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*Linguistic (in)directness in Twitter complaints: a contrastive analysis of railway complaint interactions\**. \*\*

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## 1 Background, aims and research questions

Complaints in linguistics have been studied using discourse-pragmatic and conversation-analytic (CA) approaches, with attention to the linguistic realizations of complaints as well as to the interactional dynamics of complaint interactions. A range of discursive strategies and features of complaints, such as strategies related to objectification, narration, identity construction, authenticity, audience involvement, stance, emotional expression and (in)directness, have been examined in a variety of contexts (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Chen et al., 2011; Vásquez, 2011; Dayter and Rüdiger, 2014; Decock and Spiessens 2017), and several studies – mainly from a CA-perspective – have focused on how complaints unfold in conversations in both private and professional settings (e.g., Drew and Walker, 2009; Heinemann, 2009; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011; Ekström and Lundström, 2014; Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). With respect to the study of (in)directness in complaints in particular, the critical evaluation of previous conceptualizations and applications of (in)directness has led Decock and Depraetere (2018) to propose a new taxonomy of complaints that is based on the identification of the constitutive components of a complaint situation and the extent to which these components are explicitly realized, with some attention to the ways in which they are linguistically expressed. This approach can arguably inform both CA- and discourse-pragmatic studies on complaints, as it starts from a very rigorous definition of a complaint situation and aims to analyze the different content- and language-related choices complainers can make in such a situation. However, while building on the qualitative analysis of a sample of (French, German, and Dutch) business complaints, the taxonomy has as yet not been tested on a larger corpus of complaint data. Moreover, a quantitative analysis of the linguistic realization of the complaint components was likewise beyond the scope of Decock and Depraetere (2018).

The main aims of this paper are (a) to put the taxonomy outlined in Decock and Depraetere (2018) to a data test by applying it to a larger corpus of authentic complaints and (b) to examine systematically how complaint components are linguistically realized. To this end, a corpus of French-language Twitter complaint interactions between the SNCF (the French National Railway company) or the SNCB (the Belgian National Railway company) and their customers will be used. The taxonomy in Decock and Depraetere (2018) builds on the analysis of a complaint situation in terms of four constitutive components, which have been derived from House and Kasper's (1981) and Trosborg's (1995) work on complaints:

- *Complainable*: a past or ongoing action or occurrence which does not conform to the complainer's expectations and interests
- *Dissatisfaction*: the complainer disapproves of the complainable, and makes it clear that she is annoyed or dissatisfied
- *Person or institution held responsible for the complainable*: the complainer holds the complaine (at least partially) responsible for the negative consequences of the complainable that affect the complainer
- *Wish for the complainable to be remedied*: the speaker wants the addressee to do something about the complainable and/or to solve the problem

In order to facilitate the discussion, we will refer to the constitutive components of a complaint situation by means of A (complainable), B (dissatisfaction), C (person/institution held responsible), and D (wish for complainable to be remedied).<sup>1</sup>

The taxonomy in Decock and Depraetere (2018) is based on the number of constitutive components that is explicitly expressed in a complaint situation. A distinction is made between implicit complaints and explicit complaints. A complaint is said to be implicit if it is implicated: none of the constitutive components is explicitly voiced; the complaint is inferred in context and is in principle cancellable.<sup>2</sup> A complaint is said to be explicit if the speech act is explicitly named, or if one or several of the constitutive components is/are linguistically realized. Accordingly, Decock and Depraetere (2018) distinguish five subtypes of explicit complaints (see below). Imagine the following complaint situation: Jennifer has suffered from an allergic reaction to a dish that was not glutenfree. She complains to the manager. The examples below illustrate the different complaint categories that feature in the taxonomy (see Decock and Depraetere 2018: 39-43) (Note that component combinations other than those illustrated below are possible and that the order in which the components occur (e.g. AC or CA) is not relevant to the taxonomy.):

1. Implicit complaint: *Next time I won't be ordering the set menu.*
2. Explicit reference to the speech act of complaint: *I'm writing this letter to file a complaint concerning a dish I had at your restaurant.*
3. One constitutive component is explicitly expressed: *The menu did not mention that the set lunch contained gluten and I suffered from an allergic reaction.* (A)
4. Two constitutive components are explicitly expressed: *You did not mention in the menu that set lunch contained gluten and I suffered from an allergic reaction.* (A and C)
5. Three constitutive components are explicitly expressed: *I'm annoyed because you did not mention in the menu that set lunch contained gluten and I suffered from an allergic reaction.* (A, B and C)
6. Four constitutive components are explicitly expressed: *I'm annoyed because you did not mention in the menu that set lunch contained gluten and I suffered from an*

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<sup>1</sup> Complaints are not necessarily expressed in a single sentence; they often consist of a set of speech acts, for instance, an assertion (of the complainable) combined with a request (for the complainable to be remedied). This observation has led some researchers (e.g., Tanck 2002; Vásquez 2011) to put forward the concept of 'speech act sets' when they are analyzing such 'multi-component' speech acts.

<sup>2</sup> Applied to the situation described below, if the speaker says *Next time I won't be ordering the set menu*, she cannot be accused of having *said* that there was a problem with the food.

*allergic reaction. The menu should mention information about the ingredients. (A, B, C and D)*

In Decock and Depraetere's model, the distinction between an explicit and an implicit complaint is categorical: a complaint is either explicit or implicit (that is, realized as a hint or implicated). In the present paper, we no longer consider an explicit reference to the speech act of complaint (category 2) as a separate subtype within the category of explicit complaints: the explicit reference to the speech act of complaint generally combines with a reference to one or more of the constitutive components of the complaint (see categories 3, 4, 5, and 6). In other words, while the naming of the speech act contributes to the explicitness of the complaint, and therefore needs to be taken into account, category 2 is not on par with the other categories (see Tjoncke 2018). So compared to the 2018 paper, the number of categories has been adjusted: there are now four (rather than five) subtypes of explicit complaints (see categories 3, 4, 5, and 6). Degree of explicitness is defined in terms of the number of components explicitly realized (one, two, three or four components): four-component complaints are the most explicit ones; two- and three-component complaints can contain any combination of two or three complaint components. Importantly, Decock and Depraetere's (2018) taxonomy is based on linguistic (in)directness rather than on perceived (im)politeness of complaints.<sup>3</sup> While the former is assessed by analyzing the linguistic realizations of complaints and operationalized in terms of the presence (or not) of (one or more of) the four constitutive components of a complaint situation, the latter requires an investigation of the reactions and perceptions by the addressees (see Ruytenbeek et al. (under review) for more details) and therefore concerns the perlocutionary effect of complaints.

As mentioned on p.1, the principal aim of this paper is to put the complaint taxonomy in terms of linguistic (in)directness to the test by analyzing a corpus of authentic French-language Twitter complaint interactions between railway companies and their customers. The results will be quantified and we will look for significant patterns. Importantly, the taxonomy of linguistic (in)directness will be tested here not only on the basis of the opening complaint tweets, but by analyzing the complete complaint threads. First, we will examine the types, number, preferred combinations and formal realizations of the constitutive components of the complaint situation made explicit by complaining customers in their opening complaint tweets. Secondly, we will analyze how linguistic (in)directness unfolds in the ensuing Twitter complaint thread: we identify any further complaint-related constitutive components realized in follow-up reactions by complaining customers in order to assess if complaints become increasingly more explicit (compared to the opening complaint tweets), and we likewise check if complaint-related constitutive components are realized in reactions by other customers participating in the conversation (the other customers will henceforth be labeled 'responding customers'). In order to grasp the interactional dynamics in a

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<sup>3</sup> This distinction is not always clear-cut in other work on complaints. In House and Kasper (1981), *You have ruined my blouse* (level 6) is said to be less direct than *You are really mean* (level 8). Clearly, the categorization of these examples is not based on explicitness only: each of them spells out a different facet of the complaint and they could therefore be seen as equally explicit. However, they differ in terms of the degree of offense that they may cause: saying that the addressee is mean is potentially a more severe blow to his positive face than saying that he has ruined your blouse. It is important to differentiate explicitness/implicitness and assumed degree of face-threat. In this paper, we are concerned with explicitness/implicitness only.

comprehensive way, the analysis of follow-up reactions by complaining and responding customers also looks at additional speech acts that are expressed. Thirdly, we will analyze the response strategies used by social media agents of the railway companies and assess their potential impact on the ways the Twitter complaint threads unfold. Finally, we will test the taxonomy of linguistic (in)directness by adopting a cross-linguistic perspective. More specifically, we will probe into potential differences in online complaint-related communication practices in two linguistically closely related communities: French as it is used in France and in Belgium.

The analysis presented here constitutes the first detailed, quantitative investigation of linguistic (in)directness in computer-mediated complaints. Our analysis of Twitter complaint interactions also complements previous research in other ways: first, earlier work on complaints is focused on oral complaints, and discourse-pragmatic studies of this type mainly use elicited data from discourse completion tasks or role plays (e.g., Trosborg 1995). Studies of social media complaints are fewer in number and mainly analyze the genre of negative online customer reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Couchsurfing or eBay (Vásquez, 2011; Dayter and Rüdiger, 2014; Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Meinel, 2010). On the one hand, we expect to find some overlap between negative online reviews and Twitter complaints, for instance with respect to higher levels of explicitness and aggression because of increased anonymity online and a focus on transactional rather than interactional goals (Decock and Spiessens 2017). On the other hand, online negative reviews and Twitter complaints are likely to differ in terms of their linguistic realization because of differences in addressee orientation and Twitter's technical affordances in terms of character count (280 characters) which necessitate more brevity compared to many other online platforms. Second, while the analysis of complaint interactions is central to CA-approaches, this is less the case in discourse-pragmatic and genre-analytic approaches to complaints, where the main focus tends to be on the discourse (structure) of either complaints (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Chen et al. 2011; Geluykens and Kraft, 2006; Hartford and Mahboob, 2004) or complaint responses (Trosborg and Shaw, 1998; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014; Van Herck et al., under review) without taking into account interactional patterns. By examining Twitter complaints together with social media agent responses and follow-up reactions by responding customers, we can get a more accurate picture of communicative patterns and we can enhance our understanding of the interactional dynamics at play. Our search for quantitatively significant patterns stands out here as well.

Finally, our approach contributes to cross-linguistic research in pragmatics by examining potential differences in French-French and Belgian-French online complaint-related communication practices: do francophone Belgians and French have culturally different ways of complaining and of reacting to complaints via Twitter? Studies comparing Belgian-French and French-French are – to our knowledge – non-existing. Tobback (2014) indirectly compares them in the concluding part of her contrastive study of the conversational debating style of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgian politicians, stating that the Belgian French style (as opposed to the Belgian Dutch style) resembles that of the French as it has been described by Béal (2010) (also see Tobback and Lauwers 2016). Béal observed a tendency towards *engagement* in French (compared to Australian English), which comprises, amongst others, an attitude of assertiveness and confrontation in interaction. Of course, when assessing cross-linguistic differences, alternative explanations for these differences need to be considered. Blodgett et al. (2006) argue, for instance, (contra

Hernandez, Strahle, Garcia and Sorensen 1991, Le Claire 1993, Watkins and Liu 1996), that differences in customers' return behavior should not be explained in terms of underlying cultural values or norms, but, rather, in terms of competitive forces, that is, liberal or more customer-oriented policies. In a similar way, we would like to find out if it is not (potential) differences in response policy between SNCF and SNCB that shape different communities of practice with different norms of engagement and communication. In sum, in case we observe differences between French-French and Belgian-French online complaint interactions, we will try to assess if these differences can be explained in terms of culture, response policy, or both.

In line with the rationale outlined above, our paper addresses the following research questions:

1. Which and how many constitutive components of the complaint situation are realized, what are the preferred component combinations, and what are the different formal means used to realize these components in the opening complaint tweets of complaining customers?
2. Which constitutive components of the complaint situation are realized and what are the different formal means used to realize these components in follow-up reactions by complaining customers? Is there an increase in explicitness compared to the opening tweet?
3. Which complaint-related constitutive components are realized in the tweets of responding customers, i.e., other customers who participate in the conversation?
4. Which additional speech acts are realized in follow-up tweets by complaining and responding customers?
5. Which response strategies are used by the social media agents, and what is their potential impact on the way in which the Twitter complaint interactions unfold?
6. Are there differences in the realization of complaints and in online complaint-related communication practices in French-French and Belgian-French Twitter complaint interactions, and if so, why?

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Data collection

We compiled a sample of 100 SNCB and 100 SNCF Twitter complaint threads, which were randomly collected from Twitter between September, 9<sup>th</sup> and October, 28<sup>th</sup> 2018. The random collection took the following form: we extracted a maximum of five complaint threads per day, selecting the first, the fourth, the seventh, etc. complaint exchange, until we reached about 100 complaint threads per subset. Some 'threads' only contain the opening customer complaint tweet, in the sense that some tweets were not followed by a response (either by a social media agent or another customer). We excluded threads which showed clear features of non-native speaker French, that is, tweets that are syntactically and/or semantically unacceptable in various ways.

The selection of Twitter complaint threads is based on our definition of a complaint situation (see pp.1-2). This means that in all cases, including those threads with an opening customer tweet in which the complaint is left implicit, it is clear from the interaction that

the customer initiated the Twitter conversation because something is wrong, she is dissatisfied about the situation, and she holds the railway company accountable. Opening tweets which we categorized as implicit complaints because none of the constitutive components are linguistically realized tend to take the form of requests for information (see example (1) in Section 2.3). There are only two examples of this type (see Table 4) (this testifies to the explicitness of online public customer complaints observed in previous studies, e.g., Meini, 2010), and they are to be distinguished from opening tweets that are true requests for information. For instance, when a customer inquires into a timetable (will the train be running according to the usual schedule?), and a social media agent replies and explains that everything should be fine, although there might be some delays, we can infer that it is most likely that there is no complaint situation and that the customer's tweet is a genuine request for information. It was sometimes difficult to decide on the basis of the complaint thread if the customer is actually experiencing trouble and is dissatisfied. We chose not to include the thread unless there were unambiguous cues in the interaction that prove that the customer posted the opening tweet because she was in a complaint situation.

The following table gives an overview of the composition of our corpus:

SNCF	SNCB
100 complaint threads	100 complaint threads
180 complaining customer turns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 opening complaint tweets</li> <li>• 80 follow-ups, divided over 39 complaint threads<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	217 complaining customer turns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 opening complaint tweets</li> <li>• 117 follow-ups, divided over 66 complaint threads</li> </ul>
37 SNCF turns, divided over 28 (out of 100) complaint threads	158 SNCB turns, divided over 80 (out of 100) complaint threads
95 responding customer turns, divided over 50 (out of 100) complaint threads	7 responding customer turns, divided over 6 (out of 100) complaint threads
Interactions of 1-2 turns in 51/100 tweet threads; 8 interactions longer than 10 turns (with a maximum of 49 turns)	Interactions of 2-4 turns in 58/100 tweet threads; 3 interactions longer than 10 turns (with a maximum of 18 turns)

Table 1. Overview of SNCF and SNCB samples analyzed

## 2.2 Ethical considerations

Due to their public nature, tweets are available to anyone who has access to the Internet (boyd 2010). It therefore seems, at first glance, unproblematic to use the content of these tweets in scientific research (as long as we do not claim ownership, since Twitter users remain the owners of the content they provide on the platform, cf. Twitter's terms of

<sup>4</sup> As will be explained on p.23-25, *follow-ups* can take different forms.

service <https://twitter.com/en/tos#intlTerms>). However, from an ethical perspective, the picture is more complicated. The use of Twitter data for research purposes entails several issues, such as consent to use tweets (Eysenbach and Till, 2001) and traceability of the tweets (Zimmer 2010), which have to be acknowledged and addressed (Webb et al. 2017). We briefly present our approach here, taking into account the recommendations made by Bolander and Locher (2014) and Locher and Bolander (2019) as well as the guidelines published by the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham et al. 2012; Franzke et al. 2020), Strictly speaking, by using Twitter, users agree to Twitter’s Terms of Service, which imply that organizations, including universities, are allowed to use the content of tweets for research purposes. Moreover, the tweets in our samples contain non-sensitive data only. While a few contain insults, none of them is addressed to a particular, identifiable individual. We have also anonymized the data in our samples through the use of generic labels such as ‘customer’, ‘social media agent’. Importantly as well, the people who have posted the tweets can be considered as a non-vulnerable population. Given the non-invasiveness of our study, we can thus safely assume that no one will be harmed by our use of the tweets for research purposes.

### 2.3 Data coding

We coded the opening complaint tweets as well as the follow-up tweets of complaining and responding customers in terms of linguistic (in)directness (see Section 3). We have applied the taxonomy introduced in Section 1, which distinguishes between five categories: implicit complaints and four subtypes of explicit complaints. Examples of each type are given in (1) to (5) below.

In the case of implicit complaints, it is clear from the interaction that there is a complaint situation but none of the constitutive components is explicitly expressed by the customer. We have therefore chosen to include the full complaint thread in the example in (1):<sup>5</sup>

#### (1) Implicit complaint

CC	Bsr @SNCB pouvez-vous me confirmer que le 8446 à [sic.] circulé ce jour ? Merci ! #SNCB <sup>6</sup>
SMA	Bonjour NAME CUSTOMER, selon mes infos le 8446 n'a pas circulé en tant que train de voyageurs. Celui-ci a bien cependant fait son pacours [sic.] à vide, afin que le matériel soit au bon endroit pour un trajet ultérieur. ^NAME RESPONDING SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT
CC	Dès lors, il serait opportun de mettre à jour les données dans l'attestation de retard qui indique que le train a circulé normalement #SNCB #8446 ( <i>screenshot showing journey from Bruxelles midi to Visé without any announcements of delays</i> )
SMA	Effectivement NAME CUSTOMER, merci pour ce feedback. Je remonte celui-ci vers le service concerné.

<sup>5</sup> CC stands for ‘complaining customer’; SMA stands for ‘social media agent’.

<sup>6</sup> Note that occasional spelling errors and grammatical errors have not been removed in the French language tweets; they are marked by [sic.]. We have put items in bold if we wish to highlight specific parts of the tweets.



	<u>Translation</u>
CC	<i>Good evening @SNCB can you confirm that 8446 has been running today? Thank you! #SNCB</i>
SMA	<i>Hello NAME CUSTOMER, according to the information I have the 8446 did not run as a passenger train. However, the train did the journey empty, so that the equipment is in the right place for a later journey. ^NAME RESPONDING SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT</i>
CC	<i>It would therefore be appropriate to update the delay overview according to which the train ran as usual #SNCB #8446 (screenshot showing journey from Bruxelles midi to Visé without any announcements of delays)</i>
SMA	<i>Indeed NAME CUSTOMER, thank you for this feedback. I will pass it on to the relevant department.</i>

Explicit complaints range from the least explicit (one constitutive component is expressed) to the most explicit (four constitutive components are expressed). As mentioned above, we refer to the constitutive components of a complaint situation by means of A (complainable), B (dissatisfaction), C (person/institution held responsible), and D (wish for complainable to be remedied).

**(2) Explicit complaint: one constitutive component** (in the tweet below: A)

CC	<i>@SNCB Qu'est-ce qui c'est [sic.] passé avec le train S5 vers Edingen ? Je suis à la gare d'Evere depuis 19:02, on l'attendait à 19:05, mais l'app ne dit pas qu'il soit en retard</i>
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	<i>@SNCB What happened to the S5 train to Edingen? I've been at Evere station since 19:02, we were expecting the train to arrive at 19:05, but the app doesn't say it is running late.</i>

**(3) Explicit complaint: two constitutive components** (in the tweet below: AB)

CC	<i>4h pour aller à Montpellier en train putain @SNCF</i>
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	<i>4hrs to travel to Montpellier by train for Christ's sake @SNCF</i>

**(4) Explicit complaint: three constitutive components** (in the tweet below: ABC)

CC	<i>Tu te lèves à 5h pour avoir ton train super tôt et quand t'arrives en gare ils t'annoncent 20min de retard. @SNCF tu me fatigues VRAIMENT.</i>
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	<i>You get up at 5am to catch a very early train and when you arrive at the station you're told there's a 20-minute delay. @SNCF I'm REALLY sick and tired of your behavior.</i>

**(5) Explicit complaint: four constitutive components** (in the tweet below: ABCD)

CC	<i>Arrêtez de vendre des billets quant y a VRAIMENT plus de place (cc la @SNCF)</i>
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CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>Stop selling tickets when there are ACTUALLY no places left (cc @SNCF)</i>
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The SNCB corpus was coded by two coders and served to develop coding guidelines: these guidelines provide a solid basis that helps identify the four constitutive components and that likewise offers a very detailed characterization of how the different components can be formally realized. In this way we outlined a methodology that can be replicated and applied to complaints in other languages and other genres. The SNCF corpus was used to put the guidelines to the test. Two coders coded this corpus, and we checked the coding of the constitutive components in the opening complaint tweets for interrater reliability. (We report on this in Section 3.1 below.)

Once we had identified the components realized in the opening complaint tweets (see Table 3 in Section 3.2), we examined the preferred component combinations (see Table 5 in Section 3.2) and the different formal means used to realize the constitutive components (Section 3.3). In other words, the qualitative analysis, which resulted in a descriptive overview of possible realizations of complaints, was each time complemented with a quantitative analysis with the aim of identifying significant patterns, based on chi-square tests ( $p < .05$ ).

This detailed analysis of the opening tweet was complemented with the analysis of linguistic (in)directness in the complaint interaction, that is, we checked to what extent follow-up tweets by complaining and responding customers contain (additional) realizations of the constitutive components of the complaint situation, and in what form they are communicated (see Section 4.2). Apart from analyzing linguistic (in)directness in tweets by complaining and responding customers, we also looked for potential patterns in the use of other speech acts (such as providing information) in follow-up tweets by complaining and responding customers and for patterns in the use of response strategies by the social media agents (see Sections 4.1 and 4.3). This enabled us to reflect on the impact of response strategies on the way the Twitter complaint interactions unfold, a more general research question being that of critically assessing online communication practices in two French-speaking communities. The complete set of complaint interactions was analyzed in both samples.

### 3 Linguistic (in)directness in the first complaint tweet: analysis and discussion

In this section, we will look at linguistic (in)directness in the opening complaint tweet, with attention both to the presence and combination of constitutive components and to their formal realization. Before we do so, we will report on the coding issues that we had to address.

#### 3.1 Interrater reliability

The SNCF corpus was coded by two coders, which enabled us to check interrater reliability and to fine-tune the coding guidelines where needed. While the results for components A and B were excellent and that for D good, the score for C was less convincing.

	% agreement 2 raters	Kappa score
A	96%	Excellent agreement <sup>7</sup>
B	97%	0.8
C	76%	0.4
D	85%	0.7

Table 2. Interrater reliability scores (A = the complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D = wish for the complainable to be remedied)

Two issues had to be addressed. The differences in the initial coding results mainly related to the coding of references to 'SNCB/SNCF' in the tweets. The companies' names standardly feature in tweets, preceded by @ (@SNCB/@SNCF). This is a formal requirement that needs to be respected when posting a tweet (example 6) and can hence not automatically be considered as a realization of C. In a similar way, #SNCB/#SNCF is sometimes used as a content hashtag, in which case it only serves to set the context (example 6). We therefore had to set up clear guidelines which stipulate when exactly @SNCB/@SNCF does not serve as a mere formal requirement, and when #SNCB/#SNCF is not just a content hashtag. We decided to code @SNCB/@SNCF and #SNCB/#SNCF as a linguistic expression of C in the following cases: when it is immediately preceded or followed by *merci* and *bravo* (thanking and congratulating SNCB/SNCF (sarcastically)) and when it is embedded in the clause (e.g. when @/# SNCF/SNCB is the subject of the clause, when @/# SNCF/SNCB features in a Noun Phrase or a Prepositional Phrase) (examples 8 to 10). We decided not to code @SNCF/SNCB as a formal expression of C when it is preceded or followed by a salutation (example 7).

(6)

CC	80€ si tu réserves le matin, 27€ si tu réserves le soir, avec le même train et les même [sic.] conditions. #pigeon #sncf #allosimone #arnaque #inouï @SNCF
CC	<u>Translation</u> 80€ if you book in the morning, 27€ if you book in the evening, on the same train and in same conditions. #fool [what do you take me for, a fool?] #sncf #allosimone #fraud #unheard of @SNCF

(7)

CC	@SNCB bonjour, à quand le wifi dans les trains ? (Comme au Pays-Bas )
CC	<u>Translation</u> @SNCB hello, when will there be wifi on the trains? (As in the Netherlands)

<sup>7</sup> The figures for component A were as follows: (a) both coders agree that A is realized in the tweet: 96 cases; (b) coder A and coder B disagree; A is realized (coder A)/A is not realized (coder B): 3 cases; (c) coder A and coder B disagree; A is realized (coder B)/A is not realized (coder A): 1 case; (d) both coders agree that A is not realized in the tweet: 0 cases. It is not possible to calculate a kappa score when the value for (d) is zero. However, given the overall agreement in the coding results, we can conclude that the agreement is excellent.

(8)

CC	donc j'ai mis 1h environ à faire mezidon caen [sic.] au lieu de 15/20 minutes? <b>merci @SNCF</b> c'est cool
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>so it took me about 1 hour to travel from mezidon to caen instead of 15/20 minutes? <b>thank you @SNCF</b> this is cool</i>

(9)

CC	Ils sont sympa à la <b>@SNCB</b> quand même, des retards de presque 2heures sur un train ça fait plaisir après tout 2h dans une vie, qu'est-ce que c'est ?
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>They're really nice <b>@SNCB</b>, delays of almost 2 hours on a train that's enjoyable after all 2 hours in a lifetime, what are you on about?</i>

(10)

CC	<b>@SNCB #L162</b> semaine de la mobilité, inadmissible, scandaleux, retard et suppression en cascade. Impossible de compter <b>sur la sncb</b>
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i><b>@SNCB #L162</b> mobility week, inadmissible, scandalous, endless delays and cancellations. Impossible to rely <b>on sncb</b></i>

A similar issue arose with the use of *vous* (you). In some cases (see (11)), the addressee is clearly held responsible for the complainable. In other cases (see (12) and (13)), *vous* features as subject in a request for information: the customer asks for an estimation or for an explanation. In these examples, it is more difficult to decide if the customer considers the referent of 'vous' to be responsible for the complainable or not. The function of 'vous' (does 'vous' realize C or not?) in the contexts described was assessed differently by the coders and this resulted in a low interrater reliability score. As it turns out to be impossible to draw a clear line on the basis of falsifiable criteria, the decision was taken to code all occurrences of *vous* as realizations of C (= person/institution held responsible for the complainable). Therefore, in all of the following examples, *vous* is considered to be a lexical marker that explicitly identifies the SNCB as being responsible for the problem reported by the complaining customer.

(11)

CC	<b>@SNCB</b> lorsqu'un train est annulé, <b>vous</b> ne pouvez pas le dire avant la minute précédent le passage du train ? J'aurais pris la voiture, le bus... Maintenant j'arrive 15' en retard pour le cours que je donne
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i><b>@SNCB</b> when a train is cancelled, can <b>you</b> not say it the minute before the train passes by? I would have taken the car, the bus... Now I'm 15' late for the class I'm teaching.</i>

(12)

CC	Bonjour @SNCB, <b>vous</b> pensez qu'en 20 minutes j'aurai mon billet cette fois ? Parce qu'avec un seul guichet et un billet pas en vente aux automates, ça me paraît mal barré (+ photo)
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>Hello @SNCB, do <b>you</b> think that in 20 minutes' I'll get my ticket this time? Because with only one ticket office and a no tickets for sale at the ATMs, the omens look bad (+ picture)</i>

(13)

CC	@SNCB bonjour. Pouvez <b>vous</b> [sic.] me dire pourquoi le P8400 roule au ralenti ? Et éventuellement jusqu'où va t il rouler au ralenti ? Merci
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB hello. Can <b>you</b> tell me why the P8400 is running slow? And possibly until where will it be running slow? Thank you</i>

The coding guidelines were updated in accordance with the observations made, and this enabled us to streamline the coding of component C. The new guidelines were tested on the SNCB corpus, with excellent results (kappa score of 0,8 (almost perfect agreement)). In the next section, we give an overview of the components that are realized in the opening complaint tweet in both samples.

### 3.2 Explicit realization of A, B, C and/or D

Table 3 shows that overall, the complaints are more explicit in the SNCF sample than in the SNCB sample, in the sense that there is a higher number of components that are linguistically expressed in the former. The figures in bold point to differences that are statistically significant.<sup>8</sup>

	SNCF (100 threads)	SNCB (100 threads)
A	99	98
B	93	77
C	<b>70</b>	<b>44</b>
D	33	26
	307	245

Table 3. Frequency of realization of A, B, C, D (A = complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D = wish for the complainable to be remedied)

Table 4 shows that the SNCF sample is also more explicit in the sense that tweets in which a higher number of components is expressed are more frequent:

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<sup>8</sup> In the rest of the paper, we will consistently highlight statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences in bold in the tables.

	SNCF (100)	SNCB (100) <sup>9</sup>
One component	3	9
Two components	<b>22</b>	<b>42</b>
Three components	51	36
Four components	<b>24</b>	<b>11</b>
	100	98 <sup>10</sup>

Table 4. Frequency of one-, two-, three-, four-component combinations

When it comes to component combinations, the ranking in the SNCF corpus is as follows: 1. ABC, 2. ABCD, 3. AB; in the SNCB corpus it is: 1. AB, 2. ABC, 3. ABCD. In other words, the SNCF sample is again more explicit compared to SNCB as the three-component tweets are the most frequent in the SNCF corpus compared to the two-component tweets that feature in first position the SNCB corpus.

	SNCF (100)	SNCB (100)
A	3	9
AB	20	33
ABC	42	27
ABCD	<b>24</b>	<b>11</b>
ABD	6	6
AC	0	3
ACD	3	3
AD	1	6
BC	1	0
	100	98

Table 5. Frequency of component combinations (A = complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D = wish for the complainable to be remedied)

The overviews show that the SNCF corpus is more explicit in terms of the overall number of constitutive components that is realized and as a result also in terms of the most frequent component combinations realized in the opening tweet. In the next section, we will analyze the form that the constitutive components take. We will also provide information about the number of times a specific component is realized within one tweet, which likewise increases the degree of linguistic directness.

### 3.3 Formal realization of A, B, C and D

#### 3.3.1 Component A

Component A (the content of the complainable and/or its consequences) is realized most commonly as one of the standard sentence types (declarative, exclamative, imperative,

<sup>9</sup> Two- and three-component tweets can contain any two or three components. In the case of two-component tweets, for instance, we found the following combinations: AB, AC, AD and BC. In the case of three-component tweets, the following combinations feature in the data: ABC, ABD, ACD.

<sup>10</sup> As the SNCB corpus contains two implicit complaints, the grand total is 98 here (also see Table 5).

interrogative) with a specific illocutionary force (assertion, expressive, request, rhetorical question). In some tweets, pictures (see e.g., (12)), screenshots (see e.g., (19), (31)) and hashtags (see e.g., (6)) complement the linguistic realization of A. Table 6 gives an overview of the frequency of the different types of formal realization of A. Note that the total frequency (SNCF: 135, SNCB: 144) is higher than the number of times that component A is made explicit (SNCF: 99, SNCB: 98): this shows that this component is sometimes realized more than once within one tweet.

	SNCF (99/100)	% <sup>11</sup>	SNCB (98/100)	%
Assertion_declarative (content and/or consequences)	68	50	64	44
Assertion_hashtag (content)	2	1	2	1
Expressive_exclamative (content and/or consequences)	24	18	21	15
Request_imperative (content)	3	2	1	1
Rhetorical question_interrogative (content and/or consequences)	10	7	5	3
Request_interrogative (what?)	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>
Request_interrogative (why?)	<b>4</b>	3	<b>15</b>	10
Request_interrogative (other)	6	4	13	9
Request_hashtag	1	1	0	0
Assertion_picture/screenshot	15	11	12	8
Performative_request	1	1	0	0
<b>Total number of realizations of A</b>	135		144	

Table 6. Formal realizations of component A (= the complainable)

The following examples illustrate the most common types of formal realization of component A:

(14) Assertion\_declarative (content + consequences)

CC	à cause de vos indications complètement foireuses je me retrouve à Aarschot au lieu de Jette. J'ai rarement vu une pagaille pareille dans un pays développé... c'est triste
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>because of your completely messed-up instructions I find myself in Aarschot instead of Jette. I've rarely seen such a mess in a developed country... it's sad</i>

<sup>11</sup> The percentages in this table (as well as in Tables 7 and 9) have been calculated on the basis of the total number of realizations. Applied to Table 6, given that there is a total of 135 realizations of component A in the SNCF sample, the 68 assertion\_declaratives make up 50% of the realizations of component A; the 64 cases of assertion\_declaratives in the SNCB corpus constitute 44% of the realizations of component A.

(15) Expressive\_exclamative (content + consequences)-

CC	@SNCB au départ de la gare de Gembloux vers Bruxelles. Des retards quotidiens depuis des semaines et là le grand cirque ! A quand de réelles solutions?!?!
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB ready to depart from Gembloux station to Brussels. Daily delays for weeks and now a complete mess! When will there be real solutions?!?!</i>

(16) Rhetorical question\_interrogative (content)

CC	@ SNCB les places assises dans vos trains c'est définitivement devenu utopique? Quelle que soit la destination ou l'horaire y a toujours quelque chose...
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB has seating in your trains definitely become a fantasy? Whatever the destination or the timetable, there is always an issue ...</i>

(17) Request\_interrogative (why?)

CC	@SNCB bonjour. Pouvez vous [sic.] me dire pourquoi le P8400 roule au ralenti ? Et éventuellement jusqu'où va-t-il rouler au ralenti ? Merci
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB hello. Can you tell me why the P8400 is running slow? And possibly for how long will it be running slow? Thank you</i>

(18) Request\_interrogative\_other

CC	@SNCB Bonjour, pourriez-vous mettre votre application à jour pour l'iPhone X s'il vous plaît?? Car je l'utilise très souvent. Merci d'avance!
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB Hello, could you please update your application for iPhone X?? Because I use it very often. Thank you in advance!</i>

(19) Request\_interrogative\_other

CC	@SNCB est ce [sic.] que vous pouvez me confirmer cette suppression ? (screenshot cancelled stop in Arlon)
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB Can you confirm this cancellation for me? (screenshot cancelled stop in Arlon)</i>

Note that in all the interrogatives, the complainable is realized as a presupposition, triggered either by the *wh*-word (see (17)), by the use of a change-of-state proposition (see (18)) or by the use of a definite NP (Noun Phrase) associated with an existential presupposition (see (19)). The most striking observation is that there are far more interrogatives functioning as requests for information in the SNCB (39) corpus than in the SNCF corpus (11), ranging from very general requests for information to more specific



inquiries into the why, when, where, etc. of the complainable. This observation will be taken up again in Section 4, in which the interactional dynamics are presented.

### 3.3.2 Component B

There is a large range of different formal realizations of B (disapproval, dissatisfaction or annoyance), including negative evaluative adjectives or adverbs (such as *scandaleux* (scandalous), *c'est inouï* (unheard of), *pas normal* (not normal), *inutile* (useless), *abusif* (abusive), *triste* (sad), *nul* (useless), *désolant* (a shame)), negative evaluative expressions (such as *C'est quoi ce bordel* (what the hell), *c'est limite* (you're overstepping it), *vous n'avez pas honte?* (aren't you ashamed of yourself?)), negative evaluative emoji/emoticons,<sup>12</sup> paraverbal expressions of negative emotions (example 20), rhetorical questions, which were interpreted as markers of annoyance (example 21), and irony/sarcasm (example 22).

#### (20) Paraverbal expression of negative emotion

CC	@SNCB attend toujours le bus de 07h22 à lembeek et toujours pas passé ????
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	@SNCB still waiting for the 07:22 bus to lembeek and still hasn't arrived ????

#### (21) Rhetorical question: annoyance

CC	@SNCB merci de transporter les gens comme du bétail entre Ottignies et Bruxelles ! On se fait déporter comme dans les années 40 ?
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	@SNCB thank you for transporting people like cattle between Ottignies and Brussels! Are we being deported as in the 40ies?

#### (22) Irony/sarcasm

CC	A/R Paris Grenoble dans la journée. 20 min de retard à l'aller. Pour l'instant, déjà 50 au retour. Ca sent la belle journée ça! Merci pour tout @SNCF
	<u>Translation</u>
CC	Round trip Paris Grenoble during the day. 20 min delay on the outward journey. For the moment, already 50 on the way back. It feels like a beautiful day! Thanks for everything @SNCF

#### (23) Rhetorical question (annoyance) and irony/sarcasm

CC	@SNCF Je fais 10 trajets par semaine et le train est en retard ou annulé sur minimum 5 trajets y'a pas comme un problème ?
	<u>Translation</u>

<sup>12</sup> Dresner and Herring (2010) explain that emoticons/emoji may serve three functions: they express emotions (e.g., happy or sad), they communicate non-emotional meaning (e.g., a wink when joking) and they can also function as illocutionary force indicators (e.g., a smile in order to mitigate the impact of a complaint). Emoji expressing a negative emotion in our corpus were coded as explicit realizations of component B. While much more can be said about emoji, a detailed analysis of their use is beyond the scope of this paper.

CC	@SNCF I take the train 10 times a week and the train is late or cancelled at least 5 times isn't there a sort of a problem?
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Irony and sarcasm are different in nature: it has been argued that sarcasm is not based on the overt untruthfulness typical of irony and that its goal is to cause verbal harm (Dynel 2014 and Kapogianni 2015). We have chosen to merge them into one category, because it turned out to be difficult to differentiate both categories in our data. Importantly, we consider instances of ironic/sarcastic language as explicit markers because, following our general approach to explicitness/implicitness (see Section 1), they are marked by linguistic expressions (they are not implicit (implicated) in the way the complaint components are in example (1)), albeit expressions that potentially require more processing effort. In addition, and in line with Oraby et al. (2017), who show in what ways rhetorical questions often also express sarcasm, a subset of rhetorical questions was perceived to be sarcastic in tone, meaning that rhetorical questions occasionally realize B in two different ways (example 23). The link between rhetorical questions and sarcasm is an interesting but complex question that is beyond the scope of this paper and that will be reserved for further research.

Overall, the difference in frequency of expression of component B between both samples is significant. The difference in frequency of realization of irony/sarcasm in the SNCF and the SNCB samples, as well as the use of negative emoji and emoticons, is likewise significant. It should be added that different formal realizations of B within one tweet were coded separately, but the different instantiations of the same type of B-realization (e.g., two adjectives) were counted as one realization of B. So from this perspective, the total number of B-realizations is likely to be a bit higher in actual fact.

	SNCF (93/100)	% <sup>13</sup>	SNCB (77/100)	%
Negative evaluative adjective/adverb	20	10	21	14
Negative evaluative noun	14	7	7	5
Negative evaluative verb	10	5	3	2
Negative evaluative expression	26	13	17	11
Negative evaluative hashtag	5	2	5	3
Rhetorical question	8	4	15	10
Irony and sarcasm	<b>39</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>
Punctuation ...	13	6	22	15
Punctuation !	18	9	8	5
Punctuation ?!/ ??/ !?/ ???/ !?!/ !!!/...	16	8	19	13
Negative evaluative emoji and emoticons	<b>19</b>	9	<b>8</b>	5
Capitalized letters	10	5	3	2
Insult	6	3	1	1
Threat	2	1	1	1
<b>Total number of realizations of B</b>	<b>206</b>		<b>147</b>	

Table 7. Formal realizations of component B (dissatisfaction)

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 11.

As in the case of component A, component B may be realized in different ways within one tweet: for instance, the complainer can use both a negative evaluative expression and punctuation to give vent to her annoyance. This explains why the sum of the different formal realizations (SNCF: 206, SNCB: 147) in Table 7 is higher than the number of tweets in which B is realized (SNCF: 93, SNCB: 77). Table 8 shows that dissatisfaction is also more explicit in the SNCF corpus in the sense that there is more often more than one realization of component B within one tweet. The difference in frequency of tweets that contain 1 vs. 2 or more different types of realization of B is significant (SNCF: 66 (34+20+10+2) vs. SNCB: 42 (21+12+5+4)).

	SNCF (93/100)	%	SNCB (77/100)	%
1 type	27	29 (27 out of 93)	34	44 (34 out of 77)
2 types	34	37	21	27
3 types	20	22	12	16
4 types	10	11	5	6
5 types	2	2	4	5

Table 8. Number of different types of realization of B in the opening tweets

### 3.3.3 Component C

When it comes to the formal realization of C (*the person/company held responsible for the complainable*), the tendency is again the same: C is realized more often in the SNCF corpus (70% vs. 44%), and it is realized more extensively (102 realizations of C in SNCF vs. 52 in SNCB).

	SNCF (70/100)	% <sup>14</sup>	SNCB (44/100)	%
(@/#) SNCF/SNCB	<b>44</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>vous/tu</i>	24	24	24	46
<i>vos/votre</i>	13	13	13	25
Imperative	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Interjection ( <i>dis, dites, dis-moi</i> )	<b>7</b>	7	<b>3</b>	6
NP (Noun Phrase) identifying the referent held to responsible for the complainable	2	2	0	0
<b>Total number of realizations of C</b>	<b>102</b>		<b>52</b>	

Table 9. Formal realizations of component C (= person/institution held responsible for the complainable)

As in the case of B, C may be realized more than once within one tweet (e.g., the use of the imperative combined with @SNCF):

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 11.

	SNCF (70/100)	%	SNCB (44/100)	%
1 type	45	64 (45 out of 70)	37	84 (37 out of 44)
2 types	<b>20</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>
3 types	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 10. Number of different types of realization of C in the opening tweets

The Belgian tweets contain significantly less often two or three realizations of C compared to the SNCF corpus.

Summing up, C occurs less frequently in the SNCB corpus than in the SNCF corpus (Table 9), and when it is expressed, it is more often realized once only (Table 10).

As can be observed in Tables 6, 7, and 9, the realization of components A, B, and C sometimes feature in a hashtag (#), e.g., *#fraud* (component A, see example 6), *#marre* (sick of it; component B), *merci #SNCF* (component C). These findings are in line with Scott's (2015) and Wang et al.'s (2011) analyses of hashtag functions, which they claim are not limited to a search function. Scott (2015) takes a relevance-theoretic approach and shows how Twitter hashtags have been appropriated by users "to act as a highlighting device" (2015: 14), thus drawing the reader's attention to the tagged content and guiding the overall interpretation of the utterance, helping the reader to derive either the proposition expressed by the tweet, higher-level explicatures relating to the speaker's attitude, or implicatures. Wang et al. (2011) found that hashtags serve three main purposes: (1) they say what the tweet is about (*topic hashtag*), (2) they describe emotions (*feeling hashtag*) or (3) a combination of both (*feeling topic hashtag*). Our corpus contains topic hashtags (components A (*#retard (delay)*) and C (*#SNCB*)) and feeling hashtags (component B, (*#marre* (sick of it))), which enable the reader to derive the complainable as well as explicatures related to the speaker's attitude and the institution held responsible for the complainable.

#### 3.3.4. Component D

Component D (wish for the complainable to be remedied) is realized most often through the use of requests and exhortations. It features more frequently in the SNCF (34/100) than in the SNCB corpus (26/100), but the difference is not significant. Unlike in the case of components B and C, which are often realized through different forms in one and the same tweet, there is only one case in the SNCF sample in which D has two different formal realizations within the same tweet: Table 11 shows an overall frequency of 34 realizations of D in the SNCF sample compared to 33 tweets in which D is realized.

	SNCF (33/100)	% <sup>15</sup>	SNCB (26/100)	%
Request for information related to solution (interrogative Wh, Y/N)	13	38	8	31
Request for action (suggestory formulae)	9	<b>26</b>	3	<b>12</b>
Request for action (imperative)	7	21	2	8
Request for action (preparatory conditions, willingness, propositional content)	3	<b>9</b>	8	<b>31</b>
Exhortation (exclamative)	1	<b>3</b>	4	<b>15</b>
Request for action (obligation statement)	1	3	0	0
Request (NP)	0	0	1	4
<b>Total number of realizations of D</b>	34		26	

Table 11. Formal realizations of component D (= wish for the complainable to be remedied)

While House and Kasper's (1981) categorization of requests (also used in Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984, Blum-Kulka, 1987, Blum-Kulka et al, 1989) has been particularly useful to categorize the realizations of D, there are a number of further formal realizations of D in the tweets that do not feature in their taxonomy, namely exclamatives that function as exhortations (see example 24) and the realization of a request by means of an NP (Noun Phrase), as in (25).

(24) Exhortation (exclamative)

CC	Pour UVN-FNAUT aussi c'est non! C'est à la @SNCF de s'organiser pour vendre ses billets et pas à l'usager de payer en plus pour un service non rendu ! cc @FDhersin @AisneNord
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>For UVN-FNAUT it is also no! It is up to @SNCF to organize itself to sell its tickets and not to the user to pay extra for a service not provided! cc @FDhersin @AisneNord</i>

(25) Request (NP)

CC	@SNCB <b>chauffage</b> dans IC4507 svp. Glacial. Merci. (+ gif of freezing person)
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB <b>heating</b> in IC4507 please. Freezing. Thanks. (+ gif of freezing person)</i>

We also slightly adjusted the category called 'query preparatory', which was relabeled as 'request for action (preparatory conditions, willingness, propositional content)'. The label applies to cases in which the customer makes a request and asks for the complainable to be remedied, but does so in a conventionally indirect way, by referring to what Searle calls

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 10.

'preparatory conditions'. This category is defined as follows by Blum-Kulka and Olshain (1984: 202): "the utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language". Searle (1969) defines the preparatory conditions (that is, real-world prerequisites) to the illocutionary act of a request as follows: (1) "H is able to perform A. S believes H is able to do A";<sup>16</sup> (2) "It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A without being asked". The propositional content of a request as defined by Searle is "future act A of H" and the sincerity condition is spelt out as "S wants H do to A", the essential condition of a request being captured as follows: "counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A" (1969: 66). In other words, Blum-Kulka and Olshain (1984) subsume a wider range of items (that is, willingness) under the heading of preparatory conditions. This is strictly speaking not in line with Searle's view. We have therefore broadened the category 'request for action' (see Table 11) by including not just preparatory conditions, but also requests that concern sincerity conditions and the propositional content of the speech act. The following examples illustrate the different subcategories:

(26) Request for action (preparatory conditions (ability))

CC	Dis moi [sic.] @SNCF, <b>y'a moyen de couper la clim dans ton TER de la ligne 47 le matin à 6h</b> . Les gens sont obligés de venir avec des couvertures chauffantes tellement on se les gèle. #merci #amitiés
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>Say @SNCF, <b>is there a way to turn off the air conditioning in your TER from line 47 in the morning at 6:00</b>. People are forced to come with electric blankets because it's so friggin cold. #thank you #regards</i>

(27) Request for action (willingness)

CC	Sérieux <b>vous comptez faire quelque chose un jour pour le manque de réseau entre Arlon et Namur @SNCB ? C'est insupportable</b>
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>Seriously, <b>are you planning to do anything one day about the lack of network between Arlon and Namur @SNCB? It's unacceptable</b></i>

(28) Request for action (propositional content: possibility)

CC	@SNCB quand on rate sa correspondance parce que le train a 15 minutes de retard et qu'ensuite le prochain train a encore 10 minutes de retard <b>on peut se faire rembourser son billet ?</b> C'est cher payé pour une telle qualité de service.
CC	<u>Translation</u> <i>@SNCB when you miss your connection because the train is 15 minutes late and then the next train is again 10 minutes late <b>can you get your ticket refunded?</b> Paying a high price for that quality of service.</i>

<sup>16</sup> S stands for Speaker, H refers to the Hearer (note that we use *addressee* in this paper), A stands for Action.

Taking into account the observations made, alternative labels are suggested in the second column in Table 12 that capture more explicitly and more exclusively the form of the request.

REQUEST REALIZATIONS (Blum-Kulka 1987)	REALIZATION OF D
mood derivable	(non-exclamative) imperative
performative	performative
hedged performative	hedged performative
obligation statement	necessity modal
want statement	willingness
suggestory formulae	suggestory formulae
query preparatory	ability
strong hints	implicit request
mild hints	implicit request
	exclamative (including imperatives that are exclamatives)
	NP (Noun Phrase)

Table 12. Taxonomy of request realizations (alternative labels)

Forms traditionally considered to be conventionally indirect realizations of requests for action (e.g., inquiries into ability (preparatory conditions) or willingness) (see examples (26) to (28)) have been coded as realizing D.<sup>17</sup> We used a similar strategy when coding requests for information, as in examples (7), (29), and (30).

(29) Request for information related to the solution (short-term solution)

CC	SNCB train 16h04 Bxl Lux - Gembloux supprimé. Celui de 17h04 roulera-t-il?
CC	<u>Translation</u> SNCB train 4.04 Bxl Lux - Gembloux cancelled. Will the 5.04 p.m. be running?

(30) Request for information related to the solution (short-term solution)

CC	Bsr @SNCB , le 2144 Lux Arlon est annulé. Je suis dans un bus de substitution. La correspondance avec le 2144 sera t elle [sic.] assurée ? Ou un autre train vers Libramont ?
CC	<u>Translation</u> Good evening @SNCB, 2144 Lux Arlon is cancelled. I'm on a replacement bus. Will the connection with 2144 still work? Or will there be another train to Libramont?

<sup>17</sup> This decision is debatable. As the request is cancellable, it could be argued that is not part of the explicit propositional content and that it is implicated. A lot depends on whether one takes tests that point to the differentiated status of particular information as a guideline or whether, rather, one takes (as we did) cognitive clues as guideline (which is the first interpretation accessed by the addressee?) (see e.g., Ruytenbeek 2017). Ruytenbeek et al. (2017) shows that conventionally indirect request forms prime their indirect reading even in contexts in which they are ambiguous with their literal reading.

Inspired by the standard cases of conventionally indirect requests for action, we decided to code examples like (7), (29), and (30) as explicit realizations of D as well, even though a request for information about a short-term or a long-term solution does not semantically entail a request for action and realize a suggestion about how to remedy the complainable. They nevertheless conventionally suggest how the problem can be addressed. In other words, in our interpretation, (29) is asking for the 5:04 to be running, (30) is a request to organize the connection with the 2144 or another train to Libramont, and (7) is a request to make a wifi connection available.<sup>18</sup>

Summing up, the general pattern regarding linguistic (in)directness that emerges from the analysis is that the opening complaint tweets in the SNCF corpus are more explicit (a higher number of constitutive components is realized, and a higher number of constitutive components is realized more than once) than in the SNCB corpus. In the next section, we broaden the scope and look at the ensuing interaction in both samples.

#### 4. Linguistic (in)directness and additional discursive patterns in the unfolding interaction: analysis and discussion

In Section 3, we examined linguistic (in)directness in the first tweet. Section 4 is focused on linguistic (in)directness and additional discursive patterns in the unfolding interaction.

##### 4.1 Railway response patterns

As can be observed in Table 1, the SNCB (80%) responds much more often than the SNCF (28%) to the first complaint tweets.<sup>19</sup> This different response policy is also reflected in patterns regarding the number of turns per tweet thread: the Twitter threads in the SNCB corpus tend to be slightly longer than in the SNCF corpus (2-4 turns as opposed to 1-2 turns).

The response strategies used by the SNCF and SNCB are diverse; they were categorized in terms of the taxonomic distinctions in previous discourse-pragmatic and genre-analytic studies on responses to complaints (Trosborg and Shaw, 1998; Van Herck et al., under review).<sup>20</sup> The social media agents mainly

- show empathy (SNCF: in 7% of the responses - SNCB: 10%)
- apologize (14%-43%)
- request further information (57%-34%)
- explain what has happened and why (25%-83%)
- give additional information (4%-23%)
- suggest solutions (18%-23%)

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<sup>18</sup> It may be useful to add that the “à quand” sentence (in (7)) cannot be interpreted as a neutral request for information; it functions as an exhortation for wifi to be made available and communicates the expectation that there should be wifi.

<sup>19</sup> There are six SNCF tweets from which it appears though that the SNCF responds privately to its customers.

<sup>20</sup> Percentages are based on the number of SNCB/SNCF turns, not on the number of threads in which they respond. It is possible, for instance, that – within one thread with more than one SNCB/SNCF turn – the railway company apologizes more than once.



- report corrective action that was or will be taken to address the problem (7%-25%)
- report on their efforts to investigate and attend to the complaint (21%-18%).

It is against the background of this range of SNCB/SNCF response types that the description of the customer follow-ups below has to be assessed.

#### 4.2 Linguistic (in)directness in follow-up reactions by complaining and responding customers

Given the aims of this paper, we are interested to see if and how linguistic (in)directness in follow-up customer reactions evolves compared to the opening customer complaint tweet. We distinguish between follow-up reactions by complaining customers and follow-up reactions by responding customers. Follow-ups by complaining customers can be triggered in three ways: the complaining customer may respond to the social media agent's tweet, to a tweet by another customer, or she may simply post another tweet. As shown in Table 13, complaining customers express one or more of the constitutive components of the complaint situation in their follow-up reactions in 26 out of the 39 tweet threads (67%) in the SNCF sample and in 43 out of 66 tweet threads (65%) in the SNCB sample. This boils down to 38 out of 80 (48%) follow-up turns by the complaining customer in the SNCF sample and to 69 out of 117 (59%) follow-up turns by the complaining customer in the SNCB sample. The remaining follow-up turns by complaining customers contain none of the constitutive components of the complaint situation. This means that complaining customers, in their follow-up tweets, do not always repeat or expand on the complaint which they had expressed in their first tweet. As will be shown below (see Tables 14 and 15), they realize a wide range of further speech acts in response to reactions from customer service agents and other customers.

The frequency of expression of constitutive components in follow-up reactions by complaining customers, however, only gives us a partial picture of how linguistic directness unfolds in the course of the complaint interactions. To know if complaints become *more explicit*, it is necessary to check if new components appear and if so, which ones. In other words, a more accurate picture emerges when we look at *what stage* (the opening complaint tweet or in follow-up tweets) in the interaction complaining customers make *which* constitutive components of the complaint situation explicit. As is clear from Table 13, complaining customers make a component explicit in their follow-up tweets which had not yet been expressed in their first tweets in 7 out of 26 SNCF complaint threads (27%) and in 20 out of 43 SNCB complaint threads (47%). When this happens, the new component which is made explicit is in most cases D (SNCF: 4/7 and SNCB: 15/20), and slightly less often C (SNCF: 3/7 and SNCB: 9/20). In very rare cases, A is the new component that is made explicit (SNCB: 2/20) when the opening complaint tweet was realized in an implicit way (see example (1)).<sup>21</sup> Component B is likewise added only once (SNCF: 1/7 and SNCB: 1/20). In all the other cases (SNCF: 19/26 and SNCB: 23/43)<sup>22</sup>, the follow-up complaint tweets 'merely'

<sup>21</sup> This means that there are overall 8 realizations of new components (corresponding to 7 tweet threads) in the SNCF interactions and 25 realizations of new components (corresponding to 20 tweet threads) in the SNCB interactions. In other words, occasionally two new components are made explicit per thread.

<sup>22</sup> As is clear from rows 3 and 4 in Table 13, in 7 out of 26 SNCF threads (and in 20 out of 43 SNCB threads) in which complaining customers express constitutive components, additional constitutive components are

realize the same component(s), that is, facets of the complaint situation that had already been mentioned in the opening complaint tweet.

	SNCF		SNCB	
Number of cases in which there are follow-up turns by complaining customers	<b>39</b>		<b>66</b>	
Number of follow-up turns by complaining customers	<b>80</b>		<b>117</b>	
Number of threads in which there are follow-up turns by complaining customers in which constitutive components are expressed	<b>26</b>	67% (26/39)	<b>43</b>	65% (43/66)
Number of threads in which there are follow-up turns by complaining customers in which additional constitutive components are expressed	<b>7</b>	<b>27%</b> (7/26)	<b>20</b>	<b>47%</b> (20/43)
Number of follow-up turns by complaining customers in which constitutive components are expressed	<b>38</b>	48% (38/80)	<b>69</b>	59% (69/117)
Number of tweet threads in which the new component = A			2 (/20)	
Number of tweet threads in which the new component = B	1 (/7)		1 (/20)	
Number of tweet threads in which the new component = C	3 (/7)		9 (/20)	
Number of tweet threads in which the new component = D	<b>4 (/7)</b>	57% (4/7)	<b>15 (/20)</b>	75% (15/20)

Table 13. Realization of (additional) constitutive components in follow-up tweets by complaining customers (A = complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D = wish for the complainable to be remedied)

It also appears that in the SNCB sample, compared to the SNCF sample, follow-up reactions of complaining customers are characterized by a stronger orientation towards the speech act of complaint (48% SNCF vs 59% SNCB tweets which realize constitutive components) and a more pronounced increase in linguistic directness (in 27% SNCF vs 47% SNCB tweet threads, *new* constitutive components are realized). Note that D is realized in 75% of the SNCB follow-up complaint tweets, compared to 26% in the opening tweet (see Table 3) and in 57% of the SNCF follow-up complaint tweets, compared to 33% in the opening tweet (see Table 3). Example (31) illustrates how the complaint realization can become more explicit in the course of the interaction:

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referred to. This means that in 19 out of 26 SNCF threads (and in 23 out of 43 SNCB threads), it is the same constitutive components that the customers tweet about.

(31)

CC	@SNCB est ce [sic.] que <b>vous</b> pouvez me confirmer <b>cette suppression ? (screenshot cancelled stop in Arlon) (A, C)</b>
SMA	Bonjour également NAME CUSTOMER. Malheureusement, je ne peux que confirmer cette suppression. Elle fait suite à une avarie du matériel de traction. ^NAME SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT
CC	<a href="http://www.belgianrail.be/fr/service-clientele/compensations.aspx">http://www.belgianrail.be/fr/service-clientele/compensations.aspx</a> ... c'est bien ici que je dois me rendre pour toutes <b>réclamations</b> liés [sic.] à <b>votre retard ? (A, C, D, explicit naming of the speech act)</b>
CC	<u>Translation</u> @SNCB can <b>you</b> confirm <b>this cancellation?</b> ( <i>screenshot cancelled stop in Arlon</i> )
SMA	<i>Hello to you too NAME CUSTOMER. I afraid that the train has been cancelled indeed. It is caused by damage to the motive power equipment.</i> ^NAME SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT
CC	<a href="http://www.belgianrail.be/fr/service-clientele/compensations.aspx">http://www.belgianrail.be/fr/service-clientele/compensations.aspx</a> ... <i>is this the page that I need to use for any <b>claims</b> related to <b>your delay?</b></i>

In this example, the 2<sup>nd</sup> tweet by the complaining customer explicitly refers to the speech act of complaining (*réclamation*, the French word for a specific business-related complaint type, see Decock and Spiessens 2017);<sup>23</sup> components A, C and D (in bold) are also explicitly realized (A: *cette suppression*, *screenshot*, *retard*; C: *vous*, *votre*; D: *the complaining customer is checking if she has found the right link to make a claim*). In the opening complaint tweet by this customer, only A and C are realized explicitly.

Our observations about the differences between SNCF and SNCB with respect to how linguistic (in)directness unfolds might be explained by the fact that the SNCB responds more often (disregarding potential private SNCF responses that we do not have information about, see footnote 19) to the opening complaint tweet (in 80% of the cases compared to 28% in the case of the SNCF, see Table 1). This makes it possible for a service recovery-oriented conversation to unfold between the two parties. This observation also ties in with the fact that the opening tweets in the SNCB corpus contain significantly more interrogative requests than the SNCF corpus (see Table 6: 11 (SNCF) vs 39 (SNCB)), which might indicate travelers' awareness of SNCB's high degree of involvement and responsiveness.

When it comes to the formal realization of the complaint components in follow-up tweets of complaining customers, just a few patterns stand out:

- As in the case of the first tweet (see Table 6: 11 out of 135 realizations of A are interrogative requests (SNCF), 39 out of 150 (SNCB)), the realization of A in the SNCB

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<sup>23</sup> *Réclamation* (*claim* in English) is a specific business-related complaint type. It refers to a situation in which a customer is dissatisfied with a certain product or service and therefore desires compensation in the form of a new product, repair, service improvement, or a credit note (cf. Decock and Spiessens 2017).

follow-up tweets takes more often the form of a request (9 out of 54 realizations of A (17%)) compared to the SNCF corpus (2 out of 24 realizations of A (8%)).

- We observed a significant difference in the use of negative emoji in the opening tweet as a realization of B between the SNCF (19/93, 20%) and SNCB (8/77, 10%) (see Table 7). In the follow-up complaints, negative emoji are significantly more often used (SNCF 11/30, 36%; SNCB 8/42, 19%) in both samples compared to the opening complaint tweets.

With respect to responding customers' reactions, a first observation is that there are very few responses by other customers in the SNCB corpus. There is far more input from responding customers in the SNCF corpus (see Table 1: 7 vs 95 responding customers). In the SNCF responding customers' tweets, the focus is on sharing similar negative experiences. This ties in with observations made in Dayter and Rüdiger (2014), Vásquez (2016), Orthaber (2019): complainers tend to refer to other people's feedback to corroborate their own and in this way create a sense of community. Negative emotions are also enhanced by making an additional complaint. Table 14 gives a survey of the components realized in the additional complaints made by responding customers:

	SNCF (95 turns)	SNCB (7 turns)
A (similar experience, additional complainable)	<b>49</b>	<b>1</b>
B	<b>23</b>	<b>0</b>
C	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>
D	3	0
	<b>87</b>	<b>1</b>

Table 14. Explicit realization of A, B, C, D in responding customers' turns (A = complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = person/institution held responsible for the complainable, D = wish for the complainable to be remedied)

#### 4.3 Additional speech acts and discursive strategies in follow-up reactions by complaining and responding customers

As mentioned in Section 4.2. complaining customers realize a wide range of further speech acts in response to reactions from customer service agents and other customers. Although these speech acts are still complaint-related in the sense that they are triggered by the opening complaint, complaining customers clearly move beyond the expression of A, B, C or D: for instance, they provide additional information, express gratitude or request more information. An interesting difference emerges here between the SNCF and the SNCB sample: follow-ups by SNCB complaining customers contain (many) more requests for information and expressions of gratitude. This might again be explained by the SNCB response policy, which seems to trigger more service recovery-oriented conversations compared to the SNCF.

	SNCF (80 turns)	SNCB (117 turns)
Express gratitude	<b>1</b>	<b>21</b>
Give information or explanation (mostly after a request)	19	15
Request for information		
- addressed to SNCF	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>
- addressed to other customer	2	0
Make (sarcastic) joke	3	5
Say goodbye	1	5
Disagree with social media agent	1	4
Request for action	5	3
@message to spread	7	0
Other (e.g., correct oneself, correct social media agent, give compliment, ...)	10	12

Table 15. Speech acts and interactive discourse in follow-up tweets by complaining customers

Follow-up comments by responding customers mainly occur in the SNCF corpus. Table 16 gives an (non-exhaustive) overview of the many different types of speech acts and interactive discourse in the SNCF sample:

	SNCF (95 turns)	SNCB (7 turns)
Make a (sarcastic) joke	<b>60</b>	<b>2</b>
Agree with complaining customer	<b>29</b>	<b>0</b>
Make a suggestion	<b>16</b>	<b>0</b>
Express support (e.g., “Courage!”#)	<b>14</b>	<b>0</b>
Give information	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>
Disagree with (complaining/responding) customer	<b>19</b>	<b>0</b>
Defend SNCF/SNCB	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>
Express gratitude	2	1
Request for information	6	2
Insult customer	4	0
@message to spread	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>

Table 16. Speech acts and interactive discourse in follow-up tweets by responding customers

While the interactions in the SNCB threads are clearly service recovery-oriented, the infrequent public SNCF responses leave the floor more freely to the (mainly) dissatisfied customers. These customers often express solidarity with the initial complainer by sharing similar experiences or by voicing additional complaints. They agree and share information with the initial complainer, they offer support or make suggestions. (Sarcastic) jokes are by far the most frequently used to express solidarity (see Orthaber 2019 on the use of aggressive humour as a means of voicing customer dissatisfaction). In a few cases, however, namely in the outliers with a lot of turns, we see how the interaction evolves or derails into

heated political debates on pricing policies, on privatization, etc. in which some customers also defend the SNCF and occasionally attack the complaining customer(s).

As we see it, the speech acts and interactive discourse listed in the final two tables should be assessed against the different response strategies by the social media agents that were mentioned in Section 4.1. It will be clear that the solution-oriented responses by SNCF agents often steer the interaction in a different, more positive direction, with 15 interactions explicitly ending with (rather) positive final words, as in the following example:

(32)

SMA	Je comprends. Je vais relayer votre remarque au service concerné. Je ne promets rien mais tout est systématiquement transmis. ^NAME SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT
CC	Top merci excellente journée
SMA	A vous de même mon cher NAME CUSTOMER. ^ NAME SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT
<u>Translation</u>	
SMA	<i>I understand. I will pass on your comment to the relevant department. I can't promise anything, but all comments are systematically transferred. ^ SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT</i>
CC	<i>Top thanks have a nice day</i>
SMA	<i>You too, my dear NAME CUSTOMER. ^ NAME SOCIAL MEDIA AGENT</i>

#### 5. Patterns in linguistic (in)directness in SNCF and SNCF complaint tweets: summing up and perspectives for further research

In this final section, we sum up our main findings and formulate some hypotheses with respect to cultural differences between two closely related linguistic communities. Our empirical analysis of a sample of SNCF and SNCF complaint tweet interactions has revealed clear patterns in the degree of explicitness in the opening complaint tweets (whereby A = complainable, B = dissatisfaction, C = the person/institution held responsible for the complainable, and D = wish for the complainable to be remedied). With respect to the first research question (see p.5), the following conclusions were drawn:

- The SNCF complaint tweets are more explicit than SNCF complaint tweets: the former contain a higher number of constitutive components of the complaint situation than the latter (Table 3).
- The SNCF complaint tweets contain more often components B and C (and to a lesser extent component D) than the SNCF complaint tweets. The difference is significant for component C (Table 3).
- The SNCF complaint tweets contain significantly more often A-related questions (*what, why, etc.*) than the SNCF corpus (Table 6).
- The difference in frequency of use of irony/sarcasm (SNCF: 39/93, SNCF: 17/77) and emoji/emoticons between the SNCF and the SNCF (SNCF: 19/93, SNCF: 8/77) to express component B is significant (Table 7).

When it comes to linguistic (in)directness in follow-up tweets (research questions 2, 3 and 4, see p.5), the following observations can be made:

- The complaining customer follow-ups are more ABCD-related in the SNCB corpus than in the SNCF corpus (Table 13): even though constitutive components are realized in the follow-up tweets in around 65% of the complaint *threads* (both in SNCF and SNCB samples), 59% of the SNCB *turns* (compared to 48% of the SNCF *turns*) refer to A, B, C or D.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, however, there is no significant increase in linguistic explicitness: in only half of the complaint *threads* (47% (20 out of 43)) in the SNCB sample, and in 27% (7 out of 26) in the SNCF sample, new facets of the complaint situation, that is, realizations of A, B, C or D are brought up by the complaining customers.
- Responding customers' reactions feature mainly in the SNCF corpus, with a few rare exceptions (Table 1). They tend to express solidarity with the complaining customer at the expense of the railway company (Table 16).

The obvious question that emerges is whether these facts should be explained in terms of cultural differences or, rather, result from a different response policy or a combination of both (research questions 5 and 6, p.5). We mentioned Tobback's (2014) findings with respect to differences in the conversational debating style between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgian politicians in the introduction. Her conclusion was that the Belgian French style (as opposed to the Belgian Dutch style) resembles that of the French (Béal 2010) (also see Tobback and Lauwers 2016). While the genre and medium at stake in this paper are very different, her observations tip the scales in favor of response strategy as the main factor explaining the difference in linguistic explicitness that can be observed: Francophone Belgians and French do not necessarily have culturally different ways of complaining or of reacting to complaints; they do not necessarily use social media for complaint purposes differently. Our findings point in the direction of response strategy as the main differentiating factor that can explain the differences between the communities observed. In order to test this hypothesis, a more ethnographic approach tapping into railway company guidelines on how to handle Twitter customer complaints and probing into the professional experience and perspectives of social media managers is needed. The current study has clearly underlined the importance of interactional analysis, and it calls for caution: cultural differences are unlikely to be the only factor at stake.

More in general, we have shown that the operationalization of linguistic (in)directness of complaints in terms of constitutive components is valid. It offers an objective way of assessing the linguistic means that are used to complain and it makes cross-linguistic comparisons more tangible and solid. Moreover, corpus analyses of the type reported on here constitute a very valid resource for experiments that are needed to assess perceived face threat, which we have not addressed in this paper. More in particular, our results can inform the design of the experiments, and make sure that the input consists of the most common linguistic complaint realizations (see Decock et al. (2019), Ruytenbeek et al. (under review)).

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<sup>24</sup> As is clear from Table 13, in 26 out of 39 SNCF *threads* (compared to 43 out of 66 SNCB *threads*) in which there are follow-up turns by complaining customers, constitutive components are expressed. This amounts to 38 out of 80 SNCF follow-up *turns* (compared to 69 out of 117 SNCB *turns*) in which constitutive components are expressed.

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