The Effect of CMC in Business Emails in Lingua Franca: Discourse Features and Misunderstandings

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Abstract

The paper argues that everyday exchange of business emails produces a development in the work-group relationship, which, in turn, makes new communication styles possible and acceptable by the users' habit to computer-mediated forms, even in unbalanced professional exchanges. The focus is on the (spoken) discourse features of email messages in a self-compiled corpus of selected computer-mediated business emails, produced by five participants over three months (October 2015 – February 2016). The exchange, involving the use of English by non-native speaker interactants (in particular, Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)), as well as language adjustments in a computer-mediated exchange, takes the form of a 'written dialogue', and closely resembles the features of the spoken discourse. Results confirmed that, despite being the oldest computer-mediated communication technology, emails constitute a 'not yet conventionalized' communication mode that is influenced by the push email system, and provide a new (dynamic) communicative frame.

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1. Introduction

The world of trade negotiations has always used a bridge language, adopted for communicative exchanges between speakers of different origins, which would facilitate trade and the trading processes. Despite some arising trends (e.g., the use of languages spoken in emerging economic realities), international business conducted in Italy is based on the English language, which is used as a lingua franca by and among native and non-native speakers, and goes under the acronym BELF, an abbreviation for Business English as a Lingua Franca (Firth, 1990) or, as in more modern views, for English as Business Lingua Franca (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005). Companies tend to adopt English as a pre-requisite for employees' job requirements and those who are already within a company need to develop their English proficiency.

From a different perspective, the use of available methods of communication (emails, audio, and video conferencing) is considered a fast and convenient way to make the first approaches to the clients while, at the same time, generating obstacles in the use of new language styles, where users may lack proxemic helps or turn-takings as we know them. This study observes what communicational frames emerge in a private email exchange among non-native speakers of English during the closing of a business deal in order to unravel the linguistic strategies involved in the construction of an exchange conducted in a computer-mediated context by speakers dealing with lost nuances, cultural issues, and technological affordances. The paper starts from the consideration that technology, now integrated into routines (e.g., mobile media, smartphones, etc.), increases availability and shortens distance, ultimately affecting relational exchanges and patterns of communication. This view is based on Hutchby's (2001) notion that conversation practices are shaped by and shape the affordances of communication technologies, resulting thus in 'technologized interaction'. Business emails can be consequently taken as a form of communication in professional settings adopted as a working tool, in that they help users improve their relationship with their coworkers and ultimately develop new and distinctive communication patterns that could improve professional outcomes.

In the next section, a brief literature review highlights research in computer-mediated communication and considers evolutions related to the BELF contexts. In the following sections, I introduce the corpus and methods, and then present my findings. My discussion focuses on the patterns of email communication in a specific cross-cultural business workplace and on the functions and strategies that are used to share information, coordinate and satisfy social needs as well as overcoming misunderstandings derived from the use of English as a Lingua Franca in a computer-mediated context.

2. Theoretical Framework

The features occurring in computer-mediated communication (CMC) vary according to the synchronous or asynchronous nature of the exchange. Email is a basic form of asynchronous exchange which allows a text message to be sent to a specific address (Hine, 2000), and is classified as a lean medium since it lacks immediate feedback and nonverbal cues, not only in comparison with face-to-face communication but also in comparison with other channels currently available in the business community. Despite being an 'old' form of online communication, it is considered to be quick and reliable, particularly in certain working contexts, for it offers written documents and allows communication with multiple recipients in a single action. Email is therefore considered as the preferred channel of communication for most organizations for internal and external exchanges and has become a powerful business communication tool (Guffey, 2010), considered to be an essential, dominant, and also a preferred channel of communication at business workplaces (Roshid, 2012).

This main means of communication in a business context, the email is characterized by a style that is less formal than other business letters and contains speech-like features (Baron, 1998, 2003). Rather than being a change in the standard forms of English language use in formal business writing, email has widened the stylistic range of the language and is considered an "opportunity for language

education" (Crystal, 2006, p. 133;).

Earlier research has focused on the co-existence between spoken and written styles (e.g., Baron, 2000), the functions exploited by emails (exchanging information, organization of meetings, requests, and inquiries; Chen, 2006; Mulholland, 1999), forms of politeness (Pérez-Sabater, Turner, & Montero-Fleta, 2008), and flexible registers between the spoken and written language (Gimenez, 2000). More recent research in the field has moved beyond conceiving the online language in terms of its relation to spoken/written genres but as a genre that spans into very different emanations due to its different affordances. In fact, emails are multifunctional whose language differs according to the particular purpose they are written for and the relationship between the sender and receiver (Lan & McGregor, 2012). As a particular example of the computer-mediated style, the email has been deeply studied (Gimenez, 2000, 2002) looking at its stylistic features, including linguistic economy (contractions, ellipsis, acronyms, spelling), grammatical complexity (omission of parts of speech such as subject pronoun), expressivity (unconventional punctuation, case features to express emphasis) and the form of imitation of spoken conversation styles (Cho, 2010), which is used to make physical and relational distance short but which, on the other hand, creates communication gaps and misunderstandings. Business email correspondence features run in parallel with private email exchanges with some differences (Gimenez, 2000, 2002) underlined by the informal and personalized style and the informal register. In fact, business emails are often not as 'formal' as business letters, and closely resemble features of the spoken discourse (Roshid, 2012). Other studies (e.g., Pop & Sim, 2016) proved that emails follow the linguistic conventions adopted in formal mails for their social function of impressing a business partner. Greetings and closings, for example, as well as addressing terms (Dear Sir/Dear Mr.) become part of a politeness formula to maintain relations (and contribute to a friendly or less friendly working environment), while it is inappropriate to use emoticons (as they may be perceived as unprofessional) and capitalization outside established conventions (which would appear disrespectful). Some linguistic indicators such as formality and the use of correct titles, are

considered particularly important in intercultural email communication but politeness considerations vary according to culture (Bargiela Chiappini & Kàdàr, 2011). This must be taken into account particularly by BELF users, who are already challenged by the use of a language other than their own. Research (e.g., Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012) has underlined how content and clarity are more important than form and correctness, so that BELF is sometimes described as a simplified variety of English without "complicated phraseology, idiomatic expressions or complex sentence structures" (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012, p. 266). The result is a shared and neutral code between business professionals, who are also (but not necessarily) non-native English speakers in a global business context, doing their work and reflecting the various cultural backgrounds (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012). A different approach sees BELF as the result of an intersection between BELF and professional language (English for Special Purposes (ESP)), in that it is a specialized language fulfilling commercial purpose (Millot, 2015). The nature of BELF has been studied on different levels, from a syntactic (Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010) to a discursive one (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, 2012). The cultural dimension and the measures companies have taken to address cultural issues have been studied by Leek, Turnbull, and Naudé (2001), who discussed how managers need more time to manage complex and often troubled relationships. Studies in email discourse in corporate settings suggest that BELF writers do not use a simplified version of Standard English but tend to employ standard formulae, with stylistic and discursive variations often influenced by the writers' cultural background. For example, Poppi (2012) refers to the high number of honorifics used by Chinese email writers to their less formal Italian counterparts.

From a different point of view, the advancement of communication technology, especially smartphones and internet technology, has brought profound changes in today's workplace communication particularly in the setting of business communication, with push emails that reframe the asynchronous exchange in a chat-like one. This system, which implies an always-on availability is made possible by smartphones

which, marking the incoming emails, allows a ready and fast answer, written by the recipient of the email who can read and respond within a short period of time. Consequently, there are circumstances in which the content of the email is reframed as a chat answer, with its stylistic form and contingency of feedback, making the exchange a conversation continuum. The interactional event is formed by messages and replies produced as sequences, within adjacency pair formats. Apps and startups (e.g., MailTime) are designed to make emails closer to text messaging, removing what is considered accessory (e.g., subject lines, email signatures, etc.) with the aim of making them easier to read and quicker to answer to. Such a tendency to structural reductions goes hand in hand with the email linguistic economy already acknowledged by Cho (2010), who also claimed that some expressive features (e.g., greeting and leave-taking formulas) not only are instances of linguistic innovation, but also maintain social (phatic) contact between users. Similarly, Pop and Sim (2016) note that email style tends to be less formal and more oral-oriented than other varieties of written workplace communication. However, email style may be influenced by cultural orientation, as Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) pointed out when they compared Finnish writers (more direct, frequent use of imperative and interrogative forms) to Swedish writers (high use of deferential strategies). Along the same line, Poppi (2012) illustrated how interactions are inherently intercultural, comparing business emails written by Chinese (use of honorifics) and Italian (more informal tones) employees. Finally, Skovholt (2015) identifies informal style as well as personal and emotional messages to, as she argues, build trust and promote in-group solidarity by the Agenda-leader. The informal style helps mitigating directives and intensifying expressives, which are actions that contribute to creating a picture of a unified group. All these studies confirm that despite being the oldest computer-mediated communication technology, emails constitute "a relatively 'new' communication mode with interactional norms that are not yet conventionalized" (Darics, 2015, p. 8).

3. Methodology

This paper addresses the email exchange as an online semi-spoken interaction (Herring, 1996, 2007), through the identification of some stylistic features and linguistic registers. In addition, it analyses the functions and strategies used to satisfy social needs as well as overcoming misunderstandings derived from the use of BELF by non-native speakers in a computer-mediated context. Following these aims, this paper draws on research within the field of CMC and studies the mechanisms in interaction in a work-place email exchange, which is a specific type of CMC setting where technological and situational factors contribute to creating a highly interdiscursive product. A Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis ((CMDA); Herring, 2004) framework offers the possibility to observe online interaction within the study of CMC. In Herring's (2004) words "in the broadest sense, any analysis of online behavior that is grounded in empirical, textual observations is computer-mediated discourse analysis" (p. 2). She also states that whereas CMC studies focus mostly on the technical and (socio-)psychological aspects of communication between humans as mediated by computers, Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) refers to a much broader range of phenomena with focus on language use and language itself (Herring, 2001). Additionally, this research makes reference to the asynchronous modality of exchange which affects linguistic and interactional aspects, including the message content shape, since asynchronous online communication is not linear and its turns follow each other in a numerous chronological sequence. The message content contained in these emails is shaped by the computer-mediated environment that thus contributes to creating a different kind of interaction. The corpus will be studied combining CMC and CMD approaches, and will look at structure (e.g., spelling, message organization), meaning (utterances, exchanges, etc.) and social function (face management, conflict, etc.).

Data are drawn from a self-compiled corpus of business emails sent to or from an Italian Company (IC) over a period of 5 months between 2015 and 2016. The IC released the information for the purposes of data analysis and chose what to provide. Of three sets of exchanges, I selected the one reflecting a number of business transactions in a multicultural setting, which involves Italian and Pakistani speakers using English as a Lingua Franca for business reasons. Participants are challenged in their mutual understanding of their use of BELF as non-native speakers, the computer-mediated

nature of exchange, and some cultural-related issues. The corpus consists of 155 emails, written by 3 Italian employees of an IC and 2 members of a Pakistani Company (PC), which works in the role of a distributor. The emails discuss needs assessment, presentation of the product, and many issues regarding how to obtain the contract, having the major goal of succeeding in a troubled situation such as that of closing a deal. The PC in this exchange is represented by S (the PC leader, male, around 40 years old) and A (a technician with several other functions, male, around 30 years old). The Italian employees are represented by the manager C (male, around 50 years old), and AI (two engineers, males, between 30 and 40). Despite different meanings and functions, PC is self-defined as a 'dealer' in the correspondence, so I adopt the same wording. The data were edited with all proper names replaced with pseudonyms and sensitive business information replaced by "X" or [label].

Following the main objective of investigating the discourse features in business digital interactions, the comments were gathered and analyzed into two steps. First, data were displayed according to the chronological sequence, that is, the emails were organized temporally. Thereafter, contributors (A, C, AI, and S) were identified, and the exchange was tabulated according to the classification scheme for CMD (Guffey, 2010; Herring, 2007). Then, the emails were grouped according to the sender, in order to analyze individual stylistic patterns in the use of spoken discourse features (Baron, 1998, 2003; Cho, 2010; Gimenez, 2000, 2002) and in the use of strategies for sharing information, satisfying social needs, and overcoming misunderstandings derived from the use of BELF.

4. Results

As discussed by Guffey (2010) the email message has basically four elements: an informative subject line (illustrating the content of the message), an opening (addressing and greetings formulae), a body (the content of the message), and a closing (often a leaving-taking formula).

4.1. Subjects

The subject line is used to give general information on what the message deals with, in

order to make the recipient aware of its importance in the exchange and to force the recipients to invest their time into reading it. All the messages in this study have a subject line but in most cases there was not a close relation between the subject line and the email text. The subject becomes at times an umbrella title under which some information/communication categories go, or in some other instances, especially when the mail is written as a reply, a line with no relationship with the content/function of the message-body. Some examples of sample subjects in subject line of e-mail messages are given in Table 1:

Table 1
Sample Subject Line of E-mail Messages, as Found in the Corpus

1.	Project [manufacturing tools]
2.	[Project] TOP IMPORTANT
3.	Comparison from [other agencies]
4.	[Project] updates
5.	Clarification Required
6.	Comments [date]
7.	Delivery Schedule
8.	[Project] the situational
9.	Request for documents
10.	URGENT URGENT URGENT!!!!!

The subject appears as two/three words often containing the name of the project (as in 1, 2, 4, and 8), the function of the mail (e.g., 3, 4, 5, and 9) or an indication of relevance in terms of content (2) or time (10). Capitalization, exclamation marks and typos commonly used in online informal contexts indicate flexibility and informality in the exchange. From this, it is assumed that BELF users structure their emails as native speakers do. Interestingly, the 75% of the subjects in the corpus were replies (RE:), even if the body message was not related to the subject line.

4.2. Opening and Closing, Greetings and Addressing

An opening greeting is an important aspect of email communication because it shows friendliness and a positive attitude towards the recipient (Guffey, 2010) other than indicating a form of digital politeness (Perez-Sabater et al., 2008). Data show that address terms are often used as opening greetings that appear from "Dear Mr. + Surname" (22.08%) to "Mr. + Surname" (9.09% occurrences). The low

occurrence of openings and greetings marks the informal and personalized style (see Table 2) of the exchange, in particular during the last months. In terms of preferences, Italians tend to use formal openings while Pakistanis seem to choose a more flexible approach.

Table 2
Opening Email Preferences in Pakistani and Italian Business Emails, Expressed as a Percentage

	Pakistani mail opening	Italian mail opening	Total
Dear	1.3	-	1.3
Dear + sir	0.65	1.3	1.95
Dear Mr. +name	6.5	15.58	22.08
Dear + name	3.9	-	3.9
Mr. + name	8.44	0.65	9.09
Dear all/sirs	3.9	-	3.9

Titles are used alongside opening sequences, with Italian speakers using "Dear Mr. + Surname" and Pakistani speakers using the form "Mr. + Surname, Sir/Dear Sir". Proper greetings are found only in the Pakistani emails ("Good day"), which also employ small talk ("hope you will enjoying [...]"). The opening "Dear all" occurs in group emails, with paragraphs of the main text that are individually addressed:

> Dear All,
>
> <u>First of all a very warm greetings for the year 2016, Hope you all are fine and enjoying your vacations.</u> Mr. C,
>
> Plz take out a couple of mins, I know during holidays its not good to disturb again n again. [...]

While opening sequences are quite informal (often not used), closings are very often used with the sequence "Regards + Signature" (48.05%) or simply "Regards" (24.67%). One Italian technician always uses the two languages, closing "Cordiali saluti/Best regards" (3.89%).

The language used in the components of business email messages is not formal but rather flexible and informal, in line with what Roshid (2012) has shown for online business exchanges and asynchronous communication. This might be explained by the adoption of communication styles that run in parallel with the daily and quick exchanges brought out by push emails and employed and accepted by both parties.

4.3. Body: Feature of Business E-mails and Misunderstandings

Pop and Sim (2016) proved that emails follow the linguistic conventions adopted in formal emails for their social function of impressing a business partner. Greetings and closings, for example, as well as addressing terms, become part of a politeness formula to maintain relations in a friendly working environment, while the use of emoticons and capitalization is understood to be inappropriate and disrespectful of the recipients. In early research on email messages, the texts were compared to personal letters (Herring, 1996) and the mode was described as written (Maynor, 1994). After a few years, Crystal (2006) stated that emails combine spoken and written features, Gimenez (2000, 2002) underlined email's informal and personalized style and register, while Cho (2010) talked about the 'orality of email' and the inclusion of linguistic features characteristic of spoken conversation, such as the use of deletion, expressive features, structural reduction and greetings, and leave-taking formulae (Murray, 1995). In terms of spoken features, this study found only a few examples of acronyms and abbreviations (other than technical words such as AASHTO, EN1337, and AI10), in contrast to previous findings on their use in emails (Danet, 2001) and to the principle of economy (Herring, 2001), that is, the choices made by users to economize on typing effort. However, there were a few instances of lower case usage for upper case, or bold and multiple punctuation to convey emphatic tones ("what do you mean with "verification" that company can provide AASHTO complied [tool]???", C35; "**This is not a GUARANTEE LETTER!!!**", C45). Capitalization is used to express pragmatic meaning and this feature is frequently used in the corpus. If the practice of sending emails has taken some elements from traditional correspondence, it is noticeable that the

medium increases a perception of informality that is reflected by the spoken features conveyed by the writers' style. The exchange, despite its written form, acquires traits of orality and looks closer to a chat conversation, with messages answered within a few minutes and designed as synchronous replies, using single words as email bodies ("yes", S31), or word-sign substitutions ("???", C43). Informal written style also emerges in the case of angry tones, with the use of capitalization and bold, red color to focus on the importance of what is being said. Colors are also used to identify the sender's answer within the many-to-many email, when exchanges are between many users at the same time, as in A15:

> […]
>
> All the corresponded data is attached above for your reference. **OK, data are corresponding to our quotations (Tender: vertical load [number] kN; Construction: vertical load [number] kN) That's OK**

The resulting mail thus looks more like a (asynchronous) chat conversation between three participants. As for the upper instead of lower case (and the other way round), when not used to convey emotional tones, it is suggested that users may not check their texts before sending them, which goes contrary to the idea that asynchronous CMC allows time to edit the text.

From a different standpoint, the issue of spoken discourse can be accounted for by features transferred from the first language of speakers. In fact, as noted by Lan and MacGregor (2012), in the cases of emails written by non-native speakers it is difficult "to disentangle the influence of the writer's language proficiency and the effect of the email medium" (2010, p. 8). The variety of English employed by non-native speakers (BELF) is extremely useful for international business negotiations, and yet difficult, especially when conducted by and among non-native speakers from different languages themselves, with troubles that may occur because of language misunderstandings, or because nuances of meaning might be lost. In my data, correct use of English is not a priority, see S7:

> Agreed the approval letter says from the country of manufacturer so this is clear

and will be checked as well from [company] and [company] also from contractors. They cannot manufacture in [Country] and [country] this is clear and contractors will not support them for this issue bcz they can't and will never take such type of risk as failure in this can lead to total rejection of the material. This was just to show that [company] is super Natural creature.

The example shows both the imperfect use of language (at the lexical and syntactical levels) and a personalized style (bcz) very similar to a spoken discourse continuum (almost no punctuation). However, it is the lexical level that produces language misunderstandings that need repairs ("what do you mean with "verification"?", C35; "you are speaking about "guaranteed life" or "duration of guarantee"?", C35; "The concept of "guaranteed lifetime" is void of sense", C36). This is why, as Kankanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2012) posit, knowledge of business procedures and the correct English terminology is paramount for the success of BELF encounters.

On a conflict perspective, the Italian leader acquires and shows an organizational authority in the relationship, that is recognized by others (in an email, S writes: "I have some strategy which I think will work! Need your comments", S7) and represents a change in the relationship and in the communication patterns, as it has been shaped in the exchanges over the months. The decision making is assigned to him and conflictual talk arises only on the negotiation and agreement of language definitions and labels. However, a real conflict is constantly avoided by the Asian counterparts who rather point to group harmony (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010) and cooperation to reach the business outcome, as in S21:

> Dear C, Hope you are fine, we have no doubts about your credibility and you are completely reliable, the thing is our competitors have doubts and they are spreading false news about [x], we are defending you here that's why we requested you to show us [documentation]. How could you think that we have doubts about you. Today we met with [person] he told us that [brand] are making roguery about [Italian brand], so we have stop them

there with proof documents. [...].

As in Gasiorek and Giles (2013) the interactants perform attuning strategies (positive trait attributions, increasing recipient's satisfaction) in view of a mutual adjustment which finally leads to a successful conflict management. The Asian writer chooses to regulate his turn taking an accommodating approach which, in turn, is interpreted by the Italian leader as accommodating, eliciting a common social identity (us vs other Company(ies)).

4.4. Coordinate and Satisfy Working Needs

In terms of message organization, an important feature to discuss is addressing, since emails provide new interactional practices, e.g., the text is simultaneously sent to a number of participants making the communication many-to-many, hence the exchanges are between many users at the same time. In such exchanges, in particular, participants form a network where daily tasks such as sharing information, requests and inquiries are easily achieved and contribute to the information flow. The emails in this data are mostly multi-addressed, with the sender distributing information by addressing the recipient in paragraphs. The Italian emails are mostly concerned (see Table 3) with inquiries (69%, see A) and providing information (30.8%, B) while the Pakistani emails are mostly concerned with updates (58%, C), requests (34.8%, D), and apologies (6.9%, E).

Table 3
Examples of Emails, Used to Satisfy Social Needs

A.	Dear Mr. A, In order to be informed and study our future actions, please give us a preliminary idea about the expected timetable. Is the construction started? Do you know when they will decide about the [manufacturing tool]? Your feedback will be highly appreciated. Best regards
B.	Dear Sirs, 1) We would be ready to send us the drawings with the note "Manufacturer Drawing", but consider that we haven't received an answer to our question about [tool]. With the present configuration, our [tool] can compensate about énumber] mrad [grade], that is slope = [number]%. [...]. Moreover, we had no possibilities to check the possible interferences between the anchor bars of our [tool] and the rebars of the concrete structures; in case of interference, it will be necessary to change or the distance of [tool] or the distance of the rebars. [...] Cordiali saluti / Best regards,
C.	Mr. C, Good day Sir, we are off today as it's a holiday in Pakistan. [...] Project has been started, and with the expected calculation, [tool] will be the hottest point of discussion on around [day] November. For your information, Two contractors are being awarded the project, [contractor1] and [contractor2]. An equal elevation divided in both the contractors. So the quantities will be [number and tool] each.[...] Please also note that Mr. [name] will contact you for [tool] quotations and there is also a possibility that he will visit you along with Mr. S to your offices. These are the updates till now, we assure our best cooperation to WIN this project from both the ends. For correct details or further plan, you may talk to Mr. S directly [...]. Regards, A
D.	Plz check your email I guess on 29 jan with the subject of [subject]

	So,now you have to tell about the prices! Stategy for the prices! Let me know if you want to discuss anything I will call you. [...]
E.	[…] We have also said to our customers that ITALIAN experts will come to PAKSITAN and will supervise installation (of some [tool] initially and during the project ,obviously not all few of them) to ensure the [tool] are installed as per given standard ,we are sorry we didn't asked you about this and gave them our offer without even asking and informing you.(I guess this is not a problem as we did in the past the installation process).

The functions of these emails reflect the business relationship between the Italian manufacturing company and the Pakistani role of "dealer" (agent) in the business context, as well as the tasks that are shared between them. Requests and inquiries are realized using interrogative forms or the imperative form, often mitigated by the politeness marker "please". Such a softening strategy is also used for apologies, which occur in the emails when a conflict arises, mostly due to a misunderstanding of the actions to take, the timing or lack of information. Consequently, the apology is always followed by a clause for face management as in E, "I guess [...]".

As in face-to-face oral turns, these asynchronous written exchanges show a change in style, which becomes more informal as the communicative turns are taken by the speakers. By the end of the exchange, these emails show a written style that is deeply influenced by and is close to spoken discourses.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper is an attempt at describing the technological affordances of the e-mail genre of communication in workplace BELF communication in relation to online genres. CMC combines the context-dependent interaction of oral conversation with the properties of written language. Research (Baron, 1998, 2003; Cho, 2010; Gimenez, 2000, 2002 among others) understood it to be the intersection of written and oral discourse displaying features associated with face-to-face interactions (informality, immediacy, reduced editing, and synchronicity) within a written mode (planning, asynchronicity, and no paralinguistic context). Participants overcome the constraints of email writing by using orthographic innovation and graphics in order to adapt their email environment to the spoken style of face-to-face

exchange (e.g., intonation). They also adapt their texts to the technological advances, such as the push emails, making these emails appear close to chat conversations with fast turn-takings. Polite e-mails would contain formal openings and closings, and in particular, non-native English speakers (NNES, students, in the study by Ko, Eslami, & Burlbaw, 2015) would use a more deferential style in the opening and closing of their email, compared to native speakers. However, this study shows how the level of formality changes throughout the exchange, from formality to informality, with emails that are not considered impolite by recipients. This suggests some consistency with previous research on e-mail exchanges in open contexts (as in doctor/patient exchanges in health websites) showing that conditions for politeness are changing. As already said, the subject line in my data is not always consistent with the actual content of the mail since participants tend to write their texts replying to previous messages, which ultimately results in content degeneration. Openings and closings, as structural politeness markers (Pérez-Sabater, et al., 2008), determine the kind of environment in which interlocutors exchange information. Politeness norms are considered very important in exchanges but, as is well-known, vary according to the cultural choices and speaking styles (see, among others, Bargiela Chiappini & Kádár, 2011, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). For example, Chinese tend to use honorifics more than their less formal Italian interlocutors (Poppi, 2012). A comparative study of Iranian, British, and American speakers' use of business emails in a multinational context highlighted both similarities in the use of moves and steps, and discrepancies in the use of certain rhetorical strategies (Mehrpour & Mehrzad, 2013). For instance, the Iranian business correspondence shows a predominant use of *we*, which is opposite to native English speakers' use of *I*.

For requests, the native English speakers seem to prefer indirect speech acts, whereas Iranian requests use specific expressions that minimize the imposition of their commands ("could you kindly", "we would like to ask"). This "over-politeness strategy" is the result of the direct transfer of expressions from the Persian language to the English language but, conversely, it may be inappropriate for a western reader since he might need more time to get to the core of the email (Najeeb, Maros, & Nor, 2012).

In this study, (digital) politeness norms are studied as influenced by the social and technological features of the medium other than by cultural choices. Politeness can be perceived differently depending on culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and that is why it is closely connected to BELF, with users belonging to different countries, and possibly different cultures. Directness and formality, for example, can be a two-sided issue which can cause misunderstanding and conflictual talk. This is particularly true in online written communication, which is characterized by both formality (as an inner characteristics of written styles) and directness (as computer-mediated fast communication often implies a perception of familiarity). Opening and closing sequences (Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008), as well as requests (Blum-Kulka, 1987), have been used to study the presence of politeness in written communication, which, in online contexts, show different peculiarities. Informal greetings/closings or their omission in written communication may be perceived as rude (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012) but in online contexts (e.g., a forum) their informal nature is taken as a change in stylistic/communicative norms (Zummo, 2015) even in the case of exchanges between people having different roles and power, since users take advantage of a medium feature (de-personalization/anonymity). In case of business exchanges, however, the level of formality and directness depends on how much interactants feel the exchange as an internal vs external communication (e.g., the kind of relationship they have) or on how they manage language misunderstanding leading to conflictual talk (in data, this means users employing directness up to rudeness).

Apart from politeness, and having the concept of affordance in mind, social relations are caused by some forms of technology which, in turn, are socially shaped in their form and meaning. Interactions depend on technologies and social relationships that are both mutable settings and, in case of written exchange they are outlined in genres. Genre can be described as a form of communication with a set of rules and properties recognized and conventionalized by discourse communities. The email is a written genre with defined features in its typographic form (from CMC conventions) and presentation which involves an opening (address and greeting), mail body, and closing (salutation and signature). The structural and linguistic markers in CMC genres have been analyzed in these years (e.g., Herring, 1996; Mulholland, 1999; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008) and in the emails in particular. As already stated, despite being the oldest CMC technology, emails have been considered as a "not yet conventionalized" communication mode (Darics, 2015, p. 8). One of the reasons for this might be found in the change from the asynchronous to nearly synchronous nature of the interaction, a change that has been made possible by push e-mails (a system that implies an always-on availability) and the use of smartphones. In case of BELF exchanges, even features for politeness may evolve into a different product. Emails have been innovative in business communication, being a fast and inexpensive tool, but push emails allowing an always-on availability, have provided both a competitive advantage and a new frame of communication. Smartphones signal the incoming emails, and communication becomes faster with answers written and reframed as in a chat conversation, sharing with the different writing context both style and, sequences and, in addition to, as Murphy, Maros, and Levy (2006) noted, brevity and reduced (structural) politeness indicators. The multi-addressed conversation implies a correct use of email conventions for multi-party exchanges. Moreover, the sender must consider that misunderstandings may occur because of the written nature of such communication (the recipient cannot read the writer's expression and everything is left to interpretation) and because of the use of a non-native language that is, as in my data, more of a foreign language than a second language (L2). Users therefore should know communicative protocols (netiquette for business exchanges), whether and how to use genre conventions (including

typographical adjustments to replace the tone of a face-to-face conversation), how to renegotiate and repair misunderstandings due to conflicts raised from different kinds of communicational gaps (here, at the semantic level) and also consider that, in spite of their informal nature, emails are a permanent written record and should be treated carefully. Good business communication contributes significantly to business activities and therefore managers and teams should use the right communication style to communicate efficiently, taking into account the different communicative tools, speakers' culture, and focus on the business activity. As digital technologies have spread and developed, users must be aware of the possibilities and the correct use of them, building a digital literacy. The analysis of my data suggests that users do not have a proficient use of the English language, which is used as a Lingua Franca but still generates conflicts due to misunderstandings (mostly on a lexical level). Also, data show a personalized style, which implies a certain degree of informality (which also depends on the relationship between the interlocutors) and good use of CMC awareness. Such awareness also implies a conscious lack of respect for politeness norms, which is accepted in such CMC contexts by all interlocutors. However, considering the CMC impact on style and communicative experiences, in particular for non-native speakers, and acknowledging that CMC provides a mighty pedagogical vehicle, it is important to point out the different communicative modes, as this paper attempted to do. It follows that, linguistic and media studies can effectively contribute to understanding communication dynamics in particular settings, e.g., by preparing toolkits as a means of promoting fresh areas of communicative practices in business school and education, thus preparing students for careers in the business sectors. In addition, further research may also focus on participants' culture since contributors, in this study, came from different cultures (Hall, 1976). Such analysis may lead to interesting results, as it is known that language and cultural orientations may favor misunderstandings and misinterpretations, thus being a further obstacle in business interactions.

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