



# Linguistic politeness across Austria and Italy: Backing out of an invitation with an instant message



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## ABSTRACT

The study compares how native speakers of German from the area of Innsbruck (Austria) and native speakers of Italian from the area of Rome (Italy) perceive the communicative act of backing out of an invitation for dinner at the last minute, in a situation of low social distance. The purpose of the study is twofold: to shed light on the orientation of Austrian German and Italian languages/cultures in terms of linguistic politeness, and to expand empirical cross-cultural research to a less-commonly investigated speech act. Data collected by means of a discourse completion task (DCT) are triangulated with responses to an assessment question and metapragmatic comments, and analyzed following a quantitative approach. The analysis of the DCT findings shows some cross-group differences in the choice of speech act realization strategies and internal modifiers. However, the overall results reveal more similarities than differences between the two populations regarding the informants' perception of face threat in last-minute cancellations. This seems to disprove the idea that the two groups belong to different cultural frameworks in terms of politeness orientation, at least as far as it concerns the specific speech act under investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

Drawing on their model of linguistic politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987: 245) proposed a distinction between positive and negative politeness cultures. In the former, “impositions are thought as small, social distance as no insuperable boundary to easygoing interaction, and relative power as never very great,” while the latter “are those lands of stand-offish creatures like the British (in the eyes of the Americans), the Japanese (in the eyes of the British).” Positive-politeness cultures predominantly use linguistic politeness to display affection and solidarity, whereas negative-politeness cultures prefer strategies that are aimed at generating respect and social differentiation (Barros García and Terkourafi, 2014: 263). The orientation of politeness in some cultures, such as those of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking countries, has attracted scholars' attention over the last decades, whereas other Germanic and Romance languages/cultures, like Austrian German and Italian, remained rather peripheral to this area of research.

In this study, we address politeness orientation in Austrian and Italian cultures by focusing on how native speakers of the Austrian variety of German from the area of Innsbruck and native speakers of Italian from the area of Rome perceive the

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communicative act of backing out of an invitation at the last minute with an instant message. The decision to focus on instant messaging stems from the fact that this modality is extensively used for a variety of communication purposes, including backing out of invitations.

The purpose of the study is twofold. First, we aim to investigate face concerns and politeness strategies in two languages/cultures that have not been contrastively explored from this perspective yet. Second, we intend to expand empirical cross-cultural research to include less-commonly investigated speech acts. In fact, only a few attempts have been made to empirically investigate the speech act of backing out of an invitation despite it being a common communicative situation.

From an applied standpoint, this study is expected to provide helpful information for professionals working in the fields of second language teaching and intercultural communication. As is well known, pragmatic differences across languages are “responsible for many misunderstandings, misperceptions and cultural shocks, which may have uncomfortable or sometimes problematic consequences in communication” (Ruiz de Zarobe and Ruiz de Zarobe, 2012: 15). Cross-cultural research helps raise second language learners, teachers, and users awareness of what types of linguistic behavior speakers of different cultural backgrounds consider appropriate or inappropriate. The authors of the present article are particularly concerned with such practical implications of the study since their universities, located in Innsbruck and Rome, have been involved in student exchange programs for several years.

The article is structured as follows: in Section 2, the literature on the cultural orientation of linguistic politeness will be reviewed, and findings of cross-cultural studies involving Austrian German and Italian will be summarized. A description of the speech act of backing out of an invitation in terms of face threat ends the background section. In the following section (3), the aims of the study will be presented, followed by its methodological aspects (4): the data collection instrument, the participants, the coding scheme used to annotate the data, and analytical procedures. The results are then reported (5), followed by a section of discussion and concluding remarks (6).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Politeness orientation across cultures

As previously mentioned, Brown and Levinson's (1987: 245) model distinguishes between positive and negative politeness cultures. Since this model has been criticized on many grounds (cf. Leech, 2014: 81–84, among many others, for an overview of the criticisms), the notions of positive- and negative-politeness cultures have been further refined and partially re-interpreted by other scholars, and several taxonomies of cultures have been proposed on the basis of the preferred politeness strategies. For instance, Haverkate (2004) differentiated between distancing and rapprochement/solidarity cultures, and Briz (2006) used Bravo's (1999) notions of autonomy and affiliation to talk about  $\pm$  autonomy and  $\pm$  affiliation cultures. Despite some nuances, these views seem to share a common core in that they reflect two opposite forces coexisting in humans as social beings. On one side, the tendency to identify oneself as part of the cultural and linguistic group to which one belongs; on the other, the tendency to identify oneself as an individual with unique traits which distinguish her or him from other members of the group (cf. Bravo, 2012:100).

The majority of studies which empirically investigated the politeness orientation of different cultures through speech act realization used the above-mentioned categorizations to interpret the linguistic strategies of British and American English speakers, and of Latin-American and Peninsular Spanish speakers. Anglo-American culture appears more inclined toward the protection of negative face through the avoidance/mitigation of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), prioritizing the respect of the interlocutor's individuality and right to autonomy. Latin-American and Peninsular Spanish cultures, on the contrary, are more inclined toward the use of maneuvers to enhance positive face (Face-Enhancing Acts or Face-Flattering Acts, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997), showing concern for solidarity and belongingness (Ardila, 2005; Briz, 2006; Díaz Pérez, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Fitch, 1994, 2007; Fitch and Sanders, 1994; García, 1989; Goddard, 2012; Koike, 1994; Hickey, 2005; Pinto, 2011; Placencia and García, 2007). Some scholars have claimed that not only Peninsular Spanish, but also other Mediterranean cultures, should be classified as positive-politeness cultures (Haverkate, 1994; Placencia and García, 2007; Sifianou, 1992).

Any country-based distinctions with respect to cultural orientations of politeness and pragmatic strategies are rough-grained, and subject to the risk of overgeneralization and oversimplification. Research into variational pragmatics (Schneider and Barron, 2008; Schneider and Placencia, 2017) reminds us that pragmatic variability within national cultures should not be glossed over. This is particularly crucial in the case of multicentric languages like German, which is spoken in Germany, Switzerland and Austria (Clyne, Fernandez, Muhr, 2003: 150). However, generalizations can be useful in explaining the basis for speakers' expectations and stereotypes. As pragmatic differences across cultures may easily lend themselves to stereotyping if not adequately interpreted in the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics, it is our duty as researchers to investigate speakers' perceptions and to explain them within a linguistic perspective.

Only a limited number of studies in the area of cross-cultural pragmatics has examined Austrian German or Italian. Specifically, no contrastive research has been conducted between these languages in terms of politeness strategies in speech act performance. We will therefore review the existing cross-cultural pragmatics literature comparing both Italian and Austrian German to German German, used as tertium comparationis. Afterwards, we will report the main results of the only cross-cultural study involving the speech act of backing out of an invitation.

## 2.2. Politeness and speech act realization in (Austrian) German and Italian

According to some scholars, German German seems more oriented toward negative politeness in comparison to Italian. Venuti's (2013) cross-cultural study of requests showed that the Italian participants favored constructions in which either the hearer or the speaker was mentioned, whereas alluding to the role played by external circumstances seemed to be a preferred option for the Germans. Furthermore, the Italian speakers showed a slightly lower level of indirectness, and larger use of alerters, supportive moves, and upgraders. More recently, Venuti and Hinterhölzl (2019) further explored requests in German and Italian. Their results showed that both groups of subjects relied heavily on conventionally indirect strategies. On the whole, however, German informants used more indirect request strategies than their Italian counterparts, and they chose phrasal, lexical, and syntactical modifiers with a higher frequency.

Other studies contradict Venuti and Hinterhölzl's findings. In a comparison of Italian and German customer complaints on Facebook, Kunkel (2020) found little differences in the speech act realization. The author speculated that the similarity was due to the nearly culture-neutral online context, in which the factual level, and not the relationship between complainer and complaine, is in the foreground. Comparing the reactions to compliments by German and Italian speakers, Castagneto and Ravetto (2015) found that the Germans had a preference for strategies which enabled them to avoid any kind of ambiguity. When reacting to a compliment, they appeared to be more oriented toward clarity and plain speaking than the Italian speakers, thus showing a solidarity attitude which seems incompatible with an orientation toward negative politeness.

Cross-cultural comparisons of Austrian and German German found remarkable differences between the two varieties, although mixed findings emerged from the studies. Data from a large-scale research on requests and apologies (Muhr, 1993, 1994, 2008) showed that the Austrian variety tends to be more indirect and more inclined to protect negative face, as compared to the German one. The Austrian data contained more face-saving speech acts, such as requests instead of demands, more explanations, and more requests modified with the use of the subjunctive mood. Warga's (2008) analysis of requests elicited from high school students in Graz (Austria) and Münster (Germany) obtained partially different results: German German and Austrian German appeared very similar on the macro level of speech act realization, but the external modification showed a more marked orientation toward negative politeness in the Austrian data. Warga himself attributed the differences between his and Muhr's findings to the different samples (ibid.: 261). The outlined orientation is contradicted by a study conducted outside the speech act framework: Krezenbacher (2011) reported that German speakers in Vienna (Austria) used the informal address form much more than informants from Mannheim and Leipzig (Germany), in professional contexts. The Austrian preference for affiliative expressions may document a stronger orientation toward positive politeness than the varieties spoken in Germany.

When roughly summarizing these findings, Austrian German seems more oriented to negative politeness than German German, which seems in turn to be more oriented to negative politeness than Italian. However, the picture is unclear because the studies are heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory.

The last part of this section reports the findings of a study which investigated the speech act of backing out of an invitation from a cross-cultural perspective. DISDIR (Disdetta e altre Strategie DI Rifiuto / Cancellations and other refusal strategies) (Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo, 2021) is a project aiming at comparing Italian with other languages in relation to how speakers consider what is an appropriate way to negatively react to an invitation in different situational contexts. Within this project, the analyses conducted on back-outs so far compared Italian and Colombian Spanish. The findings revealed that the Italians were more concerned with the other's negative face needs than the Colombians, who preferred to flatter the interlocutor's positive face by emphasizing that they appreciated the invitation (Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo, 2022; Nuzzo and Cortés Velásquez, 2020).

The present study will contribute to the development of the DISDIR project by expanding the analysis to another language.

## 2.3. How backing out of an accepted invitation threatens face(s)

Backing out of an accepted invitation has several characteristics in common with declining an invitation. Both speech acts belong to the category of commissives (Searle, 1977) because they commit the speaker to (not) performing an action (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007: 42). In both cases, the invitee informs the inviter that s/he will not take part in the proposed event. However, a refusal is a reactive speech act, which occurs in response to an invitation, whereas a cancellation is a proactive speech act, initiated by the invitee (even though an invitation must have been performed previously, of course).

Although similar in some respects, refusals and cancellations differ in terms of face threat. Declining an invitation entails, above all, the risk of damaging the hearer's positive face since it does not satisfy their wish to see their ideas shared and acknowledged by other members of society. The lack of agreement and solidarity that the person who refuses shows affects their own positive face needs as well (Siebold and Busch, 2015).

A cancellation on the part of the invitee, and especially a last-minute cancellation (henceforth, LMC), is particularly threatening for the addressee's negative face, as it interferes with the execution of their plans. As Brown and Levinson (1987) remind us, some Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) "intrinsically threaten both negative and positive face" (p. 67), and "many FTAs fit into more than one category, so that redressive action may be addressed to any potential aspect of the face threat" (p. 286). In fact, an LMC can offend the addressee's positive face as well, because of the invitee's non-participation in the event. However, a cancellation may save positive face when compared to an immediate refusal, as the invitee's absence is due to an unforeseen and unavoidable circumstance, and not to their decision. Therefore, the speech act of backing out of a friend's

invitation might be perceived as more imposing for negative-politeness cultures than for positive-politeness cultures. Accordingly, we assume that positive-politeness cultures do not feel the need for elaborate facework when backing out, and that they prefer pragmalinguistic strategies that display appreciation for the invitation and closeness to the inviter. On the contrary, negative-politeness cultures may tend to prefer strategies that show attention to the addressee's negative face, thus expressing concern for the inviter's efforts in organizing the event and facing a change of plan.

### 3. Aims and research questions

As previously mentioned, this study aims to explore how the communicative act of backing out of an invitation at the last minute is perceived in two geographically close but linguistically and culturally different areas: that of Innsbruck in Austria and that of Rome in Italy. The following research questions will be addressed.

1. Do the two groups of informants choose the same or different pragmalinguistic strategies to back out of a friend's invitation for dinner when using an instant message?
2. To what extent do the informants in the two groups expect a friend-invitee to back out at the last minute?
3. What similarities and/or differences do the two groups of informants show with regard to the back-out situation, from a metapragmatic perspective?

As a Mediterranean culture, Italian may be expected to be more oriented toward positive politeness than Austrian German (cf. § 2.1). This would suggest that the two groups showed differences in the way they perceive the speech act of backing out of an invitation and the pragmalinguistic strategies associated with it (cf. § 2.3). However, as the literature reviewed in section 2.2 reveals a more nuanced and even contradictory picture, we cannot make predictions or hypotheses about similarities or differences in the choices of our two groups of informants. Therefore, the present study is mainly exploratory in nature.

### 4. Methods

#### 4.1. Data collection

For this research, we relied on the data collection instrument designed for the DISDIR project (Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo, 2021) and available online.<sup>1</sup> The instrument includes a variety of types of questions which allows for data triangulation, a procedure producing “more complete information with higher levels of validity” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004:642): 3 multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task (DCT) prompts, 3 open-ended DCT prompts, 3 multiple-choice assessment questions, 3 open-ended assessment questions, 6 distractors, a section of socio-biographical questions on age, occupation, level of education, etc., and a request for final comments eliciting general reflections and stimulating metapragmatic comments (henceforth, MPCs).

The instrument was translated from Italian into German and piloted with native speakers to check the translation for both linguistic and cultural issues. Then, it was hosted in the online survey platform Google Forms. The survey's link and a brief cover letter were sent via email to students of Roma Tre University and the University of Innsbruck in March–April 2021. The participants were informed about their rights according to the European General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679) and asked to consent to the scientific use and publication of their responses. Data were collected anonymously and do not contain sensitive information.

For this study, we analyzed the data coming from only some sections of the instrument, reported in (1) in the English translation: one of the open-ended DCT prompts, to answer RQ1, one of the multiple-choice assessment questions, to answer RQ2, and the final comments, to answer RQ3. The selected DCT prompt and assessment question refer to the same scenario, an invitation to dinner from a friend at his/her place (low social distance, -D).

(1)  
Open-ended DCT prompt  
A friend has invited you over for dinner tonight and you said you would go. However, at the last minute, you send a message saying you are not going. What do you write?

Multiple-choice assessment question  
You invite a friend over for dinner on Saturday. He/she says “Yes, of course”. In your opinion.  
a. He/she will come for sure  
b. He/she will call you a few days in advance to say he/she cannot come  
c. He/she will call you on Saturday afternoon to say he/she cannot come  
d. He/she will not come without letting you know

Request for final comments

<sup>1</sup> The data collection instrument and the dataset are available at this link: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20480793.v1>.

*Observations.* If you have any comments about the situations, the questions or the words you found in the questionnaire, please write them here. For example you might want to add comments like “I usually don’t cancel when I have plans with someone, especially at the last minute” or “It is easier for me to cancel an appointment if it is with a person that I don’t know very well, I hardly ever do it with friends” or “If I have to cancel I prefer to call rather than sending a message” or other similar observations. If you do not have any comments you can skip this question.

DCT is a widely used elicitation tool in cross-cultural pragmatics research (Ogiermann, 2018). One of its major strengths is the possibility to collect large amounts of data coming from standardized situations, thus facilitating comparison across linguistic and cultural groups. However, DCT presents well known disadvantages too (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010: 46). First, the collected data lack spontaneity and cannot take into account psychological factors which occur in natural interaction. In fact, several studies have shown that the speech acts elicited through DCT diverge from those performed in spontaneous conversation (e.g., Golato, 2003). Secondly, DCT responses are limited to one conversational turn, whereas many speech acts are usually performed over several turns. In our case, however, the above-mentioned limitations may not affect the reliability of findings as (i) the two groups are compared under the same condition of unnaturalness, and (ii) the given prompt is likely to elicit only one turn in the context of instant messaging.

## 4.2. Participants

The sample for our study consists of 100 Italian native speakers (50 female and 50 male) from Rome and the surrounding region Latium (ITA), and 96 native speakers of German (50 female and 46 male) from Innsbruck and the surrounding region Tyrol (AUS). It was originally planned to have 50 Austrian males as well, but 4 informants were excluded because their responses were uninterpretable or inappropriate. The participants included in the sample are not early bilinguals, nor are they enrolled in study programs focusing on linguistics or language pedagogy, as we did not want them to have above-standard intercultural communication awareness. The groups are almost homogenous by age: the informants’ age ranges from 18 to 35 years (AUS:  $M = 23.4$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ ; ITA:  $M = 21.7$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ). Instead, they show slight differences regarding the level of education, which is on average higher in the Austrian group: 88% of the Italian informants and 62.5% of the Austrians have a secondary school degree, 11% and 30.2% a bachelor’s degree, 1% and 7.3% post-graduate degrees. In both groups, small percentages of informants lived in a foreign language context for more than 6 months (AUS 4.2%; ITA 3%).

## 4.3. Annotation

### 4.3.1. The coding scheme for LMCs

Following the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1970), researchers in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989) and L2 pragmatics (e.g., Achiba, 2003; Nuzzo, 2007; Trosborg, 1994) have traditionally used speech act coding schemes which distinguish between head act, internal modifiers and external modifiers, also called supportive moves. The head act is the part of the utterance that conveys the main illocutionary force of the speech act, whereas the modifiers contribute to modulating the intensity of that force. Internal modifiers are part of the head act; supportive moves precede or follow it. However, this categorization presents some limitations. In a number of cases, the expected head act is not produced by the speaker, and the illocutionary force of the speech act is indirectly conveyed by expressions which would be classified as supportive moves if the head act were there. Aiming to overcome this limitation, some scholars have distinguished between direct and indirect head act strategies. In their analysis of refusals, for example, Babai Shishavan and Sharifian (2016: 80) considered the indirect strategies as head acts in contexts where they occurred in the absence of direct refusal, and as supportive moves when they occurred in conjunction with direct refusal strategies. However, the distinction between direct and indirect strategies is not always clear cut, thus requiring a certain degree of interpretation on the part of the analyst.

For the present study, we decided to use the non-hierarchical taxonomy of LMCs proposed by Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2017) which assumes the existence of sub-acts as the minimum illocutionary units constituting the speech act. This modus operandi has the following advantages.

- i) it simplifies the analysis by avoiding the distinction between explicit/direct and implicit/indirect head acts;
- ii) it reduces the subjectivity of the annotation, as the coders analyze only what is expressed and the interpretation of implicit meaning is avoided;
- iii) it allows a more inductive (data-driven) analysis, as no hierarchical relation is assumed a priori: all sub-acts may equally contribute to convey the main illocutionary force of the speech act.

Following the taxonomy developed by Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2017), and further refined in Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2021), the coding scheme used to annotate our data comprises 12 types of sub-acts, some of which may have different realization strategies (Appendix, Table 1), and four types of modifiers (Appendix, Table 2). Emoticons and emojis were annotated too, and their function was determined depending on the context, mostly as modifiers.

#### 4.3.2. The coding scheme for MPCs

The MPCs were coded inductively and analyzed according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring and Gläser-Zikuda, 2008). The aspects mentioned in the MPCs were classified in 14 categories (Appendix, Table 3).

#### 4.3.3. Coding procedures

The corpus of LMCs was annotated by the four authors according to the following procedure: the coders were divided into two dyads each including a native speaker of either German or Italian and a researcher with previous experience with the coding scheme. Each dyad was responsible for the annotation of the data in one of the two languages, based on the presence of the native speaker. After some teamwork sessions in which the researchers familiarized themselves with the coding scheme and annotated 25% of corpus, the researchers worked independently using the NVivo software (version 11 pro) which allows multiple coders to work on the same source and check for interrater agreement with Cohen's  $K$  (Hoek and Scholman, 2017). The few cases in which the coefficient  $K$  within each dyad was lower than 1 underwent a post-annotation consensus-building process to make the final decision.

The analysis of the MPCs followed the same procedure: parallel coding by two researchers, interrater checking, peer discussion.

## 5. Results

In this section, the results of data analysis will be reported with reference to each research question. As far as RQ1 is concerned, the focus is on the LMCs gathered through the DCT prompt, with a comparison between Austrian and Italian data. To answer RQ2, the responses to the multiple-choice assessment question regarding the expected behavior of the invitee are taken into account. For RQ3, finally, Austrian and Italian MPCs are compared.

### 5.1. The structure of the speech act (RQ1; data from the open-ended DCT prompt)

To answer RQ1, the overall distribution of sub-acts, the preferences in terms of sub-act realization strategies, and the use of modifiers are examined. The analysis relies on 100 Italian and 96 Austrian LMCs. The total number of tokens is 1995 for AUS and 1621 for ITA, equivalent to 20.8 and 16.2 words on average per LMC. The coding process identified 383 sub-acts and 64 modifiers in the Italian and 363 sub-acts and 107 modifiers in the Austrian LMCs.

#### 5.1.1. Distribution of sub-acts

Table 1 shows, for each of the two groups, the proportion of informants who used each sub-act in their LMCs. This means that, for each percentage reported in the table, the 100% corresponds to the total number of subjects in the group.

**Table 1**

Informants using each sub-act in each group (in descending order of frequency on the AUS dataset).

Sub-act	AUS (N = 96)		ITA (N = 100)	
	informants using the sub-act		informants using the sub-act	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Cancellation	81	84.38	85	85
Remedial Move	74	77.08	83	83
Alerter	58	60.42	45	45
Offer of Repair	52	54.17	56	56
Explanation	39	40.63	55	55
Appeal to Empathy	24	25	4	4
Farewell	9	9.38	12	12
Wishes	5	5.21	1	1
Gratitude	3	3.13	4	4
Willingness	2	2.08	0	0
Irony	1	1.04	0	0
Preparator	0	0	1	1

Both groups tended to explicitly cancel their participation in the event (Cancellation, AUS: 84.38%; ITA: 85%), as exemplified in (1) and (2). When they did not produce a Cancellation, both the Austrian and the Italian respondents produced an Explanation (example 3). This seems obvious since explaining the reason why one is unable to attend an event can be understood by the interlocutor as an implicit cancellation.

This is not the only similarity between the two groups. Remedial Move (AUS: 77.08%; ITA: 83%), Offer of Repair (AUS: 54.17%; ITA: 56%) and, to a lesser extent, Farewell, Gratitude, Willingness, Irony and Preparator show a similar distribution in both datasets.

Instead, statistically significant cross-group differences emerged in the use of Alerter, Explanation, and Appeal to Empathy. The Austrian participants made more use of Alerter (AUS: 60.42%; ITA: 45%;  $\chi^2 = 4.07$  (1,  $N = 196$ ),  $p = .043$ ) and Appeal to Empathy (AUS: 25%; ITA: 4%;  $\chi^2 = 17.64$  (1,  $N = 196$ ),  $p < .001$ ), whereas a higher number of Italians used Explanation (AUS: 40.63% vs. ITA: 55%;  $\chi^2 = 4.055$  (1,  $N = 196$ ),  $p = .044$ ).

- (1)  
 AUS\_004  
 Hey, tut mir leid, mir ist etwas dazwischen gekommen... :( Ich kann leider doch nicht zum Essen kommen  
 Hey, I'm sorry, something came up... :( Unfortunately, I can't come to dinner after all.
- (2)  
 ITA\_077  
 Ciao caro/a, per un contrattempo non riesco a venire, non sai quanto mi dispiace. Spero non ti arrabbi.  
 Hello dear, because of a mishap, I am not able to come today; you don't know how sorry I am. I hope you're not angry.
- (3)  
 AUS\_025  
 Tut mir es ist was dazwischen können wir das ein anderes Mal nachholen?  
 leid, gekommen,  
 I'm sorry, something came up, could we do it some other time?

### 5.1.2. Distribution of sub-act realization strategies

Now, we will discuss the preferences in terms of sub-act realization strategies, focusing on the most frequent sub-acts. It must be noted that, in a small number of cases, the respondents repeated the same type of sub-act twice in the same LMC, using different strategies. These cases of sub-act reduplication and combination of strategies have been annotated in the analysis and are reported in Tables 2–6.

When producing a Cancellation, the respondents in both groups preferred to mention the impossibility of attending the event, as displayed in Table 2 and exemplified in (4), 'I can't come to dinner today', and (5), 'I can't be there tonight'. The other strategies (Indirect Cancellation, Non-Performative Statement, and Performative) were rarely used. However, it must be noted that the Italians opted for the Non-Performative Statement strategy (example 6, 'Tonight I won't be there after all') in a significantly higher number of cases (Fisher's Exact Test  $p = .018$ ).

(4)

**Table 2**  
 Distribution of Cancellation strategies.

Strategy	AUS n	%	ITA n	%
Impossibility	70	86.42	75	88.24
Indirect Cancellation	5	6.17	0	0
Non-Performative Statement	1	1.23	9	10.47
Performative	5	6.17	0	0
Impossibility + Indirect Cancellation	0	0	1	1.16
Total of informants who used Cancellation	81	100	85	100

- AUS\_001  
 es tut ma volle leid aber i kann heid ned zum essen kommen. Des nächste mal koch i :)  
 I'm so sorry but I can't come to dinner today. Next time I'll cook :)

- (5)  
 ITA\_007  
 Scusami davvero tanto ma ho avuto un impegno all'ultimo e non posso esserci questa sera!  
 Excuse me so much but I had a last-minute commitment and can't be there tonight!

- (6)  
 ITA\_058  
 Stasera alla fine non ci sono Scusami  
 Tonight I won't be there after all excuse me

The two groups also show similar preferences in the realization of Explanation, which is mostly performed by means of generic justifications (AUS: 66.67%; ITA: 60%), as shown in Table 3 and in example (5): 'I had a last-minute commitment'.

**Table 3**  
Explanation strategies.

Strategy	AUS		ITA	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Generic Explanation	26	66.67	33	60
Detailed Explanation	13	33.33	22	40
Total of informants who used Explanation	39	100	55	100

Conversely, interesting cross-group differences emerged in the distribution of realization strategies for Remedial Move, as displayed in Table 4. The Austrians' use of Statement of Regret (example 4, 'I'm so sorry') was significantly more frequent (AUS: 93.24%; ITA: 14.46%;  $\chi^2 = 94.101$  (1,  $N = 157$ ),  $p < .001$ ), as was the Italians' preference for Apology (ITA: 72.29%; AUS: 2.7%;  $\chi^2 = 76.391$  (1,  $N = 157$ ),  $p < .001$ ), exemplified in (5): 'Excuse me so much'. Furthermore, the combination of the two strategies was observed in a significantly higher number of cases in the Italian dataset (AUS: 4.05%; ITA: 13.25%;  $\chi^2 = 4.0759$  (1,  $N = 157$ ),  $p < .05$ ).

**Table 4**  
Distribution of Remedial Move strategies.

Strategy	AUS		ITA	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Apology	2	2.7	60	72.29
Statement of Regret	69	93.24	12	14.46
Apology + St. of R.	3	4.05	11	13.25
Total of informants who used Remedial Move	74	100	83	100

Cross-group differences were observed regarding Alerter too. The Austrian informants who used this sub-act in their LMCs chose to perform it as a Call for Attention (74.14%) more frequently than the Italians (46.67%), and this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 7.67$  (1,  $N = 103$ ),  $p < .05$ ). Conversely, the Greetings strategy (example 7, 'honey, hi') was preferred by the Italians (AUS: 25.86%; ITA: 37.78%), but this difference did not prove statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 1.18$  (1,  $N = 103$ ),  $p = .279$ ). In a small number of cases, the Italian respondents used both strategies in the same LMC (Call for Attention + Greetings: 15.55%), thus producing a double Alerter sub-act. This combo was never used by the Austrian participants.

**Table 5**  
Distribution of Alerter strategies.

Strategy	AUS		ITA	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Call for Attention	43	74.14	21	46.67
Greetings	15	25.86	17	37.78
Call for Attention + Greetings	0	0	7	15.55
Total of informants who used Alerter	58	100	45	100

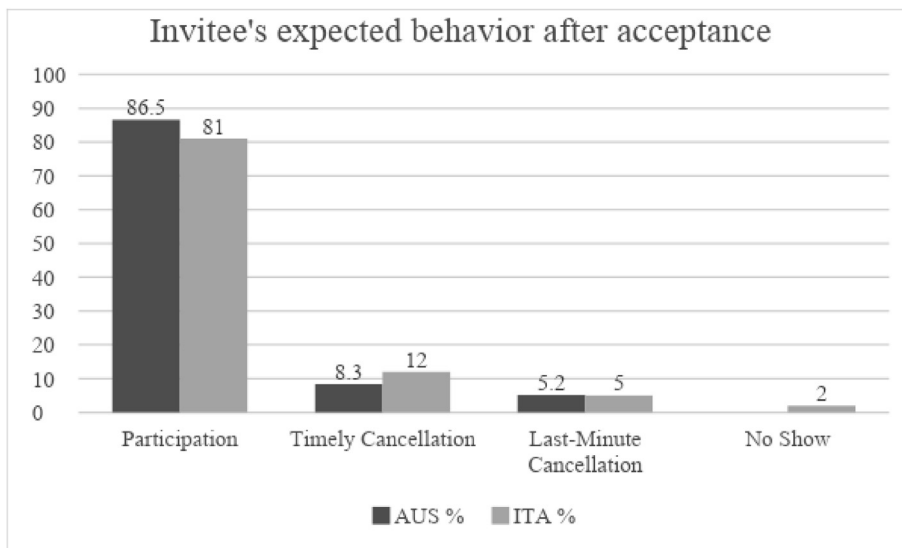
Finally, the two groups of informants showed differences in selecting the strategies to perform Offer of Repair. No Alternative (example 7, 'never mind then I'll explain better tomorrow morning') was significantly more frequent in the Italian data (AUS: 9.62%; ITA: 44.64%;  $\chi^2 = 16.49$  (1,  $N = 108$ ),  $p < .05$ ), whereas it was the opposite with Unclear Alternative (AUS: 69.23%; ITA: 30.36%;  $\chi^2 = 16.3037$  (1,  $N = 108$ ),  $p < .05$ ), exemplified in (8): 'We will make up for it'. The difference in the use of the Alternative strategy (AUS: 21.15; ITA: 8.93) did not reach statistical significance ( $\chi^2 = 3.19$  (1,  $N = 108$ ),  $p = .073$ ). Again, some combinations of strategies were found in the Italian dataset but not in the Austrian one.





5.2. Inviter's expected behavior (RQ2; data from the multiple-choice assessment question)

To answer RQ2, we considered the responses to the multiple-choice assessment question regarding the expected behavior of an invitee who accepted an invitation from a friend. All participants responded to the question. The two groups of participants showed similar expectations (Graph 1). In most cases, they were sure that the invitee would participate in the event. Only small percentages of respondents declared that they would expect a timely cancellation or a last-minute cancellation.



Graph 1. Invitee's expected behavior after acceptance.

5.3. MCP (RQ3; data from the final open-ended question)

In this last result section, RQ3 is answered by referring to the MPCs gathered with the final open-ended question of the data collection instrument (§ 4.1). Only 25 Austrians and 38 Italians answered this question, as it was not set to be required. The analysis assigned, respectively, 59 and 79 codes. The distribution of the aspects mentioned by the informants in their MPCs is reported in Table 8.

**Table 8**  
Distribution of aspects mentioned in MPCs (in descending order of frequency on the AUS dataset).

Aspects mentioned	AUS		ITA	
	Informants referring to each aspect		Informants referring to each aspect	
	n	%	n	%
Respecting Commitments	15	60	21	55
Role of Emergency	6	24	8	21
Medium of Communication	6	24	8	21
Gravity of the Short Notice	5	20	6	15.8
Role of Explanation	4	16	2	5.3
Communicating Uncertainty	4	16	2	5.3
Role of Social Distance	4	16	21	55.3
Type of Event	4	16	0	0
Role of Repair	3	12	0	0
Importance of Honesty	3	12	3	7.9
Timely Reaction	3	12	1	2.6
Role of Politeness	1	4	2	5.3
Judgment on Addressee's Behavior	1	4	3	7.9
Legitimacy of the Cancellation	0	0	2	5.3

Both groups frequently emphasized that they do not back out (Respecting Commitments, AUS: 60%; ITA: 55%), like in example (11).

(11)	AUS_002	Ich sage normalerweise bei Freunden nie ab,	außer es gibt einen wichtigen Grund [...]	Wenn dann versuche ich so früh wie möglich abzusagen,	kurzfristig ist meiner Meinung nach unhöflich
		<i>I usually never cancel on friends,</i>	<i>unless there is an important reason [...]</i>	<i>Otherwise I try to cancel as soon as possible,</i>	<i>canceling last minute is impolite in my opinion</i>
	<b>RESPECTING COMMITMENTS</b>		<b>ROLE OF EMERGENCY</b>	<b>TIMELY REACTION</b>	<b>GRAVITY OF THE SHORT NOTICE</b>

(12)	ITA_072	Solitamente se devo disdire un impegno, cerco di farlo il prima possibile possibilmente.	Se lo faccio più tardi cerco di chiamare		
		<i>Usually if I have to cancel an appointment, I try to do it as soon as possibly possible.</i>	<i>If I do it later, I try to call.</i>		
	<b>GRAVITY OF THE SHORT NOTICE</b>		<b>MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION</b>		

The two groups made reference to the Role of Emergency (example 11) or the Medium of Communication (example 12) to a similar extent (for both categories, AUS: 24%; ITA: 21%). Also, the Gravity of the Short Notice was emphasized with comparable frequency (AUS: 20%; ITA: 15.8%). Other aspects showed more pronounced differences between the two groups, but these differences did not reach statistical significance (Role of Explanation and Communicating Uncertainty, AUS: 16%; ITA: 5.3%, Fisher's Exact Test  $p = .204$ ; Type of Event and Role of Repair, AUS: 12%; ITA: 0%, Fisher's Exact Test  $p = .058$ ; Importance of Honesty, AUS: 12%; ITA: 7.9%, Fisher's Exact Test  $p = .674$ ; Timely Reaction, AUS: 12%; ITA: 2.6%, Fisher's Exact Test  $p = .292$ ).

The only significant difference among the groups is that the Italians emphasized more the Role of Social Distance in calibrating the LMC (16% AUS, 55.3% ITA,  $\chi^2 = 9.7121$  (1,  $N = 63$ ),  $p < .001$ ), as displayed in example (13).

(13)	ITA_023	Mi dispiace di più disdire appuntamenti presi con gli amici, piuttosto che con gli sconosciuti			
		<i>I regret more canceling appointments made with friends than with strangers</i>			

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

### 6.1. LMCs and politeness orientation

Brown and Levinson's politeness model still appears as the most comprehensive and easy to operationalize when analyzing empirical data, in spite of the criticisms to which it has been subjected (§ 2.1). Furthermore, much of the research conducted in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics has relied on it. For these reasons, it was decided to refer to Brown and Levinson's categories to discuss the results of our LMCs analysis, although some adjustments have been made taking into account the points raised by other scholars. In particular, more emphasis is given to positive politeness than the model would suggest, and the somewhat mechanical matching between pragmatic strategies and politeness effects (or intentions) assumed by Brown and Levinson is rejected in favor of an interpretation of the data at hand which takes into account the specific communicative situation.

The comparison of the pragmatic components of the LMCs revealed several similarities and a few differences between the two groups. In both populations of informants, concerns for the positive face needs of the addressee can be identified in the frequent use of Offer of Repair and in the preference for the realization of Cancellation through the Impossibility strategy, which attributes the non-participation to an external, uncontrollable factor thus implicitly reaffirming the willingness to participate. The Austrians intensified this latter sub-act significantly more than the Italians. To do so, they mostly used the modifier 'unfortunately' (*leider*), which magnifies the speakers' disappointment for their inability to participate. The Italians chose to modify Cancellation less frequently, and they preferred to do so by means of the Intensifier 'really' (like in 'I **really** cannot come', *non posso proprio venire*) which emphasizes the strength of the hindrance. Despite these differences, the two groups seem to share a strong commitment to protecting the addressee's positive face.

In both groups, the majority of the informants considered Remedial Move as an important component of the LMC, and many of them found it necessary to intensify this sub-act with modifiers ('I am **really** sorry', *mi dispiace davvero*; 'I am **very** sorry', *es tut mir sehr Leid*'), particularly among the Austrian informants. The interpretation of this result in terms of politeness management is unclear. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987: 189) classification, apologies belong to negative politeness. In a LMC situation, however, if the invitee apologizes for not participating in the event proposed by the interlocutor, the former shows concern toward the latter's positive face. Conversely, if the invitee apologizes for interfering with the interlocutor's plans, s/he shows concern toward his or her negative face. For this reason, we claim that apologizing for a LMC can be considered a positive politeness strategy if the speaker refers to her/his non participation in the event, but a negative politeness strategy if the speaker refers to the messing up of the inviter's plans. In our data, the informants usually do not clarify which aspect of face they intend to protect with their Remedial Move. There are only a few cases in which the informants overtly express the target of their redressive action, and, in these cases, they explicitly protect the interlocutor's

negative face in that they refer to the short notice given to the inviter ('I am very sorry for canceling only now', *Es tut mir voll leid dass ich erst jetzt absage*; 'excuse me if I am writing at the last moment', *scusami se scrivo all'ultimo momento*).

Interestingly, there are significant differences in the strategies used by the two populations of informants to perform Remedial Move. The Austrians showed a clear preference for Statement of Regret, whereas the Italians opted for Apology most of the time. This might suggest a stronger concern for their own positive face on the part of the Austrian respondents, as an Apology (e.g., 'forgive me') threatens the speaker's positive face more than a Statement of Regret ('sorry') in that the former entails an admission of guilt that the latter does not. The distribution of the two expressions in our dataset may depend on the fact that they have different degrees of conventionalization in the two languages, but this would be in line with our understanding. In fact, given that both German and Italian speakers have the two pragmalinguistic options –respectively, *Entschuldige (mich)* and *scusa(mi)* for 'forgive me'; *es tut mir leid* and *mi dispiace* for '(I am) sorry'– the difference in their conventionalization degree is likely to reflect a different orientation toward the protection of the speaker's positive face.

Similarly to what we have seen for Remedial Move, the interpretation of the differences in the use of Explanation is not easy. In Brown and Levinson's model, "give overwhelming reasons" is included among negative politeness strategies because the speaker claims "that he has compelling reasons for doing the FTA [...], thereby implying that normally he wouldn't dream of infringing H's negative face". However, in the case of a LMC, the Explanation may be used as a redressive action to both the positive and the negative aspects of face threatened by the speech act. In fact, by providing compelling reasons for backing out, the speaker may imply that normally s/he would not attack the inviter's positive face by not participating in the event, or that normally s/he would not damage the inviter's negative face by interfering with the execution of his/her plans. In our data, the use of Explanation is significantly more frequent in the Italian sample, but it is not easy to interpret this finding in terms of concerns for the addressee's face needs given the ambiguity just illustrated. Introspective methods could help understand what exactly the informants intend to justify when they choose to provide explanations for their backing out. What can be observed, however, is that the more pronounced tendency to provide explanations suggests that the Italian informants are less concerned with their own negative face than the Austrians.

In contrast, a clear difference in terms of politeness management emerges with reference to the Austrians' more frequent use of Appeal to Empathy. In this sub-act, the Austrian informants often make clear reference to the fact that their LMC may mess up the addressee's plans ('I hope you haven't cooked anything yet', *ich hoffe du hast noch nicht gekocht!*; 'You have certainly already prepared something', *Du hast sicher schon was vorbereitet*; 'I know, the very last minute', *Ich weiß, absolut last minute*), thus showing concern for the inviter's negative face needs. This difference seems to be reflected in the fact that the Gravity of the Short Notice is mentioned slightly more often by the Austrian informants in the MPCs (§ 5.3).

In sum, the analysis of the DCT responses revealed that, despite slight differences in their choice of speech act realization strategies and in the use of modifiers, both the Austrian and the Italian informants have a similar negative view of LMCs. The triangulation of these findings with information coming from the assessment question and the final comments confirmed that both populations of respondents share a similar perception of LMCs as FTAs which should be performed only in cases of emergency. In fact, they do not expect their friend invitees to back out of an invitation at the last minute, and they emphasize the importance of respecting the commitments made.

## 6.2. Comparison with prior research

Though terse and lacking a direct comparison, the literature review (§ 2.2) suggested significant differences between Austrian German and Italian. Such differences did not find support in our study. [Castagneto and Ravetto's \(2015\)](#) informants in Germany showed a preference for strategies which enabled them to avoid ambiguity in compliment responses. In our data, both the Austrians and the Italians resorted to vague explanations to a similar extent in their LMCs. In the study of requests by [Venuti \(2013\)](#), the Italian participants favored constructions in which either the hearer or the speaker was mentioned, whereas the Germans preferred to allude to the role played by external circumstances. In both groups of our study, the respondents equally made reference to external circumstances to show that their backing out was happening against their willingness. [Muhr \(1993, 1994\)](#) observed that Austrian German tends to be more indirect and more inclined to save the negative face of the speaker compared to German German. According to our data, however, Austrian German and Italian are equally direct in the use of Face-Threatening Acts as LMCs. On the contrary, our findings revealed that both the Austrians and the Italians had several concerns for the addressee's positive face, thus showing a commitment to comity which seems scarcely consistent with an orientation toward negative politeness.

The fact that our results did not agree with those reported by the abovementioned cross-cultural studies may depend on the specific characteristics of the speech act under investigation. Furthermore, variational aspects connected to the samples must be emphasized ([Warga 2008](#): 261): more in particular, Innsbruck is located in the Western part of Austria, close to the Italian border and, possibly, more easily exposed to the influence of Italian culture than other Austrian varieties considered in [Muhr \(2008\)](#) and [Warga \(2008\)](#). Finally, it should be mentioned that our sample consisted of university students, a social group exposed more than others to intercultural communication.

Our results were partially consistent with those reported by [Venuti and Hinterhölzl \(2019\)](#) and by [Kunkel \(2020\)](#). In the former study, it was observed that the German informants used modifiers with higher frequency than the Italians in their requests. These findings would suggest that Germans are more oriented toward negative politeness when compared to Italians. However, in our case, it was not always clear which aspect of face was being addressed by the Austrian informants when they made a more frequent use of modifiers in their LMCs. In fact, our analysis showed that it might not be easy to

identify exactly which aspect of face is being focused on in speech act performance, since every speech act threatens both faces of both interactants, even if with variable intensity. In the study carried out by Kunkel (2020) on German and Italian online complaints, the author found few differences. One explanation proposed by Kunkel (2020: 275) appeals to Giltrow and Stein's (2009: 11) thesis that institutional communication on the web is oriented to the same cross-cultural framework transcending language and cultural differences. This explanation cannot apply to our corpus of elicited instant messages because they are exchanged privately; so, we believe that the similarities can be attributed to medium-independent cross-cultural reasons.

### 6.3. Concluding remarks and pedagogical implications

This study has compared how native speaker students in Innsbruck and in Rome perceive the communicative act of backing out of an invitation for dinner at the last minute, in a situation of -D, using instant messaging. On one hand, our findings offer interesting insights for cross-cultural pragmatics in less-commonly investigated languages. The emergence of cross-group similarities regarding the informants' perception of face threat in LMCs seems to disprove the hypothesis (cf. § 2.1) that the two groups belong to different cultural frames in terms of politeness orientation, at least as far as the specific speech act under analysis is concerned. On the other hand, the results may offer useful suggestions and materials for pedagogical applications. The observed differences in the structure of the speech act (e.g., the frequency of modifiers and Appeal to Empathy, or the different realization strategies for Statement of Regret) are worthy of specific attention, particularly for practitioners who teach learners involved in mobility programs between Austria and Italy. Instruction could take the form of consciousness raising and/or more task-oriented activities. In both cases, the study paves the way for innovative teaching practices which could integrate corpus analysis in advanced foreign language instruction, for example by embracing a Data Driven Learning (Boulton, 2017) approach.

To overcome some of the limitations of the study, further directions may include triangulating DCT responses with stimulated-recall or think-aloud protocols to better investigate the reason behind pragmatic choices, and extending the investigation to different and more heterogeneous social groups.

### Authors contributions

The four authors were equally involved in the conceptualization, methodology, data curation (annotation) as well as in the investigation process. Nicola Brocca is responsible for formal analysis, software and project administration and visualization. He wrote sections 2.2, 4, 5.3, and -jointly with Elena Nuzzo- 6.2 and 6.3. Elena Nuzzo holds responsibility for the refinement of the theoretical background regarding linguistic politeness, and for the formal analysis. She wrote Sections 1,2.1, 2.3, 3, 5.1, 6.1, and -jointly with Nicola Brocca- 6.2. and 6.3. Diego Cortés Velásquez is responsible for the formal analysis, software administration and visualization. He wrote Section 5.2. Maria Rudigier is responsible for data curation, review and editing.

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### Appendix

**Table 1**  
LMCs' sub-act types (in alphabetical order)

SUB-ACT	Realization strategies	FUNCTION (INV = the invitee)
Alerter	1. Call for attention 2. Greeting	INV calls the addressee's attention
Appeal to Empathy Cancellation	1. Impossibility 2. Indirect Cancellation 3. Non-performative Statement 4. Performative	INV appeals to empathy from or for the addressee INV communicates s/he will not attend the event s/he had accepted an invitation for
Explanation	1. Generic Explanation 2. Detailed Explanation	INV provides a reason for their non-participation (health, work, family, etc.)
Farewell Gratitude Irony		INV signals the end of the conversation with closing expressions INV expresses gratitude for the invitation INV makes an ironic comment
Offer of Repair	1. Alternative 2. Unclear Alternative 3. No Alternative	INV promises to repair somehow (with a new appointment, a phone call, detailed explanations, etc.)
Preparator		INV prepares the round for the upcoming speech act

**Table 1** (continued)

SUB-ACT	Realization strategies	FUNCTION (INV = the invitee)
Remedial Move	1. Apology 2. Statement of Regret	INV says s/he is sorry or asks for forgiveness
Willingness Wishes		INV states their willingness to participate INV expresses well-wishes for the event s/he will not attend

**Table 2**

LMCs' modifiers (in alphabetical order)

Modifier	Function
Downtoner	Mitigates the strength of the illocutionary force of the sub-act in which it appears
Evaluation	Expresses the speaker's standpoint on the state of affairs described in the sub-act in which it appears
Intensifier	Increases the strength of the illocutionary force of the sub-act in which it appears
Term of Endearment	Qualifies the relationship between speaker and addressee

**Table 3**

Aspects mentioned in MPCs (in alphabetical order)

Aspect	DESCRIPTION (INF = the informant)
Communicating Uncertainty	INF emphasizes the importance of expressing their doubts about being able to participate when accepting the invitation
Gravity of the Short Notice	INF emphasizes the gravity of backing out last minute
Importance of Honesty	INF emphasizes the importance of honesty
Judgment on the Addressee's Behavior	INF comments on the addressee's behavior
Legitimacy of the Cancellation	INF emphasizes that backing out is legitimate
Medium of Communication	INF comments on the medium of communication used
Respecting Commitments	INF expresses their attitude towards keeping appointments
Role of Emergency	INF emphasizes the importance of emergency or urgency in justifying a backout
Role of Explanation	INF emphasizes the importance of an explanation
Role of Politeness	INF emphasizes the importance of a polite cancellation
Role of Repair	INF emphasizes the importance of a remedial move
Role of Social Distance	INF refers to social distance as a relevant variable
Timely Reaction	INF emphasizes the importance of refusing as soon as possible instead of backing out later
Type of Event	INF refers to the type of the event as a relevant variable

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