COMMUNICATION STYLES AT WORK: HOW DO MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT NATIONAL CULTURES DEAL WITH INFORMATION REQUESTS AND DIRECTIVES WHEN WRITING EMAILS?

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Abstract

Ever since globalization began changing the world by removing geographical barriers, the exchange of information and knowledge has become easier thanks to the Internet and the use of English as a global lingua franca. In the business arena, one of the most common forms of communication is emails, which have replaced traditional communication methods such as by letter, fax, and telephone (Lightfoot 2006). Emails are so cheap, easy to store, retrieve, forward, and send to multiple recipients whenever needed (Crystal 2006; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2005) that even small companies can generate an enormous volume of email traffic to fulfil their daily tasks, with tremendous amounts of data being exchanged (Laclavík and Maynard 2009).

Bearing in mind that different national cultures have an impact on communication styles (Gudykunst *et al*. 1988; De Mooij 2014), the present contribution focuses on three corpora of 100 emails each, written by the Japanese, Chinese and Emirati employees of a multinational freight-forwarding company with a view to comparing the communication styles adopted when interacting with colleagues from a different country within the time constraints connected with the common field of operation. In particular, the analysis aims to explore the strategies deployed to tackle potentially face-threatening speech acts like information requests and directives. The results show that cultural differences in email are present and can be explained by Hofstede's (2009) dimensions of power-distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty-avoidance and short- versus long-term orientation. In particular, power-distance and short- versus long-term orientation have a significant impact on the preference for promptness, task-relatedness, and relationship-relatedness in email communication.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century English is very much a global language, used by individuals and companies in order to communicate efficiently with anyone in many parts of the world. The fact that non-native speakers of the language outnumber its native speakers clearly shows that the status of English "cannot any more be perceived as 'foreign' in the same way as French, German, or Chinese, which are studied with the aim of being able to interact with the native speakers of those languages" (Louhiala-Salminen

and Kankaanranta 2011: 254). English is thus being dissociated from its primary lingua-cultural roots and transferred to new communicative contexts with ever-changing constellations of interactants.

As a consequence of observable changes in global language use, it is not possible to fall back on the traditions of British or US orientation (Mauranen 2015: 48), as the interlocutors that we meet and the target audience of our messages are no longer confined to a given nationality or locality and they use English as a communicative resource like their own languages (Seidlhofer 2015). These considerations paved the way for the introduction of the concept of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca). ELF was at first defined as "a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth 1996: 240). However, this somewhat restrictive definition was subsequently made more comprehensive when Seidlhofer (2011: 7) defined ELF as the "use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option".

ELF cannot be considered 'bad' or 'deficient' English since its users are capable of exploiting the forms and functions of the language effectively in any kind of cross-linguistic exchange ranging from the most rudimentary utterances to elaborate arguments.

In business contexts, in particular, where English is employed to conduct negotiations in a global environment, the BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) acronym was introduced by Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* (2005: 403-404), in order to refer to "English used as a 'neutral' and shared communication code". In recent years this acronym has been enriched with new shades of meaning, and now stands for 'English as a Business Lingua Franca' (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013), to underline an increasing interest in global business communication and in the role played by English as the working language used to negotiate, persuade, solve problems, build relationships, sell goods, create contracts, manage conflict, give instructions, motivate, etc. (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2018; Velilla Sánchez 2015; Roshid *et al.* 2018). Unsurprisingly, given the variety of its functions and contexts of use, BELF communication does not always follow English native-speakers' rules (Martins 2017), also because cultural differences among the interactants may lead to unexpected ways of using the language. For this reason, it is of particular relevance to shed light on the way English is adapted, rather than simply adopted by international users. In this regard the present study aims to focus on the communication styles displayed by the members of different cultures in their email communication, with particular reference to the strategies adopted to tackle particular kinds of speech acts, e.g. information requests and directives.

2. The relevance of culture in international interactions

Culture penetrates every corner of our societies. Like software to computers, culture works as the mental software for humans, and plays a significant role in forming our ways of feeling, thinking and acting. Geertz (1973: 44) views culture as a set of control mechanisms for governing behaviour. Culture includes shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values found among speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographical region (Triandis 1995). When talking

about culture, it is advisable not to fall into the trap of stereotyping, i.e. drawing general conclusions on the basis of limited knowledge about a country and its inhabitants. In fact, cultures are formed by different individuals getting together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: all the pieces are different and yet together they make a unique picture (Hofstede 2015: 3).

2.1. *Hofstede's dimensional scales*
Cultures are very complex, but according to Hofstede (2015: 3), if you realize that "they all share a limited number of fundamental problems which provide a structure, you can use that to describe them". Through the research they carried out, Hofstede and his colleagues were able to give different national societies scores on the following six dimensional scales, rooted in basic values and related to observable behaviour (Hofstede *et al.* 2010):

- individualism vs collectivism, connected with how dependent people are on others;
- power-distance (strong vs weak), connected with the way people handle inequality;
- uncertainty-avoidance (strong vs weak), connected with how people deal with the unknown;
- masculinity vs femininity, connected with emotional gender roles;
- long-term versus short-term orientation, connected with people's time perspective;
- indulgence vs restraint, connected with how people deal with natural drives.

The scores of the three countries under scrutiny here, on the basis of Hofstede's (2015) taxonomies, read as follows:

Country	PDI	IND	MAS	UAI	LTO	INDUL
Japan	54	46	95	92	88	42
China	80	20	66	30	87	24
UAE	74	36	52	66	22	22

Table 1. Scores of three countries on the basis of Hofstede's taxonomies (https://www.hofstede-insights.com/fi/product/compare-countries/)

Obviously, the above figures have to be interpreted 'with a pinch of salt'. In fact, even though Hofstede (2009: 24) defines cultures as "the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another", this does not mean that everyone in a given society is programmed in the same way, as there is considerable room for variation. In fact, sometimes the differences among individuals in one country's culture may be bigger than the differences between two country cultures. We can, nevertheless, still use the country scores based on the law of large numbers, and on the fact that most people are strongly influenced by social control. It is important, however, to remember that statements about just one culture on the level of 'values' do not describe 'reality'; such statements are generalizations and they must be considered as relative. Without comparison, a country score is meaningless (Hofstede 1991).
Since only four dimensions relate to differences in communication styles (Hofstede 2015), they are the ones which will be referred to in the comparison between the three

countries under scrutiny, i.e. power-distance, individualism vs collectivism, uncertainty-avoidance and short-term vs long-term orientation.

Power-distance

At an intermediate score of 54, Japan is a borderline hierarchical society, even though the Japanese are always conscious of their hierarchical position in any social setting and act accordingly. The United Arab Emirates and China score higher than Japan on this dimension (scores of 74 and 80, respectively): people accept a hierarchical order, subordinates expect to be told what to do, and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat.

Individualism versus collectivism

At a score of 20 Chinese society is more collectivist than the other two countries. However, it is possible to say that, to a greater or lesser extent, all three countries are characterized by a close long-term commitment to the 'group', be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships.

Uncertainty-avoidance

China has a low score on uncertainty-avoidance. Chinese people are comfortable with ambiguity and they are also adaptable and entrepreneurial. As a consequence, adherence to laws and rules may be flexible to suit the actual situation and pragmatism is a fact of life. The UAE and Japan have higher scores (66 and 92), which indicate a high preference for avoiding uncertainty, and an emotional need for rules (even if the rules never seem to work).

Long-term versus short-term orientation

The normative nature of the Emirati society can be seen in its low score of 22 on this dimension. People in such societies exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively low propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. China and Japan have much higher scores (87 and 88) in this dimension. These societies show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

2.2. Culture and communication

Drawing upon De Mooij (2014), Hofstede (2015: 5) lists the consequence, in terms of communication styles, linked to each of the above-mentioned dimensions.

Societies with a high power-distance score respect authority and the language used depends on the relative position and status of the interactants. In low power-distance societies, inequality is minimized and critical opinions are often expressed.

Individualist societies have a tendency to use a direct, personal style, and believe that everything should be explicit. They are also active in their own quest for information, on social media or from other sources. Collectivist societies tend to rely on an indirect, visual and metaphorical style, with many things left implicit. Harmony should be preserved, and direct confrontations are avoided. They use social media more to keep in touch with the members of the group rather than to look for information.

Strong uncertainty-avoidance is conducive to greater clarity, structure, precision, scientific control, slow adoption of innovations; official messages are meant to be serious, as there is no place for humour. Low uncertainty-avoidance can result in a reduced need for structure and precision and in the occasional adoption of a humorous tone.

Finally, short-term oriented societies tend to express self-enhancement needs, as well as an urgency for instant reaction, while long-term oriented cultures are characterized by a patient, perseverant and pragmatic attitude.

3. The study

Given that the aim of business communication is normally to achieve mutual understanding, in order to get the job 'done' (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010), the preservation of a good relationship between the interactants is crucial in international exchanges (Caleffi 2020: 253). Email writers are generally aware of the importance of mitigating the directness of potentially face-threatening speech acts, as shown by the variety of strategies employed in the email chains written and received by employees in charge of customer services in four companies dealing with different lines of business analysed in Poppi (2020). However, since dimensions of culture have an impact on communication styles (Gudykunst *et al.* 1988; De Mooij 2014), it may be worth investigating the differences in the way members of different national cultures tackle potentially face-threatening speech acts like information requests and directives.

3.1. *Methodology*

In 2005 Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta proposed a tripartite model to categorize emails into three different genres: noticeboard genre emails (meant to inform the employees about the company's activities); postman genre messages (serving the function of delivering other documents for information and/or comments); and dialogue genre messages (whose purpose is to exchange information about the corporation's activities). However, since this model is no longer considered to be very productive, in the present study it was decided to refer to Goldstein and Sabin's (2006) categorization of email exchanges on the basis of the speech acts they entail. Accordingly, after manually annotating the emails in the corpus, out of the twelve main categories of speech acts identified, it was decided to concentrate on information requests (henceforth IRs) and directives – requesting someone to do something – (henceforth Ds), namely acts that may go against the receiver's face and can be defined as potentially face-threatening (Brown and Levinson 1987). In fact, since "composing email messages which contain speech acts that are potentially face-threatening, like directives or requests, can be a daunting task" (Darics 2015: 291), it is essential that email writers become aware of the importance of formulating messages which do not sound too threatening for the addressee.

Accordingly, in order to highlight the strategies deployed by the interactants, it was necessary to fine-tune the analysis by referring to the three levels of directness concerning the verbalization of requests highlighted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 201):

a) the most direct, explicit level, realized by requests syntactically marked as such, like imperatives, or by other verbal means that name the act as a request, such as performatives (Austin 1962) and 'hedged performatives' (Fraser 1975);

b) the conventionally indirect level; procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language. These strategies have been commonly referred to in speech act literature, since Searle (1975), as indirect speech acts; an example would be "Could you do it?" or "Would you do it?" meant as requests;

c) non-conventionally indirect level, i.e. the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to the object or element needed for the implementation of the act ("Why is the window open?"), or by reliance on contextual clues ("It's cold in here" used as an invitation to close the window/door).

Finally, once each IR and D had been classified as direct, indirect or non-conventionally indirect, reference was made to the adaptation of the studies by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and Sifianou (1992) provided by Darics and Koller (2018), in order to identify the various communicative strategies adopted by the interactants to mitigate the potentially face-threatening force of their acts:

- consultative devices "*would you mind? Do you think…?*"
- downtoners "*possibly, perhaps, maybe…*"
- understaters/hedges "*a bit, sort of…*"
- subjectivizers "*I'm afraid, I think…*"
- cajolers "*you know, you see…*"
- appealers "*do this, will you? OK?...*" (Darics and Koller 2018: 292)

3.2. *Data collection*

The company under scrutiny here is a multinational freight-forwarding company with more than 300 offices all over the world and its main headquarters in Italy. English is the 'official language' of the organization and employees communicate mainly via email and telephone. Shipments are realized by plane and by sea and the mission of the organization is to deliver the products safely and on time. The messages examined in the present study were written over a period of six months, from October 2020 to April 2021. Since language reflects values, and the expression of values varies according to the language used (Giles and Franklyn-Stokes 1989), it was decided to focus on informants using a language which was not their own mother tongue to address a member of another culture (Italian), from the company's main headquarters.

The emails coming from the Japanese were written by twelve different employees of three branches, while the Chinese emails were sent by twenty employees based in seven offices. The third corpus consists of the emails written by thirteen Emirati employees working in the Dubai and Abu Dhabi offices. The employees working for the Japanese, Chinese and Emirati branches are either Ocean Export Specialists or Ocean Export Supervisors. Therefore, most of the emails were exchanged between people with the same position, whose main task is to provide customer services. In order to warrant confidentiality, all sensitive data, including the names of the writers of the emails, were deleted.

Each corpus contains 100 emails. The majority of emails are parts of chains, with interactants asking for information in order to get the job done as soon as possible, so they are normally not very long. Since each email may contain more than one IR and/or D, after manually highlighting IRs and Ds, the data were normalized per hundred occurrences.

4. Information requests

Table 2 shows the different levels of directness of the IRs contained in the three corpora.

	DIRECT IRs	INDIRECT IRs	NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT IRs
Japanese corpus	49%	36%	15%
Chinese corpus	52%	36%	12%
Emirati corpus	64%	19%	17%

Table 2. Direct, indirect and non-conventionally indirect IRs

4.1. *Direct IRs*

First of all, it is important to highlight that the number of direct IRs is higher than the number of indirect IRs. This result is not surprising, despite the fact that Japan, China and the UAE can be described, to varying degrees, as prevalently collectivist countries and as such share a general tendency towards an indirect communicative style. In fact, in Business-to-Business (B2B) encounters interactants usually prefer to address each other in a direct way, as there is no time to lose in order to get the job done (Poppi 2020).

In general, most IRs are mitigated, in line with the need to preserve the business relationship and with the three countries' collectivist positioning. However, by looking in detail at the way these direct IRs are phrased, it is possible to highlight several differences.

In the Emirati corpus (EC) the majority of direct IRs are expressed with the imperative, e.g.:

1. Keep us posted.

which is often mitigated by the downtoner *please or pls*

2. Please provide the rate.

Also in the Japanese (JC) and Chinese corpus (CC) direct IRs are usually expressed by means of imperatives, but they are always mitigated by *please* or *pls* used both on its own and also in combination with *kindly*:

3. *Please* check and tell us if we can still get the space on ULSAN EXPRESS or not (JC).
4. *Please* check the best rate & concern first available vessel message for us (CC).

5. *Please kindly* contact each shipper and inform us the exact status (JC) (20 occurrences).
6. *Please kindly* advise our soonest sailing schedule and best cost (CC) (13 occurrences).

In the EC there is only one instance of *please + kindly*:

7. *Pls* arrange *Kindly* update us the rate for Nov.

and one instance of *kindly please*:

8. *Kindly please* assist to check and confirm if we can maintain and extend below rates for Nov 2020.

At times direct IRs take the form of direct questions. Once again, a certain difference is noticeable in the three corpora. In fact, in the EC corpus questions are often left unmitigated:

9. Is at least the 20' available with usual tiles rate?
10. What about the cost?

while in the Japanese and Chinese corpora direct questions, which are much less common, are usually mitigated by consultative devices, as in:

11. *Can* you tell us the last loading date for both of vessel? (JC).
12. *Would* you *kindly help* to check with EVERGREEN or OOCL if we can get the space for 1x40GP? (CC).

Indirect IRs are almost twice as common in the Japanese and Chinese corpora and are mitigated by a variety of devices:

Subjectivizers

13. *I think* these charges are too expensive even though only 1 container. Please check and issue credit note and send us asap (JC) [1].
14. *I know* that space is tight so if possible confirm with the shipper how many containers will be ready and book the space (CC).

Consultative devices

15. Meanwhile *would you provide* the inspection receipt for the at cost charge EUR … so that we show to client, thank you (CC).
16. *Would you kindly send* us C/N by email? (JC).

Understaters

17. *Can you try* to re-check when the shipment will be ready? (JC).

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[1] The italics are mine in this citation, as they are in other citations.

The percentages of non-conventionally indirect IRs are similar in all three corpora. They mainly take the form of affirmative sentences, some of which may be further mitigated by a variety of devices:

> 18. We are waiting for your *prompt* (cajoler) reply. (JC).
> 19. Waiting for the HBL draft after loading 23-Nov. (CC).
> 20. Your prompt reply will be *highly appreciated* (subjectivizer)! (CC).
> 21. Wait for *your further* (cajoler) update of the Job number, *thank you very much* (cajoler) (CC).

There are also a few instances of expressions with no mitigation devices (example no. 22) where the writer is pressing the colleague to provide a reply. These statements are more frequent in the EC, as in:

> 22. Reminder for below message (EC).

This tendency can be explained by referring to the countries' different scores in uncertainty-avoidance. In fact, the UAE is short-term oriented and the communication style adopted by the Emirati email writers is characterized by task-relatedness and the need for an urgent reply as confirmed by the less abundant use of mitigating devices. On the contrary, the Chinese and Japanese writers' communication style is more relationship-oriented and displays a wider range of mitigating devices (downtoners, consultative devices) and references to contextual preconditions (*can you…?*; *would you kindly help…?*).

4.2. *Directives (Ds)*

When it comes to Ds, we can see that the data are quite similar to those concerning IRs. In fact, direct Ds are more frequent than indirect Ds, with the EC displaying the highest number of direct Ds.

The most common form of direct Ds is expressed by means of imperatives mitigated by *please*.

	DIRECT Ds	INDIRECT Ds	NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT Ds
Japanese corpus	76%	10%	14%
Chinese corpus	62%	25%	13%
Emirati corpus	88%	4%	8%

Table 3. Direct, indirect and non-conventionally indirect Ds

Also in this case, *please* is sometimes used in combination with *kindly,* in the Japanese and Chinese corpora, while the EC mostly contains imperatives only mitigated by *please*:

> 23. *Please* kindly contact the shipper and inform us the exact status. If you tell proforma invoice number to the shipper, they will recognize this order (JC).
> 24. *Please* URGENTLY amend shipper details mentioned as … to … as per below COO copy (CC).

Once again, also non-conventionally indirect Ds, like non-conventionally indirect IDs, are often further mitigated by cajolers and subjectivizers, especially in the Japanese and Chinese corpora. In general, we can conclude that Emirati employees are more direct than their Japanese and Chinese counterparts, as confirmed by the higher number of direct Ds:

> Japan 76% - China 62% - UAE 88%

and by the lower number of indirect and non-conventionally indirect Ds:

> Japan 24% - China 38% - UAE 12%

As regards the EC, we can observe that the general impression of a 'less indirect' attitude displayed by the employees is confirmed if we look at two sample email messages in their entirety:

> 25. Ciao FN [2],
> **Did you read my earlier mail carefully? It seems not really.**
> This cntr we are talking about is DDP, which means PREPAID (PP) for what we usually get usd/.
> […]
> **Now, to make it very easy, I was proposing you to share the profit of the three cntrs you loaded last week** where you make eur…/cntr, if yes then I agree to ship this cntr and share the loss in order to help… with this cntr only.
> Let me know,
> **Another example, for the shipments going to Egypt and KSA you have handled (still Prepaid) I haven't asked any profit even if I am the one who got the business**.
> Rgds.

In example no. 25, the answer provided to a rhetorical question asked by the email writer her/himself turns into a reproach towards the addressee. Then in the following lines, s/he adopts a rather condescending tone (*now, to make it very easy…*) and closes off by openly boasting about her/his behaviour (*I haven't asked any profit even if I am the one who got the business*).

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[2] FN refers to the addressee's first name.

In example no. 26, the email writer displays once again a rather aggressive tone, when s/he addresses her/his colleague by saying "I am not sure if you noticed we are not getting new bookings since a while":

> 26. Dear FN and FN,
> **Pls note customer just informed me to hold this booking as he is going to check with the other 3 forwarders he is using out of Italy,**
> **I am not sure if you noticed we are not getting new bookings since a while, only this booking where we are facing same issues SPACE.**
> Now, customer is going to check tomorrow, can you pls do the same? pls note customer has about 20 cntrs to be booked before Xmas closure
> **But he is not sure to involve us as we lost his trust.**
> Can you pls intervene and find a solution?
> Thx.

At the opposite end of the spectrum we can find the email messages written by the Japanese (no. 27) and Chinese employees (no. 28), which are characterized by a much gentler and more indirect tone, attested by the presence of a subjectivizer (*we know* in example no. 28), a cajoler (*would you negotiate* in example no. 27) and a consultative device (*As you know*, in example no. 27) and by the frequent use of *please* (especially in example no. 27). Moreover, they also provide tables and well-organized information, probably for the purposes of making their messages as clear as possible.

> 27. Dear FN,
> SHPR : …..
> PO : LEA099/200
> P/F : 9760.595
> POD : KOBE
>
> We would like you to load LEA099/200-1 on 20ftx1 and catch below vessel to KOBE by ONE.

GENOVA(2nd) SINGAPORE	2021-02-26 (Fri) 2021-03-26 (Fri)	SINGAPORE KOBE, HYOGO	2021-03-19 (Fri) 2021-04-01 (Thu)	MD2 FP1	ZEPHYR LUMOS 001E NYK ORPHEUS 061E

> As you know, max G/W is 21500kg for Japan.
> Then, pls let us know cargo details of balance PLT under LEA099/200-2 for buyer's cnsl to SANWA.
>
> Then, pls put cnee's PO# on C1.
> Recently, it's missing and we've got a complaint from cnee.
> Though we add at our end, someone delete it in issuing HBL.
> Pls be sure to mention "LEA099/200-1" as exp reference.
> We are waiting for your soonest confirmation.
>
> Thanks and best regards,

28. Dear FN,

Further to the free period thing, it shows following shpt will arrive at XINGANG on 07-Feb, per client, as it's very close to our Spring Festival which will start since 11-Feb, the cargo p/u has to be done after holiday.

So they really need 14days free period for this one.

We know it's under spot not contract shpt, would you negotiate with carrier to consider the holiday factor in CHINA and extend the free period to 14days?

Otherwise we may have to share the detention/demurrage charge internally like other shpts.

Thank you.

	House Bill Number	Order References	Master Bill	Actual Pickup	ETD	ETA	ATA	20GP	Remark
ITASPAFMG	MOD0004399321	JOZH2020-IM43	MAEU206824040	2020/12/18	2020/12/30	2021/2/07	TBC	9	Need to apply 14days free period

Thanks and Best Regards

Once again, we can see that the communication style of the Emirati email writers is definitely less mitigated than the one adopted by the Chinese and Japanese employees, who employ a wider range of mitigating devices (cajolers, subjectivizers, consultative devices) which serve the purpose of safeguarding the relationship with their interlocutors, and promoting future collaboration. The only element which seems at odds with Hofstede's score is the presence of tables in the CC. In fact, given that Chinese culture normally displays a low uncertainty-avoidance score, one might be led to expect no particular concern about the need for clarity, precision and structure, typical of countries with a high uncertainty-avoidance score. However, it is also to be remembered that long-term oriented countries tend to learn from others and to be quite pragmatic. This might account for the presence of tables in the CC.

One final comment about the communication style of the Emirati employees concerns the presence of self-enhancing (*I am the one who got the business*), condescending (*now, to make it very easy*) almost patronizing statements in example no. 25 (*Did you read my earlier mail carefully? It seems not really),* which clearly prove that the writers prioritize tasks over the relationship with their fellow workers.

5. Conclusions

Globalization is a widely discussed topic which can be defined as the increasing interconnectedness of human activities around the world. Increased speed in transportation and in accessing the Internet have deeply influenced how international transactions are conducted, as enterprises are more and more engaged in international business in order to increase profits in sales and distribution of services. As a consequence, the growth of international business requires highly effective global communication (Martin and Nakayama 2010: 18), which will have to take into account the presence of possible cultural differences. The present study shows that when it comes to the emails

exchanged among the employees of a freight-forwarding company, it is possible to claim that even if the email writers work for the same company and are subject to stringent time constraints because of their chosen line of business, several differences can be detected in the adopted communication styles.

The analysis focused on Information requests (IRs) and Directives (Ds), which are potentially FTAs and should therefore be mitigated, in order to prevent a possible negative impact on the reception of the message. Even though Japan, China and the UAE can be described as collectivist countries, and as such share a general tendency towards an indirect communication style, direct IRs and Ds are more frequent than indirect ones. This is of course hardly surprising, in that in B2B encounters interactants want to deal with the issue at hand as quickly as possible, as there is no time to lose. The number of direct IRs and Ds is not so dissimilar in the three corpora, even if the highest numbers are always to be found in the EC. However, differences emerge in the way these direct IRs and Ds are phrased. In fact, direct IRs and Ds are mostly realized by means of imperatives mitigated by the downtoners *please* (JC, CC and EC) and *kindly* (JC and CC) or by means of questions. The latter are usually mitigated by cajolers (in the JC and CC), which turn them into indirect IRs and Ds respectively, while in the EC questions are left unmitigated.

In the Chinese and Japanese corpora the number of indirect IRs is higher than in the Emirati corpus. This confirms that the desire to build a rapport with the counterpart is visible especially in the emails written by the Chinese and Japanese employees, while in the Emirati corpora several unmitigated messages soliciting an urgent reply were detected.

The preliminary results of the analysis confirm in the first place that email writers are generally aware of the importance of mitigating the directness of face-threatening speech acts like requests, and especially directives (Lefringhausen *et al.* 2019). Moreover, even though the messages are often short and contain mostly information about the shipment status, it was possible to identify and analyse the strategies favoured by the employees coming from different national cultures, which show how a country's L1 and culture do have an impact on pragmatics and on the way request schemata are expressed through language. It is moreover possible to interpret the differences in the adopted communication style, by referring to Hofstede's taxonomies. In particular, it was proved that power-distance and short-term versus long term orientation have a significant impact on the preference for the urgency, self-enhancement and task-relatedness displayed in the emails written by the Emirati employees and the relationship-relatedness which was noticed in the Chinese and Japanese writers' email communications.

Obviously, the limited size of the three corpora under scrutiny here does not allow for any generalizations to be made. Moreover, we should refrain from drawing general conclusions on the basis of limited knowledge about a country and its inhabitants, in that cultures are formed by different individuals interacting like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. However, the recurring trends that have been highlighted in the messages written by twelve Japanese employees, twenty Chinese employees and thirteen Emirati employees makes it possible to state that as far as this particular case-study is concerned, the evidence collected is in line with Hofstede's (2009) belief that the use we make of language becomes the most direct practice emanating from the core values that underlie our culture.

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