



Electronic Complaints

Marja E. Meinel

T Frank & Timme

Verlag für wissenschaftliche Literatur



Kulturen – Kommunikation – Kontakte

Hartwig Kalverkämper (Hg.)

Band 18

Marja E. Meinel

Electronic Complaints

An Empirical Study on British English and
German Complaints on eBay

FFrank & Timme
Verlag für wissenschaftliche Literatur

Cover: The subject matter of the present book is COMPLAINTS, the logical structure of which is represented by the model <<“Something has happened” and “There has been a controversial reaction to the event”>>. It addresses two ways of acting which constitute a whole, but which nevertheless oppose each other.

The chosen labyrinth effectively portrays this dialectic model of action with its dualistic forms and structures: the two shifted offset squares with their unique labyrinthine structures form a holistic single unit. Autonomy (accomplishment, complaint), controversy (complaint, criticism, refusal) as well as the holistic communicative act (sequence of action and complaint, linking of texts, intertextuality, interconnected text types) are represented with this artistic labyrinth, which therefore serves as an adequate visual metaphor for the pragmatic subject of this book.

Source of the labyrinth: Ulrich Koch: Labyrinth. Irrwege, Wirrgärten und Suchbilder und ein Ariadnefaden zum Herausfinden. Mit einem Vorwort von Hans-Peter Niebuhr. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1987, Nr. 31: „Vier Ecken“.

ISBN 978-3-7329-0030-5

ISSN 1868-8306

© Frank & Timme GmbH Verlag für wissenschaftliche Literatur
Berlin 2014. Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

Das Werk einschließlich aller Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechts-
gesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlags unzulässig und strafbar.
Das gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen,
Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in
elektronischen Systemen.

Herstellung durch das atelier eilenberger, Taucha bei Leipzig.

Printed in Germany.

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier.

Zugl. Dissertation an der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, 2010

www.frank-timme.de

To my Father

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	x
List of abbreviations	xi
List of tables	xiii
List of figures	xix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Complaining within cross-cultural pragmatics	5
2.1. Pragmatics	5
2.2. Speech act analysis	6
2.2.1. Speech act theory	6
2.2.2. Discourse analysis	11
2.2.2.1. An integrative model of discourse	11
2.2.3. The focus of the present study: complaints	12
2.2.3.1. Reasons for choosing complaints	13
2.2.3.2. Characteristics of complaints	15
2.3. Theories of (im)politeness	18
2.3.1. The conversational-maxim view	19
2.3.2. The face-saving view	22
2.3.3. The conversational-contract view	27
2.3.4. The concept of relational work.....	28
2.3.5. The concept of rapport management	33
2.3.6. A model of impoliteness	37
2.4. Pragmatics across cultures	41
2.4.1. Contrastive pragmatics.....	41
2.4.2. Cross-cultural versus intercultural pragmatics	42
2.4.3. Culture	43
Chapter 3: Computer-mediated communication (CMC)	46
3.1. Definition of CMC	46
3.2. A brief history of CMC	47

3.3. Classification of computer-mediated discourse (CMD)	48
3.3.1. Earlier approaches to classifying CMD	49
3.3.2. The faceted classification scheme of CMD.....	51
Chapter 4: The methodology of the present study	59
4.1. The data of the present study	59
4.1.1. eBay and its feedback forum.....	59
4.1.2. The technical and social context of the present data.....	61
4.1.3. Data collection procedures	70
4.1.4. Choice of data: advantages and disadvantages	74
4.2. Statistical analysis	78
Chapter 5: Data analysis	80
5.1. Complaint strategies	81
5.1.1. Data analysis	84
5.2. Level of directness	86
5.2.1. Data analysis	88
5.3. Modification	89
5.3.1. Data analysis	93
5.4. Use of pronouns	94
5.4.1. Data analysis	98
5.5. Features of CMC	99
5.5.1. Data analysis	103
5.6. Sum variables	104
5.6.1. Data analysis	106
Chapter 6: Results	107
6.1. Comparison of British English versus German complaints	107
6.1.1. Data set: Item has not been received.....	108
6.1.2. Data set: The item was different than expected	122
6.1.3. Data set: Item has not been received (double complaints).....	135
6.1.4. Data set: Item was different than expected (double complaints)	148
6.2. Comparison of the British English data sets	162

6.3. Comparison of the German data sets	185
6.4. Summary of the results	206
Chapter 7: Discussion	216
7.1. Discussion in light of previous research on complaints	216
7.2. Discussion in light of (im)politeness theories	228
Chapter 8: Implications and outlook.....	243
References	247
Appendix	272

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people who deserve my deep gratitude.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Dr. Klaus P. Schneider (University Bonn, Germany) for his support, advice, and encouragement during these years. My further heartfelt thanks go to Ejo Zimmermann, who not only patiently taught me the statistics I needed, but also most skilfully introduced me to SPSS. Furthermore, I want to express my gratitude to Christoph Henn, editor of the *eBay Magazin*, who was always eager to help me with questions concerning eBay. Also many thanks go to my proof-readers Fanny Bates and Ryan Dux for their invaluable feedback and suggestions for linguistic improvements.

My sincere appreciation goes to my parents, who emotionally and financially supported me throughout my studies, making my academic career possible.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to express my deep gratefulness to my husband Michael Meinel who has always supported me by his boundless patience and good humour, but most importantly by his infinite love.

List of abbreviations

?	The reason for complaining could not be identified.
#	Absolute frequencies
%	Relative frequencies
BrE	British English
Capitalisation (words)	Capitalisation of words
Capitalisation (message)	Capitalisation of the whole message
CMC	Computer-mediated communication
CMD	Computer-mediated discourse
CofP	Community of Practice
CP	Cooperative Principle
D	“Double complaint”, i.e. a user complains for two reasons at the same time.
D_Status	The German Federal Statistics Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder
Demonstrative pronouns	Demonstrative pronouns followed by nouns denoting the complainee
Ex.m. (single)	Single exclamation marks
Ex.m. (repeated)	Repetition of exclamation marks
(Item) DIFF	Data set: ‘Item different than expected’, i.e. a user complains about the fact that the item s/he received was somehow different than s/he expected it to be.
(Item) DIFF-D	Data set: ‘Item different, double-complaint’, i.e. a user complains about the fact that the item s/he received was somehow different than s/he expected it to be, in addition to another reason for complaining.
FVF	Final value fee
G	German

Intensifier (downgrading)	Intensifier used to aggravate the mitigating effect of downgrading modifiers
Intensifying features CMC (downgrading)	Intensifying features of CMC used to aggravate the softening effect of downgrading modifiers.
(Item) NR	Data set: ‘Item has never been received’, i.e. a user complains about the fact that s/he has never received the item.
(Item) NR-D	Data set: ‘Item never received, double complaint’, i.e. a user complains about the fact that s/he has never received the item in addition to another reason for complaining.
NPBA	Non-paying bidder alert
p	Probability level
PP	Politeness Principle
Pronouns (complainee)	Pronouns referring to the complainee
Pronouns (eBay community)	Pronouns addressing the eBay community
Repet. other punct. m.	Repetition of punctuation marks other than exclamation marks
T	“Triple complaint“, i.e. a user complains for three reasons at the same time.

List of tables

Table 2.1: Components of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2000b: 15).....	36
Table 3.1: The medium factors of Herring’s classification scheme (Herring 2007:13).	52
Table 3.2: The social factors of Herring’s classification scheme (Herring 2007: 18f.).....	55
Table 4.1: Medium factors that characterise the feedback forum of eBay.	61
Table 4.2: Situation factors that characterise the feedback forum of eBay.....	65
Table 4.3: Distribution of the occurring reasons for complaining on eBay in per cent (%). ...	71
Table 4.4: Relative frequencies regarding complaints about a long delivery time. Significant differences are highlighted by bold print.	73
Table 4.5: Overview of the British English data of the present study.	73
Table 4.6: Overview of the German data of the present study.....	74
Table 4.7: The ratio of native and foreign population in the UK and Germany in 2005.	77
Table 4.8: The data sets which were compared for investigation of research question 1.	78
Table 4.9: The data sets which were compared for investigation of research question 2.	79
Table 4.10: The data sets which were compared for investigation of research question 3.	79
Table 5.1: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (BrE, NR 1) with regard to the use of complaint strategies.....	85
Table 5.2: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (BrE, NR-D 9) with regard to the use of complaint strategies.....	86
Table 5.3: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (BrE, NR-D 64) with regard to the use of modification.	94
Table 5.4: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (BrE, NR 51) with regard to the use of pronouns.....	98
Table 5.5: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (G, NR 49) with regard to the use of features of CMC.....	104
Table 5.6: Overview of the sum variables and the variables incorporated in them.	105
Table 5.7: Overview of the coding of the online complaint (G, DIFF-D 82) with regard to the use of the sum variables.....	106
Table 6.1: British English (BrE) and German traders’ use of complaint strategies, level of directness, and amount of strategy combinations in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	108

Table 6.2: The amount of strategies BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	110
Table 6.3: The strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	111
Table 6.4: The amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	113
Table 6.5: BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	114
Table 6.6: BrE and German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	115
Table 6.7: BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	116
Table 6.8: BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i> .	118
Table 6.9: The results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item NR</i> .	120
Table 6.10: British English (BrE) and German traders' use of complaint strategies, level of directness, and amount of strategy combinations in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	122
Table 6.11: The amount of strategies BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	124
Table 6.12: The strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	125
Table 6.13: The amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	127
Table 6.14: BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	128
Table 6.15: BrE and German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	129
Table 6.16: BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	130
Table 6.17: BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	132
Table 6.18: The results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item DIFF</i> .	133
Table 6.19: British English (BrE) and German traders' use of complaint strategies, level of directness, and amount of strategy combinations in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i> .	135

Table 6.20: The amount of strategies BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	137
Table 6.21: The strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	138
Table 6.22: The amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	140
Table 6.23: BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	141
Table 6.24: BrE and German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	142
Table 6.25: BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	143
Table 6.26: BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	145
Table 6.27: The results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	147
Table 6.28: BrE and German traders' use of complaint strategies, level of directness, and amount of strategy combinations in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	148
Table 6.29: The amount of strategies BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	150
Table 6.30: The strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	152
Table 6.31: The amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	153
Table 6.32: BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	154
Table 6.33: BrE and German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	156
Table 6.34: BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	157
Table 6.35: BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	159
Table 6.36: The results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> . 160	
Table 6.37: BrE eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the four different data sets.....	163

Table 6.38: Statistical comparison of BrE traders' use of complaint strategies, level of directness and strategy combinations in the four different data sets.....	164
Table 6.39: The amount of strategies BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.....	165
Table 6.40: Statistical comparison of the amount of strategies BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.....	166
Table 6.41: The strategy sequences BrE traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.....	167
Table 6.42: Statistical comparison of the strategy sequences BrE traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.....	168
Table 6.43: The amount of different strategy sequences BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.....	170
Table 6.44: Statistical comparison of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.....	171
Table 6.45: BrE eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.....	171
Table 6.46: Statistical comparison of BrE eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.....	172
Table 6.47: BrE eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.....	174
Table 6.48: Statistical comparison of BrE eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.....	175
Table 6.49: BrE eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the four different data sets.....	175
Table 6.50: Statistical comparison of BrE eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints of the four different data sets.....	176
Table 6.51: BrE eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.....	178
Table 6.52: Statistical comparison of BrE eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.....	179
Table 6.53: The occurrence of the sum variables in the four different BrE data sets.....	182
Table 6.54: Statistical comparison of the occurrence of the sum variables in the four BrE data sets.....	183
Table 6.55: German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the four different data sets.....	185

Table 6.56: Statistical comparison of German traders' use of complaint strategies, level of directness and strategy combinations in the four different data sets.....	186
Table 6.57: The amount of strategies German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.	188
Table 6.58: Statistical comparison of the amount of strategies German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.	189
Table 6.59: The strategy sequences German traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.	190
Table 6.60: Statistical comparison of the strategy sequences German traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.	192
Table 6.61: The amount of different strategy sequences German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.	193
Table 6.62: Statistical comparison of the amount of different strategy sequences German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets....	194
Table 6.63: German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	194
Table 6.64: Statistical comparison of German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	195
Table 6.65: German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	196
Table 6.66: Statistical comparison of German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	197
Table 6.67: German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the four different data sets.	198
Table 6.68: Statistical comparison of German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the four different data sets.	199
Table 6.69: German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.	200
Table 6.70: Statistical comparison of German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.	201
Table 6.71: The occurrence of sum variables in the four different German data sets.	203
Table 6.72: Statistical comparison of the occurrence of sum variables in the four German data sets.	204
Table 6.73: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence the different features BrE traders may use to mitigate their complaints.	209

Table 6.74: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence the different features BrE traders may use to intensify their complaints.	210
Table 6.75: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence BrE traders' use of first person pronouns to express their personal involvement.	211
Table 6.76: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence the different features German traders may use to mitigate their complaints.	212
Table 6.77: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence the different features German traders may use to intensify their complaints.	213
Table 6.78: Overview of how the two investigated factors influence German traders' use of first person pronouns to express their personal involvement.	213

List of figures

Figure 2.1: Brown and Levinson's (1987) super strategies for doing FTAs (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69).....	23
Figure 2.2: Relational work and its polite (shaded) version, illustrated with respect to the judgments on (im)politeness, appropriateness and markedness (Locher 2004: 90).....	29
Figure 4.1: Graphic representation of the occurring reasons for complaining on the British and German eBay domain. Results figuring less than 3% are not illustrated.	72
Figure 4.2: Graphic representation of the ratio of native and foreign population in the UK and Germany in 2005.	77
Figure 6.1: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	109
Figure 6.2: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies BrE and German traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	110
Figure 6.3: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	112
Figure 6.4: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	113
Figure 6.5: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	114
Figure 6.6: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	115
Figure 6.7: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	117
Figure 6.8: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR</i>	119
Figure 6.9: Graphic representation of the results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item NR</i>	121
Figure 6.10: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	123
Figure 6.11: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies BrE and German traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	124
Figure 6.12: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	126

Figure 6.13: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	127
Figure 6.14: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	128
Figure 6.15: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	129
Figure 6.16: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	131
Figure 6.17: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	132
Figure 6.18: Graphic representation of the results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item DIFF</i>	134
Figure 6.19: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	136
Figure 6.20: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies BrE and German traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	137
Figure 6.21: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	139
Figure 6.22: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	140
Figure 6.23: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	141
Figure 6.24: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	142
Figure 6.25: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	144
Figure 6.26: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	146
Figure 6.27: Graphic representation of the results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item NR-D</i>	147
Figure 6.28: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	149
Figure 6.29: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies BrE and German traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i>	151

Figure 6.30: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences BrE or German eBay traders' use in at least 5% of the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	152
Figure 6.31: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE and German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	154
Figure 6.32: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	155
Figure 6.33: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	156
Figure 6.34: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	158
Figure 6.35: Graphic representation of BrE and German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	159
Figure 6.36: Graphic representation of the results of the sum variables in the BrE and German data set <i>Item DIFF-D</i> .	161
Figure 6.37: Graphic representation of BrE eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the four different data sets.	163
Figure 6.38: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.	166
Figure 6.39: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences BrE traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.	168
Figure 6.40: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences BrE eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets..	170
Figure 6.41: Graphic representation of BrE eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	172
Figure 6.42: Graphic representation of BrE eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	174
Figure 6.43: Graphic representation of BrE eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the four different data sets.	176
Figure 6.44: Graphic representation of BrE eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.	179
Figure 6.45: Graphic representation of the occurrence of the sum variables in the four BrE data sets.	183
Figure 6.46: Graphic representation of German eBay traders' use of complaint strategies and combinations of them in the four different data sets.	186

Figure 6.47: Graphic representation of the amount of strategies German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets.	189
Figure 6.48: Graphic representation of the strategy sequences German traders use in at least 5% in one of the data sets under investigation.	191
Figure 6.49: Graphic representation of the amount of different strategy sequences German eBay traders use to formulate their complaints in the four different data sets..	193
Figure 6.50: Graphic representation of German eBay traders' use of upgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.....	195
Figure 6.51: Graphic representation of German eBay traders' use of downgrading modifiers in their complaints in the four different data sets.	197
Figure 6.52: Graphic representation of German eBay traders' use of pronouns in the complaints in the four different data sets.	199
Figure 6.53: Graphic representation of German eBay traders' use of features of CMC in the complaints in the four different data sets.	201
Figure 6.54: Graphic representation of the occurrence of sum variables in the four German data sets.	204
Figure 7.1: Graphic representation of the four British English data sets on a severity scale.	226
Figure 7.2: Graphic representation of the four German data sets on a severity scale.	226

Chapter 1: Introduction

"The Internet? We are not interested in it" - Bill Gates, 1993
(<http://www.quotesandsayings.com/gbillgates.htm>)

Despite Bill Gates' lack of interest in the Internet, illustrating his pessimistic prognosis of its acceptance, the World Wide Web nowadays enjoys great popularity as a new means of communication. It has opened up a wide range of possibilities for its users. At the same time though, its usage demands new communicative skills, not only due to the different mode of communication, but also since the Internet connects speakers from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

As studies on cross-cultural, intercultural, and interlanguage communication have shown, different cultural norms can result in misunderstandings, communication breakdown, and/or the formation of stereotypes (cf. Clyne et al. 1991; House 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 2000; House and Kasper 1981; Miller 2000; Murphy and Neu 1996; Trosborg 1995; Tyler 1995). However, almost all of these studies have focused on spoken communication only, thus leaving a large research gap as to whether these findings also apply to other language modalities such as writing or "computer-mediated communication (CMC)" (Herring 1996: 1), also known as electronic discourse (cf. Davis and Brewer 1997). The latter is especially worth investigating due to the immense increase in computer usage as well as the large number of culturally different speakers "meeting" every day on the Internet.

Research on CMC started in the 1980s. Since then many studies have focused on describing the diversity of electronic text-types, the particularities of the communicative situations involved, and the specific linguistic features of this rather new language modality (cf. Abbott 2002; Bader 2002; Bays 1998; Bergs 1999; Claridge 2007; Herring 1996; Maynor 1994; Raettig 1999; Siever et al. 2005; Wenz 1998; Werry 1996; Yates 1996). Another branch of CMC research has investigated gender differences and gender asymmetries in online communication (cf. Brail 1996; O'Brian 1999; Brown 2000; Cherny 1994; Cohen 2001; Ess 1996; Gilboa 1996; Hall 1996; Harcourt 2000; Herring 2003, 2004b; Kiesler et al. 1984; Sutton 1994). Additionally, "broader metapragmatic

issues” (Herring et al. 2013: 23), such as code alternation and genre in CMC, have attracted scholarly attention (cf. Androutsopoulos 2013; Androutsopoulos and Hinnekamp 2001; Giltrow 2013; Giltrow and Stein 2009; Goldbarg 2009; Heyd 2008; Paolillo 2011; Siebenhaar 2006). However, the areas of cross-cultural pragmatics or speech act analysis have still mainly been neglected. With regard to the latter, it is especially worth looking at complaints in CMC, since the vast spread of the Internet has been accompanied by an ever-growing interest in e-commerce (cf. Albrecht et al. 2007: 708) where this type of speech act is very common, so that the complaining behaviour between sellers and buyers from all over the world has definitely increased. Due to the fact that not only the interlocutor’s face, but also financial losses are at stake in business transactions, misunderstanding your trading partner’s complaints can be particularly detrimental. It is hence of crucial importance to avoid these misunderstandings, but this can only be achieved if more cross-cultural research provides insight into speakers’ cultural norms when complaining.

Faced with the lack of attention to cross-cultural differences in CMC, which is especially important regarding complaining behaviour, the present study wants to contribute to this still undiscovered research area by comparing British English and German complaints in CMC, precisely on eBay.

This study is thus anchored in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, and the main approach taken is speech-act based. However, as complaints are always embedded in discourse and thereby occur as post-event, the present investigation certainly also takes the contextual factors of the data into account, thus additionally drawing on research from discourse analysis.

The overall aim of this project is a comparison of the British English and German production of computer-mediated complaints and, consequently, a description of similarities and differences, of which the latter may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural electronic communicative situations.¹ Specifically, the collected complaints were analysed according to five categories: the use of complaint strategies, the chosen level of directness, the employment of modification, the use of pronouns, and the handling of features

¹ For differences between British English and German speakers that led to misunderstandings in spoken interactions see, for instance, House and Kasper (1981), Möhl (1996), and Trosborg (1995).

of CMC. In light of these categories, the following research questions guided the investigation.

1. Do British and German traders' computer-mediated complaints differ with regard to the five categories of analysis?
2. Does the reason for complaining influence their linguistic choices?
3. Does it make a difference whether they have one or two reasons for their online complaint?

To find answers to these research questions, British and German complaints were taken from the British and German feedback forum of the online auction house eBay and analysed according to the five categories. The results were then statistically compared. Apart from contributing to research on cross-cultural pragmatics and thereby being relevant for the improvement of cross-cultural communication, this study is significant for research on complaining behaviour as well as for research on CMC. What is more, its findings are also fundamental for the areas of interlanguage research and second language teaching, since knowledge of British and German speakers' communicative norms when complaining in CMC is essential for further in-depth analyses of learners' interlanguage, which will aid the production of effective teaching materials.

The present report is divided into eight chapters, structured as follows. The theoretical background information of the present study is given in Chapter 2 and 3. More precisely, in Chapter 2 important theories regarding complaints within cross-cultural pragmatics are explained. Hence, a brief overview of pragmatics and the key concepts of speech act analyses with focus on complaints is given. This is followed by descriptions of relevant (im)politeness theories and a clarification of important terms related to pragmatics across cultures, i.e. contrastive, cross-cultural, and intercultural pragmatics. Chapter 3, on the other hand, gives a theoretical summary of the chosen modality of communication, namely CMC. Here, CMC is defined, its history briefly presented, and approaches to classifying computer-mediated discourse (CMD) are outlined.

Chapter 4 turns to the methodology of the present study, focusing on its data. Consequently, the chosen database and its contextual features are described. Additionally, the data collection procedures are outlined, the advantages and disadvantages of the present data are discussed, and its statistical analyses are

briefly explained. In Chapter 5 the different categories of analysis are presented. Each category is described and the procedures of data analysis are explained. In Chapter 6 the results of this study are illustrated following the order of the research questions and in Chapter 7 discussed in light of previous research on complaints as well as (im)politeness theories. Last but not least, Chapter 8 concludes this report by pointing at implications of the present results for the improvement of cross-cultural communication and language pedagogy, as well as making suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Complaining within cross-cultural pragmatics

As mentioned in the introduction, the present study is anchored in the field of pragmatics, a rather “‘young’ science“ (Mey 1998: 716) which, since its beginnings in the late sixties and early seventies, has not only expanded its scope very rapidly but also become an extremely popular research area.

This chapter begins with a brief description of pragmatics and presents the definition used in this study (2.1.), followed by a characterisation of important pragmatic theories, which are relevant for the present study. These include theories in the field of speech act analysis, which are crucial when dealing with complaints (2.2.). Furthermore, important theories of (im)politeness are explained (2.3.) and relevant terms within the field of pragmatics across cultures are defined (2.4.), which helps to clarify the chosen methodological approach.

2.1. Pragmatics

Since the pragmatic turn in linguistics, many different definitions of pragmatics have been put forward (cf. Crystal 1985: 240; Gass 1997: 20ff.; Reynolds 1995: 5). Although many researchers have referred to Charles Morris’s (1938) famous concept of pragmatics as “the study of the relation of signs to interpreters” (Morris 1938: 6), no agreement has been reached so far as to what pragmatics actually is or what it is not.

Regarding the present study, Mey’s (1993) definition has been chosen as a working definition. He says, “*Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society*” (Mey 1993: 6). His definition illustrates the shift of researchers away from analysing purely linguistic means to also dealing with extralinguistic factors, hence the user’s context in society.

These two sides are also represented in Leech’s (1983) distinction between the areas of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics is, on the one hand, “the study of the more linguistic end of pragmatics”, which means that researchers “consider the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions” (Leech 1983: 11). Examples of such resources are the use of realisation strategies or means of modification.

Sociopragmatics, on the other hand, “is the sociological interface of pragmatics” (Leech 1983: 10). Hence it focuses on the influence of extralinguistic factors on a particular illocution, such as social distance, power relations or the cultural background of the interlocutors. As the present study is concerned with participants of different cultural backgrounds, yet at the same time compares the linguistic means the subjects use in complaining in CMC, this study incorporates both areas of Leech’s (1983) concept of pragmatics.

Apart from this, pragmatics divide their field of research into micro- and macropragmatics (cf. Mey 1993, 1998). As the prefixes indicate, the former is “the study of language in smaller contexts”, which has traditionally been understood “as comprising the sentence (and its immediate surroundings)” (Mey 1998: 728). Researchers in this field consequently deal with topics such as speech acts, reference or anaphora. When focusing on macropragmatics, the interest is on “user interaction, in various ways, and in a number of settings” (Mey 1998: 728). Thus conversational analysis, pragmatics across cultures, social aspects of pragmatics, or metapragmatics are research issues here. Although the present study addresses a cultural aspect in a computational environment, the centre of attention is on the speech act of complaining and hence on micropragmatics.

2.2. Speech act analysis

Because this study focuses on complaints, this subchapter turns to relevant theories of speech act analysis. Thus, the basic assumptions of speech act theory are presented (2.2.1.) and a brief description of discourse analysis (2.2.2.), specifically of the integrated model developed by Edmondson (1981) (2.2.2.1.), is given. These concepts are relevant when the focus shifts to the speech act under investigation, complaints (2.2.3.). Reasons for choosing complaints are given (2.2.3.1.) and the nature of complaints are explained (2.2.3.2.).

2.2.1. Speech act theory

Since the beginnings of pragmatics, speech act theory has been one of the most influential theories in this field. Due to its suitability for studies focussing on

language in use, speech act theory has been used as a theoretical approach in many studies (cf. Barron 2003; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; House and Kasper 1981; Möhl 1996; Trosborg 1995) including the present one. Therefore, this subchapter provides a brief overview of its fundamental claims.

The foundations of speech act theory were laid by J. L. Austin, a British professor of philosophy, whose William James Lectures, which he delivered at Harvard University in 1955 and were published posthumously as “How to Do Things with Words” (1962), led to an enormous interest in speech acts. In the following years, speech act theory was highly influenced by his student follower, John Searle, and resulted in linguists turning away from “truth-conditional semantics” (Barron 2003: 11), which was prevalent at that time. The fundamental claim of speech act theory is that speech is action, and hence each sentence a speech act² which is created when “speaker/writer S makes an utterance U to hearer/reader H in context C” (Allan 1998: 927).

Austin (1962) was the first to isolate a hierarchy of acts that are performed simultaneously when speaking (adapted here):

- (1) locutionary act: the uttering of a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference.
- (2) illocutionary act: the performing of utterances which have a certain (conventional) force, such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc.
- (3) perlocutionary act: the bringing about of effect upon the feelings, thoughts or action of the hearer, audience or other people.

(Austin 1962: 108)

In other words, when producing an utterance, a speaker does not only express something about the world (locution), but at the same time has an intention uttering his words (illocution), which he hopes to have the desired effect on the hearer (perlocution).

Perlocutionary effects have often been neglected by speech act theorists, as it has been argued that they fall outside of linguistics, because they are not part of language per se but instead responses to the illocutions in utterances (cf. Allan 1998: 928). What linguists, however, have looked at closely are the intentions of speakers, namely the illocutionary act. These reveal the way a speaker wants his utterance to be interpreted by a hearer, regardless of the way it is phrased. This is of great importance, since one proposition may occur in different illocutionary

² The notions of ‘spoken’ and ‘speaking’ also properly include writing for simplicity of exposition.