JoLIE 17:1/2024
doi: https://doi.org/10.29302/jolie.2024.17.1.6

THE RELATIONAL COMPONENT IN FACE-THREATENING ACTS: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Silvia Emilia Plăcintar
Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Received: 23 January 2024
Revised: 29 March 2024
Accepted: 19 April 2024
Published: 30 June 2024

Abstract

This study starts from the classic face politeness model of Brown and Levinson (1987), with focus on face-threatening acts in isolation, and complements it with alternative paradigms that view face and facework from a relational and interactional perspective. Next, the paper introduces a framework of linguistic strategies for the expression of relational meaning to analyse the choices that language users make to convey an attitude of affective involvement in concrete instances of social interaction. These models are then applied in the interpretation of two corpora of business letters produced by Romanian and by Finnish students of business English in response to the same communicative situation that requires the formulation of these speech acts: giving bad news and providing reasons for it, making a request, and making a commitment. The analysis is guided by two questions: (1) What are the linguistic strategies engaged for the expression of affect? (2) Is culture a factor that influences how respondents view / use language? The findings of the comparative analysis point to marked differences in the primary function of language as employed by the two groups of respondents. While Finns view language predominantly for the transactional purpose with minimal expression of relational meaning, Romanians use it primarily as a means of building rapport by engaging frequently interpersonal markers of mitigation, politeness and solidarity.

Keywords: Face; Facework; Politeness; Relational meaning; Rapport management.

1 Introduction

The constructs of face, facework and politeness have gained importance in the field of communication studies as they are associated with socio-communicative competence in general and self-presentation and management of interpersonal relations in particular. According to Bakhtin, "the style of a discourse is the speaker's subjective emotional evaluation of the referentially semantic content of his utterances" (1984: 84). In the same vein, Zdrenghea and Hoye note that the interpretation of an utterance involves a complex process of analysing its propositional content through the attribution to it of an attitude or some "personal participation" (1995: 61). The assessment of the emotional meaning attached to the

How to cite this article: Plăcintar, S. E. (2024). The relational component in face-threatening acts: A cross-cultural analysis. *Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education – JoLIE, 17*(1), 93-108. https://doi.org/10.29302/jolie.2024.17.1.6

informational content of communicative interaction is operationalised through the concepts of face and facework.

The history of research on the phenomenon of politeness and politeness strategies starts with the influential theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), which is based on the notion of face. Since then, experts in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, ethnomethodology, linguistic pragmatics, communication studies and intercultural studies have critiqued and amended their face management model given their findings on and insights into the actualisation of face politeness in linguistic interaction in various modes and cultural contexts of communication.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Face and facework

Goffman is credited with introducing the concept of face, which he defines as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (1967: 5). To Goffman, face is "located in the flow of events in the encounter" (1967: 7) and sustained by other people's judgements; face is therefore viewed as a social element, rather than as a private or internalised property. To secure this public image, parties to communicative interaction perform in such a way as to reciprocally maintain and defend each other's self-image. In other words, Goffman's notion of face is essentially an expression of social relatedness.

Brown and Levinson define face as "the *public self-image* that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61, emphasis added). Their conceptualisation of face differs from Goffman's in that it is no longer public property granted to individuals by their interlocutors' judgement and perception during the interactional act of communication itself, but private property that intrinsically belongs to the self. Fraser (1990) notes that the "public" element, which is crucial to Goffman's analysis of face, seems to become an "external" qualifier for this image, rather than an "intrinsic" component of it (238-239). Brown and Levinson (1987) apply the notion of face to conceive an interactional system consisting of a speaker and an addressee, each a "Model Person" endowed with positive and negative face. They describe face as a two-dimensional concept that comprises simultaneous human wants: (1) *positive face*, i.e. the need for having one's values approved, appreciated and accepted by others; and (2) *negative face*, i.e. the need for autonomy that guarantees freedom of action.

Facework refers to communication behaviour meant to uphold our own face (defensive facework) or our interlocutors' faces (protective facework). These two facework strategies are equivalent in Brown and Levinson's (1987) face management model with positive politeness and negative politeness, respectively. They explain that certain speech acts, which they categorise as *face threatening acts*

(FTAs), are inherently threatening to either the addresser's or the addressee's positive or negative face, and assume that the assessment by the communicators of how much risk they take in performing such acts depends on the evaluations they make about their relationship with the interlocutor(s). The face-threatening potential of the underlying act is the sum of three pragmatic variables: (1) the power advantage that the speaker may have over the recipient, (2) the social distance between them, and (3) the rating of that imposition in a certain context.

Once the potential face threat has been weighed, the speaker can choose one of these five strategies: (1) to perform the FTA "bald on record"; (2) to perform the FTA "on-record" by means of a redressive positive politeness strategy to make the interactional partner feel that his/her values are shared; (3) to opt for a redressive negative politeness behaviour that will indicate a desire to avoid any imposition on the interlocutor's freedom of action; (4) to perform the FTA "off record" by implicature, thus giving the addressee the option not to acknowledge the extra intended meaning, and (5) to give up performing the FTA altogether.

Brown and Levinson's treatment of face as an interactional force is undoubtedly significant, mainly in that it highlights how the outcome of interpersonal communication is influenced by the assumptions the speakers make about their own and their interlocutors' faces and how these assumptions are encoded in their use of language. Despite being aware of the cultural specificity of face, Brown and Levinson claim that the two consubstantial face-wants are universal. In their view, while some cultures may be predominantly negative-politeness oriented, and others may have a predominant tendency towards positive-politeness behaviour, cultural variability will only be manifest in how polite behaviour is assessed and will not affect the content of positive and negative face (1987: 13). Their theory on the role of face and facework in the enactment of politeness has been criticised by scholars in various fields related to linguistics, such as communication studies, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics.

2.2 Alternative face politeness paradigms

One issue on which the debate has centred is that Brown and Levinson's model is anchored within a specific Anglo-Saxon culture that does not allow for the manifestation of other face wants in some non-Western cultures. Scholars such as Matsumoto (1988), Wierzbicka (1991), Mao (1994), Ting-Toomey (1994), Scollon and Scollon (1995), and Spencer-Oatey (2000) have analysed the phenomenon of politeness from the socio-cross-cultural perspective. They base their arguments on comparative and contrastive studies of Western and Eastern interactional behaviour and discourse styles and conclude that face construals, and therefore face sensitivities, vary across cultures. For example, Mao understands the Chinese and Japanese concept of face as being driven by "a *centripetal force*" since it "gravitates toward social recognition and hierarchical interdependence", in opposition to Brown and Levinson's conception of face, which is informed by "a *centrifugal force*, as Anglo-American face spirals outward from individual desires or wants, and sees the

self as the initiating agent" (1994: 471, original emphasis). These divergent ideals about self-image underlie two different face orientations that shape the discourse style of the two cultures.

Mao provides a solution to these cross-cultural discursive differences by formulating the theory of *relative face orientation* based on the assumption that face is a public image that we claim for ourselves by emulating "the ideal social identity or the ideal individual autonomy" sanctioned by a certain community (1994: 472). This is a flexible framework that accommodates both negative-politeness and positive-politeness cultures: the predominant orientation towards one ideal does not exclude the pursuit of the other: "the other 'eclipsed' ideal does not always remain in the background, and it may, whenever appropriate, be represented, in varying degrees, in some discourse activities within the same community" (1994: 472.). This remark about the emergence of face in the course of interaction lies at the basis of the interactional and relational perspective on face politeness, which is briefly reviewed next.

Another critical remark is that Brown and Levinson's framework is based on the speech act theory and Grice's (1975) Communicative Principle, both derived from an analysis of sentences in isolation. Bargiela-Chiappini (2003), Haugh (2009), Locher and Watts (2005), and Arundale (2006) contend that face should be conceptualised not in terms of individualistic wants, but as the social self, emerged in its relation and interaction with other social selves. This view on face is grounded on the constructionist approach to communication used by ethnomethodologists, conversation analysts and linguistic pragmatists to describe conversation as a social project jointly achieved by the interactants. Relationships are initiated, developed, maintained or terminated in social interaction, and it is in situated communicative encounters where face claims are presented and evaluated. It follows that face can be framed as essentially both "relational and interactional" (Arundale 2006).

Arundale (2006) calls this discursive conceptualisation of face the interactional achievement model or face constituting theory, within which "face meanings and actions emerge in the same manner as all other interpretings that participants form in using language" (2006: 210). He draws on Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) Relational Dialectics Theory for an understanding of the dialectics of relational communication and an explanation of face and politeness as culture-general and culture-specific phenomena. On this view, interpersonal relationships can be characterised by three pairs of oppositional states, namely (1) openness or sharing versus closeness, (2) certainty versus uncertainty, and (3) connectedness versus separatedness. Arundale argues that the third dialectic is relevant for the notion of face as connectedness and separatedness are associated with different relational meanings: the former with interdependence, involvement, solidarity, harmony, unity – attitudes that are inclusive of Brown and Levinson's positive face politeness –, and the latter with independence, autonomy, dissociation, or divergence – values that compose negative face politeness. In light of the Relational Dialectics Theory, the classic definition of face is re-conceptualised in concrete terms as a participant's perception and interpretation of some achieved

connectedness and separatedness in the course of interpersonal communication. These two attitudes or stances will be voiced or interpreted differently, at different times, in different relationships, and in different cultures.

A third critique levelled against Brown and Levinson's face politeness model is its overly concern with the minimisation of the face threat. Spencer-Oatey's (2000) model of rapport management offers a more comprehensive, applicative and inclusive approach based on the same notion of face as a universal human need, but extended beyond its concern with the minimisation of the face threat that some speech acts may pose. Her framework of relational communication strikes a balance between self and other by including two components – *face* (quality face + identity face) and *sociality rights* (equity rights + association rights) – each defined from a personal / independent and a social / interdependent perspective. Spencer-Oatey (2000) emphasises that in each society there are established behavioural norms shaped by cultural values that can influence how language is used for the achievement of certain meanings. She distinguishes between sociopragmatic rules, such as (in)tolerance of unpredictable situations and dissent, emphasis on following / dispensing with protocol and social customs, preference for implicit / explicit communication style, value placed on / minimisation of power differences, and pragmalinguistic strategies that affect how a given meaning is conveyed in certain circumstances. For example, for the linguistic realisation of an apology, one culture may find it appropriate to include an explanation, while another culture may feel it is proper to acknowledge the mistake without an attempt by the speaker to redress his / her face by finding an excuse. Spencer-Oatey concludes that representations of what constitutes appropriate conduct in interaction may be shaped by culture-specific sensitivities that are manifested through differing pragmalinguistic strategies.

The ensuing section introduces a framework for the analysis of the linguistic realisation of relational meaning, which will be applied in the subsequent data interpretation.

3 Linguistic Strategies for the Expression of Relational Meaning

As mentioned above, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory includes the interpersonal phenomenon of *mitigation*, since their only preoccupation is with the attenuation of the unwelcome negative effects of speech acts. Mitigation can be altruistic / addressee-oriented or self-serving / speaker-oriented and is achieved mainly through the strategies of indirectness and tentativeness (Fraser 1980; Ng and Bradac 1993). *Indirectness* requires that addressees deduce the intended meaning by the addresser, while *tentativeness* is engaged to attenuate the harshness or hostility of explicit messages, when these are preferred to indirect ones for considerations of effectiveness in communication.

Koester's investigation of workplace discourse is a conclusive demonstration of the hypothesis that irrespective of whether "discourse participants

are focusing on transactional goals (getting the job done) or relational goals (building and maintaining the relationship with their interlocutor), some kind of interpersonal meaning is always expressed" (2006: 63). She raises the question whether our concerns about face explain all reasons for affective orientation in interaction and distinguishes between *politeness*, which covers speakers' intent to smooth the threatening acts through indirectness and distancing devices (see mitigation, above), and *solidarity*, defined as "the expression of mutuality and common ground" (2006: 62) and indicated by such strategies as claiming common ground, showing interest, expression of approval and empathy, or offering help. The main "interpersonal markers" that Koester identifies in her corpus of workplace conversations are (1) modal verbs, (2) hedges and emphatics / intensifiers, and (3) vague language, of which modals constitute the largest, the most complex and the most multifunctional category.

Modality, the expression of the speaker's attitude towards the ideational content of an utterance, is a means of conveying the interpersonal meanings of commitment and detachment *par excellence*. The literature differentiates between (1) epistemic modality and epistemic modals (*can, could, would, will, be going to, think, know*), dealing with the speaker's subjective stance vis-à-vis the truth of the proposition he / she utters, and (2) deontic modality and deontic modals [*have (got) to, need (to), should, want (to)*], concerned with the notions of obligation, necessity or absence of them. Deontic modality conveys a more neutral attitude of the speaker as the focus is on information and the transactional purposes of the interaction, while epistemic modality is indicative of the speaker's attitude towards the interlocutor and therefore serves relational purposes. As Koester concludes, the two functions can be engaged simultaneously and be achieved through the other linguistic strategies mentioned above. Koester also notices the role of affect in evaluation, which can constitute the main goal of a communication episode in a business context, since decision making may be reliant on it. Linguistic markers of the evaluative function can be adjectives, verbs, adverbs, nouns, or idioms.

These categories of interpersonal markers can be engaged either separately or in various combinations to convey relational meanings, as it will be illustrated in the ensuing description and interpretation of the linguistic relational devices identified in two corpora of business letters by Romanian and by Finnish students in Business English.

4 Description of Data and Research Questions

The main corpus (Corpus A) consists of fifty business letters produced by our final year students in economics and business administration. The second corpus (Corpus B)[1] is comprised of eight letters by Finnish students of English with some work

[1] The samples were obtained with the kind cooperation of Ryland Gibbs-Harris, then Centre Manager for Richard Lewis Communications in Tampere, Finland, and instructor in Business English and Communication Skills.

experience. This application will first focus on a detailed analysis of the linguistic realisation of face politeness as a manifestation of affect in the Romanian students' letters and then provide a general characterisation of the style in the Finnish students' letters in order to demonstrate that communication patterns can vary across cultures. Below is the writing task that generated the data.

> *Your company has employed an outside consultant to organise an exhibition of your products, to be held next month. His work is unsatisfactory, and your boss has now decided that you should take over full responsibility instead. Your boss has asked you to write a letter to the consultant to explain why he has been replaced. Write the letter to the consultant, (1) giving two reasons why he has been replaced; (2) telling him he will be paid for his work; and (3) asking him to brief you on the current situation.*[2]

The interactional situation is *asymmetrical*, with the sender speaking on behalf of the recipient's employer / superior. The task asks that the message to be conveyed should contain these acts: breaking the bad news and giving reasons for the dismissal of the consultant, i.e. criticising, making a request, and making a commitment / promise. The communicative context is *hierarchical*, given the employer's power advantage over the consultant and the considerable overall weightiness of the imposition on / threat to the addressee's face and social entitlements.

The business letter as a genre is predominantly *transactional* and goal-oriented in nature, so the expectation is that the sender will have a clear and concise idea about the message (s)he needs to convey and what the receiver needs to know so that the desired practical outcome is achieved. Nevertheless, in interactional contexts where the unpleasant message is likely to threaten the receiver's self- and public image, one will also expect that the addresser will be careful about the relational side of communication and therefore engage a courteous and constructive style.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify to what degree the Romanian and the Finnish respondents are mindful of the addressee's face sensibilities and sociality rights and what linguistic strategies are engaged for the expression of affect. The study will address two questions: (1) What are the linguistic strategies engaged for the expression of affect? (2) Do cultural values influence assumptions about what constitutes appropriate communication?

5 Data Analysis

Question 1: What are the linguistic strategies engaged for the expression of relational meaning?
Analysis of Corpus A

[2] University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, Business English Certificates, *Information for Candidates BEC Higher* (2011:8)

As a general characterisation, the emotional language prevailed over the transactional content in 80% of the letters; only five letters were written in a predominantly direct and moderately mitigated style; other five sounded awkward and inappropriately personal in a harshly critical and moralising tone. To analyse how the candidates marked their letters for affect, each meaning component of the message will be considered in detail.

First, the act of "Giving bad news" will be investigated, with instances of disclaimers, apologies, and expression of solidarity through show of sympathy being identified. The corpus shows abundant use of disclaimers by the sender to assure the addressee that (s)he had no role in the decision that is brought to the attention of the latter. Typically, the introductory paragraph provides an extensive explanation that it is somebody else's *decision* / somebody else who *decided* that the consultant should be replaced. The item *decided* and its derivative provide the sender the means to avoid responsibility for what is being announced, gain distance and therefore appear more objective and detached as a reporter of unwelcome news. *Decision* and *decide* also to fulfil the function of lexicalised markers of deontic obligation: their association with the decision maker (*our boss / company / firm / management department / staff*) implies the modal meaning of obligation coming from a super ordinate authority. Other similar lexicalised markers are *job*, *duty*, *in the name of*, *I was asked*. There are also several instances of modals of deontic obligation: *need to* and *have to*.

The expression *I am / We are sorry* encountered in half of the letters is used to perform three different acts: (1) prospective disclaimers (e.g. *I am sorry to inform you that you have been replaced*), (2) retrospective apologetic disclaimers (e.g. *We are sorry about this inconvenience*), and (3) solidarity through display of empathy (e.g. *I'm sorry for you*). Below is a selection of the most illustrative occurrences of speaker-oriented and addressee-oriented mitigating strategies that render the act of giving bad news tentative. In these instances of affective content, the sympathetic and apologetic feelings are conjoined (2&3), or reinforced through emphatics (2, 4, 5 & 6) and repetition (4, 5 & 6), or described in strongly emotionally loaded language (2, 5 & 6).

[1] I have the duty in the name of the company to announce you about the decision that has been taken.

[2] It's very difficult for me to give you this news because I really understand that this job is very important for you and your family.

[3] I know it's hard for you and I am sorry we had to do this.

[4] I am very sorry that I have to give you this news. (...) I am truly sorry for this situation.

[5] I need to tell you, with sadness, about our firm's decision to stop our collaboration with you. I am very sorry, but I will explain some reasons for your replacement. (…) I'm very sorry for the news I gave you.

[6] I want to make it clear that it wasn't a pleasure for me to write this letter. (…) Believe me this was a hard job to tell you that we must replace you.

The meaning component "Giving reasons for dismissal" presupposes engagement of evaluative language. In essence, the speech act of criticising implicates threat to the addressee's positive face or quality self-image, but since this

is a case of professional evaluation or work-related criticism, negative assessment also affects identity face, i.e. our sense of public worth, according to Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management model. The common assumption is that the sender will resort to linguistic mitigators to attenuate the humiliation that the addressee may experience.

The most frequent relational devices identified are (1) epistemic modals (*seems, think, I'm afraid*), (2) the empathetic parenthetical adverbial *unfortunately* to precede negative assessment, and (3) the acknowledgement of some merit in the consultant's professional activity to compensate for the ensuing unfavorable evaluation. In three instances, the evaluator emphasises the value placed on the positive side by using the pragmatic marker *First of all*. These strategies are used separately or in combination (7, 9 & 11) to enhance the soothing effect on the interlocutor's affected self- and public esteem. This interpretation is supported by the following samples of mitigated criticism:

[7] Unfortunately, it seems that your work is unsatisfactory and we have to replace you.
[8] I think that you didn't seem enthusiastic enough about the expansion of our company.
[9] First of all, I would like to say that the collaboration with your company was a big success and I truly think that in the future we will work together again. Unfortunately, we have decided to stop the collaboration.
[10] First of all I would like to say that we appreciate all you have done, but your efforts and hard work were not enough.
[11] My boss appreciates you because of your hard work and your good ideas but I think your business plan is not what he wants.

As for the substance proper of the assessment, the evaluative language falls into words with negative meaning, be they nouns, adjectives or adverbs, or words with positive meaning, most frequently verbs, used in negative statements. As shown in the table below, the Romanian students use quite a wide range of evaluative vocabulary to describe the negative performance of the consultant and therefore comply with the request of providing reasons for his replacement. Most of the lexical items for the function of describing the consultant's performance belong to two main word classes: adjectives and verbs.

Table 1. Evaluative language used by the Romanian respondents

Negative meaning (adjectives and nouns)	*Negated positive meaning (didn't / weren't)*

unsatisfactory (work / behaviour / ideas / skills) - incomplete (reports / tasks) - inefficient (plan) - superficial (research) - slow (progress) - unimpressive (results) - wrong (economic indicators) - insufficient (ideas and skills) - unsuccessful (plan) - late - tired - (treated your colleagues) inappropriately - (moved too) slowly - mistakes - errors - problems - lack (of concern) - delay	- seem enthusiastic - respect indications / your program - rise to our expectations - succeed to expand the business - focus entirely on the project - meet our requirements - show enough interest - collaborate / cooperate with the team - analyze the market - have solid knowledge - able to come up with ideas - dedicated enough

While it is only natural that one should make such lexical choices as above to provide reasons for the termination of the business cooperation, a few of the informants chose to amplify criticism by using intensifiers, as in *huge mistakes*, *a lot of errors*, *extremely serious reasons*, *(some reports) weren't good at all*, *the most unsuccessful plan I have ever seen*, or even add a tough moralising note to their negative feedback. However, there are a few attempts to diminish the negative meaning of the evaluative statements. For example, the phrase *in our opinion* implies that the negative remark can be contradicted, leaving thus room for the addressee's own opinion. Similarly, the adverbial *in the last days* indicates that at least the consultant's earlier performance may have been positive.

The third speech act included in the letters is the request that the consultant should provide an update on the current situation. Making a request constitutes a threat to the addressee's negative face or equity rights. Although the speaker is in a high-power position, the Romanian respondents manifest an exaggerated concern with protecting the consultant's face, which is noticeable in the use of mitigating language and distancing strategies that result in long and heavy formulations and even contradictory combinations of affective meanings. The most frequent occurrences are the deontic modals *have to, need to, want to*, the tentative expressions *would like (to ask)*, *would appreciate if*, *if it's possible*, *if you can*, the institutional *we*, and the invocation of a higher authority to deny any responsibility for the request.

The fourth speech act that the informants were required to perform in their letters is the promise on behalf of the company to pay the consultant for the work already performed. The task of undertaking to do a favour to the consultant, after having given him the bad news and the negative feedback, and having asked him for a brief, apparently thrilled the students, for this meaning component contains the most richly emotional linguistic manifestation in the whole corpus. Besides the act of pledging and guaranteeing (*will*, *assure*, *guarantee, of course*), which in two

instances is accompanied by details supporting the materialisation of the promise (12 & 13), there are frequent occurrences of expressive speech acts like thanks (14), appreciation (15), overt display of enthusiasm (16), and apologies (17).

[12] Of course money is not a problem and we assure you that your work will be paid on time.

[13] I want to assure you that you will be paid for the work you have done for us until now. I have already given your contacts to Financial Department so that they will contact you for a bank account.

[14] We thank you for your job and you will receive shortly the money.

[15] He [the boss] appreciates you because of your hard work and your good ideas. He wants you to be announced that you will be paid for your work.

[16] I'm happy to announce that you will be paid for your services.

[17] I want you to know that you will be paid for your work and we are sorry for this inconvenience.

The most obvious pattern of transition from the meaning components containing face threatening content to the commissive act of rewarding the consultant is the encouraging and comforting phrase *not to worry* (18). In an excess of grandeur, the company representative promises additional favours (19). Another strategy with a similar effect, though less emotional, is the concessive argument introduced by *however* and *but*, doubled by *even if* in two instances for the sake of emphasising the company's fair-play behaviour in business (20).

[18] You don't need to worry; the company pays you for your work and effort.

[19] You will be paid for the work that you have already done. In addition, you will receive an extra payment to encourage you to look for another job.

[20] However, you will be paid for your work even if it is unsatisfactory from our view.

Only 10% of the Romanian respondents used the verb *to inform* to adopt a neutral stance by formulating announcements that qualify as constatives, rather than commissives. At the opposite pole, there are pompous, wordy, ambiguous or contradictory formulations, as shown in (22).

[21] I inform you that the company will pay you for your work.

[22] I want you to have the guarantee that you will be paid for your work because we are a serious company and we know to give recompense for people who worked for us.

The closing paragraphs in the letters also provide examples of rapport enhancement strategies, in particular through affective association, which is achieved mainly through the use of the verb *hope* to express optimism for future cooperation. Other expressive acts are thanking, (reinforced) apologising, and well-wishing. Some final paragraphs have a double (25) or a triple function (26). By contrast, some candidates chose to close on an altogether unfriendly and unnecessarily critical note (27) or by putting together incompatible acts (28).

[23] I hope we will keep in touch and maybe in the future we will collaborate again.

[24] Finally, I want to thank you for your services and for your time.

[25] I'm sorry and I hope that in the future you will be able to get results.

[26] Thank you for your understanding and help and I wish you all the best in the future and hope for a better and longer future collaboration.

[27] I hope that in the future you will be more careful and that you will take your responsibilities more seriously.

[28] Thank you for your services. I hope you understand the situation, because we want to expand the business and you aren't the consultant that could do that and that is the reason why you have been replaced. Good luck in future.

All in all, the abundance of affective language engaged in performing the act of promising and in closing the message proves that the students relished the occasion of restoring the addressee's positive / quality face.

Analysis of Corpus B

The most conspicuous features of the samples by the Finnish respondents are: (1) the prevalence of factual content over emotions, (2) job orientation and, (3) direct but polite style.

Most of the speech acts performed are of constative and directive nature, a trait that derives from the addressers' concern with the transactional aspect of the message. The expressive acts of thanking, apologising, and regretting occur in each sample, but they do not constitute the core of the content as in Corpus A. The persuasiveness of the message is achieved not through effusive manifestations, but through a formal and detached, direct, and polite or minimally mitigated style. These instances illustrate a task-oriented style that is trimmed of emotional language.

[29] I regret to inform that we are not satisfied with the quality of your service and are thus unwilling to continue the co-operation between us.

[30] So at this date we serve notice of termination on our agreement. You will be paid for the work done this far.

[31] The board has decided to replace you and would like you to brief me in what has been done and what should be done in the near future in the projects you were in charge of.

The preoccupation with the clarity and conciseness of the message also results in a professional layout given by a text organised into distinctive paragraphs, each focusing on one meaning component. With no exception, the letters all begin with some minimal background information about the business agreement in question (32 & 33) and conclude with precise instructions and deadlines as to a subsequent course of action (34 & 35).

[32] We have earlier agreed on business consulting with your company in order to expand our current product portfolio. The details of work have been defined in agreement signed on 1 March 2011.

[33] Your company and VTT Expert Services Ltd have made the agreement of you working as a consultant when expanding our business in your country.

[34] At the end I would appreciate if you could give me a shot brief about the work done and the current situation. You can send me at the same time the account of used working hours for the payment.

[35] Please tell us also (about) your latest situation in that work. Give us a short report, deadline 3 June.

In short, in the same given context, the Finnish students view language almost strictly as a means of performing a transaction, while for the Romanian students language is mainly selected for its relational function. Based on these findings, the second research question will be considered.

Question 2: Does culture influence assumptions about what constitutes appropriate communication?

The high incidence of expressions of affect in the Romanian students' letters qualifies their communication style as markedly emotive and other-oriented. The numerous cases of inconsistent and, in some cases, inappropriately personal relational strategies speak about what in our informants' perception was a challenging situation where they felt they had to pursue irreconcilable goals, namely both to criticise the consultant and to maintain the relationship. The vague and protracted arguments and explanations are features that derive from an effort to accommodate the two opposite communicative purposes and counterbalance the FTAs by marking them for dispreferredness, which resulted in more complexly structured formulations. On the other hand, the Finnish students' letters stand out as prevalently business-like, direct, minimally tentative, but nevertheless polite / politic.

To answer this question, the findings on the differences in the discursive style in the two corpora will be related to a research-based characterisation of the cultural behaviour of Romanians and Finns provided by Lewis (2006). He associates each country with one of these three broad cultural types: linear-active, multi-active and reactive. Businesspeople in linear cultures tend to manifest task-oriented behaviour and follow plans strictly (e.g. Germans and Swiss), while those from the multi-active category display a preference for relationship-oriented conduct, tolerance of loquacity and an emotionally confrontational style in communication (e.g. Italians, Latin Americans and Arabs). Reactive cultures distinguish themselves as reserved, silent, polite, thoughtful and non-confrontational (e.g. Chinese, Japanese and Finns). These culture-based differences in behavior explain why "Italians see Germans as stiff and time-dominated; Germans see Italians as gesticulating in chaos; the Japanese observe and quietly learn from both" (Lewis 2006: 27).

As it can be guessed from the discussion of corpus A, Romania's cultural classification is "multi-active, dialogue-oriented" (Lewis 2006: 324). Romanians take pride in being a Balkan anomaly and claim affinities with the Mediterranean cultures. They engage a personal style of address, are oratorical by nature, sophisticated in discourse and therefore used to lengthy presentations and complex arguments. Romanians dislike impolite, aggressive behaviour and direct expression of disagreement. In the July 2011 newsletter, in his message entitled *The European Dream Team?*, Lewis labels Romanians as "poetic", a description validated in the following instance in Corpus A.

[36] Your plan is not adequate for what the company dreams to obtain.

How does Lewis portray the Finns and their typical interactional style? The Finns place themselves between the linear-active and reactive types, with a dominant tendency to value truth over diplomacy and officialdom over informality. These values make Finns task-oriented, reticent, taciturn and respect-oriented interrelators. In the same newsletter (see above) Finns are portrayed as "commonsensical". Having lived both in Japan and Finland, Lewis remarks the two cultures have similar

discourse: "I have great respect for and sympathy with the admirable reserve and obvious sincerity of Finns and Japanese" (2006: 333).

It can be concluded that Lewis's characterisation of the two discourse styles is confirmed by the findings of the present study. This conclusion leads to the assertion that assumptions about appropriate communication are influenced by (differing) cultural values, attitudes and expectations. It could be assumed that in a real situation of the type described in the writing task, where the communicators are a Finn and a Romanian, the former would perceive the Romanian style as intimidatingly personal and effusive, while the Romanian might feel offended by the distant and official style of the Finn.

6 Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the notions of face facework and politeness, which are crucial phenomena in the study of interpersonal communication as they involve the expression of a social image to others as part of a network of relationships in a specific culture. All the postmodern alternatives to the traditional view on face and politeness emphasise the cognitive and interactional dimensions of face and politeness, the differentiation between anticipated and inferred politeness based on the role of utterance interpretation by participants engaged in communication, and the cultural variability of what is viewed as politic / appropriate behaviour. The tenet which unites these models is that face and politeness can only be studied relevantly from a discursive perspective as instantiations of connectedness / association and separatedness / dissociation manifested in the actual use of language in interpersonal communication by participants who function as partners in a joint relational and interactional project.

The study of the rapport management strategies used by the Romanian and the Finnish respondents in their business letters in response to the same situation points to marked differences in how language is engaged: the former displayed an inclination to place high value on mitigating the hostile effect and the imposition of the face threatening acts on the receiver, while the latter were concerned primarily with the transactional aspect of the message. The existence of cultural distinctions between discursive styles influences the priorities of (intercultural) business communication training programmes in a foreign language. For this reason, emphasis needs to be placed on the trainees' extralinguistic competence of adjusting their communication style to the expectations of their interlocutors, especially in intercultural professional interaction. Sensitising them with respect to cultural differences in communication can facilitate the adoption of appropriate cultural behaviour in the target culture, which will facilitate the achievement of the desired effect of a communicative exchange.

References

Arundale, R. (2006). Face as relational and interactional: A communication framework for research on face, facework, and politeness. *Journal of Politeness Research*, *2*(2), 193-216. https://doi.org/10.1515/PR.2006.011

Bakhtin, M. (1986). The problem of speech genres (Vern W. McGee, Trans.). In C. Emerson, & M. Holquist (Eds.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 60-102). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (2003). Face and politeness: New (insights) for (old) concepts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *35*(10-11), 1453-1469. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00173-X.

Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996) *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fraser, B. (1980). Conversational mitigation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *4*(4), 341-350. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(80)90029-6

Fraser, B. (1990). Perspectives on politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *14*(2), 219-236. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(90)90081-N

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviour.* Aldine.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole, & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics*, III (pp. 41-58).

Haugh, M. (2009). Face and interaction. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini, & M. Haugh (Eds.), *Face, communication and social interaction* (pp. 1-30). Equinox.

Koester, A. (2006). *Investigating workplace discourse.* Routledge.

Lewis, R. D. (2006). *When cultures collide. Leading across cultures.* Nicholas Brealey International.

Locher, M. A., & Watts, R. J. (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, *1*(1), 9-33. https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.9

Mao, L. R. (1994). Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *21*(5), 451-486. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(94)90025-6

Matsumoto, Y. (1989). Politeness and conversational universals – Observations from Japanese. *Multilingua*, *8*(2-3), 207-222. https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1989.8.2-3.207

Ng, H. S., & Bradac, J. (1993). *Power in language*. Sage Publications.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (1995). *Intercultural communication.* Blackwell.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). Rapport management: A framework for analysis. In H. Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures* (pp. 11-46). Continuum.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1994). Face and facework: An introduction. In S. Ting-Toomey (Ed.), *The challenge of facework: Cross-cultural and interpersonal issues* (pp. 1-14). State University of New York-Albany Press.

Watts, R. J. (2008). Linguistic politeness and politic verbal behaviour: Reconsidering claims for universality. In R. J. Watts, S. Ide, & K. Ehlich (Eds.), *Politeness in language*: *Studies in its history, theory and practice* (pp. 43-70). Mouton de Gruyter.

Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Zdrenghea, M., & Hoye, L. F. (1995). *Modal verbs and modal expressions in English.* Clusium.