

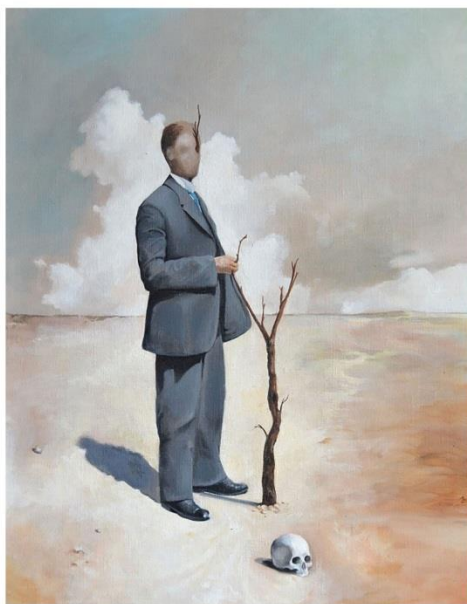
# opción

Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Lingüística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

Año 35, diciembre 2019 N°

24

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales  
ISSN 1012-1587/ ISSNc: 2477-9385  
Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



Universidad del Zulia  
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



# The Representation of Complaints in English and Indonesian Discourses

**Burhanuddin Arafah<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

[burhan-arafah@unhas.ac.id](mailto:burhan-arafah@unhas.ac.id)

**Kaharuddin<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN)

Alauddin Makassar

[andi.kaharuddin@uin-alauddin.ac.id](mailto:andi.kaharuddin@uin-alauddin.ac.id)

## Abstract

This study compared the strategies of complaints presented by educated English native speakers and Indonesians via comparative quantitative research methods. The quantitative results showed that ENSs and INNs shared a similarity in the use of complaint strategies across the three offenses. In conclusion, the socio-cultural competence of the complaint strategies will not be used appropriately by non-native speakers of English and Indonesian without having an accurate knowledge in this area. Hence, language teachers should then be able to focus their instructions on the similarities and the differences between complaints in English and Indonesian.

**Keywords:** Complaint, Speech Act, Complaint Strategy, Cross-Linguistic.

## La representación de quejas en discursos en inglés e indonesio

### Resumen

Este estudio comparó las estrategias de quejas presentadas por hablantes nativos de inglés educados e indonesios a través de métodos

Recibido: 10-11-2018 •Aceptado: 10-03-2019

de investigación cuantitativa comparativa. Los resultados cuantitativos mostraron que las ENS y las INS compartían una similitud en el uso de estrategias de quejas en los tres delitos. En conclusión, la competencia sociocultural de las estrategias de denuncia no será utilizada adecuadamente por hablantes no nativos de inglés e indonesio sin tener un conocimiento preciso en esta área. Por lo tanto, los profesores de idiomas deberían poder centrar sus instrucciones en las similitudes y las diferencias entre las quejas en inglés e indonesio.

**Palabras clave:** Queja, Acta de discurso, Estrategia de queja, Lingüística cruzada.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A speech act is an utterance that performs an act used by a speaker in communication e.g. apologizing, complimenting, and complaining. Sustained efforts within and across languages have been expended to explore the degree of existing patterns of a given speech act since the 1980s. However, complaining has been an under-researched speech act in the cross-cultural pragmatics compared to the other well-defined speech acts e.g. apologizing, requesting, and complimenting (CHEN, 2011). The complaint may occur anywhere at home, at workplaces, in organizations or even in social media. It is usually made in an offensive situation when an action violates social norms and fails to meet the expectations of a complainer, then it is expressed for conveying dissatisfaction in the form of trouble telling, griping, finding fault, criticizing and whining.

Complaint expressions exist in any languages and are introduced in different terms such as trouble-telling (JEFFERSON, 1980),

troubles-talk, disapproval, griping or grumbling (BOXER, 1993), face-threatening acts (BROWN & LEVINSON, 1987), displeasure or annoyance, attack on the negative face (FRESCURA, 2006), negative evaluation, negative world of mouth (EINWILLER & STEILEN, 2015), and negative feelings. The various terms share one common feature i.e. indicating a complainer's dissatisfaction because of an unfavorable event or an unsatisfactory behavior.

Studies on complaints have been mostly conducted by using pragmatics approach. These studies mainly center around identifying strategies used by speakers of a particular language in making complaints e.g. variation in complaint by university students in Japan, Singapore, and the U.S., English complaint by Bruneian English speakers (HENRY & HO, 2010), complaint strategies of Cantonese learners of English, and complaints made by Chinese EFL learners. These researches differ since they are focused on exploring strategy use from particular viewpoints such as social distance, regions (HENRY & HO, 2010), age, language proficiency level, and level of study.

As a result, it is difficult to decide any common principles of complaint across languages. Some are also conducted to compare how complaints differently uttered between native speakers of a language and learners of the language e.g. English and Japanese, American and Chinese (CHEN, 2011), English and Russian, and Chinese and British. The studies generally intend to: identify the similarities and differences in the two languages (CHEN, 2011), investigate the structure and cultural styles of the two languages, judge appropriateness of various

complaint formulations, investigate learners' development of pragmatic competence in L2.

Based on the studies, this work aims to describe the preferences of complaint strategy from a cross-linguistic comparison perspective between college-educated ENSs and INSs due to the following reasons. First, cross-cultural studies on complaints have been investigated in a variety of languages; however, comparing strategy preference of complaint made by college-educated native speakers of English and Indonesian is still relatively understudied. Second, such cross-cultural research reveals specific cultural norms and values which are very useful to improve inter-cultural interactions. Such information should be one of the primary aims of teaching pragmatic competence to FL and L2 learners since the knowledge develops their socio-cultural ability to communicate in a language appropriately and culturally HANDFORD (2002) that they can make complaints in appropriate ways when facing offensive situations.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study involved two categories of participants. The first category consisted of 14 college-educated native speakers of Canadian English working for PT. Vale Indonesia in east Luwu Regency South Sulawesi, 5 of whom were males and 9 females. Their ages ranged between 30 and 45. 10 participants (71.43%) were graduated from undergraduate and 4 (28.57%) graduated from the postgraduate level

of education. The number of ENs participants was initially decided based on the recommendations of CHEN, CHEN & CHANG (2010) for a cross-cultural study that to get representative number, each group should approximately consist of 30 samples. However, the number was not able to be satisfied since some of ENSs participants were uncooperative. This fact certainly affected the quality of data derived from ENSs' subjects. The second category was composed of 30 INs consisting 17 females and 13 males. They were university graduates from undergraduate (66.66%) and postgraduate (33.34%) level of education. Their ages ranged between 25 and 40.

### **3. DATA ANALYSIS**

In order to identify the complaint strategies made by the participants of this study, the data from the DCTs were analyzed by using a qualitative data analysis and classified by referring to the notion of five major strategies of complaining D'AMICO-REISNER (1985) which were simplified into two categories i.e. implicit strategy (IS) and explicit strategy (ES). A certain act of complaining was categorized into IS under the condition of two things i.e. 1). The complaint was made by completely avoiding to mention the offense (situation) and the offender (person). 2). The complaint was expressed using annoyance about the offense and the offender without direct reference. Besides, a certain complaint was categorized into ES under the condition of two things as well i.e. 1). The complaint was made by

using an explicit reference to the situation or the person. 2). The complaint was made by accusing and threatening. These strategies of complaint were used since all linguistic expressions given by the ENSs and INSs correspond to one of these strategies. However, sub-strategy was added to this study since it existed in the participants' complaint expressions.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The strategies of complaints of the ENSs are presented and analyzed according to the expressions of complaints collected in the three offenses that cover the complaint from one friend to another, from intimate to intimate and from the stranger to the stranger. The result of the data analysis can be seen in the following table:

Table 1: ENSs Complaint Strategies

| Situati<br>ons | Complaint strategies and categories |           |               |           |                   |           |                |   |        |   | Total |    |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|---|--------|---|-------|----|
|                | Implicit strategy                   |           |               |           | Explicit strategy |           |                |   |        |   |       |    |
|                | Reproa<br>ch                        |           | Annoya<br>nce |           | Exp.comp<br>laint |           | Accusat<br>ion |   | Threat |   |       |    |
|                | F                                   | %         | F             | %         | F                 | %         | F              | % | F      | % | F     | %  |
| 1              | 4                                   | 30.<br>77 | 6             | 46.<br>15 | 3                 | 23.0<br>7 | -              | - | -      | - | 1     | 10 |
|                | <b>10 (76.93 %)</b>                 |           |               |           | <b>3 (23.07)</b>  |           |                |   |        |   | 3     | 0  |
| 2              | 1                                   | 10        | 4             | 40        | 5                 | 50        | -              | - | -      | - | 1     | 10 |



|       |                    |     |    |     |                    |      |   |     |   |     |   |    |
|-------|--------------------|-----|----|-----|--------------------|------|---|-----|---|-----|---|----|
|       | <b>5 (50 %)</b>    |     |    |     | <b>5 (50 %)</b>    |      |   |     |   |     | 0 | 0  |
| 3     | -                  | -   | 4  | 36. | -                  | -    | 5 | 45. | 2 | 18. | 1 | 10 |
|       |                    |     |    | 36  |                    |      |   | 45  |   | 18  | 1 | 0  |
|       | <b>4 (36.36 %)</b> |     |    |     | <b>7 (63.63 %)</b> |      |   |     |   |     |   |    |
| Total | 5                  | 14. | 14 | 41. | 8                  | 23.5 | 5 | 14. | 2 | 5.8 | 3 | 10 |
|       |                    | 71  |    | 18  |                    | 2    |   | 71  |   | 8   | 4 | 0  |
|       | 19 (55.88 %)       |     |    |     | 15 (44.12 %)       |      |   |     |   |     |   |    |

As shown in Table 1, for situation 1, thirteen ENSs participated and majority used an implicit strategy (76.93 %). Six of the thirteen subjects (46.15%) used annoyance category when mentioning the offender, you without direct reference to the offense the big mess, for example, ENS 3: Wow, it looks like you have been busy in the kitchen. The example is an expression of some degree of annoyance, but it is implicit since the offensive situation is not mentioned in this complaint. For situation 2, ten ENSs participated and tended to use an implicit and explicit strategy in the same 50% percentage number. The category of explicit complaints was mostly selected (50%).

An explicit complaint is classified as an explicit strategy since speakers explicitly address their complaints with direct reference by involving you and the offense in affirmative sentences e.g. ENS 1: Oh no, where you are going, now help me pick up these groceries. The example given illustrates how the speaker directly refers to his annoyance to the hearer by involving you in the statement as well as the groceries spilled on the floor. For situation 3, eleven subjects participated and used mainly an explicit strategy to complain in this

situation (63.63%). More than forty-five percent selected category of accusation. An accusation is an explicit strategy in which the speaker directly accuses the complaine of the offense and implies that there may be consequences for the offender, for example, ENS 10: Hey! What are you doing, I hope you have insurance, you need to pay for this damage.

The examples indicate that complaints to a stranger tend to be more explicit and direct than complaints to friends or intimates for ENSs. This is consistent with DECAPUA's (1988) assertion that social distance, social power and the severity of wrong in the situations have influenced the subjects' use of strategy to declare complaints. ENSs tend to be more direct in complaining to strangers due to a great social distance. FRASER, RINTELL & WALTERS (1980) also states that three main factors involved in the selection of a complaint strategy namely power, distance, and the weight of imposition.

The aspects seem to be very influential for the ENSs in expressing direct and explicit complaints to stranger for three reasons, that is, firstly, the relationship between speakers and the hearers in verbal exchange may not last for a long period of time, secondly, the social status between the interlocutors is the same and they have the same power to speak since they do not know each other that makes the speakers say something without worrying about maintaining their relationships, thirdly, the seriousness of the offense has made them use more explicit way to complain. The strategies of complaints of ENSs indicate that the choice of the strategies of complaints between the three offensive situations is a majority implicit strategy (55.88%). The

ENSs seemed to prefer strategies with a medium degree of severity, avoiding both the less serious and the more serious (DECAPUA, 1988).

For the purpose of comparison, the result of analysis regarding the linguistic behavior of INSs when presenting complaints about the three offenses is presented in table 3.

Table 2: INSs Complaint Strategies

| Sit<br>ua<br>tio<br>ns | Complaint strategies and categories |       |               |       |             |    |                   |       |                |       |        |       | Total |     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------------|----|-------------------|-------|----------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-----|
|                        | Implicit strategy                   |       |               |       |             |    | Explicit strategy |       |                |       |        |       |       |     |
|                        | Repro<br>ach                        |       | Annoy<br>ance |       | Silen<br>ce |    | Exp.com<br>plaint |       | Accusat<br>ion |       | Threat |       |       |     |
|                        | F                                   | %     | F             | %     | F           | %  | F                 | %     | F              | %     | F      | %     | F     | %   |
| 1                      | 4                                   | 13.33 | 6             | 20    | 6           | 20 | 14                | 46.66 | -              | -     | -      | -     | 3     | 100 |
|                        | 16 (53.33 %)                        |       |               |       |             |    | 14 (46.66)        |       |                |       |        |       |       |     |
| 2                      | 5                                   | 16.67 | 4             | 13.33 | -           | -  | 18                | 60    | 3              | 10    | -      | -     | 3     | 100 |
|                        | 9 (30 %)                            |       |               |       |             |    | 21 (70 %)         |       |                |       |        |       |       |     |
| 3                      | -                                   | -     | -             | -     | -           | -  | 7                 | 23.33 | 9              | 30    | 1      | 46.67 | 3     | 100 |
|                        | 0 (0 %)                             |       |               |       |             |    | 30 (100 %)        |       |                |       |        |       |       |     |
| To<br>tal              | 9                                   | 14.71 | 10            | 41.18 | 6           |    | 39                | 23.52 | 12             | 14.71 | 1      | 5.88  | 9     | 100 |
|                        | 25 (27.8 %)                         |       |               |       |             |    | 65 (72.2 %)       |       |                |       |        |       |       |     |

The results presented above show that for situation 1, most of INSS (53.33%) declared complaint in the most implicit way. Six of the thirty subjects (20%) used the annoyance category. In this category, the speaker presents a complaint to the offender without mentioning the offense, for example. INS 21: Oh, kamu kerja apa (Oh, what are you doing). Another interesting way to complain about this situation was not to say anything. Saying nothing (silence) is identified as a new category of complaint that can only be found in the data provided by the INSS. This category was selected by 20% of the INSS. Silence is considered as a more implicit way of complaining than of reproach and can be classified in the same implicit category.

As DECAPUA (1988) points out that when presenting or interpreting complaints, non-verbal characteristics are important parts of the communication, for example, gestures, motions, gaze, postural shifts, etc. Some INSS preferred not to say anything about situation 1, but they could interpret their complaints by keeping silent along with one of the nonverbal characteristics. According to the verbal report of the INSS, silence was done for two reasons, that is, to show an understanding of the friend's bad habit and to avoid verbal conflicts. In addition, 46.66% of the INSS selected an explicit strategy by using explicit complaint to file a complaint mentioning the offender kamu, anda (you) and the offense dapur berantakan (the big mess) e.g. INS 11: Wah, apa yang sudah kamu kerjakan? kok dapur saya berantakan begini (What have you done? Why did you make such a big mess in my kitchen?). Some of the INSS reported that mentioning the offender

and the offense was the most effective way to make the offender aware their mistakes.

For situation 2, it was found that INs preferred to use the explicit strategy (70%), Sixty percent of the subjects selected explicit complaint category. Here, the speakers made direct complaints by mentioning the offender e.g. *sayang* (dear), *kamu* (you), *nak* (son) and the offense e.g. INS 11: *Aduh, hati-hati dong sayang kalau lagi jalan. Lihat barang-barang belanjaan itu berhamburan? (Be careful dear, when moving around, look at the groceries, spilled on the floor)*. Some INs reported that mentioning the offender using *sayang* (dear) or *nak* (son) instead of *kamu* (you) is intended to soften the complaint against the offender. Besides, the use of imperatives e.g. *hati-hati kalau lagi jalan* (be careful when moving around) is intended to indicate the speaker's request for non-recurrence). Imperatives were used by 50% of the INs. In this regard, the native speakers of Indonesian express their complaints to intimate directly and explicitly due to the power in which the speakers' power is higher than the hearers in the verbal exchanges.

In the culture of Indonesia, those who possess higher social status tend to be more explicit and direct in saying something than those of lower status. Another significant finding was the use of initiators to start complaining along with implicit strategies (reproach and annoyance) such as *aduh*, *hei*, *eh*, *astaga*, and *waduh*. Forty percent of the INs started complaining about such exclamations e.g. INS 20: *Hei, lagi terburu-buru ya, hati-hati! (Hey, are you in a hurry? Be careful!)*. In addition, almost all of the INs subjects closed their

complaints by giving opportunity to the offender to fix the offense (50%) such as immediate order by mentioning the offender using informal pronoun *kamu/kau* as stated by INS 6: *Kamu harus kumpulkan barang-barang itu semuanya* (You must pick all the groceries up), sharing responsibilities for the problem by involving the speaker himself to fix the situation as made by INS 4: *Sekarang, bantu saya bereskan barang-barang ini* (Now, help me pick up these groceries), requesting the complainees for non-recurrence as made by INS 3: *Jangan sampai terjadi lagi pada orang lain* (Never do this again to other people).

For situation 3, more than forty-six percent of the subjects made a complaint by immediately threatening the offender. The selection of threat categories in larger portions than the other categories was motivated by cultural assumption that all speakers have to cost for the damage of themselves since their cars have no insurance. This consequently makes most Indonesian native speakers viewed the offense as a very serious problem. There was a tendency on some INSS to keep on threatening the complainees unless s/he immediately fixes the offense e.g. as the complaint made by INS 9: *Pak, mobil saya rusak, jadi bapak harus memperbaikinya, kalau tidak saya akan laporkan kejadian ini pada polisi* (My car is dented, you must repair it. If you do not, I will report this incident to the police). Besides, the data also revealed that the second most preferred category was accusation. Thirty percent of the INSS utilized it and followed by explicit complaint (23.33%). Verbal report data indicated, many Indonesians felt that there was no much point in trying to negotiate the offense by

asking for explanation since it was clearly the offender's fault that he dented the car. They know that the offender's action of running his car into the side of another car and dents it was against the law and consequently had to be responsible for the damage. This knowledge made them express complaints using immediate threats.

The analysis of this part has enriched the understanding of INs's choice of the complaint strategies in reaction to the three offenses in which the majority of the INs chose an explicit strategy. This choice was specifically given to situation 2 (70%) and situation 3 (100%). There were two main purposes of using this strategy i.e. to show displeasure as a reaction to perceived offenses by explicitly mentioning the offender and the offense, and to hold the offender accountable for the offensive behavior. In short, INs tend to use complaint strategies with more severe ones in comparison to those employed by ENs which tend to avoid the less and the more severe strategies.

In situation 1, most ENs (76.93%) made complaints using implicit strategy. The following utterances show the linguistic expressions used by ENs in this situation.

In situation 2, the participants made complaints about an intimate's unpleasant behavior. There were only ten ENs participated in this situation. They tended to use explicit and implicit strategies in the same number of percentage 50%. The explicit strategy was used because the ENs explicitly address their complaints with direct reference to the offender and the offense in affirmative sentences.

In addition, some ENSs used implicit strategy by mentioning the offender you without direct reference to the offense.

In situation 3, most ENSs complained about explicit strategy (63.63%) in the form of accusation and threat in which the complainer directly accuses the complaine of the offense and hints that there may be consequences for the offender.

The result of analysis from the three offensive situations identified four complaint moves which may be recognized as the components of complaining strategies used by ENSs namely, Initiating, Questioning, Criticizing, and Requesting for repairs. The result of analysis from the three offenses comes up with five complaint moves used by ENSs in presenting complaints about a friend's unpleasant behavior namely, Initiating, Recalling the event, Criticizing, Questioning, and Requesting for repair. Besides, four complaint moves used by INSs in presenting complaints to an intimate or a stranger namely, Initiating, Criticizing, Questioning, and Requesting for repair.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This study attempted to compare the complaint behavior of college-educated native speakers of English (ENSs) and Indonesian (INSs). The results show similarities in strategy selection, but differences in terms of complaint categories, complaint moves as well as linguistic expressions for the same offenses between the two groups.



Labeling the features of the complaint speech act will be beneficial for both language learners since it will assist them not only to make complaints in accordance with the norms and values of the target culture but also to interpret this speech act correctly.

The socio-cultural competence of the complaint strategies will not be used appropriately by non-native speakers of English and Indonesian without having an accurate knowledge in this area. Hence, language teachers should then be able to focus their instructions on the similarities and the differences between complaints in English and Indonesian. Once the students are exposed to the target culture they rapidly begin to acquire socio-cultural competence.

Teaching the students cross-cultural similarities and differences in a speech act means to take the teaching of language truly educational since it not only helps the students understand the way pragmatic cultures operate in other culture but also encourages them to avoid possible intercultural miscommunication due to different pragmatic norms. It is believed that the proper use of complaints as part of the socio-cultural competence can improve an offensive situation, avoid verbal confrontation and establish the interaction of cooperation and solidarity between the interlocutors in cross-cultural communications. As BOXER (1993) affirms that although the common image of complaining is negative, some complaints are often negotiable and have the function of establishing the solidarity of friendship between the interlocutors.

**REFERENCES**

- BILLMYER, K., & VARGHESE, M. (2000). "Investigating instrument-based pragmatic variability: Effects of enhancing discourse completion tests". **Applied Linguistics**. Vol. 21, N° 4: 517-552. UK.
- BOXER, D. (1993). "Complaints as positive strategies: What the learner needs to know". **Tesol Quarterly**. Vol. 27, N° 2: 277-299. UK.
- BROWN, P., & LEVINSON, S. (1987). "Politeness: Some universals in language usage". **Cambridge university press**. Vol. 4. UK.
- CHEN, Y. (2011). "American and Chinese complaints: Strategy use from a cross-cultural perspective". **Intercultural Pragmatics**. Vol. 8, N° 2: 253–275. UK.
- CHEN, Y., CHEN, C., & CHANG, M. (2010). "The Effects of Instruction on Chinese University Students". **Taiwan Journal of TESOL**. Vol. 7, N° 1: 29-65.
- D'AMICO-REISNER, L. (1985). "An ethnolinguistic study of disapproval exchanges". **Doctoral dissertation, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania**. USA.
- DECAPUA, A. (1988). "Complaints: A comparison between German and English". **Paper presented at the 1988 TESOL Convention**. Chicago. USA.
- EINWILLER, S., & STEILEN, S. (2015). "Handling complaints on social network sites—An analysis of complaints and complaint responses on Facebook and Twitter pages of large US companies". **Public Relations Review**. Vol. 41, N° 2: 195-204. UK.
- FRASER, B., RINTELL, E., & WALTERS, J. (1980). "An approach to conducting research on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a

second language”. **Discourse analysis in second language research**. pp. 75-91. UK.

FRESCURA, M. (2006). “Reacting to a context-specific reprimand: A study of an Italian speech community”. **Journal of pragmatics**. Vol. 38, N° 12: 2144-2157. USA.

HANDFORD, M. (2002). “Developing sociocultural competence in the ESL classroom”. **Nottingham Linguistic Circular**. Vol. 17, pp. 1-16. USA.

HENRY, A., & HO, D. (2010). “The act of complaining in Brunei—Then and now”. **Journal of Pragmatics**. Vol. 42, N° 3: 840-855. USA.

JEFFERSON, G. (1980). “On trouble-premonitory response to the inquiry”. **Sociological inquiry**. Vol. 50, N° 3-4: 153-185. USA.





DEL ZULIA

---

# opción

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales  
Año 35, N° 24, (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

Maracaibo - Venezuela

[www.luz.edu.ve](http://www.luz.edu.ve)

[www.serbi.luz.edu.ve](http://www.serbi.luz.edu.ve)

[produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve](http://produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve)