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Building Rapport in BELF Communication: Solidarity Strategies in Business Emails¹

Abstract

In the globalized market, business professionals use emails to communicate with customers, suppliers, and even colleagues who may be based in any part of the world, employing English as a business lingua franca (BELF). Despite the goal-oriented nature of business communication, rapport is “an essential element in the building and maintenance of strong work relations” (Pullin 2010, 456), and the achievement of business goals may be “dependent to some extent on the establishment of relations” (Pullin 2010, 458). However, nurturing interpersonal relationships may be difficult in intercultural business interactions (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003), especially in the case of business emailing, whose main aim is the rapid fulfillment of the task at hand.

Based on a corpus of business email exchanges amongst BELF users of different L1s, this paper proposes a classification of ‘solidarity strategies’ (Köster 2006) aimed at building and nurturing rapport in email communication despite the pressure of getting the job done. It is argued that being less concerned with issues of accuracy in the target language, BELF email writers seem to pay more attention to the pragmatic needs of business communication, including that of building trust and common ground.

1. Introduction

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In all contexts of verbal communication, language is used to perform a variety of functions, from the mere transfer of information through to the definition of our attitudes and emotions, and the shaping of relations. This is also true in the context of business communication, which entails both a transactional and an interactional dimension (Köster 2006; 2010; Planken 2005). In fact, in business-oriented communication, language does not only allow the accomplishment of concrete objectives relating to the task at hand, but also plays an important role in the establishment of a working relationship between business interlocutors, performing what Spencer-Oatey (2000a; 2000b; 2005) has termed ‘rapport management’, namely, the management of “the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people” (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 96). Indeed, as Pullin (2010, 458) suggests, transactional and interactional functions in business communication are intrinsically linked, since “all goal-oriented talk is dependent to some extent on the establishment of relations”. To put it in Hollman and Kleiner’s (1997, 194) words, “rapport [...] is a business tool which helps in all transactions.”

Given the global nature of today’s business, and the unquestionable status of English as *the* global lingua franca of the 21st century, most business communication is now carried out in increasingly intercultural settings, where English functions as *the* common working language (e.g. Charles 2008; Ehrenreich 2010; Evans 2013). This has sparked a new strand of research within the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) paradigm, namely research on the use of English as a/the Lingua Franca of Business (BELF) (Lohuiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta 2005; Gerritsen and Nickerson 2009; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013). Several aspects of the verbal behaviour of ELF speakers in business contexts have been investigated, many of which relating to the pragmatic

strategies adopted in BELF spoken interactions (e.g. Poncini 2007; Wolfartsberger 2009; Cogo 2016; Franceschi 2017). Still, Kalocsai (2011, 113) has remarked that “the interpersonal function [of the observed forms of ELF communication] has received comparatively less attention than the communicative function”, maybe because English as a business lingua franca is often looked at as ‘one tool in a business toolkit’ (Charles 2008), that is, ‘language for communication’ rather than ‘language for identification’ (Hüllen 1992).

The aim of the present study is to highlight the multiple functions of the linguistic choices made by ELF users in written business interactions. It is claimed that a cooperative and mutually supportive attitude may contribute not only to the process of meaning-making for the fulfillment of the business task at hand (Köster 2010), but also to “[1] simultaneously create a ‘feeling of shared satisfaction’ (Hülmbauer 2007, 10), [2] express solidarity (e.g. Cogo 2007, 2009) and [3] establish rapport (Kordon 2006)” (Kalocsai 2011, 114).

2. Relational talk in BELF spoken interactions

Amongst the studies focusing on BELF spoken interactions, some have foregrounded the importance of creating and maintaining rapport in situations where a lingua franca is used. Many of these studies have their roots in pragmatics, and more specifically in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and the notion of ‘facework’ (Scollon and Scollon 2001). Spencer-Oatey (2000a; 2000b) has proposed a more comprehensive framework to describe relational management in spoken interactions, and the factors that may have an influence on it. These include not only merely linguistic features, but also elements more specifically concerned with the dynamics of interaction, like the sequencing of interactional content,

turn-taking, the choice of register, as well as non-verbal elements of communication, such as proxemics, gestures, and even the physical setting in which the interaction takes place. Köster's (2006) notion of 'solidarity' also suggests a framework of analysis that goes beyond politeness, in that it refers to "the affective dimension of interpersonal relations, and involves the expression of mutuality and common ground" (Köster 2006, 62). In other words, solidarity and the related notion of rapport are associated with the wish to build and maintain good working relations through the construction of close ties between business interlocutors, which, in turn, is of direct relevance to the achievement of business goals.

Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003) have explored the management of rapport in intercultural welcome-meetings, and confirmed Fraser and Nolan's (1981) view that "no sentence of linguistic construction is inherently polite or impolite" since communication "is not simply a matter of linguistic encoding and decoding" (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003, 44), but involves a number of elements whose 'perception' lies in the hands of the interlocutors.

Planken (2005) has analysed rapport management in sales negotiations carried out by both professional and aspiring negotiators using English as a lingua franca. Besides considering the occurrence of 'safe talk' in the different phases of the negotiation process, Planken has investigated the role played by mere linguistic items, namely personal pronouns, and shown how their use can contribute to establishing solidarity (inclusive 'we'), other-orientedness ('you'), self-orientedness ('I') and professional distance (exclusive 'we') in the negotiator relationship (Ibid., 393). Pullin (2010) has explored the role of small talk in the construction of rapport and solidarity in BELF settings by analysing data drawn from three meetings in a multilingual Swiss company. Her conclusions seem to support the claim that the ability to build solidarity and intercultural understanding is of the utmost

importance for the establishment of smooth working relations in lingua franca settings, in that it contributes to forging a sense of group identity. This reflects Planken's (2005, 397) claim that interculturalness is a 'safe-talk' topic in its own right, as "by pointing out and acknowledging cultural differences, participants try to create a temporary² in-group of (fellow) non-natives, whose common ground is the fact that they differ culturally", which, in turn, is "clearly aimed at rapport-building". That small talk can effectively fulfill the purpose of building and maintaining rapport has been claimed also by studies (e.g. Holmes 2000; Köster 2006, 2010) showing that, rather than being peripheral to the workplace, 'relational talk' provides a space for business interlocutors to liaise not only professionally, but also socially and linguistically, thus contributing to the success of the business. In Köster's (2010, 97-98) words, "relational talk is far too prevalent to be considered marginal in the workplace. [...] Even relational talk which may seem quite extraneous to the business at hand, may ultimately serve transactional goals". On a merely linguistic level, it has been shown (e.g. Kordon 2006) that strong agreement tokens (such as *of course*, *exactly*) can also have an affective function, and that the use of personal pronouns, specialized lexis and evaluative language can create a sense of group identity and build positive relationships (e.g. Poncini 2007). Also phatic expressions (e.g. *Have a nice day*) do contribute to the establishment, maintenance and management of human bonding (e.g. Köster 2010).

3. Rapport building in BELF email exchanges

² The 'fleeting' nature of BELF interactions has been highlighted by Pitzl (2019), who has suggested a complementing framework to the Community of Practice approach for the study of BELF contexts, namely that of Transient International Group (TIG).

If the interpersonal dimension of BELF communication has been investigated in relation to spoken interactions, comparatively less has been done with specific reference to the role that written exchanges, and in particular emails, may have on rapport building (Ho 2014). Emails are now integrated into business routines and are undoubtedly the most frequently used means of communication in professional settings for both internal and external exchanges (e.g. Guffey 2010). They have become a widespread working tool in the modern workplace, most of the times even replacing other popular forms of business communication —both face-to-face interactions, like meetings, and more synchronous exchanges, such as telephone calls (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011), whereby its hybrid nature as ‘written speech’ has often been highlighted (e.g. Maynor 1994; Baron 2003). The ubiquity of emails has increased their potential to affect relational exchanges, especially in cross-cultural business settings (Roshid 2012), where “employees of all rank and order are charged with the task of maintaining frequent communication with business partners, often originating from significantly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds whilst having to use English as a business lingua franca” (Li 2016, 64). In highly connected cross-cultural business settings, not only are business emails increasingly ‘multifunctional’ (Zummo 2018), but their authors are also expected to carry out multiple tasks that go far beyond the simple transmission of information (Skovholt 2015). In email-exchanges, BELF email-writers are faced with a number of challenges (e.g. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2012), from the use of a language other than their own, to the clarity of the content they are conveying, up to the need to be aware of pragmatic variation across languages and cultures (Poppi 2012), something they are not usually trained in through traditional Business-English training (Caleffi and Poppi 2019). Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) claim that, alongside clarity and directness,

politeness – that is, a “positive, friendly and constructive” (Ibid., 256) attitude – is a vital factor for effective BELF communication, and that traditional small talk and the use of greetings are essential in the establishment of personal contact. In fact, when different linguacultures are involved, email-writers need to take into account that even greetings, closings, titles and addressing terms “become part of a politeness formula to maintain relations” (Zummo 2018, 49). Moreover, some linguistic indicators like register and degree of formality/informality are particularly important in intercultural email communication, in that the same speech act may be performed following different politeness strategies (e.g. directness vs indirectness) according to culture (Bargiela-Chiappini and Kádár, 2011).

In comparison with face-to-face interaction and other channels of synchronous communication currently available in the business world (e.g. video-conferencing), investigation into the interactional dimension of business communication via email can only be carried out based on the analysis of purely linguistic features, as paralinguistic, proxemic or other non-verbal and contextual cues are not (or only partially)³ available. As Skovholt (2015, 108) maintains, “analysing language usage coincides with discovering how social relations are constructed”. Crook and Booth (1997), for example, have explored the importance of word choices in business email communication for the development of a ‘common language’ amongst the participants in the communicative event. Their study is based on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles 1973) as a framework to explain the relationship between the author and the reader of a written message. Although originally developed to describe the communicative behaviour of participants

³ Emoticons or unorthodox use of capitalisation may be used to provide prosodic and/or emotional information (Skovholt 2015), although they can be perceived as unprofessional (e.g. Zummo 2018).

in oral interactions, CAT has been expanded to other modes of interaction (Giles and Ogay 2007), including technology or computer-mediated communication, without changing its primary goal, namely that of addressing interpersonal communication issues. Drawing on the notion of 'convergence' (Giles 1973), Crook and Booth (1997, 6) maintain that one dimension of diversity between individuals is their preference for one of the three main sensory systems (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic). The preferred sensory system is reflected in language use through words like *see, clear* (visual style), *hear, sound* (auditory style), and *feel, grasp* (kinaesthetic style). In their study, the individuals who received emails which matched their preferred representational system reported more rapport, that is, "a trusting, harmonious relationship" (Ibid., 6) with the sender than those who received emails that did not match their preferred style.

Incelli's (2013) study of business email interactions between a British and an Italian company seems to support the claim that speakers using a lingua franca also express their cultural identity in the language (e.g. Meierkord 2000). Drawing on politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey 2000a) theories, Incelli's study reveals that the business emails written by British native speakers tended to be highly informational rather than relational. As she says, "[a]lthough the UK participants took into account the recipient and aimed to maintain social relations, e.g. *We understand; I trust this clarifies the matter*, at the same time they were detached and distant, in keeping with standard business letters" (Incelli 2013, 526). On the contrary, her Italian writers appeared to be more oriented towards relational discourse, which is "reflected in the use of private verbs, such as *wonder, hope*, the use of personal pronouns (*I, me*) and emphasisers, e.g. *I really need the material urgently*" (Ibid., 526), as well as in the use of emphatic particles expressing opinion and emotion, e.g. *only*,

so much, so, also. According to this study, then, Italian emailers seem to be more concerned with building rapport if compared with their British counterparts.

Broadening the range of analytical frameworks that can be employed for the study of rapport management, Ho (2014) has explored how the authors of workplace request email construct the discourse of request grounders with language of evaluation for the purpose of rapport management. Ho's study draws on Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), which allows "to identify the lexicogrammatical resources used by individuals in realizing affect and involvement" (Ho 2014, 74) in the use of evaluative language. Ho's analysis reveals that professionals make use of various lexicogrammatical resources realizing the rapport management function from the three main categories of which evaluative language is comprised, namely attitude, engagement, and graduation and their relative subcategories (affect, judgment, appreciation; dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction; focus and force). For example, attitude is realized in the writer's expressions of feelings (e. g. *I am glad*), judgments (e.g. *early enough*) and appreciations (*It seems unacceptable*); engagement in the use of dialogic expansion (*It seems*) and dialogic contraction (*The user cannot enter the system*); graduation in the use of focus (*It will be tightly scrutinized*).

4. The study

The present study was carried out based on a self-compiled corpus of 198 business emails written in BELF contexts.⁴ In these emails, I sought to identify examples of language use showing the writers' wish to build and/or maintain rapport with their interlocutors. Not

⁴ The corpus was compiled for analysis as part of a broader PRIN project (see 'Acknowledgements').

all the collected emails were suitable for the analysis, as some of them were only 'one-way', that is, they were not part of an exchange. I therefore selected only emails constituting part of a thread made up by at least two messages (from A to B, and back from B to A). In this way, I identified 50 different exchanges, with an average number of 2 to 3 emails each.

For the analysis, I elaborated a tentative classification based on which the selected examples could be organized. The classification corresponds to a number of speech acts (Austin 1962) which, despite their different illocutionary force, seem to be performed, in the data, with the common goal of building and/or maintaining rapport, thus functioning as 'solidarity strategies' that go beyond politeness (Köster 2006). The selected examples of language items illustrated below did not play a specific informative role in the exchanges in which they were used. Neither did they add anything to the content of the message. This seems to suggest that in the emailers' intention their function was primarily that of establishing and/or maintaining some form of rapport. Indeed, they appeared to have been employed to create a sense of smoothness and solidarity with the addressee(s), performing the same phatic function as that of small talk in face-to-face communication. Hence, as will be illustrated in the following section, I deemed it as reasonable to assume that the senders' concern when using certain expressions was to create a friendly environment in which to get the recipient to perform a certain task, or even simply for the sake of present and future relationships.

The collected emails were part of exchanges between business interlocutors of different L1s, namely Italian, Swedish, German, French, and English. To ensure anonymity, the data was edited by substituting all proper names with random attribution of letters of the alphabet, and sensitive business information was replaced by "xxx". The only piece of information about the authors of the emails

that was retained was the assumed L1 of the interlocutors, which was attributed based on the country where the company for which they worked was located.⁵A written consent for the use of the emails for research purposes was obtained by the companies that accepted to participate in the study.

The following table (Table 1) shows the speech acts that were identified in the corpus with one example each from the data.⁶

Speech act	Example
Wishing	<i>Have a nice evening!</i>
Appreciating	<i>Thanks a lot for your feedback, much appreciated.</i>
Offering availability/ help	<i>I am always available for a call.</i>
Apologizing	<i>Sorry for confusing you.</i>
Providing an explanation	<i>For us, xxx euros is a lot, considering all the crazy costs we are already covering.</i>
Thanking	<i>Many thanks in advance.</i>
Chit-chatting⁷	<i>I am good just two days before the Christmas holidays</i>
Self-blaming	<i>I missed to tell the complete truth.</i>
Cooperating (suggesting a solution)	<i>Do you think you can send them today in order I receive them this Friday?</i>
Expressing feelings	<i>Fantastic! I am glad the issue is solved!</i>

Table 1. Speech acts functioning as ‘solidarity strategies’.

To show how the identified speech acts functioned as ‘solidarity strategies’, some examples are illustrated in the next section. The examples are extracts from exchanges selected from the data. In each extract, bold is used for the identified speech act(s), and

⁵ This seemed a reasonable assumption, although it offers no certainty about the actual L1s of the writers.

⁶ All Extracts from the data are verbatim.

⁷ I used this expression to refer to ‘small-talk’.

information about which of the speech acts from Table 1 is exemplified is provided in square brackets. Underlining is used for expressions or lexical items which also play a role in the construction of the relationship within the exchange.

5. Findings⁸

Exchange No.1

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/German

In this exchange, the Italian writer needs some details about the delivery of catalogues. The exchange follows a telephone conversation between the two interlocutors. At the end of the email from which the Extract is taken, the Italian writer provides an explanation for having recapped the whole content of the call:

Extract 1

I am always available [offering availability] *for a call, just need to get all of these details in an email for future reference.*

The explanation sounds as the writer's attempt to be proactive about any possible annoyance the recap may cause to her interlocutor. The use of the degree adverb *just* as a marker of dialogic contraction seems to support this assumption.

A few days later, having received no reply, the Italian writer contacts her German interlocutor again.

Extract 2

Hi A,

I hope you're well. [wishing]

Any news for us? Will we be able to get the FR catalogues for XX?

Thanks,[thanking]

⁸Bold and underlining are mine.

Before making her direct request, the Italian writer addresses the interlocutor with phatic language (*I hope you're well*). The first-person singular subject of the 'wish'—which conveys a sense of personal involvement— is replaced with *we* when it comes to the actual request: the writer seems concerned to detach herself from the possible threatening of her interlocutor's negative face: she is making the request in the name of the company.

Exchange No. 2

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/German

In Extract 3, the German interlocutor is responding to his Italian counterpart's signalling of a possible misunderstanding. The first concern of the German partner is that of apologizing. Then he confirms that the Italian interlocutor has correctly understood the message, and provides an explanation for what seems to have caused the 'confusion':

Extract 3

Dear M.,

Sorry for confusing you. [apologizing] *What you said is also what I meant.* *The additional information (which confused you) was that we always need to print two languages @ same quantities together to get this price.*

The Italian counterpart replies by showing appreciation for the explanation:

Extract 4

Hi, M.,

Thank you for the conditions [thanking] ***that you've kindly explained*** [appreciating] ***in your email.***

Exchange No. 3

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/German

In this exchange, the Italian interlocutor comments on the price estimate submitted by the German supplier and provides an explanation for her comment, which anticipates her request to send the file:

Extract 5

*We are thinking about printing 200 copies, but xxx for this is a lot, we could get better rate from our local agency, **especially considering all the crazy costs we're covering with this additional exhibition.** [providing an explanation] *Would you be open in sending us the file for us to manage?**

The German interlocutor seems concerned with maintaining a smooth relationship with the customer, and shows willingness to cooperate by explaining the reasons for the cost, at the same time taking on the responsibility for not having provided enough information. With reference to the Italian interlocutor's indirect hint that they might decide to contact the local agent, the German counterpart shows availability but at the same time concern for the consequences this might have on the client's image:

Extract 6

Dear M,
*When I informed you about the cost, **I missed to tell the complete truth.** [self-blaming]*
***Since I forgot to inform you about [...], we will take the responsibility for this cost.** [providing an explanation; cooperating (suggesting a solution)]*
*Regarding printing, **we can accept** [offering availability] *that you print locally, **but we do not recommend as we would like to maintain appearance.**[providing an explanation] **However, you shall not compromise in paper and print quality [providing an explanation] as well as appearance.****

The German writer takes on himself the 'blame' for not having told "the complete truth", and shifts the willingness to cooperate onto the

company he represents (*we*). *We* is also the subject of the ‘acceptance’ and of the ‘recommendation’, which is justified and explained. The high deontic modality of the modal expression “you shall not” does not seem to be to interpret in its literal meaning of prohibition, but may rather be a strong suggestion, further explaining why the ‘local printing’ is ‘not recommended’.

Exchange No. 4

Interlocutors’ L1s: Italian/German

In this exchange, the Italian interlocutor is suggesting a possible cooperation for the production of a catalogue. Before making the suggestion, she starts with a wish, and then accompanies the suggestion with an explicit expression of her feelings (affect):

Extract 7

Hi M.,

I hope you’re well. [wishing]

Any plans to produce the xxx catalogue in Italian?

We are waiting for it since a long time, I would be 100% happy to help [expressing feelings; offering help] *translating if you wish.*

Many thanks. [thanking]

In his reply, the German interlocutor is also very friendly: he both opens and closes his reply with expressions of affect:

Extract 8

Hi M.,

Thanks I am good just two days before the Christmas holidays

[chit-chatting] – ***I hope you as well.*** [wishing]

[...]

I wish you nice and relaxing Christmas holidays and a good start of 2019! [wishing]

Exchange No. 5

Interlocutors’ L1s: Italian/Swedish

In this exchange, the Swedish writer contacts his Italian counterpart to ask for help with some new software. Before making his request, he uses phatic language, accompanied by a friendly emoticon, to refer back to the Italian business partner's recent trip to Sweden, and only afterwards he moves on to the business task:

Extract 9

Hi M.,
How are things with you? Did you miss Sweden yet? 😊 [chit-chatting]
I need your help with.
[...]

The Italian interlocutor replies accordingly, by responding to his counterpart's wish to start the communicative event in the friendliest way, although maybe not aware of a possible threatening act towards the Swedish partner's positive face in underlining his feeling "pretty fine" with being in Italy (thus implicitly suggesting he did not like Sweden that much). The use of the dots would seem to make this 'dislike' a possible implicature:

Extract 10

Hi A.,
Not missing Sweden yet...😊 I feel pretty fine here down in Italy...
[chit-chatting]
About your questions, it depends:
[...]

Exchange No. 6

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/Swedish

In this exchange, the Italian interlocutor contacts his Swedish counterpart to inform her that he has not been emailed the feedback he was expecting to receive. The message sounds somehow face threatening, including the final 'thanking':

Extract 11

Hi S.,

I haven't received yet your complete feedback for the demo session provided to xxx at the beginning of this month.

I was expecting to receive the email you shared during the call with the feedback of all the topics, as agreed.

Thanks. [thanking]

The Swedish writer's reply does not sound particularly friendly, although mitigated by a marker of dialogic expansion (*I am not sure*):

Extract 12

Hi M.

I am not sure I understand [self-blaming] *what you need. After the demo, X sent you the minutes containing the items from my note for both PP and DQM.*

Is there anything that you need from us?

At this point, the Italian counterpart tries to re-establish 'smoothness' by taking on the responsibility for the inconvenience:

Extract 13

Hi S.,

Maybe I lost it somewhere [self-blaming], *could you please forward it to me again?*

Thanks. [thanking]

Exchange No. 7

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/English

In this exchange, the Italian writer contacts his English counterpart to ask for help with the consultation of a price list from which a product seems to be missing. He asks his English business partner to make the product available for selection, and thanks the partner in advance by using an expression (*Many thanks in advance*) which is

commonly used in business Italian, but maybe does not sound particularly polite in English:

Extract 14

Dear A,

I write you about what I mentioned during the call with Z, regarding the missing product with code xxx. I attach you the screenshot of the list of products that appears as I create an opportunity. The figure related to our product xxx is missing.

Is possible to make it [the product] available for selection?

Many thanks in advance. [thanking]

The expression *Many thanks in advance* may be a face-threatening act as it takes it for granted that the addressee will do the thing he/she is being thanked for. The English counterpart, however, does not sound annoyed, and maintains rapport by ensuring his availability through quite a standard formula in business English:

Extract 15

Hello B,

You appear to be using the incorrect Price book, please use Price Book February 2019.[...].

If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to ask.

[offering availability]

The Italian writer's reply is much more emphatic and personalized, with the Italian counterpart sounding less formal and expressing his feelings and gratitude:

Extract 16

Hello A,

super [expressing feelings] *I see different figures on the product list now. Now it's way better.* [appreciating]

Thank you so much [thanking] *for your prompt support.* [appreciating]

At this point, also the English interlocutor shifts to more informality:

Extract 17

Hello B.,

Fantastic, I am glad the issue is solved! [expressing feelings]

Exchange No. 8

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian / French

This exchange is an example of the first contacts between an Italian and a French company. The Italian writer suggests a possible meeting during a trade fair that will take place in the next weeks. The tone is quite formal, still the Italian interlocutor tries to establish some form of common ground (the fair in which both parts are assumed to be interested):

Extract 18

We inform that we'll be visiting the fair xxx on 7th February and we wonder if you are also planning to go there. If yes, would you be available to meet us and make our acquaintance? This could be a good opportunity to show you our quality and explain our services. I look forward to your kind reply.

The evaluative language used here (*good opportunity; kind reply*) sounds more like standard business-English formulae than personalized solutions adopted by the Italian writer to build rapport. Still, though by means of professional distance (use of the exclusive *we*) the Italian writer seems to be 'preparing the ground' for a possible future cooperation between the two partners. After receiving a reply from the prospective French customer informing the Italian counterpart of their impossibility to be at the fair, the Italian emailer changes her register by making her text slightly more personalized, in particular by expressing her feelings:

Extract 19

Thank you [thanking] *for your kind reply.* [appreciating] **It's a pity we can't meet!** [expressing feelings]

Exchange No. 9

Interlocutors' L1s: Italian/French

In this exchange, the French interlocutor contacts the Italian partner to inform her that some material is missing from the consignment they have just received. The French writer does not sound annoyed by the inconvenience and, instead of complaining, he suggests a possible solution using a polite indirect request:

Extract 20

*Hello A., We received the order today but I have a problem, cardboards are missing. **Do you think you can send them today** [suggesting a solution] *in order I receive them this Friday?**

The Italian counterpart seems worried that the inconvenience might jeopardize the relationships with the customer. Her reply is quite complex: while trying to preserve the image of her company, she apologises twice, provides an explanation for what has happened, and also shows cooperation by proposing a discount on the next order:

Extract 21

Good morning,

I am very sorry for this inconvenience. [apologizing]

*We sent the cardboard yesterday but **we have a new worker and she has a lot to improve.*** [providing an explanation; self-blaming] *To the next order, you will receive a discount* [cooperating (suggesting a solution)] **because usually we are better.** [providing an explanation]

I hope that this inconvenience does not change your idea [wishing; expressing feelings].

Sorry. [apologizing]

Have a nice day. [wishing]

6. Discussion of findings

The examples illustrated in the previous section provide instances of how business professionals seek to build and maintain a smooth working relationship with each other while communicating via email in their daily routine. For the BELF email writers participating in this study one of the most frequent ways to build and/or maintain a friendly relationship with their interlocutors was the direct expression of their feelings (e.g. *Fantastic! I am glad this issue is solved!*), which in terms of evaluative language is what Martin and White (2005) have defined as 'affect', that is, the use of lexicogrammatical resources "being concerned with positive and negative feelings" (Martin and White's 2005, 42, quoted in Ho 2014, 65). Another frequent speech act serving the aim of creating and/or maintaining rapport was the provision of an explanation, sometimes even a detailed one (e.g. *We sent the cardboard yesterday but we have a new worker and she has a lot to improve. To the next order, you will receive a discount because usually we are better*). This is in line with Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2011, 255) claim that one of the vital factors for successful communication is "supporting facts with explanations". Appreciating has also proven to be an effective way of maintaining smooth relationships in business (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003); this seems to be confirmed by the examples in the present study, where appreciation of the counterpart's contribution to the achievement of the business purpose (e.g. *Now it's way better*), or simply of the specific task (e.g. *Thank you so much for your prompt support*) is often explicitly expressed. The need for business professionals to maintain smooth relations was shown in the examples also by a high degree of cooperation, for instance through the suggestion of concrete solutions to a problem (e.g. *Do you think*

you can send them today in order I receive them this Friday?), by blaming oneself for the occurrence of an inconvenience (*I missed to tell the complete truth*), by apologizing (e.g. *Sorry for confusing you*), or by offering help/availability (*I am always available for a call*). Wishing (e.g. *Have a nice evening!*) and thanking (e.g. *Thanks in advance*) were the speech acts where more conventional expressions were used, but still with examples of positively-perceived culture-bound formulae (e.g. *Thanks in advance*). Finally, it is worth observing that, though with a limited number of occurrences, also due to the limited amount of data available, chit-chatting (e.g. *How are things with you? Did you miss Sweden yet?☺*) seemed to have some space in business 'written speech' (despite the urge of 'getting the job done'), serving the same interactional function as that of small talk in business oral interactions.

7. Conclusions

This study has sought to show that, though mainly exchanged 'to get the job done', business emails, as the most popular means of communication amongst business professionals, have become a space for social relationships to be developed and maintained in the increasingly multilingual and multicultural workplace (Roshid, Webb, and Chowdhury 2018). The examples illustrated in this study seem to suggest that, while communicating via email with their counterparts abroad to carry out their business tasks, business professionals are also concerned with maintaining harmony, smoothness and warmth (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009) in interpersonal relationship. As said in the previous sections, BELF email-writers are faced with a number of challenges, from the use of a language other than their own, to the clarity of the content they are conveying, up to the need to be aware of pragmatic variation across languages and cultures (e.g. Kankaanranta, and Louhiala-Salminen

2012). With regard to the language issue, several studies (e.g. Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Ehrenreich 2010) have revealed that the success of BELF communication is largely independent of the interlocutors' approximation to native competence. It has also been shown (e.g. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2010; Deterding 2013) that misunderstanding rarely happens between BELF professionals, and BELF-based interactions are often reported to be successful, "the reasons for this being the high degree of cooperation and the collaborative practices that can be observed among speakers in business context" (Ehrenreich 2016, 138). In the present study, no occurrences of metalinguistic comments or other hints in the emails were found which may suggest that the writers were concerned with (standard) language when emailing each other. On the contrary, the illustrated examples appear to show that the writers of the emails were aware of the importance of pragmatic aspects, like that of maintaining a 'friendly' communicative environment. This seems to support the claim that relational talk and rapport "are perceived to be an integral and highly relevant part of BELF competence, even though the relational mode is often felt to be more challenging than business-related or specialized talk" (Ibid., 138).

As a concluding remark, it may be relevant to observe that the "pragmatic attitude" (Ehrenreich 2010, 417) that BELF professionals show in their emailing activity seems to be the result of their personal involvement in the business rather than that of formal training. In the data examined for this study, few occurrences of conventional expressions (e.g. *Thanks for your understanding*) were found, whereas many of the examples showed the writers' creativity in 'personalizing' their pragmatic formulae (e.g. *I hope that this inconvenience does not change your idea*) to make them sound clearer and more effective (at least in the writers' intentions). It would seem, therefore, that a "pragmatic attitude" leading, for

example, to the establishment of good relationships between business partners, is easier to acquire directly in the workplace through the active (and effective) cooperation within the community of practice of business professionals. Yet, training programmes fostering awareness of such “pragmatic attitude” and providing tips on how to develop it could only help business professionals meet “the challenges posed by global business interaction” (Ehrenreich 2016, 138). In this perspective, empirical research on BELF should probably focus more than it has done so far on how business professionals using English as a Business Lingua Franca cope with pragmatic needs. As discussed above, building rapport and common ground is crucial for business relationships, in that interactional goals may ultimately serve transactional goals.

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