

Troubled talk in cross-cultural business emails.

A digital Conversation Analysis of Interactions

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Abstract

This study analyses the troubled talk occurring in an exchange of business emails between an Italian manufacturing company's general manager, his staff and their Pakistani consultants. The exchange is a communicative event in which conflicts (i.e. troubles) arise due to a variety of causes: the computer-mediated communication, the use of English as a Lingua Franca, the cultural differences between interactants and the stressful nature of the situation.

Set in the tradition of studies which look at issues of intercultural differences in communication, (Katan 2006; Cucchi 2010; Manca 2016), this research addresses the question of the ongoing adaptation between high context and low context communication preferences (Hall, 1976) embraced by the Italian and the Urdu speakers. Politeness strategies have already been studied in the context of email writings (e.g. Poppi, 2012) and as an interactional event (Herring 1996; Baron 1998, 2003; Cho 2010; Gimenez 2000, 2002; Giles, et al., 2015) but to the best of my knowledge, this is the first study involving Italian and Pakistani intercultural interaction of any kind.

This research attempts to make a contribution to linguistic studies by verifying whether: 1) emails can be studied using interactional methodological tools; 2) both positive and negative politeness strategies are used in the exchanges; and 3) language and cultural attitudes may favour misunderstandings and misinterpretations, thus being an obstacle in intercultural business interactions.

Results show that linguistic research can contribute to online interactional events by identifying linguistic and pragmatic markers that could be associated with cultural dimensions (Hall 1976; Katan 2004; Hofstede 2004)

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Politeness, trouble, business emails

1. Introduction

In business communication, the variety of English employed by non-native speakers from other cultures goes under the acronym BELF (as used henceforth), which stands for Business English as a Lingua Franca. Business negotiations can be difficult, especially when conducted by and among non-native speakers, since nuances of meaning might be lost and cultural issues may interfere with interpretation of meanings. Moreover, the newly available mediated methods of

communication, considered a fast and convenient way to make first contact with clients, can also create obstacles because they use different discourse styles. For example, push emails, a system that implies an always-on availability, have provided new frames of communication. Smartphones signal the incoming emails, which can be read and answered within a short period of time, and the content of the email is reframed as a chat answer. The interactional event thus takes the form of messages, with replies conceived as sequences within adjacency pair formats.

This work aims to shed light on the conflicts emerging during troubled professional encounters, in particular, on the linguistic patterns and communicative features employed by interactants using BELF in a computer-mediated context, such as salutation norms, web-influenced styles, requests, repairs and politeness strategies to solve conflicts.

In order to achieve this purpose discourse style, organization, adjacency, turn-taking as well as politeness accommodation will be analysed with interaction analytical tools provided by the Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project (CCSARP, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984) and digital Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA) (Giles, et al., 2015). Finally, the linguistic and communicative features identified, troubles and repairs will be discussed within the frameworks of intercultural communication (Hall, 1976; Katan, 1999/2004; Lewis, 2006; Hooker, 2008).

2. Theoretical background

As an analytical framework to study contexts, digital CA explores the convergence of written texts and talk (conversational-like data) occurring in digital (synchronous and asynchronous) contexts with a conversation analytic approach. In CA, interactional topics include the notion of “trouble” as an obstacle occurring in interactions caused by a gap in understanding of messages, in auditory perception, or in the expression of a message (Schlegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977). The remedy for this communication breakdown is repair (Schlegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977), which occurs when participants identify a problem during the interaction and provide a side sequence to overcome the communication gap. Research has extensively studied such repair episodes in face-to-face interactions (e.g. Egbert, 1997; Fox, Hayashi and Jasperson, 1996; Maynard and Heritage, 2005), and Herring (1999; 2013) has studied cases of repair strategies in multiparty online textual or audiovisual conversations to overcome problems due to the lack of textual cohesion and coherence. Later on, conversation analytical tools have been adapted to synchronous online interactions (Herring, 1999; Giles et al., 2015) and to asynchronous settings. For example, Gibson (2009) adapts the notion of sequentiality to the study of interculturality in email exchanges, exploring the ways in which conversation analysis aids “the analysis of culture as a textual

interactional achievement”¹. Although email is “now considered the oldest computer-mediated communication technology, [it] still constitutes a relatively 'new' communication mode with interactional norms that are not yet conventionalized” (Darics, 2015: 8). Research has demonstrated that emails have their own stylistic features (Gimenez, 2000, 2002), including linguistic economy (contractions, ellipsis, acronyms, spelling), grammatical complexity (omission of parts of speech such as subject pronoun), expressivity (unconventional punctuation, case features to express emphasis) as well as speech-like features (Baron 1998, 2003). These conversational features are used to make physical and relational distance shorter but, on the other hand, may create communication gaps and misunderstandings (Cho, 2010). Other studies (Gimenez, 2000, 2002) have also underlined that emails are characterized by an informal and personalized style and register, and yet that, in more professional contexts, they display the linguistic conventions used for their social function of impressing a business partner (Pop and Sim, 2016).

Drawing on findings from research on politeness (see, among others, Bargiela Chiappini and Kádár, 2011), greetings and closings in email exchanges, as well as address terms, are part of politeness formulae to maintain relations in a friendly working environment, while the use of emoticons and capitalization are understood as inappropriate and disrespectful of business email recipients. Some linguistic indicators such as formality and the use of appropriate titles are considered particularly important but politeness norms, as is well-known, vary according to culture. In fact, the way speakers use language and communicate messages is structured according to values and conventions that are aspects of one's culture. For example, from an intercultural standpoint, Chinese tend to use honorifics more than their less formal Italian interlocutors (Poppi, 2012). This depends on the cultural choices and speaking styles within the in-group, and on how much can be communicated through words or by cultural contexts (Katan 2004). Thus, when speakers express an opinion or describe a personal experience revealing their identity, they are also expressing their beliefs, their values and perceptions, that is, they are expressing their culture. Hall uses the terms of high and low-context cultures (Hall, 1976) to refer to how people from different cultures communicate, that is how they convey meanings using words and contexts.

Lexico-grammatical features appear to be generally unproblematic and of no obstacle to communicative success in ELF (English as Lingua Franca, Seidhofer 2004) and, when adopted in business contexts (BELF), the language used reflects the various cultural background of its speakers (Louhiala-Salminen, 2012). This has been also showed by Cucchi (2010) who used Hofstede's dimensions (individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity

¹ <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1253/2730> [Last Accessed September 2017].

versus femininity) to study English as a lingua franca, for predicting and interpreting linguistic differences on the basis of cultural differences. She demonstrates that ELF used by Italians reflects specific national discourse styles that depend on the speakers' cultural orientations (use of pronouns, reduced personalization, complexity and technical words), thus confirming that cultural dimensions are effective in predicting or explaining specific communicative and linguistic choices on the basis of national identity. Cross-cultural studies have widely demonstrated the interconnectedness between language and culture in promotional language such as tourism (Manca 2008; Katan 2016), private pension brochures (Katan 2006), advertising (Cucchi 2010), and business communication (Hooker 2008). All these studies reveal specific features related both to High Context Cultures (HCCs) and Low Context Cultures (LCCs) a sort of categorization seen as a continuum rather than a clear-cut distinction. Following Hall (1976), Katan (2006), argues that HCCs are more implicit in their communication that is less linear with respect to the LCC. LCCs (e.g. British or North American), on the other hand, tend to be more explicit, task-centred, with a division of responsibilities, and tend to explain things to accommodate individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds. In Lewis' tripartite model HCCs are similar to "reactive cultures" (e.g. Pakistani culture) seen as being accommodating, polite and indirect, if compared to the "multi-active" type (e.g. Italian) that show emotionally-charged reactions and impatience. The third cultural type is called "linear-active" (e.g. Germany) that is more oriented towards directness and planning events ahead step by step.

An additional perspective is offered by Hooker (2008), who shows how the cultural mechanism that is displayed in an exchange highlights the differences between what he has called rule-based and relationship-based culture practices. These two categories regulate interpersonal relations and, on a deeper level, deal with the perception of human existence. While rule-based cultures rely on confidence in rules and norms, relationship-based cultures trust individuals and are therefore more interested in maintaining good connections. These two cultural behaviours seem to be "grounded in different conceptions of human nature" (Hooker, 2008:1) since they regulate relations and deal "with the uncertainty of human existence" (ibid). This distinction not only does it affect negotiation style, attitudes and power distance but also offers new perspectives for understanding intercultural/cross-cultural business communication. Hooker's research has shown that doing business with cultures other than one's own, thus, often means encountering misunderstanding and communication differences when exchanging information. For example, the comparative analysis of business emails in a multinational context between Iranians and native English speakers' (from Britain and the United States) highlighted both similarities in the use of moves and steps in the emails, and discrepancies in the use of certain rhetorical strategies (Mehrpour and Mehrzad, 2013). According to this study, Iranian requests sound more respectful because of specific expressions that minimize the imposition of their

commands (“could you kindly”, “we would like to ask”). The result is an “over-politeness strategy” – as the scholars put it, which is mainly due to the direct transfer of expressions from the Persian language to the English language and may be seen as inappropriate for an English audience, since readers need more time to get to the core of the email (Najeeb, Maros and Nor, 2012).

Cultural and linguistic differences in interactional business English may result, as a consequence, in a lack of comprehensibility thus creating interactional trouble (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Hooker, 2008; Suh, 2015).

2.1 Data and participants

The data consists of a self-compiled corpus of business emails, exchanged between an Italian company manager and his staff, and a Pakistani “dealer²”, the manager, and his technician. All participants are male, in their thirties to fifties. The Italian manager and his staff work for an Italian company that provides manufactured tools. In this exchange, they talk about a particular tool that will be used in a big project financed by the Pakistani Ministry, the client. The Italian company is represented by its dealer, a company that works as one of the sub-contractors. The client asks the main contractor (that relies on sub-contractors) to search for the best materials, which will be checked and eventually approved by a consultant. The main contractor chooses the different companies represented by the subcontractors, because it receives Ministry funds only once the consultant has approved of the quality of materials and of construction standards. The subcontractor has consequently the important role of mediator between the manufacturing company and the main contractor (and consultant).

The corpus is composed of 155 emails produced by four participants between October 2015 and February 2016. During the first month only 15 emails were written but the number increased over the following months (68 emails in February). The emails are mostly from the two managers (55 emails by the Pakistani manager, identified here by PM, and 57 by the Italian, identified here by IM). The Pakistani technician's emails (PT) are mostly sent to the Italian manager (31 emails), while the Italian technicians (IT) write to both PM and PT (11 emails).

2.2 Methods and Analysis

This paper makes use of digital CA (Giles, et al., 2015), which describes the practices of interactions analysing both individual instances and collections of patterns occurring in, and adapted for, digital (computer-mediated and often internet-mediated) contexts. In addition to the study of interaction patterns, digital CA offers important tools to study intercultural communication in terms of

² The term is taken from the data and refers to the particular activity of the Pakistani group, with the meaning of middleman, distributor.

different strategies employed by native and non-native speakers. Kaur (2011) identifies four main sources of misunderstanding when using English as Lingua Franca in social interactions: pragmatic ambiguity, performance-related misunderstanding (mishearings or slips of tongue), language-related misunderstanding (non-standard use of lexical items) and gaps in world knowledge. For this paper, these sources should be understood within the online asynchronous context in which communication occurs, i.e. language-related, channel-related and cultural-related constraints.

Following the main objective of identifying the origin of miscommunication, emails were displayed according to their chronological sequence, then they were grouped by sender in order to analyse individual stylistic patterns. The analysis was carried out following three stages according to the framework adopted: 1. Digital interaction was analysed within the Digital CA; 2. politeness and requests relying on Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project model and the digital CA, and 3. troubles and repairs are discussed within the framework of intercultural communication. The emails were first investigated as an interactional event: participants were identified and the sequential organization was studied following a chronological order. The emails were categorized according to the following criteria: addressivity (that is the practice used to identify the intended addressee by name, in particular in asynchronous group discourse, Herring 1999), the topic under discussion, adjacency pairs, sequences of utterances that are mutually dependent and are produced by two participants, (opening sequence-greeting or answer-question sequences). Table 1 summarizes the type of sequence analysis.

Date	Addressivity	Topic under discussion
15/10	PT >IM	Purchase order and advance payment. Question: confirm payment
15/10	IM >PT	Payment check + question: confirmation labelling
15/10	PT >IM	Confirmation answered
15/10	IM >PT	Answer acknowledged + Question on furniture
19/10	PT >IM	Answer on furniture + question competitors
22/10	IM >PT	Answer competitors

Table 1: Sequence in email exchange between participants PT and IM, date and topic.

Secondly, the emails were edited for privacy issues, grouped by sender and analysed for style differences. Two categories were taken into account, in accordance with their layout and content: letters and memos. Letters (see below, a) are characterized by either a graphic distribution of the written text, by at least an opening (Dear Mr, Dear Sir, or Sir) or a closing (Best Regards), and a formal writing style. Memos (as in b) have a more informal style (very often reproducing speech-like style) or they

may be a list of things to-do.

a. Dear Mr. IM.,

Thank you for your Greetings.

Sir, for your kind information, we had a discussion with Mr. [name] and they have requested us to submit another proposal of [...]

We have downloaded the catalog from you website. Today, Mr.

PM and I will visit [the site] for the construction drawings of the [tool]. We will inform you regarding the loads and the parameters [client] has considered for this type of [tool].

Please inform us the best suitable time we expect your proposal for [tool] ready to be submitted to [client].

Regards, A [Signature] (A13)

b. Yes! (PM31)

In the second stage, data was analysed in terms of politeness norms in epistolary conventions (opening and salutation; closing and signature; addressing and titles), and in terms of request strategies at sentence level, since request may be concerned with an imposition softened by politeness. They may be of a direct nature (want statements, obligation statements, hedged performatives, performatives and mood derivables), conventionally indirect requests (suggestory formulae, query-preparatory), and non-conventional indirect requests (strong hints, mild hints). I am drawing upon the Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project (CCSARP, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), because it focuses on the speech acts of requests and apologies. The request is a speech act that is considered to be a negative face-threatening act and deeply influenced by culture (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), since speakers tend to adopt the strategy involving the degree of directness allowed by their own native politeness system, and may cause cross-cultural miscommunication. The concepts of negative/positive face and threatening acts are taken from Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), in which politeness is intended as a set of social skills used by participants to protect one's self-image (face) in a social interaction. In particular, Brown and Levinson's analysis of politeness considers both positive strategies (paying attention to the other's face needs) and negative strategies (ensuring that the other's face is not imposed on).

Following Blum-Kulka's (1984) categories, four types of sentence-level request strategies were considered for the analysis. Examples from my data are given for reasons of greater comprehensibility: 1. Mood Derivable (the most direct request, in which the grammatical mood of the verb marks its illocutionary force, "Do the needful and much more to sort this issue positively"), 2. Want Statement (with sentences overtly expressing the request to satisfy the speaker's intentions, desire or feeling, "I want to know in advance your further steps"), 3. Query Preparatory

(a preparatory condition of possibility or willingness as in “Could you please investigate about this possibility?”), and 4. Hint (the request is suggested but not expressed “consider that we haven't received an answer to our question about [preferred tool]”).

Finally, I discuss the exchange in terms of cultural distance and relate it to high and low context culture categories (Hall, 1976) and to Hooker's distinction of rule-based and relationship-based cultures (2008). Cultural differences in business communication, according to Hooker, depend on the high or low context culture origin of the interlocutors, and generate different ways to e.g. write a contract, negotiate, or make a decision. On a deeper level, Hooker explains that these differences are related to different conceptions of human existence e.g. the confidence in the objective validity of rules, the social ties that guarantee and have precedence over one's own welfare, and even the conception of human nature. In relationship-based cultures, human existence is understood beyond the single unit of the individual and is extended to the community. Relationships are fundamental and social control is exercised through them (2008:10), with certain figures having authority over others, whereas, in rule-based cultures, the individual is seen as having no authority over others. In Hofstede's model this different degree of “unequal distribution of power within societies” is called Power Distance (Cucchi 2015: 6). Focusing on adjacency pairs, misunderstanding and conflict in talk, and its repair were studied; and the results were compared with reference to negative and positive politeness as well as to high and low context cultural orientations. The exchange is also studied in terms of cross-cultural business communication style, looking at the cultural mechanism that is displayed in the exchange, distinguishing rule-based and relationship-based culture practices (Hooker, 2008).

3. Findings

3.1. *First step: The interactional event*

The first email, sent on August 17th, 2015, deals with some issues concerning the business project. At that time and for the following two months participants are PT and IM. Sequences deal with timetable updates, requests for feedback and confirmations of payments. The emails are quite short with few sentences, in (almost) formal style and mostly organised as question/answer pairs.

15.10 08:38 A > IM

Dear Sir,

Please find below the swift message of payment transfer to your account.
Please confirm us if you received the payment.

15.10 12:10 IM > A

Yes, payment received and production process officially started. Today we will update you about the revised delivery schedule. Please confirm with urgency to Mr. [name] your APPROVAL (or your comments) about our labelling proposal.

Best regards [signature]

The second email in the example (15.10 12:10 IM>A) shows how some messages are functionally related to each other: the second email is dependent on the first one in a two-part exchange as it requires the first email to fully understand the meaning of the interjection 'yes'. Consequently, these emails represent an adjacency pair within the online interaction.

In November, a misunderstanding concerning a product breaks the flow of conversation, which is restored after a few email exchanges. Within a month, though, the issue is discussed again and some complaints and mild accusations are made. This time, a third participant, the leader of the Pakistani company, takes part in the exchange with the aim of providing an adjustment (defending his group's work). The Christmas holidays interrupt the exchange for some days, with only the Pakistani participants sending emails with updates. After the Italian Christmas break, an intense exchange of emails takes place, with an average of eight emails a day. The topics deal with requests for documents, guarantee issues, technical questions regarding materials and drawings, and commercial strategies. This time all the participants contribute to the exchange, but the dialogue is essentially between PM and IM (i.e. the Pakistani technician and the Italian manager). The emails are multi-addressed, with a number of emails within the same day concerning a variety of issues. As such, the reply may be a single email addressing the specific issue but more often, when the exchange involves more participants and long emails, question-answer sequences take the form of multicolour successions of lines, added to a forwarded message, each colour representing one participant's reply:

15.01 15:41 PM > IM email text: "comments in blue"

14.01 15:39 IM> A, PM email text: "reply below in red"

14.01 15:26 A >IM, PM [text in black]

Moreover, Mr. PM met Project Manager [...], and he asked PM. about a 50 year warranty for [...]. We told them that in general [company] provides a 5 year warranty. Then they [...]. See, the reason to tell you all this regarding warranty is to ask you what to offer as they require a 50 year warranty [...] Please explain to us regarding what to offer as a warranty. [...] **We can propose 10 year warranty [...]. In addition we can issue a declaration of performance stating [...].** Just received a paper from [source][...]. Mr.[name] will send you.

This strategy of multicolour succession is employed to reduce the time spent

writing and to make everyone aware of the discussion under way. Addressivity becomes essential in order to avoid misunderstanding and to ensure one is talking with the proper interlocutor. The following email is from PM to IM and IT, but it has an in-text addressed to PT:

PM> IM, PT, IT
 FYI. Plz check the pics attached! This was also submitted to [...].
 Mr.PT plz say [name] to get specs from [...]. Regards [signature]
 (PM14)

The more tense the dialogue becomes, the more the email style turns into a spoken-like exchange. The email texts become a chat style conversation, with messages answered within a few minutes and designed as synchronous replies, using single words as email bodies ('yes', PM31), or word-sign substitutions ('???', IM43). Informal written style also emerges in the case of angry tones, with the use of capitalization and bold, **red** to focus on the importance of what is being said, as in the case of these extracts from the Italian emails:

1) Mr. PM., As discussed by phone, YOU are our representative in the area and YOU must solve this unbelievable issue. (IM29)

2)**This is not a GUARANTEE LETTER!!!**

This is just a service life confirmation [...]. You/your customer are doing a fatal confusion (IM45)

3)Dear All, [...]. **It is absolutely wrong and ridiculous that [their] documentation is better.** In the table it seem [we] did not have sent drawings and installation procedures [...]. **So contact immediately the client, the engineer and all necessary people to clarify immediately and give them all the documents [...]. We have worked a lot and we do not accept to be out [...].** (IT6)

By analysing data as an interactional event it is demonstrated that its computer-mediated nature does not constitute communication troubles, since users are aware of the communication mechanisms typical of computer-mediated exchanges. In the following paragraph, I will take into account textual style and format organization as they may reveal users' adaptation to the ongoing interaction.

3.2 The email context: Discourse Organization, Communication Styles, and Politeness

Results for email style show that memos were preferred to emails (95 memos and 59 emails), with memos that omit greetings, and emails including address terms

that vary from “Dear Mr + Surname” (28 occurrences) to “Mr + Surname” (14 occurrences). The low occurrence of address titles confirms the essentially informal style of the exchange. Workgroup emails are opened by 'Dear all', with paragraphs in the main text that are addressed to individuals. Titles are used alongside opening sequences, with Italian speakers using “Dear Mr + Surname” and Pakistani speakers using the form “Mr + Surname, Sir/Dear Sir” (see Table 2). Interestingly, “sir” is used quite often, both as an opening and as an addressing term in the mail body and its overuse shows both a close relationship between the sender and the reader and the conversation-like style of the email. It also reminds of the over-politeness strategy (Najeeb, Maros and Nor, 2012) that is used in reactive cultural types (Lewis, 1996).

Discourse Categories	Italian writers	Pakistani writers
Opening	Dear Mr + Surname	Mr + Surname, Sir/Dear Sir
Greetings and small talk	-	Good day, hope you will enjoying [...], hope you are fine
Expression of gratitude	Thank you for your detailed reply	Mr IM, Sir, [...] thank you for your support
Closing	Regards + Signature, saluti/Best regards	Regards + Signature, Regards

Table 2: Examples of discourse organization and examples taken from the Italian and the Pakistani mails.

After addressing the email (referring to the recipient by name), only the Pakistani speakers continue with greetings and small talk, which is a typical Pakistani communication pattern according to Lewis (1996). Expressions of gratitude are found only in four emails, two in the Pakistani technician's emails and two in the Italian leader's. While opening sequences are quite informal (often even omitted), closings are always used with the sequence “Regards + Signature” or simply “Regards”. One Italian technician always uses the two languages, closing “Cordiali saluti/Best regards”.

123 requests in 89 emails were found, with the highest percentage being (77%) in the Italian leader's emails and the lowest (29%) being in the Pakistani Manager's. Both direct (Mood derivable and Want statements) and indirect (Query preparatory and hint) strategies are involved but the “mood derivable” category is used far more often by all writers (69,92%), although it is always softened by the use of “please” (as in “Please, clarify immediately your position”, IM29). Applying a decreasing percentage of use, the next strategies are the “Want” statements (e.g. “I want to know in advance your further steps”; 13,1%) and the “query preparatory” requests (e.g. “Could you please investigate about this possibility?”;

13,82%). The “Want” statement is the least used strategy in the Pakistani requests (three occurrences). The “hint utterance” is the least used request strategy (3,25%) in the data, and employed when dealing with delicate matters (“the best will be to have some info about [product’s name] before issuing our proposal”, IM14).

Speakers tend to use both indirect and direct strategies in their emails, and this is important for politeness considerations. Indirect requests are not the most common choice, perhaps because they are considered inappropriate in the business context. Participants rather use direct strategies preceded by softeners, which are face-saving but do not change the immediacy or the tone of the request. Direct strategies, involving a marked illocutionary force (Mood derivable requests that make use of imperatives as in “Do the needful”, IM30) as well as the speakers' expressed intention that the addressee will act as requested (Want statement), are often used in particular by the Italian speakers, who tend to sound more direct. This is also suggested by their use of capitalization and red colours as strategies to convey a (moderately) aggressive tone, and by quite directive sequences (see examples above in 1, 2, and 3) that, together with their high use of mood derivable request strategy may suggest a forceful transactional nature of this email exchange. On the other hand, the Pakistani writers tend to mitigate their utterances and use softening reply strategies when accused of something (as in “How could you think we have doubts about you?”, PM6). Such use of softening strategies (mostly hedges and hinting) is usually employed as a (negative) politeness strategy to save the recipients' face, since they minimize the imposition of the speech act. However, the use of softeners does not mirror the sender's consideration and respect for the recipient, since no instances of more articulated negative politeness strategies, such as “If you have the time, could you send me the documents” are found. Such a sentence would show the sender's consideration for the recipient's time but, also, the addition could be perceived as a loss of recipients' time (Najeeb, Maros and Nor, 2012). In addition, more articulated strategies would not be consistent with the rapidity and the brevity of the exchange in the email interaction, which forces the development of more versatile politeness strategies (Baron, 1998; Gimenez 2000; Murphy and Levy 2006). The difference in the request strategies employed by the participants may depend on their different cultural orientation, which is probably the main issue causing communication problems.

3.3. On communication problems, repairs and cultural preferences

In this section the use of ELF is considered as a possible cause of troubles and then data is discussed against the intercultural framework of relation-based versus rule-based cultures to verify whether cultural differences may be seen as the source of troubles in communication.

The data under investigation contains a variety of communication problems, which presumably depend on various aspects, e.g. the email exchange, the use of English by non-native speakers, the different cultures of the speakers', and the situational

context (the closing of the deal is at the same time a reason for tension as well as the final reciprocal goal).

Since exchanges establish and negotiate personal relationships, the interaction must take into account the participants and their culture. In the days immediately before the 25th December, the cultural assumption of the Italian speakers encourages the exchange of Christmas wishes in their closings (“Best regards, merry Xmas and happy new year!”, IM15). The Italian speakers are well aware of the different cultural background at least on this aspect of material culture as evidenced by their email informing their interlocutors that their offices will be closed (“As usual our offices will close today at noon for Xmas and will reopen at January 7th.”, IM12), because of 'their' holidays (“Since we are very close to *our* Christmas holidays [...]”, IT1). Their Pakistani interlocutors adapt their response to the situational context (“Please get ready after *your* holidays for a proposal”, PT18), and respond to the New Year wishes (“First of all a very warm greetings for the year 2016, hope you all are fine and enjoying *your* vacations”, PM26). Integrating the wishes in the corpus of their texts, they show communicative competence since they orient themselves to otherness, select the situational information and choose the type of response that allows a successful exchange. The potential cultural blunder is averted and the relationship is saved. Communication problems occur instead because of misunderstandings concerning the deal and depend mostly on their linguistic competence and the lexis they use. English accuracy is not an issue:

4) Our priority is also [tool] firstly but [client] didn't give any comment because they have submitted to [name], today I went to [client] still same answer that no response from [name]. [name] designer said that [company] came up with some [specific] codes which he himself gave him answers regarding to come up with AASHTO no [specific] code. (PM1)

A recent study on BELF (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012) suggests that content and clarity are more important than form and “correctness”. So for them business English is described as a simplified variety of English without “complicated phraseology, idiomatic expressions or complex sentence structures” (ibid.: 266). In this corpus, the deviant use of language is not a cause of communication troubles (as in Seidhofer, 2004) except at the lexical level, which results in language misunderstandings that need repairs (“what do you mean with “verification?””, IM35; “you are speaking about “guaranteed life” or “duration of guarantee?””, IM35). When communication problems concern words referring to strategic concepts, repairs come in the form of clarifications:

5) (I) Coming to guarantee terms, it is necessary to define two concepts: A) Guarantee terms - this is the period in which [company]

will keep the responsibility about fabrication defects. Our standard time is [...].

B) Expected lifetime - it corresponds to the expected life of the bearing, keeping the same design performances. It is totally different from the previous point. The expected lifetime could be [...].

The concept of "guaranteed lifetime" is void of sense. (IM36)

From the perspective of high and low context orientations (Hall 1976; Lewis 2006), Katan (2006) and Cucchi (2010) have shown that HCCs are more expressive, highlighting feelings and relationships in interaction, whereas LCCs are instrumental in that they rely on facts. In the wake of these studies, Pakistani and Italian subjects in the data are expected to orient themselves as in a high context culture frame. However, data seem to show that different orientations are involved. For example, in my data, IM presents the Italian company as a horizontal structure, he points out that people's roles are established by their accomplishments, and each person has their own set of tasks and responsibilities. This is an example of Hofstede's low power distance dimension, which seems to correlate with a rule-based society (Hooker 2008), since the social structure is decentralized and responsibility is distributed. IM's messages are direct, regulated by compliance with pre-existing agreements, less interested in courtesy and face-saving. The Italian emails often contain background information and explanations that are provided to avoid misunderstanding (see e.g. "5"), whereas the Pakistani emails seem more interested in the group relationship (e.g. they use small talk about the Christmas holidays), and talk around the point, an attitude that may cause frustration to their Italian interlocutors ("Confused questions are the reason of confused answers (if any)!" IM35). Moreover, IM tries to withdraw from conflicts to avoid direct messages to save the Pakistani's face and not to destroy the relationship. Indeed, he tries to focus on solutions as we can see in example "5", where he tries to clear up the linguistic misunderstanding. It seems IM's attitudes are closer to the linear-active cultural type (as in Lewis Model, 1996), which shows similarities with low context culture orientations. After that, in a further email, he blames the person responsible for the misunderstanding (see example "1"), which seems to be concerned with a multi-active type (in the Lewis model) or, better, to the rule-based culture position (Hooker, 2008). 'Rule-based' regards human beings as autonomous individuals, responsible for their own actions. In addition, the correspondence written by the Pakistani group shows a degree of deference, with an attention to high power distance, conveyed by the practices of respect and formality (the use of greetings, the repetition of the use of the word "sir"). This is a characteristic of relationship-based cultures, which focus on maintaining

relations and therefore rely on courtesy and face-saving exchanges.

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

The data under investigation are a rich source of linguistic information about what normally happens during a business relationship in terms of rapport management, conflict and repair strategies. Digital CA and the study of sequences have provided new methodological perspectives in the analysis of email exchanges: the sequential organization has allowed understanding of how the conversation evolves in terms of conventions, how the topic is addressed and how relations unfold. The conversation takes place as an email exchange between five writers, who are familiar with multi-addressed email conventions. Elements of structural politeness (greetings and closings) are used to maintain working relationships, but are omitted or limited in the case of hurried responses. Unlike the former variable (i.e. the digital context), ELF, on the contrary, may be a cause of communication troubles but only at the lexical level. Misunderstandings are mostly based on lexicon; and conflict concerns the action to be undertaken or have been already undertaken, and the renegotiation of such actions. In all these cases, users know how to use genre conventions, including typographical adjustments, to mirror the tone of a face-to-face conversation. We can safely state that the mediated-computer communication does not constitute in this case a source of troubles.

Finally, the intercultural analysis has proved valuable to detect the origin of communication conflicts which seems to depend on the cultural differences between rule-based and relationship-based cultures (Hooker, 2008). Although it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between the cultures at play, and I can only refer to the participants' preferences, it seems that the Italian contributors respond to a rule-based orientation, thus showing practices that are typical of a low context culture (where, for example, communication tends to be explicit, see Katan, 2006). The Italians do business with interlocutors, who have different orientations than their own, which means that they often encounter misunderstanding when exchanging information, and occasionally suffer from what they perceive as a lack of information (“Your clarifications will help us to understand what happens”, IM10; “What happens? What about the requested deliveries?”, IM20, in bold red letters in the email to express frustration/disagreements). The Pakistani participants, presumably also due to their role as intermediaries within the relationship, employ the practices which are typical of relationship-based cultures, giving a lot of weight to people and meetings and preferring situational knowledge³ (“it will be sorted out at the time of installation or at the time of visit

³ Situational knowledge is a term used in media and communication contexts. The situational knowledge is an experience-based knowledge that people use (even if unaware of it) to understand an environment/context/situation that looks like something similar to what one has once

not a big deal”, PM11; “Tomorrow again ... Discussionwill start ...lets see what comes into their mind”, PM42), which will provide an implicit understanding of the context, based on their past experience of the same situation.

The push email system creates a new frame in which the email takes the form of a spoken/chat-like dialogue with very quick answers (like 'yes', PM31) in a conversation continuum. It is a development of email discourse as an intersection of written and oral discourse, displaying features associated with face-to-face interactions (informality, immediacy, and synchronicity) within a written mode (planning, asynchronicity), described by Cho (2010) and Gimenez (2000, 2002). My study also confirms how graphics and orthographic devices (capitalization, different colours, punctuation marks) are employed to move closer to the spoken style of face-to-face exchanges (i.e. changing tone through capitalization). These emails appear to resemble chat conversations, sharing style and time sequences, and are characterized by brevity and reduced politeness indicators (Murphy and Levy, 2006). My results also suggest that, in this particular exchange, the Pakistani writers fall at the two extremes of formality, being inclined towards both conversation-like styles (PM) and to (more) formal written sequences (PT), whereas the Italian speakers fall within this formality continuum.

The data have also shown that there are different orientations toward the conflict raised by misunderstandings, which depend on the speakers' cultural preferences. In our data, Italian strategies involve a high level of directness, with sentences and capitalization that intensify the force of the complaints. On the other hand, the Pakistani interlocutors were found to prefer softer strategies (reformulations and indirect complaints). The difference in orientations may be explained in terms of power relations: despite the potential symmetrical positions of the interlocutors, in particular of the two managers PM and IM, the use of directives by Italian speakers, together with the Pakistanis' constant requests for directions, suggests an unbalanced relationship or, in Hooker's terms, a different consideration of authority figures. Certainly, all these strategies do not help to protect the relationship between the participants, where the main act taking place is the business deal. This study suggests that this mutual goal is challenged by both language misunderstandings and by cultural orientational preferences. The latter represent obstacles and cause delays in the business process and schedule, as demonstrated by the example of service life confirmation/guarantee email.

experienced. In business contexts, situational knowledge is thought to influence decision (and that is why it is often used for advertisement and product information).

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