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LINGUISTIC (IN) DIRECTNESS IN COVID-19 COMPLAINTS ON CHINA'S E-GOVERNMENT PLATFORM

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Abstract

This paper presents a pragmatic analysis of online complaints written by Chinese citizens in Wuhan during the early phase of the city's Covid-19 outbreak. Complaint strategies in the messages posted on a platform called Message Board for Leaders (MBL) were identified. A total of 320 citizen complaints were downloaded directly from MBL and analyzed in terms of linguistic (in)directness. The findings reveal that the citizens tended to make complaints using a high degree of directness to display deference and proximity and thereby increase the probability that the authorities would solve their problems. The citizens also generally avoided linguistic expressions of negative emotions to lower the level of complaint strength and impoliteness and construct positive self-images. In general, these complaints were of a public nature and were highly constrained by the online institutional context within which they were produced. The results provide a renewed understanding of the nature of complaints in Chinese culture.

Keywords: citizen complaints; linguistic (in)directness; e-government; Covid-19; Wuhan

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Introduction

As countries around the world adopt a greater number of digital technologies, they try to provide their citizens with more advanced public services, including e-government services. E-government is the use of digital devices to provide public services to citizens (Fang, 2002)¹. Establishing this

service involves a two-way communication i.e., government to citizen, and citizen to government (Malodia et al., 2021)². The latter implies that citizens are provided with the power and freedom to use digital platforms to communicate with government authorities. As citizens are bestowed with more control, they face a choice between adhering to the traditional Chinese cultural norm of indirect communication or adopting a more direct approach when interacting with government authorities in online political/administrative contexts. This dilemma is especially evident when citizens are confronted with complicated speech acts (Leech, 1983)³, such as complaints. The emergence of online political communication through e-government service platforms presents a relatively new linguistic phenomenon that warrants increased attention.

This research is set in the context of an early Covid-19 outbreak to examine how people complained using e-government service platforms. During this period, Chinese citizens were not permitted to seek assistance in person. Therefore, online communication became the only effective option, hence the focus of this study. In the early stages of the outbreak, authorities and public institutions lacked experience in coping with the spread of the virus, causing a high level of dissatisfaction amongst citizens (Zhao et al., 2020)⁴. Although complaining on the e-government platform has now become normal, the manner in which complaints were made during those early days makes for an interesting study because of the insight it offers to understand how the process has evolved. The aim of this study is to investigate how Chinese citizens file complaints in an online administrative setting during a certain time frame. In order to achieve this goal, the question that this research attempts to answer is ‘How were online complaints made by citizens to administrators during the early days of Covid-19?’

Literature Review

Previous research on complaints

Extensive research has been conducted using elicited complaints data through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), for example, in the work of House and Kasper (2011)⁵. However, it is important to acknowledge that while the DCT can produce large quantities of focused data within a short period of time, it is not recommended due to potential biases from specific communities or groups, as well as invented responses from inexperienced participants (Yuan and Chen, 2015)⁶. Therefore, it is crucial to base this research on authentic complaints. Further, most studies on authentic complaint interactions have focused on everyday conversations that examine specific characteristics such as complaint terminations (Ekström & Lundström, 2014; Kevoe-Feldman, 2018)^{7,8}, third-party complaints, and sharing of complaint stories (Selting, 2012)⁹. There is a distinct lack of discourse-based research (excluding conversations) on complaints, particularly in terms of online discourse. While there is some research on computer-mediated complaint discourses, it has primarily focused on business contexts across different platforms such as consumer e-mail complaints (Decock & Spiessens, 2017)¹⁰, negative reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor (Vásquez, 2011)¹¹ or Couchsurfing (Dayter & Rüdiger, 2014)¹², and consumer complaint threads on Twitter (Depraetere et al., 2021)¹³. Consequently, not much research can be found on computer-mediated discourse in other institutional contexts, such as the online administrative/political environment.

In addition, there is a large amount of work on complaints in English as alphabetic languages have features that are amenable to modern research. For example, Meinel (2013)¹⁴, and

Decock and Depraetere (2018)¹⁵ discovered that dissatisfaction and disapproval in English complaints can be expressed through the use of capital letters. This is not the case of non-alphabetic (logographic, ideographic or pictographic) languages such as Chinese. Moreover, the trend of analysis that primarily focuses on English hinders the goal of understanding how a similar message is made in other languages and cultures. This makes it necessary to conduct such research on a non-English language such as Chinese.

Directness and indirectness of complaints

Previous studies on complaints in Chinese often used the analytical framework of directness, which involved explicitness and implicitness as well as perceived politeness and perceived face threat (House & Kasper, 2011; Trosborg, 1995; Yuan, 2009)^{5,16,17}. However, recent studies suggest a divergent trend in which these two sets of constructs are separated (Decock & Depraetere, 2018; Depraetere et al., 2021)^{15, 13}. This is based on the understanding that perceived face threat or perceived politeness is what happens after something is said. This is otherwise known as a perlocutionary act, which refers to the interpretation made by the complaint recipients based on their understanding and perception. As a result of this, Decock & Depraetere (2018)¹⁵ defined that a complaint situation, or the reasons for complaining, is comprised of four components:

- A. the *complainable* which explicitly refers to the action or events of the complainer
- B. the complainer expresses *dissatisfaction or disapproval* of the events or situations
- C. *agentive involvement* which refers to the fact the complainer believes that the listener bears either full or partial responsibility for the negative consequences resulting from the events or situations, which affect the speaker
- D. *expectation for the complainable to be remedied* which refers to the complainer expecting the listener to act and address the events or situations in order to rectify the issue

The presence or absence of these components in a complaint situation determines whether the complaint is direct or indirect (Depraetere et al., 2021)¹³. The researchers argued that a complaint can be categorised as implicit/indirect if all four components are absent or implicated. However, the identification of implicit complaint situations is highly dependent on interaction and ‘cancellable’ (p.171). The researchers also noted that if one or more components are expressed explicitly in the complaint situation, then the complaint is categorised as direct. The level of directness increases when more components are explicitly present. For example, the combination of four components phrased explicitly is the most direct complaint. Altogether there are four direct complaint subcategories (Depraetere et al., 2021)¹³. To illustrate, in an imaginary situation in which Tom worked for a construction company for six months but did not receive a salary, the following are the types of explicit complaints he could make to a government leader on e-government service platforms. Note that the first type is implicit.

1. Implicit complaint:
I will not work for this company again.
2. One constitutive component:
{I did not receive my six months’ salary and I now do not have a cent on me.} (A)
3. Two constitutive components:
{The company} (C) {did not pay me for my six months of hard work, and I now do not have a cent on me} (A).
4. Three constitutive components:

{I am so angry} (B) {that the company} (C) {did not pay for my six months' hard work, and I now do not have a cent on me} (A).

5. Four constitutive components:

{I am so angry} (B) {that the company} (C) {did not pay for my six months' hard work, and I now do not have a cent on me} (A). {Pay my back wages} (D).

Boxer (1993)¹⁸ provided a dichotomous classification of complaints, distinguishing them as either direct or indirect based on a participation framework (which is distinct from the (in)directness concept in this study). In a direct complaint, the complaint recipient is the same as the agent responsible for the complaint. In contrast, an indirect complaint involves a third party who is not accountable for the issue being complained about. However, this distinction, originally designed for verbal communication, may not be entirely suitable for online complaints made in the context of this study because government authorities addressed by citizens often do not directly cause the actions being complained about. Nevertheless, as government representatives, they do bear some responsibility to address the complaints. Citizens believe that representatives have the power to resolve such issues through direct action, such as implementing movement orders for stranded citizens or assigning designated offices, such as the Labour Bureau, to assist workers in obtaining their salaries (Amosun et al., 2022)¹⁹. Zhou (2016)²⁰ categorised institutional online complaints as a distinct form of indirect complaints, where the complaint recipient acts on behalf of the offender but is not directly responsible for the offensive act. In a small minority of cases, however, government representatives may be the cause of the offence.

Chinese culture

China is seen as a nation with high-context cultures, where the interactions among its people are usually implicit and context-oriented (Hall, 1976)²¹. Chinese people tend to communicate in an elaborate manner as they regard such a style as displaying wisdom (Ma & Chuang, 2001)²². Collectivism, stemming from traditional Chinese philosophy, deems harmony as the most important and the Chinese think highly of harmony and cultivating good relations. This is reflected in their communication, whereby indirect talking styles, otherwise seen as 'beating around the bush' (Hofstede, 2001)²³, are appreciated. Crucially, power distance has an important role in a collective culture. It is believed that less powerful people are more likely to acknowledge hierarchy, inequity, and power differences (ibid), which subsequently impacts their language use. Kang (2010)²⁴ reports that Chinese speakers are wary of complaining from a position of little or no authority. Similarly, Shang (2017)²⁵ reveals that in a Chinese context, power has an impact on complaint strategies used by introverts. Such individuals only indirectly make their complaints to people in higher social positions. All of this indicates that culture has an impact on people's use of language and in the case of China, the public is assumed to be implicit when communicating with authorities who are more powerful than them.

Collectively, the present study analyses complaints based on authentic as opposed to elicited data in the rarely researched Chinese online administrative context by using the latest analytical tool, i.e., linguistic (in)directness, to explore complaint strategies used by citizens.

Methodology

Corpus

The data in this study is from a sample of 320 complaint messages from the MBL (<http://liuyan.people.com.cn/>), the largest and most influential online governmental interactive platform (Li et al., 2019)²⁶. This platform was founded in 2006 in China, with the aim of providing Webcare or “organizational responses on social media” (van Noort et al., 2015, p. 78)²⁷ to citizens. The sample was narrowed down to Wuhan (<http://liuyan.people.com.cn/forum/list?fid=233>), the capital city of the Hubei province. To further narrow down the data, messages addressed to the Secretary of Party Committees of Wuhan City (<http://liuyan.people.com.cn/threads/list?fid=1169>) on the MBL from February 1st to March 31st, 2020, were collected as samples, as the virus situation was at its worst in the city during these months. There were 510 messages left on the platform during this period, and 320 messages were identified as complaint situations. The identification of a complaint situation was based on the definition by Depraetere et al. (2021)¹³. All messages were examined three times by the first author and a colleague who was trained in linguistic pragmatics to ensure that each of them, either implicitly or explicitly, constituted a complaint situation.

The average length of complaint messages in the MBL was approximately 190 words. The longest message consisted of 957 words, and the shortest, 21 words. The complainers in the MBL included not only Wuhan residents but also individuals who were stranded in the city during the pandemic. Consequently, the content of the messages spans a broad range of topics, including scarcity of resources such as medical resources, inadequate community management, and issues related to lockdown policies (see Table 1).

Table 1
Topics of complaints on MBL during early Covid-19

Topics	Frequency (/320)	Percentage
Resumption of work and school	80	25%
Inadequate community management	69	22%
Negative practices of businesses	56	18%
Lockdown policies	46	14%
Scarcity of resources	39	12%
Urban construction	14	4%
Unavailability of aid	8	3%
Traffic	4	1%
Noise disturbance	2	1%
Environmental protection	1	0.3%
Food security	1	0.3%

Ethical considerations

The research data was taken from a public platform. Use of a digital public platform suggests that users would follow its rules and regulations (Bolander and Locher, 2014)²⁸. The MBL claims that its content can be used for research purposes on the condition that the principle of anonymity is followed (<http://liuyan.people.com.cn/help?cat=2#>). Thus, the messages were anonymised using generic words such as ‘house agent name’, ‘property management company name’, and

‘community name’. The messages did not include any other sensitive information and were ethically appropriate for research purposes.

Coding

The coding scheme was based on the four components of a complaint outlined by Depraetere et al. (2021)¹³. Two coders, the first author and a trained colleague, were involved in the coding process. The data were manually coded in two rounds; the inter-coder reliability was at 0.82%. All discrepancies were sorted out through discussion. One issue concerning titles and salutations received special attention. This refers to the fact that government leaders were occasionally directly addressed in the opening of the message as some citizens wrote messages in the form of a letter although it was not compulsory to do so. In terms of coding, C (the assumed responsible agent/institution) was considered to be realised by the term of address such as ‘Secretary of Party Committees + surname’ (see Example 8) which was then followed by a salutation (Depraetere et al., 2021)¹³. In other cases, there was a second agent mentioned. This was the actual causer of the offence; this individual would be considered as another C (see Example 9).

Results and discussion

First of all, it is noteworthy that some messages contained elements that were obviously irrelevant to the actual complaints. These expressions can be interpreted as ‘positive commentary’ (Vásquez, 2011)¹¹ and are used to provide a preamble (Zhang, 1995)²⁹. In the data, these elements include small talk such as ‘这个时候您肯定很忙，有很多问题要处理’ (I know you are busy, and have a lot of problems to be dealt with) and supportive moves such as ‘我也相信全国人民，在国家的带领下，疫情肯定会过去，国家也出了很多好的政策’ (I also have confidence in Chinese citizens, under the leadership of the country, the pandemic situation will surely be improved, the country has introduced many good policies).

According to Vásquez (2011)¹¹, positive comments found in complaints in online business contexts demonstrate customer rationality. In the context of the study, portraying a positive quality such as being considerate may increase the citizens’ chances of obtaining government assistance. However, after scrutinising the complaints made on the MBL outside the early Covid-19 period, no similar positive comments were found at all. These elements could be part of the uniqueness of the comments made during this period.

Table 2 presents the overall frequencies of components A, B, C and D in the data.

Table 2
Frequency of realisation of A, B, C and D

	Frequency (/320)	Percentage
A	320	100%
B	123	53.5%
C	269	84%
D	266	83%

A: The complainable; B: dissatisfaction or disapproval; C: agentive involvement; D: request for a remedy

The overwhelming presence of component A (complainable) shows that the public perceived it as a justification for their complaints, which means they needed to express their grievances because some undesirable outcome of something in the community was affecting their well-being. In some cases, these complainables were accompanied by visual evidence such as pictures and screenshots related to what was complained about. Many complaints also provided additional detail, with some even delivered in the form of a story. These detailed narratives served multiple purposes, including mitigating the intensity of citizens' complaints and serving to demonstrate respect for authority, implying that their complaints were motivated by obligation rather than aggression. This, in turn, reduced the perceived threat. The realisation of component A thus could be seen as reflecting the characteristics of a Chinese collective and high-context culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001)^{21,23}. In this type of speech event (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Saville-Troike, 1989)^{30,31}, 'the distribution of power between participants is clearly defined and accepted as an integral part of the [interaction]' (Wolfson, 1997, p. 117)³². The detailed description of component A underscores complainers' efforts to mitigate the negative effects of making complaints and prevent themselves from being labelled as moaners.

As for the realisation of component B (dissatisfaction or disapproval), it was comparatively less frequent than the other three components with 53.5% of the total. It suggests that public members tried to make their complaints clearer by elucidating the complained-about facts, pointing out the involved agents, and requesting resolutions. This is inconsistent with previous research in which the realisation of component B was at least 77% (Depraetere et al., 2021; Ruytenbeek et al., 2021)^{13,33}. The difference may result from an awareness of power differences in this context. The lack of component B also shows that many public members were pragmatic and saw the platform as just an instrument to communicate with a public administrator/leader. This might indicate for them that direct complaints without component B were better than those with it.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the differently constituted complaint components in the data.

Table 3

Frequency of one or two/ three/ four constitutive component(s)

	Frequency (/320)	Percentage
One constitutive component	9	2.8%
Two constitutive components	49	15.3%
Three constitutive components	176	55%
Four constitutive components	86	26.8%

In the data, only AB, AC and AD (two components) and ABC, ABD and ACD (three components) were attested.

No implicit complaints were identified in the current dataset. Table 1 shows that Chinese citizens only use explicit complaints (100%). Consequently, the most frequently used complaint is a combination of three components (55%). In the meantime, over a quarter of complaints are realised by a combination of four components that are explicitly communicated. This figure is followed by complaint situations that include two components expressed explicitly (15.3%). The least commonly used complaint strategy is realised by one component (2.8%).

Other than that, Chinese citizens demonstrated a tendency to employ multiple components in complaint situations, indicating a preference for explicit and direct complaints. This finding contradicts the observations made by Kang (2010)²⁴, Shang (2017)²⁵ and Chen et al. (2011)³⁴, who suggested that Chinese citizens, influenced by their collective and high-context culture, display indirectness as a sign of respect towards leaders. The higher level of directness observed in online complaints can be attributed to differences in how directness is operationalised. Specifically, in the present context, linguistic (in)directness is defined based on the explicitness and implicitness of the complaints whereas in previous research, the degree of face threat was also considered a constituent. Furthermore, the specific online context in which complaints were made, along with the relative anonymity of both complainers and recipients, may contribute to the increased level of directness (Vásquez, 2011)¹¹.

Table 4 gives the overall frequencies of the complaint component combinations.

Table 4

Frequency of complaint component combination

	Frequency (/320)	Percentage
A	9	2.8%
AB	5	1.5%
AC	22	7.2%
AD	22	7.2%
ABC	17	5.3%
ABD	15	4.7%
ACD	144	45%
ABCD	86	26.8%

A: The complainable; B: dissatisfaction or disapproval; C: agentive involvement; D: request for a remedy

Table 4 shows that component A (complainable) is indispensable in any explicit complaint and therefore serves as a compulsory component. As for two-component complaints, Chinese citizens are more likely to use two types of combinations, i.e., AC and AD. AC means complainers explicitly make their point by stating facts that describe what is complained about and point out the involved agent. AD shows that complainers refer to the offensive act and ask for compensation explicitly. Interestingly, the percentage of a combination of components A, C and D, at nearly 45%, is among the highest. The most frequent single strategy, i.e., a combination of four constitutive components, is only used in 26.8% of the total.

Category 1: Hint or implicit complaint

The absence of implicit complaints in this dataset is unexpected as it indicates that at least one component of the complaint is explicitly expressed in each of the citizen complaints on the MBL.

Category 2: One constitutive component

A

(1). 地下车库脏水横流，无人打扫消杀，反应无效。（四张照片）

Literal translation:

Land down car warehouse dirty water cross flow, none people beat sweep remove disinfect, report answer no effect. (pictures attached)

loose translation:

{The underground garage is full of dirty water as it has not been cleaned or sterilised. (pictures attached)} (**A**)

The situation in example (1) refers to the requirement to keep all places, including garages, clean and sterilised. The complaint is about a dirty garage that is left unattended. Four pictures displaying a dirty underground garage are used to bolster the realisation of A. This citizen might hold the governor responsible for this but does not explicitly communicate this. Therefore, this is a direct complaint with only component A realised.

Category 3: Two constitutive components

A+B

(2). 我们一家三口滞留武汉已经一个月啦，身边人没有生病的，无确诊，无疑似，无接触，无发热，我们三人连续 23 天体温正常，已和社区报备，为什么不让我们离开呢？自驾车也不行吗？

孩子中考啊，耽误不得啊！！！！

Literal translation:

I they one family three people lag stay Wuhan already through one piece month lah, body around people no have grow sick of, no sure diagnosis, no suspect like, no catch touch, no produce fever, I they three people repeatedly continue 23 days body temperature correct common, already and society community report prepare, for what no let I they leave open?

Self drive car also no workable?

Child son middle test Ah, delay miss no proper Ah !!!

Loose translation:

{For the past month, three members of our family have resided in Wuhan. We have not encountered any infections, diagnoses, or suspicions among the people in our vicinity. We have avoided contact with infected individuals and have not experienced any symptoms such as fever. Our temperatures have remained within the normal range for the past 23 days, and we have reported our records to the local community.} (**A**) {Why not let us go? Not even driving? It is impossible to delay the entrance examination for the children's high school!!!!} (**B**)

Component A is communicated explicitly by stating the fact that family movement is still controlled even when family members are healthy and can drive their own car to leave. B is made explicit not only paraverbally by repetitively using exclamation marks but also verbally by using the interjection ‘*啊啊*’ (Ah) and the interrogative beginning with ‘why not’ that connote ‘a combination of a question and a criticism’ (Gao, 1999, p. 9)³⁵.

A+C

(3). 我于 2020-1-10 和 (房产中介名称) 解约, (房产中介名称) 承诺 7 个工作日内退款, 两个月了, 1181 元至今未退给我, 我只是个学生, 退租扣了我一个月房租我觉得合情合理, 现在两个月了剩下的钱都没退给我, 而且也没联系过我

Literal translation:

I they at 2020-1-10 and (house property medium agent name name) untie contract, (house property medium agent name name) hold promise seven work days within return money, two piece month, 1181 Yuan till today yet return give me, I only is a learn student, return rent deduct I one piece month house rent I feel fit emotion fit logic, now at two piece month remnant left of money all not return give me, and further also not join tie me

Loose translation:

The contract was terminated with {(name of house agent)} (C) on January 1st, 2020. {A refund was promised within seven working days; it has now been two months and I am yet to receive my 1181-Yuan refund. I am a student and I think it is reasonable to deduct one month’s rent for vacating the premises. For two months I have not received the remainder of the money and they never get in touch.} (A)

The complaint is clearly presented by explicitly describing the failure of the house agent to return the money within the agreed timeframe. The author highlights their identity as a student, emphasising their financial need, as they lack a job to sustain themselves. Despite the circumstances, the student demonstrates their understanding by acknowledging the reasonableness of the deduction. Component A is restated explicitly with two facts: the house agent’s failure to return the money and their lack of communication. Component C is involved as the student directly refers to the name of the house agent.

A+D

(4). 有自驾车的武汉市民基本上回武汉了, 我们这些没有车的武汉人在省内已经困了两个月了, 什么时候能够开通省内城际到武汉的长途汽车或者火车呢?

Literal translation:

Have self drive car of Wuhan city citizen base foundation on return Wuhan, I they this some no has car of Wuhan people at province in already through trapped two piece month, what time can open province in inter city to Wuhan of long distance steam car or person fire train?

Loose translation:

{While Wuhan residents who own cars have already returned to the city, those of us without vehicles have had to remain in the province for a duration of two months.}(A){When could the bus or train from other cities of the province to Wuhan be reopened?} (D)

In this example, component A is communicated explicitly by demonstrating that the complainer, as a carless Wuhan citizen, cannot return even when they are inside the province when other Wuhan citizens have already returned in their own cars. Component D is realised by requesting information relevant to the exact time for reopening public transportation, such as buses or trains.

Category 4: Three constitutive components

A+B+C

- (5). 1.本人所在（名称）隔离点，卫生环境很差，部分隔离宿舍漏水，虽然宿舍内有热水，但必须刷卡才能使用，很多年纪大的老人不会用，甚至会被烫伤。
- 2.一日三餐从来都是要滞后一个多小时，饭菜送来了都是冷的，饭有时都是未熟透的夹生饭
- 3.隔离宿舍内无电视也就算了，连网络也没有，14天的隔离期让大家怎么渡过，难道是鼓励大家聚集在一起聊天打发时间吗？

Literal translation:

1. I people place at (name) separate leave site, guard born ring environment very bad, part separate leave place to stay abandon, although night dormitory in have hot water, but must need swipe card only can use, very many age period bid of old people not will use, even will be burnt harm
2. One day three meals from come all is will lag back one piece more small hour, meal dish deliver come all is cold of, meal have time all is yet cooked through of mingled raw rice
3. separate leave night dormitory inside no electronic television also never mind, and internet also not have, fourteen days of separate leave period let big home how get over, hard way is drum reward big home at one rise chat sky beat send time?

Loose translation:

1. I am at {the (name) quarantine site}(C). {The hygiene is terrible. There are leaks in some of the isolation dormitories and although there is hot water you must swipe your card to use it. Many older people have been burnt, if they have been able to use it at all.
2. There is always a delay in delivering any of the three provided meals per day. When the food does arrive it is cold and the rice is often undercooked.
3. It is of no great concern that there is no television in the quarantine dormitory, but there is no internet service at all.}(A) {How are we supposed to get through the 14-day quarantine? By encouraging everyone to gather together and chat to pass the time? } (B)

In example (5), the citizen explicitly expresses agentive involvement, specifically referring to the quarantine site in the first sentence. Subsequently, the citizen explicitly communicates

component A by listing offences occurring at the quarantine site, including poor living conditions, low-quality food, and lack of internet connection. Finally, in the last sentence, component B is realised by using sarcasm, highlighting the citizen's dissatisfaction and frustration with no internet connection.

A+B+D

(6). 本人 1 月 20 日返汉探亲，至今已 58 天，迟迟不能返回，现今已失业中，小孩上网课因书本不能邮寄上课质量大大折扣，每天心急如焚。都说要安排滞留人员返乡，为什么一直不落实行动？后天回复都是要我们理解配合，我们都居家隔离快二月了，谁来理解配合我们？

Literal translation:

I people January month 20th day return Wuhan visit relatives, to today already 58 day, slow slow no can return back, present today already lost job in, small child attend internet class because book book no can post send attend class quality quantity big big fold deduct, every day heart worry like burnt. All say will fix arrange stranded stay people member return hometown, for what one straight no fall real do act? Behind day return reply all is require I they reason untie match fit, I they all stay home separate leave almost two piece month, who come reason untie match fit us?

Loose translation:

{On January 20th, I travelled to Wuhan to visit my relatives. It has been 58 days since then, and I am still unable to return. As a result, I am currently unemployed. The quality of online classes has suffered due to the unavailability of textbooks from school,}(A){causing me to experience distraught on a daily basis. It has been suggested that arrangements will be made for stranded individuals to return home. Why not take any action?} (B) {The response from the platform has been to request our understanding and cooperation. After being in quarantine for almost two months, who will understand and cooperate with us?}(D)

In this sample, component A is realised explicitly by stating the proposition that a citizen is stranded in Wuhan, and therefore has already lost their job. Moreover, their child attends online classes without textbooks as they cannot be sent by post, which affects learning efficiency. Component B is communicated explicitly by showing the negative effect of “distraught” (心急如焚) as well as an interrogative sentence begins with ‘why not’ expressing anger. On a critical note, extreme case formulation marked by ‘everyday’ is used here to ‘show that the problem is recurring or long-term’ (Pomerantz, 1986; Rääbis et al., 2019, p. 4)^{36,37}. Component D is realised by asking for information to understand their situation and requesting leaders to take action to help citizens return home.

A+C+D

(7).尊敬的领导 你好 我是山西运城的 年前自驾来武汉探亲 到现在已经一个多月了 俩小孩 一个三岁多 一个一岁 带的奶粉 纸尿裤早都用没了 现在也买不到 孩子还水土不服 一直哭闹 实在是没办法 。我们身体一直健康。请开通离汉通道，我们自驾回家。

Literal translation:

Respect respect of leader guide you good I am Shan Xi Yun Cheng of year before self drive come Wu Han visit relative to present at already through one piece more month two small child one piece three age more one piece one age bring of milk powder paper urine pants early all use no now at also buy no arrive child son also water land no serve one straight cry noise real at is no manage way . I they body body one straight healthy peaceful. Please open through leave Wuhan through road, I they self drive back home.

Loose translation:

{Dear leader}(C) Greetings, I am from Yuncheng, Shanxi. {It has been over a month, since the New Year, that I drove to Wuhan to visit relatives. I have two children; one is three years old and the other is one year old. The milk powder and diapers I brought were used up long ago. Now they are unavailable the children are always crying. I now do not know what to do. We have always been in good health. Please open the road for leaving Wuhan, and we will drive home.

In this sample, the explicit realisation of component A is due to the quarantine policy that causes the citizen to be stranded in Wuhan. Consequently, there is a desperate need for food and supplies for children, who have been crying because of their discomfort. Agent C, i.e., ‘领导’ (leader) is preceded by a salutation. The explicit expression of D is realised by requesting a solution to open the road to leave Wuhan.

(8). (姓) 书记, 我是汉阳居民, 现在又不能出门, 网上也不能下单, 快递小哥也不能代跑腿上路, 病人没纸尿裤用, 衣服天天拉湿, 真不知如何是好! 谢谢 (姓) 书记!

Literal translation:

(Surname) book Sectary, I am Hanyang reside citizen, now at again no can outside door, net on also no can down order, fast pass small brother also no can replace run leg on road, sick people no paper urine pants use, clothes clothes day day poo wet, really no know as how is good! Thank thank (Surname) book Sectary!

Loose translation:

{Secretary of Party Committees (surname)} (C), I am a resident in Hanyang. {I am not allowed to go out. I cannot shop online; the delivery man cannot help as the road is closed. The patient has no diapers and his/her clothes are always wet because of faeces and urine.} (A) {I really do not know what to do!} (D)Thanks, Secretary Surname!

This is a direct complaint that holds the secretary responsible for the actions being complained about, specifically the movement control orders. The complainer explicitly refers to the negative consequences brought about by the lockdown, realising component A. Furthermore, the complainant addresses the leader by their official title, the Secretary of Party Committees, thereby establishing component C. The complainer’s statement of feeling helpless implies a need for government assistance, as indicated in component D. The expression of gratitude here is ‘an up-and-coming indirect form of request’, with which the citizen ‘states a general rule, and then assumes in advance that the reader will be considerate enough to conform to it’ (Leech, 2014)³⁸. The analysis of this message highlights that a complaint situation does not occur in isolation but is part of a larger set of speech acts, which is consistent with previous findings by Cohen and Olshtain (1993)³⁹ and Murphy and Neu (2009)⁴⁰.

Category 5: four constitutive components

A+B+C+D

(9). 我们（小区名称）物业，在疫情期间，毫无作为；不对公共区域进行消杀，不监管独居老人在小区垃圾桶捡垃圾行为，不上门排查，不给居民团购生活物资……疑似病例在早期隐瞒不公开，不隔离！家属也不隔离！……这也就罢了，竟然雇水军在网点赞当代国际花园的物业行为很好，不作为却还使坏！其行为，令人发指！业主意见很大，民不聊生！却又无可奈何。因为他们一手遮天！求书记拯救我们小区的居民，这里有上万人居住

Literal translation:

I they (small district name) thing business, at pandemic situation period between, none action; don't public area conduct disinfect, don not supervise living alone old people at community dustbin pick up rubbish behavior, don't drop in check, don't provide residents group buy living necessities...this also never mind, unexpectedly hire water army on internet like (community name) proper performance very good, no action but also play dirty trick! Their behavior, make one's hair stand up in anger! Property owner criticize very big, the people are destitute! But still helpless. Because they shut out the heavens with one palm! Beg the sectary save our community residents, here have ten thousand people live

Loose Translation:

{The property management company of our community (name)} (C) {did nothing during the epidemic; public areas were not sterilised; No one spies on the old man who picks up trash from trash cans in our community and provides door-to-door troubleshooting services; no group purchasing that will provide residents with basic supplies...the information about suspected cases is concealed and not transparent, these cases are not isolated! And their relatives are isolated neither!... That is fine, they even hired online trolls to give positive comments on their performances,} (A) {they did nothing, what's worse, played a dirty trick! Their behaviours are unspeakable! Property owners strongly have a problem with this, people are suffering! Even helpless. Because they hide the truth from the people!} (B) {(I) beg the Party Secretary to save the residents in our community; there are tens of thousands of people living here} (D)

In this indirect complaint (in terms of participation framework), a citizen states that things are supposed to be performed by a property company, but it ultimately did not accept responsibility. Moreover, they attempted to construct a good image by employing trolls to give positive comments online. By sharing this company's misbehaviours, component A is communicated explicitly. Component B is expressed explicitly through the multiple uses of exclamation marks as well as through negative emotions (e.g. '无可奈何' =helpless) and evaluations (e.g. '令人发指' = unspeakable, '一手遮天' = hide the truth from the people, '民不聊生' = people are suffering). Two parties are assumed to take responsibility for these offences. The first sentence directly refers to the name of the property management company, which makes the first component C explicit. The citizen then considers that the Party secretary has at least partial responsibility for this offence, therefore, they ask the officer to give them a hand. In this case, the

second component C, the Party secretary, is communicated on the record and a request for this offence to be remedied is made, which makes explicit reference to the realisation of D.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has revealed that the Chinese public overwhelmingly prefers to use direct language when expressing complaints towards authorities who hold higher status and power, particularly in an online context. This preference can be attributed to two factors: the concept of directness and the public online institutional context of e-government service platforms. Firstly, the directness employed by citizens in this context conveys deference and proximity instead of impoliteness and offensiveness (Beamer, 2003)⁴¹, implying that the greater the level of directness, indicated by explicitly expressing multiple constitutive components (except component B) in a complaint, the more respect and accommodation the citizens demonstrate towards government authorities. Secondly, the instrumental nature of the platform where citizens leave their messages to seek help compels them to simply go straight to the point. This interactive session serves both personal and institutional purposes. On the one hand, citizens request a remedy for the offence by making a complaint while on the other, the government aims to fulfil its goal of serving the people. Additionally, the avoidance of expression B in which complainers voice out their dissatisfaction can reduce impoliteness (Ruytenbeek et al., 2022)⁴² and assist citizens in creating a positive image (Vásquez, 2011)¹¹. Thus it can be concluded that citizens have two primary motivations for posting complaint messages on a public service platform, i.e., seeking help and constructing a positive self-image in the public domain.

This study has its limitations, most notably in the fact that the complaints were produced under a specific condition, i.e., the early period of Covid-19. It is not known if Chinese citizens would employ the same complaining strategies under other conditions. The level of the linguistic (in) directness of complaints in an online political context in those circumstances must therefore be examined.

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