

“WAITING FOR YOUR INFO”

An explanatory look at the communicative strategies deployed to mitigate potentially face-threatening acts in emails

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Abstract – Emails are perhaps the most common form of communication in business contexts. In spite of their prominence they are, however, still a common source of misunderstanding and stress. Drawing upon the integration of linguistic and genre aspects, a previous study (Poppi 2015) showed that in order to be able to decide how to draft an email, it is not possible to refer to structural characteristics and style of language alone, as in business communication the boundaries and expectations of the genre are often overruled by inventiveness and creativity. In particular, inventiveness and creativity may especially prove useful when composing emails containing potentially face-threatening acts like directives or requests. The present contribution focuses on 41 email chains written and received by the employees of companies dealing with car-trading, manufacturing of tights and socks, ICT (Information and Computer Technologies) assistance, transport and logistics, who were in charge of customer services. At first, reference was made to Goldstein and Sabin’s (2006) categorization of email exchanges on the basis of the speech act they entail. Out of the twelve main categories identified by them, it was decided to concentrate on those messages which proved to be the textualization of requests and directives (requesting someone to do something), with a view to disclosing the strategies employed to downgrade or mitigate the directness of these potentially face-threatening speech acts. In order to perform this latter stage of the analysis, it was decided to refer to the adaptation of the studies by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and Sifianou (1992) provided by Darics and Koller (2018), as well as to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain’s classification of levels of directness. The preliminary results of the analysis confirm that email writers are generally aware of the importance of mitigating the directness of face-threatening speech acts like information requests, and especially directives, as shown by the variety of strategies employed in the samples under scrutiny here.

Keywords: email acts; information requests; directives; face-threatening acts; communication strategies.

1. Introduction

Nowadays emails are an essential part of daily business and consumer communication. In 2018, 281 billion emails were sent and received every day

and the figure is expected to reach 347 billion daily emails in 2023 (Statista 2020). At the same time, the number of worldwide email users will grow from 40 billion in 2020 to nearly 4.5 billion by 2024 (The Radicati Group Inc. 2020). In the business arena, several studies have documented the different functions performed by emails (Darics 2015; Darics, Koller 2018; Dop 2001; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta 2005; Nickerson 1999; Rice *et al.* 1998;), which have become a ubiquitous tool utilized so predominantly (Sumecki *et al.* 2011), that they have substituted traditional communication methods such as letter, fax, and telephone (Lightfoot 2006). In fact, emails are so cheap, easy to store, retrieve, forward, and send to multiple recipients whenever it is needed (Crystal 2006; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta, 2005) that even small companies can generate an enormous volume of email traffic to fulfill their daily tasks, with tremendous amounts of data (Laclavík, Maynard 2009). It goes without saying, therefore, that the revolutionary influence of this medium upon business operations as well as employees cannot be underestimated (Hewitt 2006).

However, in spite, or perhaps because of their prominence, emails are still a common source of misunderstanding and stress. In fact, as Evans points out, they “are not the one-off, memo style messages that tend to appear as models or exercises in textbooks, but rather are chains of pithy, purposeful messages that connect and expedite flows of business activities” (2013, p. 288). Moreover, since the expected degree of (in)formality, (in)directness and mitigation, the presence or absence of formulaic expressions and cues, as well as the required forms of address can vary a lot, it is clear that email writing may require a high level of pragmatic competence, in order to have their writers’ communicative intentions appropriately encoded.

Indeed, pragmatic awareness and communicative strategies have been investigated in ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) contexts (Björkman 2011, 2014). Nonetheless, the business arena has somehow been devoted less attention, especially when it comes to computer-mediated communication. Therefore, drawing on Pérez Sabater *et al.*’s (2008, p. 84) remark that: “given the complexity of email communication, its main features are still in need of research”, the present study will analyse 41 email chains (corresponding to 230 emails) of standard work-related discourse, with a view to disclosing the different communicative strategies employed to mitigate the impact of potentially face-threatening speech acts like requests and directives (requesting someone to do something).

2. BELF and emails

Hoermann stated that “e-mail, like other genres of writing, is a

communicative correspondence that comes with its own specific reader expectations or conventions” (2013, p. 2). For instance, since initiations and response of emails are usually quicker than with other means of written communication, in the fast-paced and highly connected global economy, where communicators operate within a tight time frame, emails can be expected to be relatively informal. In addition, the speed of the communicative exchanges, which often leaves less time available for consideration, may lead to the use of abbreviations and short forms, and possibly misspellings and other typing errors (Crystal 2006), but also to a mixture between spoken and written language (Baron 2001; Incelli 2013).

In today’s business contexts, most e-mails among stakeholders coming from different countries are drafted in English, which is used as a common working language. In the past, this common means of communication was referred to as BELF, i.e. Business English Lingua Franca (Lohuiala-Salminen *et al.* 2005). Recently, however, it has been redefined as English as Business Lingua Franca (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013, p. 17), in order to emphasize the domain of use rather than the type of English, and the fact that the English language is normally the main, but not the only component of a ‘continuum’ of linguistic manifestations (Caleffi, Poppi 2019).

When it comes to providing a better definition of BELF, there are three important features that can be of help, i.e. neutrality, practicability and cultural diversity. First of all, BELF acts as a neutral tool shared among speakers of different first languages, as it puts everybody at a disadvantage (Lohuiala-Salminen *et al.* 2005 pp. 403-404). Secondly, it is of a highly practical type, in that it does not focus on errors, but rather on successful communication and understanding (Rogerson-Revell 2008), to the extent that in the business arena, it may sometimes happen that a “grammatically and lexically ‘correct’ message doesn’t necessarily do the job, but a message with many mistakes may do so” (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2007, p. 56). Finally, the fact that BELF may be influenced by the different cultural identities of its users, rather than preventing successful communication, acts as a trigger for acknowledging individual differences and adjusting accordingly (Martins 2017, p. 63).

3. Different types of emails

The aim of business communication is normally to achieve mutual understanding, in order to get the job ‘done’ (Kankaanranta, Planken 2010). However, communication failures can occur at times, because of lack of comprehensibility, cultural differences and stereotyped associations. (Gerritsen, Nickerson 2009, p. 182). Email exchanges can be seen as a dialogue, but there are some differences with the traditional conversational

dialogues, in that, for instance, there is no interruption in emails, as an addressee can never interrupt the message composed by the sender. Moreover, in principle, emails can be used with no words at all, for instance when they are used to forward documents. Finally, since emails are exchanged via computer, they lack emotional cues and body language.

As a consequence, email messages are at times misinterpreted or regarded as impolite, as discourtesy could at times originate “from the need for haste and brevity” (Evans 2012, p. 208). Obviously, there is a wide range of email types, drafted on the basis of the situations which they address, the rhetorical action the writer intends to accomplish and their conventional layout.

Several attempts have been made to provide a comprehensive taxonomy of different types of emails. A very popular one was Lohuiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta’s tripartite model (2005), which includes noticeboard genre messages, (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); dialogue genre messages, (whose purpose is to exchange information about the corporation activities).

Goldstein and Sabin (2006), heavily borrowing from the well established Speech Acts theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), focused on the concept of *email speech acts*, and made an attempt to categorize email exchanges by examining the speech acts they entail. They identified twelve main categories:

Category	Example	Suggested genres
(S) Self	Email to self	Email reminders/notes
(N) Non-personal	Bulk emails	Spam (Advertising, Phishing, etc. E-Newsletters)
(T) Transmissives	Forwarding documents	Digital cover letter/memo to attachments
(R) Responses	Provide info to question	Email Conversations
(F) Responses with forward function	Provide info to a question and ask questions	Email Conversations
(I) Information request	Ask for information	Email Conversations
(D) Directive	Ask someone to do something	Email Conversations
(C) Commits	Commit/offer to do something	Email Conversations
(A) Assertions	Make a statement or state an opinion	Email Conversations
(B) Behabitive	Express feelings	Email Conversations
(V) Verdictive	Statement of accomplishments, e.g. paper notifications	Official document
(O) other	Phatic communication	Conversation

Table 1
The 12 main Email Acts (Goldstein, Sabin 2006).

Since emails are mainly task-oriented, most of them will inevitably contain requests for information and/or action (directives), that is acts that may go against the receiver’s face wants and as such have been identified by Brown and Levinson (1987) as potentially face-threatening.

A request consists of an “illocutionary speech act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker” (Trosborg 1995, p. 187). According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 201), the nature of requests entails the loss of two kinds of freedom. namely the addressee’s “freedom of action” and “freedom from imposition”. In this regard, strategic employment of linguistic means enables the mitigation of the impositions determined by the act of requesting; specifically, speakers may decide to rely on varying levels of directness to deliver their want (Blum-Kulka, Olshtain 1984, p. 201).

By examining the strategies employed by NNSs (Non-Native Speakers) in downgrading or mitigating the directness of requests, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) realized that although NNSs use lexical politeness markers such as *please*, they very rarely use other lexical or phrasal downgraders, which results in overly direct messages. Therefore,

alongside clarity, considered as an essential feature of communicative success, it is also important to mitigate potentially Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), which might otherwise have a negative influence on how one's message is perceived.

This can be accomplished by resorting to communicative strategies (CSs), that is a set of pragmatic resources which may at first sight prove hard to define in a clear-cut way, because of their “elusive nature” (Kárpáti 2017, p. 5). Originally, they were conceived as recurrent practices among non-native speakers and language learners “as a compensative device to fill the gaps in their linguistic competence” (Franceschi 2019, p. 59). Over the years, however, in ELF research CSs have come up to identify a regular practice common both to native and non-native speakers alike (Franceschi 2019), employed to solve communicative problems and breakdowns.

4. Approaches to the analysis of communication strategies

When talking about communication strategies, it is important in the first place to point out the divergent interpretations advanced by SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and ELF researchers. While the former insist on *problematicity* tout court, as one of the defining aspects of CSs (Dörnyei, Scott 1997 p. 182), the latter distinguish between *real* problems, which have occurred and have been clearly registered in the interaction, and *potential* problems, which might take place (Björkman 2014, p. 124).

In fact, the SLA paradigm established its CS conceptualization for the purpose of language teaching, with the language learner emerging as “deficient by definition” (Kasper, Kellerman, 1997, p.5) as he/she was supposed to reach native-like proficiency. In contrast, in the ELF paradigm, non-native structures are considered means that “[..] can be deployed resourcefully and strategically to accomplish [...] interactional ends” (Firth, Wagner 1997).

Since speakers engaging in ELF interactions display particular awareness to the differences in accents, competence and cultural backgrounds entailed in communicative exchanges of this nature, as a result of such differences, communication strategies represent a means which ELF speakers resort to in order to proactively work towards the anticipation of interactional disorder (Björkman 2014 p. 124). In other words, CSs can be considered as tools that enable ELF speakers to accomplish successful communication and “have been shown to be an essential element of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) interactions, with participants cooperatively building effective communication through a number of pragmatic moves” (Vettorel 2019, p.

72).

Within the ELF approaches to the analysis of communicative strategies, several studies have been conducted. Some of them have focused on the distinct functions of some specific strategy, whilst others have attempted to provide more comprehensive frameworks.¹ In order to analyse the strategies used to mitigate possible face-threatening acts in the email exchanges, the present study will take as a point of departure the list of linguistic and discourse strategies in email communication devised in the first place by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and Sifianou (1992), which was subsequently adapted by Darics and Koller (2018, p. 292):

Linguistic/discourse strategy	Explanation	Examples
Consultative devices	The speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly, bidding for cooperation	Would you mind? Do you think? Is/would it be all right if? Is/Would it be possible? Do you think I could?
Downtoners	Modifiers used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his/her requests is likely to have on the hearer	Possibly, perhaps, just, rather, maybe, by any chance at all
Understaters/hedges	Adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition	A bit, a little, sort of
Subjectivizers	Elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of the request	I'm afraid, I wonder, I think
Cajolers	Conventionalized addressee-oriented modifiers whose function is to make things clearer for the addressee and invite him/her to metaphorically	You know, you see

¹ To provide a full and detailed account of all the existing studies would fall far beyond the scope of the present work. See Björkman 2014 for a comprehensive survey of the main contributions in this area, which include, for instance, Cogo 2009; Firth 1996; Kirkpatrick 2007; Mauranen 2005 and 2007.

	participate in the speech act	
Appealers	Addressee-oriented elements occurring in a syntactically final position. They may signal turn-availability and are used by the speaker whenever he or she wishes to appeal to his/her hearer's benevolent understanding	Clean the table, dear, will you? OK?

Table 2
Linguistic and discourse strategies in emails (Darics, Koller 2018, p. 292).

5. Data and methodology

In the first place, reference was made to the results of a previous study (Poppi 2015), which showed how homogeneity is not a distinctive characteristics of emails. Relying on the evidence gathered on the occasion of a small-scale study, it was possible to claim that within each of the three categories originally developed by Lohuiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2005), a further distinction can be made, depending on the relationship between the parties involved, their number and the intended communicative purpose. In particular, the analysis showed that when the emails still maintain the rhetorical structure introduced by the traditional business letter, a kind of message is produced, where the generic potential/capabilities of the business letter are used in relatively conventionalized and somewhat standardized ways. These messages could be defined as “business letter-emails”. On the contrary, when a more innovative attempt is made towards a novel construct and the exploitation of established conventions and available generic resources, we are dealing with “email-emails”.

Communicative purpose	Audience	Category	Subgenre	Typical features
To inform about the organization's activities	multiple	Noticeboard	'Business-letter email'	Standardized structure and language
To deliver other documents, attachments or other messages	Multiple. Restricted group of stakeholders	Postman	'Email-email'	Usually short. Mostly informal when addressed to a well-known addressee
To exchange information about the corporate	One interlocutor Restricted	Dialogue	'Business-letter email' 'Email-	Variable nature Language and structure can be

activities	group of stakeholders		email'	informal when addressed to a well-known addressee; but tend to become more formal and standardized when particular care is required
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Table 3
Summative table of what is possible, feasible and appropriate in email interactions (adapted from Poppi 2015, p. 291).

Moreover, the same study (Poppi, 2015), drawing upon the integration of linguistic and genre aspects, showed that in order to be able to decide how to draft an email, it is not possible to refer to structural characteristics and style of language alone, as in business communication the boundaries and expectations of the genre (AlAfnan, 2015) are often overruled by inventiveness and creativity.

In particular, when composing emails containing requests and directives writers can try and mitigate their potentially face-threatening impact by creatively deploying a variety of communicative strategies, which will change depending on the specificity of the company’s intentions and on the relationship with the intended audience. By doing so professionals will end up drafting their messages by conforming to a set of rules typical of each individual workplace, which may not be carried over to the next employer. In this way emails turn into a "chameleon genre," i.e. a genre that does whatever its users want it to do (Droz and Jacobs 2019).

The present study sets out to disclose the communicative strategies adopted to mitigate the directness of requests and directives, considered as potentially face-threatening speech acts, in a corpus of 41 email chains (or 230 emails), written and received by the employees of four companies operating in the field of: car-trading, manufacturing of tights and socks, ICT assistance and transport and logistics during a 4-month period (from November 2018 to February 2019).

In order to analyse the emails, which were arranged into four sub-corpora, it was decided to refer in the first place to Goldstein and Sabin’s (2006) categorization of email exchanges on the basis of the speech act they entail. Accordingly, after manually annotating the emails in the corpus, out of the twelve main categories identified, it was decided to concentrate on those messages which proved to be the textualization of information requests (henceforth IRs) and directives (henceforth Ds), requesting someone to do something.

Then, given the complexity of email communication, and in order to highlight the strategies deployed by the interactants when performing possibly face-threatening acts like requests for information and action, 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, p.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 are 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. nonconventionally indirect level, i.e. the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to 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’).

Finally, once each IR and D had been classified as: direct, indirect or nonconventionally 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 highlight the various communicative strategies adopted by the interactants.

5.1. The analysis

The four sub-corpora are not homogeneous in terms of number of emails, their length and presence of IRs and Ds, even if the percentage of email messages which enact these two acts seems to be fairly high:

Sub-corpus	Number of email chains	Number of emails	Number of IRs and Ds
1. car-trading	3	20	9 (45%)
2. manufacturing of tights and socks	17	105	50 (48%)
3. ICT assistance	4	22	15 (68%)
4. transport and logistics	17	83	51 (61%)

Table 4
Composition of the sub-corpora.

Obviously, the higher the number of email chains, the higher the number of interactants is, as well as the number of email acts. All sub-corpora refer to B2B (business to business exchanges). However, while three of the corpora refer to well-established business relationships, the manufacturing of tights and socks corpus contains the emails exchanged between the company and a prospective customer. To ensure confidentiality, all sensitive data were deleted and only the initial letter of the names of the people involved were retained.

The four sub-corpora contain a total of 125 potentially face-threatening acts, 73 information requests (58.4%) and 52 directives (41.6%):²

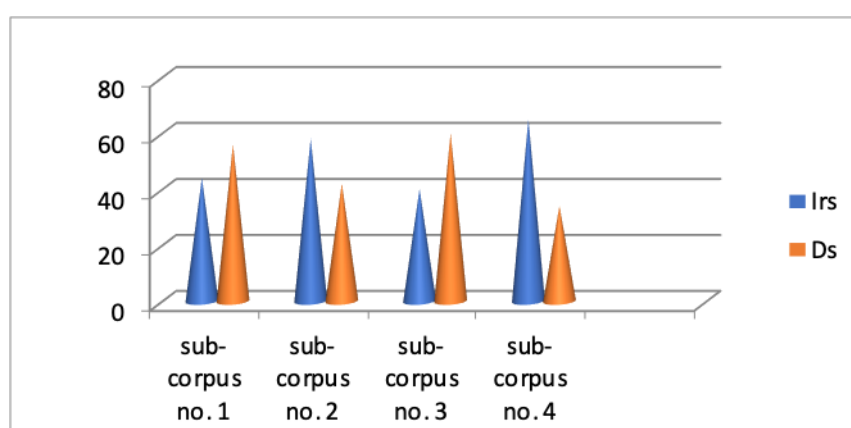


Table 5
Distribution of IRs and Ds in the four sub-corpora.

As we can see, IRs are more numerous than Ds in corpora no. 2 and 4, while the opposite is the case in corpora no. 1 and 3.

5.1.1. Information Requests

For what concerns Blum-Kulka, Olshtain’s (1984), we can see that there are differences levels of directness. In particular it is worth noticing that in corpus no. 3 there are only indirect IRs and therefore no direct IRs or

² Generally speaking, whenever an IR occurs, there is an information gap that has to be filled by the addressee of the message. On the contrary, whenever a D is uttered, it means that the addresser expects the addressee to perform some kind of action. Special attention, however, should be devoted to a special kind of requests, that rather than data, require the addressee to provide some kind of confirmation, normally of a certain course of action. In this case the focus is not on the mere provision of information, but rather on the performance of an action which will in turn set in motion a set of other actions. Accordingly, the few instances of confirmation requests in the corpus (3.2%) were classified as Ds.

nonconventionally indirect IRs. Moreover, corpus no. 4 is the only one which contains instances of nonconventionally indirect IRs.

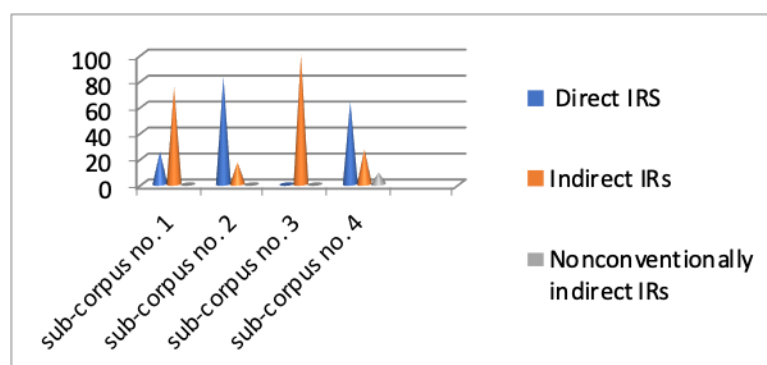


Table 6
Distribution of IRs in the four sub-corpora.

The total number of direct IRs, expressed by means of direct questions, imperatives, nominal groups without any verb, and positive sentences simply followed by an interrogative mark is higher than indirect IRs:

- (1) Is there an easier way? (sub-corpus no. 1).
- (2) Do you have picture of your tights with Crystal? (sub-corpus no. 2).³
- (3) Please tell me the problems so we'll be possible we repair or we'll not commit another time (sub-corpus no. 2).
- (4) Should you tell the length XXL? (sub-corpus no. 2)
- (5) Loading tomorrow, delivery max Thuersday xxy? (sub-corpus no. 4)

This first result is in a way not surprising, in that very often in B2B exchanges there is not much time to lose, in order to get the job done, and since IRs are less of a threat to the receiver's freedom than Ds, business professionals may be more prone to using direct IRs freely, for the sake of brevity and also efficiency. This is in a way confirmed by the fact that at times we have, in the same mail, a series of direct IRs, one following the other:

- (6) Any instruction? (sub-corpus no. 4).
- (7) Sea or Air? (sub-corpus no. 4).
- (8) Vietnam or China? (sub-corpus no. 4).

In some other cases, we can find an indirect IR among a series of direct IRs, as if the writer felt the need to mitigate his/her long list of questions:

³ All the examples have been quoted verbatim.

- (9) Everything ok? (sub-corpus no. 2).
- (10) Just wanted to know if you have already had any feedback about our tights (indirect IR) (sub-corpus no. 2).
- (11) Did you get them tested? (sub-corpus no. 2).
- (12) Good news for us? (sub-corpus no. 2).

The above mentioned use of a mitigating strategy is not isolated, in that very often direct IRs (normally expressed by means of an imperative form) are mitigated by downtoners, (e.g. *please*).

Indirect IRs are accompanied by different communicative strategies, which mostly include consultative devices as in no.13, 14 and 15, subjectivizers, as in no. 16 and 17 and cajolers as in no. 18:

- (13) [...] because he never received an answer from you despite their emails and *would like to know if this is possible or not* (sub-corpus no. 1).
- (14) For socks, *do you think you could make 30% discount only for this marketing operations?* (sub-corpus no. 2)
- (15) *Can you try to change the printer as below?* (sub-corpus no. 3).
- (16) *Should I add twice the product and add on the description line ‘Monthly fee’/‘One time fee’ as a workaround?* (sub-corpus no. 1)
- (17) *I just need to know*, like this I can anticipate (sub-corpus no. 2)
- (18) I make you today transfer of xxxx € *right?* (sub-corpus no. 2)

Sometimes different communicative strategies are employed together, for instance, consultative and downtoners as in example no. 19:

- (19) Could you please give me more details regarding these 2 invoices? (sub-corpus no. 4).

Differently from the other three sub-corpora, subcorpus no. 3 does not contain any instances of direct IRs, but only indirect IRs, some of which (mainly uttered by a Chinese speaker) employ a mixture of strategies, namely consultative and downtoners:

- (20) Kindly ask if I have to change the printer each time when I try to print the document (sub-corpus no. 3).

Finally, in sub-corpus no. 4 we have a few examples of nonconventionally indirect IRs, in which the request is realized by referring to what is needed for the implementation of the action:

- (21) Waiting for your info.
- (22) I need also your bank details IBAN + SWIFT.

5.1.2. Directives

Given that directives pose a threat to another person's freedom of action" and "freedom from imposition" one might reasonably expect them to be more mitigated than IRs. This is the case in corpora no. 1 and 3 (which contain no instance of direct Ds, but only indirect Ds and nonconventionally indirect Ds, differently from what can be observed in corpora no. 2 and 4.

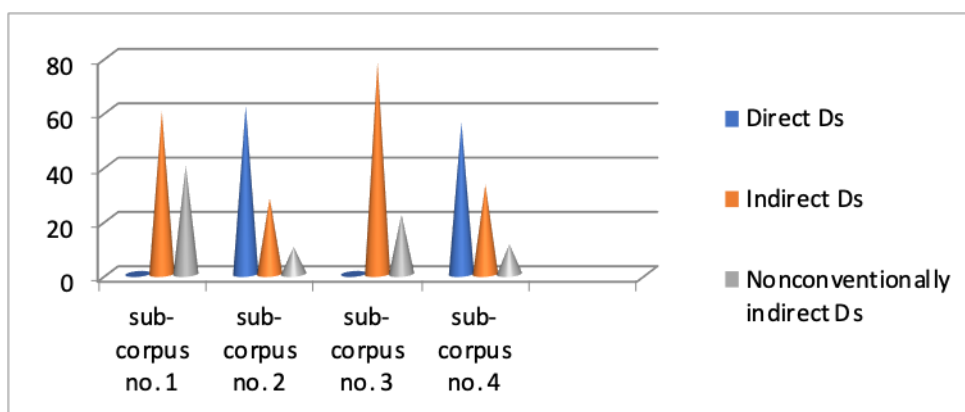


Table 7
Distribution of Ds in the four sub-corpora.

All in all the most frequently used directives are the indirect ones, which are mostly mitigated by consultative devices like, for instance, *Is it possible*, sometimes accompanied by downgraders: (cf. examples no. 24 and 26):

- (23) Is it possible to make it available for selection? (sub-corpus 1)
- (24) Would you be so kind to give support? (sub-corpus 1)
- (25) Could you please send me a size chart for your tights? (sub-corpus no. 2)
- (26) If you confirm very quickly, we'll start prepare your goods (sub-corpus no. 2).
- (27) Can you help me to solve the situation, please? (sub-corpus no. 3)
- (28) Could You please send me the xxx's details? (sub-corpus no. 4)

Sometimes, as in example no. 28 we can see that the second person singular and plural pronoun is written with a capital letter, possibly as a sign of deference. However, this is an idiosyncratic use on the part of two interactants in corpus no. 4 (an Italian and a Polish one), rather than a ubiquitous feature.

Direct Ds are often expressed by means of imperatives, mitigated by the presence of please:

- (29) Please be so kind to cnfirm the truck loading tomorrow.

In all sub-corpora there are also instances of nonconventionally indirect

directives, mostly accompanied by consultative devices, as in:

- (30) Is it possible that I am not able to set up a password manually anymore? (sub-corpus no. 1)
- (31) Okay, I wait your reply as soon as possible (sub-corpus no. 2)
- (32) I have to print out the invoice as above xxx, as follows the steps from our colleague in Italy, I still have problem to print (sub-corpus no. 3).
- (33) So we wait for a confirmation from you. (sub-corpus no. 4).

6. Conclusions

Kramsch and Huffmaster (2015) hold that globalization has modified the expectations of foreign language users, who are now required to be ready to communicate in transcultural and translingual situations. This is clearly a challenge for everyone who is involved in communication practices, including language trainers and language teachers, who have been used to teaching the language following the principles of monolingual immersion, and using a communicative pedagogy based on the monolithic paradigm of the ideal native speaker model. In contemporary society, however, an innovative approach to language teaching is required, which acknowledges that learning is a process that takes place within social interaction. This is especially true when it comes to mastering business discourse, which consists of “a web of negotiated textualizations, constructed by social actors as they go about their daily activities in pursuit of organizational and personal goals” (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, 2002, p. 274).

The samples analysed in the present study represent some of the most frequent uses of email communication in the companies under scrutiny, in the selected time –span. The preliminary results of the analysis confirm in the first place that there is no such thing as ‘the language of emails’, and that it is unrealistic to think that it is possible to teach (and learn) ‘how to write emails’ as such. What can be taught and learnt is that not all emails are the same and that it is necessary to gauge the context before deciding what is appropriate. In particular, attention should be especially devoted to those email messages which enact potentially face-threatening acts like, for instance, information requests and directive.

In the data under scrutiny here, despite the differences among the various sub-corpora, overall IRs are more frequently employed than Ds. As already stated, this is in a way not surprising, given that IRs can be perceived as less threatening than Ds and business professionals may be more prone to using direct IRs freely, for the sake of brevity and also efficiency. This does not mean, however, that mitigating strategies are never deployed. Actually, the opposite is true, in that all direct IRs expressed by means of an imperative form are mitigated by the downtoner please. Moreover, at times writers

employ a combination of strategies together, mostly consultative and downtoners. Finally, for what concerns Ds, we can say that indirect Ds are more common than direct Ds. In fact, two corpora, no. 1 and 3, contain no instances of direct Ds, but only indirect Ds and nonconventionally indirect Ds. Also indirect Ds are mitigated, mostly by means of consultative devices like, for instance, *Is it possible*, sometimes accompanied by downgraders. There are also a few examples of nonconventionally indirect Ds, as well as IRs, in which the request is expressed by means of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to an object or element needed for the implementation of the act, or by reliance on contextual clues.

Summing up, it is possible to conclude that the evidence gathered does not confirm what claimed by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), according to whom although NNSs use lexical politeness markers such as *please*, they very rarely use other lexical or phrasal downgraders, which results in overly direct messages.

In fact, the present analysis showed that email writers are generally aware of the importance of mitigating the directness of face-threatening speech acts like information requests, and especially directives, as shown by the variety of strategies employed in the samples under scrutiny here, especially consultative devices, downtoners and subjectivizers. In other words, we can state that they seem aware of the need to adopt proactive measures (communicative strategies) in order to work towards the anticipation of interactional problems.

Obviously, the evidence gathered on the occasion of the present study is limited in size and cannot therefore be meant as a representative sample of business settings in general. This is why more extensive research will be necessary to provide new evidence and further the investigation of communicative strategies in computer-mediated ELF interactions, possibly taking into account also the implications deriving from the writers' cultures and/or their specific business culture

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