

Pedagogical Foray: Complaining

Review and—if possible—act out this dialog

Math study group members complaining about their homework assignment

Nick: Male senior undergrad

Jane: Female senior undergrad

Amy: Female senior undergrad

Setting: Nesbitt Lounge, East Hall

1 Jane: Alright...Why did she give multiple parts for every single problem we have?

2 Amy: She wanted to torture us.

3 Nick: I think it's cuz like, that last time I don't think we did a lot on the homework,
if I remember right.

4 Jane: I really like how she says this problem set contains a total of four problems.
It's like no, four times two plus one problems.

5 Nick: Yeah why does she tell us it contains four problems?

6 Jane: Oh I can't see 'em. Oh the printer chewed off, just cut off number four. So,
maybe that's why she puts it at the top just in case.

7 Nick: Yeah that is a little quirk. She's trying to trick us into thinking like oh...

8 Jane: Yeah she's like "Oh that's not bad this problem set only has four problems in
it." Yeah, whatever.

9 Amy: And there's like two parts for three of 'em.

10 Nick: Alright, so, oh my gosh so this has three parts.

11 Jane: For all of 'em?

12 Amy: Two parts for all of 'em?

13 Jane: Yeah. And number two has three parts.

14 Nick: This has three parts.

15 Amy: Oh you've got to be kidding.

16 Nick: Well at least we only have to do two of the five parts on fourteen. No, this
won't necessarily be that hard.

17 Jane: Did you say two of the five parts on fourteen?

- 18 Nick: Yeah we only have to do one and two out of five.
- 19 Jane: Oh, alright.
- 20 Nick: And on fifteen we only have to do two of, well one out of four but its number two. Why don't we...Fourteen's gonna be easy let's start there. It really is gonna be easy.
- 21 Jane: Oh yeah alright <Reading: *Find the image of the point...*>

Adapted from MICASE: R. C. Simpson, S. L. Briggs, J. Ovens, and J. M. Swales. (2002) The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan. (SGR385SU057)

Worksheet for Math Study Group extract

Now do the following—if possible work with a partner.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Would you say this extract is an example of "academic speech"? What are the pros and cons of labeling it so?
2. What might have occurred *before* and *after* this extract?
3. The given title is "complaining about their homework assignment". This is obviously true on one level. But how else might you describe it? If it is "complaining", what is its underlying purpose or function?
4. The two main speakers are Nick and Jane. How similar or different might their attitudes be to the tasks on hand? What evidence can you bring to support your viewpoint?
5. Would you say that this type of complaining episode is common among undergraduates?
6. If you had to divide this extract into two parts, at which turn would you say the second part begins, and why?

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

7. Jane, in Turn 1, opens the episode by asking a question. Does she really expect an informative answer?
8. She gets two responses. Which one might she prefer, and why?
9. How would you characterize Jane's "I really like..." opening statement in Turn 4?

10. What does Nick's question in Turn 5 tell us?

11. In Turn 8, Jane produces an utterance that contains what is sometimes called "a pseudo-quotative". Can you explain?

12. At the end of Turn 8, Jane comments, "Yeah, whatever". How would you explain this use of *whatever* to a newly-arrived international student?

13. In Turn 15, Amy says "Oh, you've got to be kidding". What other expressions would have got her point across?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS

1. When John tried this out with an undergraduate class, 23 out of 24 participants were of the firm opinion that this episode was *not* an example of academic speech. This near unanimity surprised him. Reasons given included: "too much slang", "not on an academic topic", and "not concerned with the transmission of knowledge". On the other hand, a study group is an academic grouping, the episode takes place on campus, and the three students are talking about an academic assignment. And there is doubtless no more "slang" in this extract than in many lectures. The issue would then seem to be open, and might depend on how you assess this kind of complaining. John, for one, and unlike his students, does not have much problem in considering this episode "academic speech".

2. This might have been the beginning of the study group session as a whole. In fact it occurs about 55 minutes into the session, following, among other things, a discussion of their lecture notes. Obviously, what follows is their attempts to do the problems.

3. Expressions that come to mind are "whining" and "pissing and moaning". A more academic expression might be "commiserating with each other". The underlying purpose of this is to build rapport among the group; a way of recognizing that "we're all in the same boat" in an "us versus them" scenario. Note how the instructor is always referred to as "she"—as some kind of opponent. According to Boxer and Pickering¹, this kind of complaining is often misunderstood by international students and mis-presented by their ESL instructors.

4. Nick is the "can-do" member of the group; Jane is the main "piss-and-moaner".

5. In our experience, undergrads readily agree that they do this a lot when talking about assignments.

6. Most people opt for Turn 16, when Nick turns the conversation back to actually doing the homework.

7. No, she expects sympathy.

8. Jane clearly prefers Amy's response, which is the complaining one, rather than Nick's attempt to justify the instructor.
9. This is clearly sarcastic. Note that an international student might take it literally and so lose track of the dialogue.
10. It tells us that Nick is now on board, and is on "the same page" as the two women.
11. The *like* often prefaces the imagined words of another speaker. You can find many other examples in MICASE; mostly the pseudo-communicatives are critical of the imagined speakers.
12. This kind of *whatever* is used mainly by younger Americans. It is typically dismissive. In this example, it communicates "I don't agree, *whatever* she says" or perhaps "hat she says doesn't make any sense". There are 732 examples of *whatever* in MICASE; you might like to look at a selection of them to see how common this dismissive use of *whatever* actually is.
13. How about "you must be joking" or "you can't be serious"?

At this point, you might want to re-read (or re-enact) the dialog, as you should now have a deeper understanding of the situation.

ROLE PLAYS

Imagine there is a fourth member of the study group.

In Role Play A, the fourth member immediately joins in the complaining and so establishes his or her membership of the embattled group. Act this out.

In Role Play B, the fourth member is much like Nick, but he is even more concerned to justify the instructor and actually do the homework. Act this out.

THE FUTURE

Some time soon, the soundfile for this extract should be available. How might this affect your sense of this extract? This is experimental material and we would really appreciate feedback. Comments and suggestions to leicher@umich.edu and/or jmswales@umich.edu