify the way in which apologies are linguistically realised, they have not been able to agree on a universal categorization and have offered different research perspectives. The present study has adopted Trosborg's (1995) classification of apology, since its precondition is that a) it implies cost to the speaker and support to the hearer, b) it aims at restoring harmony. According to this taxonomy, apology strategies can be used by speakers for seven different reasons – excluding the one expressing direct apology which is taken as a pre-requisite for the present analysis.

Below, Trosborg's (1995) list of strategies:

1. Denying responsibility
2. Minimising the degree of offence
3. Acknowledging responsibility
4. Explaining or accounting for the complainable
5. Offering repair
6. Promising forbearance
7. Expressing concern for the hearer

The aforementioned communicative functions are supported by specific linguistic strategies, which allow the speakers to convey the message. For example, if the interlocutor refuses to take responsibility (1), s/he can deny being responsible for the violation with a certain degree of explicitness or blame a third party or the hearer as the cause of further violation (Trosborg 1995). In addition, if the speaker aims at minimising the misdeed (2), s/he can blur the nature of the offense or question the identity of the offender (Kampf 2009). On the contrary, when the speaker accepts responsibility for the wrong that was done (3), s/he generally opts for an indirect apology explaining what happened or retracing facts. When the apologiser wants to demonstrate to the recipient that he completely accepts responsibility for what happened, s/he expresses sincere regret and remorse (4) (Trosborg 1995) favouring a direct apology. Offering repair (5) and promising forbearance (6) are translated into the interlocutor's promise that the wrong will not recur and that verbal apologies will be accompanied by concrete measures. The last category (7)

means that apologies are not merely expressing empty rhetoric, but the hearer-oriented approach shows empathy for the complainer.

It is also worth noting that the pragmatic appropriateness of a particular expression depends on several factors which may vary according to the situational context and to the interlocutor's cultural background. The strategy chosen by speakers to apologize is, therefore, generally culture-dependent. In the case of the present study, the assumption is even more valid in the case of the complainer, who is given an answer: indeed, it is up to him/her to recognize the validity of the speech act. Given the fact that airlines customer services do not know the nationality of each person writing in English, they are forced to adopt strategies which can sympathise with a wide audience and that have an intercultural perspective. With this premise, the results provided by the analysis will show the most frequent linguistic strategies used by airline companies to restore their reputation trying to avoid conflict-related situations with the international community.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Data collection process

The corpus consists of complete threads (Tweets & Replies) collected from the Twitter accounts of four European airlines, two scheduled companies (British Airways, Lufthansa), and two low-cost companies (Ryanair and EasyJet), written in August 2021. We decided to focus on the adjacency pair "tweet & reply" in order to get a complete overview of the communicative exchange involving the apology strategies.

A Python[5] script was employed to obtain complaints from the Twitter accounts of the airline companies taken into consideration. Before saving them as CSV files, data went through an anonymization process in which all usernames of customers were changed into a format of 'id' plus six randomized numbers such as 'id679841'. This guaranteed further protection for customers, while also retaining import retweet information. Finally, the new CSV file was reformatted into XML, allowing for the meta data annotation (such as 'author', 'created_utc', and 'complaint_type', 'apology_type') to be separated from the 'title' and the body of the 'selftext', as well as to be readable for any corpus linguistics analytical tool. At the end of the entire data preparation process, the corpus consisted of 301,412 words. We excluded threads with tweets that are syntactically and/or semantically unacceptable.

The following table represents data subdivision according to the different airlines considered for the analysis:

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[5] Python is an interpreted, object-oriented, high-level programming language with dynamic semantics. Its high-level built-in data structures, combined with dynamic typing and dynamic binding, make it very attractive for Rapid Application Development, as well as for use as a scripting or glue language to connect existing components together. (https://www.python.org/doc/essays/blurb/ (18.7.2022).

	Tweets & Replies (August 2021)	Tokens (August 2021)
British Airways	1,674	110,439
Lufthansa	1,437	75,420
EasyJet	1,395	85,350
Ryanair	620	30,203
TOT	3,689	301,412

Table 1
Corpus distribution according to the different airline companies.

Given the heterogeneity of the interactions and in order to work on the qualitative analysis which implied a more careful reading of data (due to their style, length and content), we needed to create a more limited corpus. We therefore compiled a smaller pilot corpus containing 100 complaint threads for each airline, thus a total of 400 Tweets&Replies dealing with customers' dissatisfaction, which were randomly collected. The random collection was performed through the NumPy Python package, which automatically selected 100 samples for each corpus, thus ensuring the same representativeness as the main corpus.

3.2. Methodology for the analysis

The study adopted a mixed method approach and data were investigated both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. Our methodology drew on corpus linguistics, on the one hand, and pragmatics, on the other.
In a need for a more fine-grained analysis, we decided to restrict our analysis to those complaint-response formulae, which, as anticipated in the previous sections, respect the following linguistic criteria:

a complaint explicitly including the four constitutive components	+	a response beginning with explicit linguistic devices for the act of apologizing

Table 2
Complaint-response formula.

Customer service employees always respond choosing the explicit performative verb for the act of apologizing ("apologize") or expressions involving the word "sorry"; they usually add some details concerning the complainable and potential solutions. Therefore, our attention focused also on the second part of the response with other apology strategies (see section 4).

So, in the second phase of the investigation, the corpus software SketchEngine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004) was used to automatically identify routinized expressions usually associated with the act of apologizing through the Concordance tool.

The complete dataset was searched for the lexemes conventionally recognised as Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) of apologies (Trosborg 1995). According to the apology strategies theorized by Trosborg (see bullet points 7-13 in section 2), the restoration of a complainable may be performed through the following linguistic sub-strategies:

Apology strategies	Linguistic realisations
Denying responsibility	e.g. we know nothing about it; it's not our fault
Minimising the degree of offence	e.g. oh, what does that matter, that's nothing; well, everybody does that
Acknowledging responsibility	e.g. I can see your point; it was entirely my fault
Explaining or accounting for the complainable	e.g. such things are bound to happen; sorry for the late reply, but the system broke down
Offering repair	e.g. We'll pay for the suitcase; You can get a free ticket instead
Promising forbearance	e.g. It won't happen again
Expressing concern for the hearer	e.g. Sorry for the inconvenience

Table 3
Apology strategies and their linguistic realisations.

In addition to the aforementioned linguistic strategies, the analysis also took into consideration strategic disarmers, which are adopted to modify the attitudinal tone of the interaction and "pave the way for the acceptance of the apology" (Trosborg 1995, p. 383). Downtoners, understaters and hedges are also used to save the apologizer's face, making him/her appear less guilty and helping to restore harmony between the two interlocutors.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative overview

From a quantitative point of view, the following table illustrates the number of threads with the linguistic patterns described above:

Airline Company	N. of threads (/100)
British Airways	33
Lufthansa	29
Ryanair	12
EasyJet	48

Table 4
Number of threads (a complaint explicitly including the four constitutive components + a response beginning with explicit linguistic devices for the act of apologizing) for each airline company.

As shown in Table 4, EasyJet ranks first (including 48 out of 100 responses) for the number of answers that include direct apologies. The British low-cost company is followed by the two flag carrier airlines, whose responses displaying linguistic expressions of direct apology are around 30%. Unlike the other three companies, Ryanair shows a lower tendency to use direct apology linguistic expressions, as there are only 12 answers matching the analysis categories. It is also striking that the two low-cost airlines differ greatly in the use of explicit apologies, as the data demonstrate.

As far as the second phase of the analysis is concerned, routinized expressions usually associated with the act of apologizing were categorized, as illustrated below:

Apology strategies	British Airways	Lufthansa	Ryanair	EasyJet
Denying responsibility	16	11	3	18
Minimising the degree of offence	0	0	0	0
Acknowledging responsibility	23	21	8	35
Explaining or accounting for the complainable	17	13	7	28
Offering repair	8	5	1	11
Promising forbearence	19	20	3	24
Expressing concern for the hearer	30	17	0	41

Table 5
Quantitative presence of apology strategies within each sub-corpus.

As the figures show, the three categories which are mainly used by the four airlines are a) Acknowledging responsibility; b) Explaining or accounting for the complainable, and c) Promising forbearance. The hearer-oriented approach is also given prominence by the customer services, although there are no expressions conveying concern for the complainer in the threads downloaded from the Ryanair Twitter account. It needs to be pointed out that the total number of each column exceeds the total number of threads taken into consideration for each company because several strategies are used within the same reply. In addition, the figures in the table should be relativised considering the total number of threads for each airline company.

    Once the quantitative study was completed, the qualitative analysis of the data was carried out to comment upon the most frequent strategies used by the airline companies. The following sub-sections illustrate the results from the qualitative investigation. In order to make the interpretation of our data clearer, the most frequent strategies used by the four airlines (see table 5) will be exemplified.

4.2. Direct apology + denying responsibility

(1)   @id348765 · Aug 16
        Me "I'd like to upgrade my flight" @British_Airways "we can't help you, please call Qatar Airways. Me "I'd like to upgrade my flight". @qatarairways "We can't help you, please call BA". Does anyone know what's going on? 65mins of telephone queing time for nothing

        British Airways @British_Airways · Aug 16
        I'm sorry you're unhappy with the response, but if someone buys a ticket through another airline and the flight is operated by us. The airline you booked with are the only ones that are able to help you.

Example n.1 shows a direct apology, introduced with the use of the first-person pronoun, followed by the explicit reference to the factor determining the act of complaining. The second part of the customer service reply, introduced by "but", explicitly denies that the airline company is in any way responsible for it. The response also contains a justification, as they explain that the company they booked the flight with is responsible for the

problem. Interestingly, the skilled choice of the expression "[they] are the only ones that are able to help you" displays a hearer-oriented approach, thanks to the use of the verb "help" that implies the acknowledgement of an obstacle; moreover, putting it that way, the third party is not accused of being responsible for the problem but presented as the only one who can help the complainer. The strategic use of the adverb "only" stresses the fact that British Airways is not in any way responsible for bookings made with other companies. Thus, by maximizing the expression of beliefs conveying approval of the other (Leech 1983), British Airways remains neutral, showing solidarity both with the traveller and with the third party.

4.3. Direct apology + acknowledging responsibility

(2)   @id561234 · Aug 16
        Given the state of the airline industry right now, you would think that @British_Airways would respond to customers a bit quicker than they are. I don't want to resolve my problem by twitter, I just want to talk to someone!

        British Airways @British_Airways · Aug 16
        Hi XXX, sorry for the late reply! Our contact centre teams are extremely busy at the moment, with the recent travel guidance changes, but we're doing everything we can to answer calls as quickly as possible. Do you still need help? If so, feel free to send us a DM.

Unlike the previous response, in Example n. 2 British Airways chooses to admit responsibility, expressing self-deficiency by writing "our contact centre teams are extremely busy at the moment", including the first adverbial intensifier "extremely" which strengthens the valuable work they are doing. However, the admission of guilt is immediately mitigated by placing the blame outside: they clarify that the delays are not due to dissatisfied customers or problems caused by the airline, but rather to changes in the travel guidance, which, given the pandemic period, were generally provided by the World Health Organization or by the local government. The second part of the sentence includes a commissive speech act, as the customer service promises to answer travellers' calls as soon as possible. Moreover, choosing to change the subject of the second sentence from a more neutral "contact centre teams" to the first-person plural pronoun "we" and adding the second adverbial intensifier "everything" contributes to maximizing the expression of benefit to others. The inclusion of a direct question also helps the operator establish a more direct and informal contact with the complainers, inviting them to send a direct message.

4.4. Direct apology + explaining or accounting for the complainable

(3)   @id879326 · Aug 16
        @Lufthansa awful service. Tried contacting the support team on international toll free number but never got the response. Been on infinite loop. Asks to stay on hold for 15 mins n thn just disconnects. Horrible experience. Could you please ask the team to call back? I have queries about my upcoming flights and I am getting no help.

        Lufthansa @Lufthansa · Aug 16
        I'm sorry, I'm afraid we're unable to arrange a call back, as they're an inbound phone operation only. Is this something we can help with? If so, please send us a DM including your full name, booking reference and date of travel, so we can take a look.

In most of the cases analysed, responses given by the customer service include more than one apology strategy. In this example, the operator answers the traveller by explicitly

explaining that complainers cannot be called back because the call centre only allows incoming calls; the use of the subjectivizer "I'm afraid" contributes to playing down the blame, including the writer's personal voice. As in the previous example, the last part of the reply involves a promise to help the customer. Interestingly, the invitation to send a private message takes on a more formal form here, as the customer is asked to include all booking details. Even in this case, the future action intended to benefit the client is immediately mitigated due to the inclusion of the final part of the message: the operator does not guarantee that they will come up with a solution, but they promise only to examine the dossier.

4.5. Direct apology + offering repair

(4)   @id934584 · Aug 23
        @Ryanair proudly working on retaining their crown as worst airline. Cancelling our flight tomorrow from Italy with no reason offered, no alternative offered. All the extra expense of car hire, accommodation etc? Bad luck.

        @Ryanair Hi, we are sorry, but the flight cancellation is due to France and Italian National Strike. You can find in the notification you have received the alternative options.

        @ id934584 we are desperately trying to rebook our flights from Bologna. Does that apply to those flights as well?

        @ id934584 The alternative options you provided are useless. The page link for refunds says nothing about refunds. We have no information on how or where to rebook. And there is nothing about compensation for car hire or accommodation.

        @Ryanair you can contact our call center in order to re-route your flight. They will assist you regarding the available options. Please, find the following link […]

In this example the communicative exchange between the customer and Ryanair's operator is longer than the previous ones analysed and includes several strategies. The interaction develops over several turns almost as if it were a telephone conversation. After the direct apology "we are sorry", in the first reply the operator answers by denying responsibility for the flight cancellation, shifting the blame onto the national air transport strike. This strategy is introduced by "but" as if to bring about a change of perspective from the first direct apology towards a discharge of responsibility. Interestingly, the operation to remedy the customer's problem is left in the customer's hands and this is signalled linguistically by the use of the pronoun "you" followed by a second part in which the customer is asked to find the solutions to the problem in the instructions received from the airline in the notification. However, given the client's insistence on reiterating the problem and emphasising how the proposed method does not work, the strategy adopted by Ryanair's operator changes, the customer is still asked to perform an action ("you can call the call center"), but at the same time he/she offers a repair, that is the possibility to rebook another flight with the help of the staff responsible for such action. This operation is clear thanks to the change in the use of the personal pronoun from "you" to "they" followed by the verb "assist" indicating the airline's willingness to remedy the customer's problem with the means at their disposal.

4.6. Direct apology + promising forbearance

(5)   @id239812 · Aug 25
the variety and freshness of food available at your lounge in Glasgow 4th January 2020 at 14.00 hrs was appalling, simply appalling.

British Airways@British_Airways I'm sorry to hear this, John. We know how important our lounge facilities are to our customers, so it's disappointing you feel they'd fallen below our usual high standards. Please be assured, I'll pass on your comments as feedback to the Glasgow Airport Lounge Manager to improve our service for the future .

In the extract, British Airways shows empathy with the client by recognising the importance of what the client says and aligning with the client's views on the issue ("we know how important […]"). After that, the operator shows responsibility by expressing disappointment for the inconvenience experienced by the customer ("it's disappointing you feel […]"). In this case, moreover, the apology is not only related to the problems that have been caused by the company, but also related to the behavior in the future as the airline company promises forbearance to the customer through the action of passing his/her comments directly to the Glasgow Airport Lounge Manager. The interaction ends indeed with a clear commitment from British Arways not to repeat the action and to "improve [their] services in the future".

4.7. Direct apology + expressing concern for the hearer

(6)   @id569312 · Aug 15
@easyJet Just got off a flight from Luton to Malaga only to find that you have man handled my suitcase so violently that my case has cracked and the wheel doesn't hold itself up. Utterly disgusting, maybe try and treat your customers with some more respect. 1 easyJet @easyJet · Aug 15

EasyJet @EasyJet   Aug 15
Hi XXX, I am sorry to hear that this has happened and do apologise for the inconvenience caused. Make sure that you complete the damage report at the Baggage services desk.

The inclusion of the performative verb "apologise" after "I am sorry" is useful to modify the attitudinal tone of the interaction: empathising with the customer is in fact an effective strategy to soften the customer's feelings. In this situational context, apologising "for the inconvenience caused" can also be interpreted as a strategic disarmer itself, as it contributes to placating the customer. Additional support is offered in the second part of the response, in which the operator recommends that the customer complete and return the form.

5. Conclusions

Over the last decades, the internet and the advent of Web 2.0. have deeply changed the relationship between sellers and consumers: customer-seller relationships have become multidirectional thanks to a highly interactive environment, which aims at promoting communication and collaboration among users (Charlesworth 2014, p. 2). However, the increased market visibility for companies goes hand in hand with greater freedom for customers to interact directly on the web, becoming creators of content that can greatly influence a company's image. In fact, whilst interaction with customers via Web 2.0

platforms can lead to excellent publicity for companies, it can also give voice to their complaints that need to be handled carefully to avoid potentially damaging situations of conflict.

Considering the role of handling complaints on social media platforms, the goal of the present study was to investigate the linguistic strategies used by the customer service of four European airline companies (British Airways, Lufthansa, Ryanair and EasyJet) to manage customers' complaints shared on Twitter and avoid conflict-related situations. The first general observation that can be made is that companies seem to be coherent in the way they handle complaints on Twitter and their marketing approach are consistent with the two flag companies, i.e. British Airways and Lufthansa being more attentive to customer needs. On the other hand, even though EasyJet and Ryanair are both low-cost airline companies, they show a different attitude towards customers' problems. While Ryanair simply provides easy and sporadic support on Twitter (see the limited number of threads per month compared to the other companies), EasyJet guarantees an important presence on the social media platform, more in line with the services offered by the two flag airline companies.

Furthermore, the style of the answers provided to handle complaints mirrors some of their choices. We found that British Airways, Lufthansa and EasyJet use similar apology strategies and IFID. In fact, they adopt a range of different linguistic disarmers to modify the attitudinal tone of their replies in order to meet the customer's needs, even in the limited communicative space offered by Twitter. On the contrary, Ryanair usually provides more direct feedback with a limited use of linguistic disarmers showing a less empathetic attitude towards customers. However, the study has demonstrated that all companies tend not to minimize the degree of offence (Trosborg 1995), but adopt a customer-oriented approach to soften the complainer's feelings despite their different attitudes.

Interestingly, for all companies, explicit remedial acts are not usually proposed via Twitter and customers who need a care action to be taken are invited to join a private conversation with the company, as the case will be dealt with the dedicated customer care through traditional channels (i.e. telephone call or DM).

To sum up, the analysis has thus demonstrated that the four airline companies taken into consideration for the present study do not provide standard tweets to answer complaints; in fact, they customise almost every tweet, including references to the specific question expressed by each customer and use different levels of politeness in their apology strategies. Whenever operators feel that Twitter conversational space is not enough to solve the customer's problem, they suggest moving the conversation to private channels to protect the company's reputation from further public attacks and find the most suitable solution for the client.

Since this study was a pilot project, future research will explore the whole corpus to gain a wider perspective of the ways in which the four companies use discursive strategies to avoid/mitigate conflict related situations also substantiating our observations with quantitative data. Furthermore, given the complexity of the theoretical framework, a systematic investigation of linguistic disarmers will be conducted. We will also take into consideration the wider context in which this kind of interactions take place in order to understand the role of corporate strategies in dealing with complaints on Web 2.0 platforms as well as training possibilities offered to customer care employees.

Bionotes: Silvia Cavalieri holds a Ph.D in Comparative Languages and Cultures from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE). She is temporary assistant professor (RTD-B) in English

Language and Translation at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Verona. Before that, she was temporary assistant professor (RTD- A) at the Department MEMOTEF of the "Sapienza" University of Rome. Her areas of research and publication include ESP, legal language, courtroom discourse, academic discourse, and medical discourse with a focus on corpus linguistics and digital humanities. She is currently working on the InterDiplo project, which focuses on the language used in spoken interactions by diplomats, ambassadors, and international relations.

Sara Corrizzato is a temporary assistant professor in English Language and Translation at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Verona. Her research focuses on corpus linguistics and Digital Humanities, ESP, audiovisual language and audiovisual translation. Her volume "Spike Lee's Bamboozled: A Contrastive analysis of Compliments and Insults from English into Italian" was released in 2015. She is currently working on the InterDiplo project, which focuses on the language used in spoken interactions by diplomats, ambassadors, and international relations.

Authors' addresses: silvia.cavalieri@univr.it; sara.corrizzato@univr.it

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