

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN BELF E-MAILING 'Only' a matter of shared understanding?

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Abstract – Research in BELF (English as a Business Lingua Franca) has increasingly focused on pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of business communication (Kecskes 2019). In particular, a number of studies has explored the employment of Communication Strategies (CSs) in interactions in the workplace, both in oral communication (Franceschi 2019; Haegeman 2002; Poncini 2004) and in digital written exchanges (Incelli 2013; Ren 2018; Zummo 2018). CSs have mainly been analysed from a perspective of 'problematicity' (Bialystok 1990), in that they are usually presented as moves undertaken to repair (Watterson 2008), signal (Cogo, Pitzl 2016), or pre-empt (Mauranen 2006) problems of understanding, with the aim of achieving successful communication (Pitzl 2010). This paper suggests a broadening of the notion of communication strategy in the domain of BELF that includes the achievement of goals other than, or at least complementary to, shared understanding. It does so by analysing some examples from a collection of business e-mails which seem to suggest that there may be other reasons, besides mutual intelligibility, for business partners to employ certain communication strategies. The pedagogical implications of this broadening are also considered, with reference to the findings of current research concerning Business English (BE) teaching material (Vettorel, Franceschi 2020).

Keywords: BELF; Business English; Communication Strategies; Business E-mailing; Business Rapport-Building.

1. Introduction

In recent years, research in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has expanded to contexts of international communication within specific domains, particularly in the domain of business. The increasing interest in global business communication and in the role played therein by English as the working language has led to the coinage of a new acronym, BELF, originally standing for 'Business English as a Lingua Franca' (Gerritsen, Nickerson 2009; Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* 2005), and then redefined as 'Business ELF' (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013). Indeed, globalization has massively changed the business environment, transforming it into a multicultural, multilingual and multimodal context which requires of professionals in the sector a combination of multiple competences. In this

regard, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) have developed the notion of Global Communicative Competence (GCC). This includes not only competence in business as such (“business knowhow”), but also the ability to successfully exploit a repertoire of linguistic resources in a fluid setting, where speakers of different mother tongues work together relying on a main shared code (“BELF competence”); moreover, it includes awareness of the challenges posed by the different cultural backgrounds that have come into connection due to cross-border mergers and partnerships, and thanks to the striking development of multimodal communication technologies (“multicultural competence”).

The multilingual and multicultural nature of global business has heightened the need for business partners to develop awareness of pragmatic strategies (Cogo 2012) that may contribute to successful interactions, or, on the contrary, lead to failure in communication, with implications for the achievement of transactional goals. Indeed, the common denominator amongst the multiple abilities of which GCC is comprised seems to be a form of ‘strategic competence’, that is, the ability to accommodate to the communicative event – and to the participants therein – both linguistically and culturally (Cogo 2016). This has aroused interest in the type of strategies adopted in BELF contexts, making communication strategies (CSs) a major topic of investigation in BELF research, with regard to both oral communication (Franceschi 2017, 2019; Haegeman 2002; Poncini 2003, 2004; Rogerson-Revell 2010; Wolfartsberger 2011), and, to a lesser extent, digital written interaction (Carrió Pastor 2015; Incelli 2013; Zummo 2018).

The classification and the analysis of CSs, however, have mostly been carried out from a ‘problematicity’ (Bialystok 1990) perspective, in that CSs are normally presented as strategic moves initiated by BELF interactants to tackle problems of understanding, mainly in the sense of intelligibility.

Based on the analysis of a small corpus of business email-exchanges amongst business professionals, this paper claims that communicative effectiveness in the business world may not depend *only* on the achievement of mutual intelligibility. The completion of transactional tasks, in reality, heavily depends also, and at least equally, on the construction of trusting, harmonious and smooth interpersonal relationships (Crook, Booth 1997; Spencer-Oatey 2005). As the empirical investigation reported on in this paper seeks to show, the use of certain CSs may be driven not so much by the need to negotiate meaning for the sake of shared understanding, but rather by the interactants’ willingness to build rapport as the precondition for successful business.

As explained in the following sections, what emerges from the email-exchanges analysed herein seems to indicate a broader understanding of the notion of ‘communication strategy’ when it comes to the workplace; at the

same time, it appears to call for a reconsideration of the very aim of the business professionals' training that is provided through ELT business materials and resources (Caleffi, Poppi 2019).

2. The notion of 'communication strategy': from SLA to ELF

Although the beginning of CS research dates back to the 1970s, it still seems difficult to provide a rigorous definition of 'communication strategy' on which researchers would agree. The term was first conceptualised in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Selinker (1972) first used it to refer to the ways in which second language learners deal with the difficulties they encounter during communication when their linguistic resources are inadequate. Many more, and often diverging, definitions have been provided since then. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) have included the notion of CSs in their model of communicative competence as one of the constituents of strategic competence. They maintain that strategic competence is made up of "verbal and non verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale, Swain 1980, p. 30). Tarone (1981) claims that CSs "are used to compensate for some deficiency in the linguistic system, and focus on exploring alternate ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message without necessarily considering situational appropriateness" (Tarone 1981, p. 287), the primary function of CSs being "to negotiate an agreement on meaning between two interlocutors" (Tarone 1981, p. 288). Faerch and Kasper (1984) have defined CSs from a psycholinguistic perspective, and related them to individual language users' experience of communicative problems, and their "plans" on how to solve such problems. As Dörnyei and Scott (1997) maintain in their comprehensive overview of CSs literature, CSs research was particularly productive in the 1990s, with the release of the first monographs (Byalstock 1990), further empirical studies and conceptual analyses leading to different conceptualisations and classifications (Yule, Tarone 1991), and work on the teachability of CSs (Dörnyei, Thurrell 1991). Quite interestingly for the topic of the present paper, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) remark the fact that when it comes to establishing the principles based on which CSs can be identified as such, "two defining criteria are consistently mentioned, *problem-orientedness* and *consciousness*" (Dörnyei, Scott 1997, p. 182).¹ As for the former criterion, it seems

¹ Emphasis in the original.

undeniable that in early CSs research problematicity is part and parcel of the conceptualisation of CSs.

Research on CSs has become relevant to ELF studies with the increasing interest in the pragmatics and dynamics of ELF interaction – particularly, with the shift of focus in ELF research from the description of pronunciation (Jenkins 2000) and lexico-grammar ‘regularities’ (Seidlhofer 2004) observed across ELF users, to the adoption of the communities of practice (Wenger 1998) framework (Seidlhofer 2007), and later on to the analysis of “the underlying processes that led to ELF users’ linguistic choices as they negotiated intercultural communication” (Jenkins 2017, p. 8). As Björkman (2014, p. 126) suggests, “the notion of problematicity is surely not irrelevant to ELF investigation”. Indeed, contexts of ELF communication are characterised by “asymmetries” (Linell 1998) strictly connected with the multilingual and multicultural nature of ELF interaction. ELF speakers’ awareness of such asymmetries somehow provides them with a certain degree of “preparedness” (Björkman 2014) towards communication problems that might occur in the course of interaction. Which is why they are more likely to do ‘pro-active’ work to prevent miscommunication, besides adopting remedy strategies when miscommunication does occur (Pitzl 2010). This has increasingly led ELF researchers to ‘group’ CSs – and to accordingly organise their classification – within three main typologies: pre-emptive CSs (Kaur 2009; Mauranen 2006), signalling CSs (Cogo, Pitzl 2016), and repair CSs (Kaur 2011; Watterson 2008). Irrespective of the typology, the common aim these CSs seem to share is that of tackling language-related problems of understanding for the sake of successful communication and the achievement of share understanding (Pitzl 2010).

Yet, empirical studies have shown that problems of understanding occur infrequently in ELF interaction (Deterding 2013; Mauranen 2006; Poncini 2003). Which might in itself suggest that there may be other reasons why ELF speakers use CSs, and certain CSs in particular. These other reasons may be related to the very meaning of the term ‘strategy’. As Dörnyei and Scott (1997) remark, “*strategy* in general has come to refer to the implementation of a set of procedures for accomplishing something” (Dörnyei, Scott 1997, p. 179),² that is, in Bialystok’s (1990, p. 1) terms, to the “wilful planning to achieve explicit goals”. According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), this implies that, in its broadest and most general sense, “a *communication strategy* [...] is a plan of action to accomplish a communication goal” (Dörnyei, Scott 1997, p. 179).³ Still, the achievement

² Emphasis in the original.

³ Emphasis in the original.

of communication goals may not be dependent exclusively on the ability to tackle language-related problems of understanding, especially when it comes to high-stakes interactions like those characterising business communication, as is discussed in the next sections.

3. Research on Communication Strategies in BELF contexts

The adoption of the communities of practice framework in ELF research, and the increasing interest in the dynamics of interaction in multilingual and multicultural settings have certainly contributed to the expansion of CSs research to the realm of BELF communication.

Similarly to ELF research, most studies exploring the use of CSs in BELF contexts have concerned oral interactions. Haegeman (2002), for example, has analysed business telephone calls in ELF focusing on strategies of simplification of language usage (the so-called 'foreigner talk') to compensate for the co-participant's lack of linguistic proficiency; Poncini (2004) has investigated the exploitation of multilingual resources to effectively participate in multicultural business meetings; Rogerson-Revell (2010) has analysed strategies adopted in international business meetings to accommodate linguistic differences and difficulties; Franceschi (2017) has considered the role of linguacultural repertoires as an asset to ELF talk in business contexts. Some research has also explored the use of CSs in international digital environments such as Instagram (Brunner, Diemer 2019), and, especially, in online BELF interactions, mainly business e-mail exchanges. Indeed, e-mails have replaced other forms of traditional written business communication, like business letters or faxes (Guffey 2010; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanraanta 2011). Several studies have examined not only the linguistic and discursive features of e-mails in the workplace (Carrió Pastor, Muñiz Calderón 2012; Gimenez 2000, 2006; Kankaanraanta 2006; Petterson 2015), but also the pragmatics of intercultural business discourse via e-mail (Carrió Pastor 2015; Davis *et al.* 2009; Freytag 2019; Lenassi 2015; Lorenzo-Dus, Bou-Franch 2013; Roshid *et al.* 2018), and, specifically – though to a lesser extent – the CSs used by ELF speakers in business e-mail interaction (Lindgren 2014; Millot 2017; Ren 2018).

When analysing CSs in business e-mailing, once again the focus is usually on their use as a means to signal, prevent or remedy occurrences of misunderstanding mainly related to linguistic asymmetries. Less attention, instead, has been paid to the interactional dimension of e-mailing (Caleffi forthcoming). In fact, business communication does not only have a transactional function, but it also entails an interactional dimension (Köster

2006, 2010; Planken 2005) without which business would not be carried out successfully. This is particularly true when communication occurs via e-mail, having e-mails replaced also face-to-face interactions in business, such as meetings or telephone calls (Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta 2011). Awareness of the importance of building rapport with business partners (Kalocsai 2011) is a fundamental component of the business know-how that professionals are required to have, as “rapport [...] is a business tool which helps in all transactions” (Hollman, Kleiner 1997, p. 194). For this reason, it seems reasonable to think that the employment of certain CSs may be aimed not so much at tackling (possible) breakdowns in communication due to code-related issues. Rather, it may be driven by the interactants’ willingness to establish the solidarity which is expected amongst the members of communities of practice in business. This is even more so in a cross-cultural setting like that of BELF. Here, communities of practice are comprised of professionals who not only have different linguistic backgrounds, but first and foremost different business practices, that is, different ways of doing business, with their own peculiar interactional dynamics. Lack of awareness of asymmetries in this respect may significantly jeopardise business, which is why the communication goals that CSs are supposed to accomplish in business interaction cannot but include relational/interpersonal goals such as the achievement of affinity (Wiemann, Daly 1994), solidarity (Köster 2006) and rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005). This is only possible if business professionals are prepared to take into account and to adjust to their business partners’ interpersonal-pragmatics practices. Such awareness can develop directly in the workplace, but it can also be enhanced by well-designed business training.

The next section provides examples of CSs that are used in BELF e-mail exchanges with the aim of establishing smooth working relationships, and, ultimately, of building rapport.

4. Examples of CSs in e-mail interaction aimed at building rapport

The examples illustrated in this section are taken from a self-compiled corpus of 240 real-life business e-mails written by BELF users of different L1s, namely Italian, German, French, English, Danish, Swedish, and Chinese. The e-mails correspond to 61 exchanges of an average of 4 e-mails each, and were collected over a time span of 4 months, from November 2018 to February 2019. The exchanges were identified based on the topic, in the sense that sometimes they were carried out in different steps during the same day, or even the next day, but still concerned the original topic. The e-mails were

written and received by Italian professionals working in either the commercial or the customer service departments of four Italian companies operating in the fields of car-trading, manufacturing of tights and socks, ICT assistance, transport and logistics. The data were collected after sending the participating companies an informed consent, where they were provided with details about the research project,⁴ and guaranteed anonymity. Anonymity was ensured by removing from the e-mails all personal data such as the names⁵ and e-mail addresses of the writers and of their companies (including those of any other person or company mentioned in the e-mails), and any confidential⁶ information concerning their business (for example prices, product names, etc.). The only personal information that was disclosed in the compilation of the corpus was the L1 of the writers, which was attributed based on the country where the respective company was located.⁷

As explained in the previous sections, the aim of the present study was to address the issue of whether CSs in BELF e-mail interaction are 'only' employed to handle language-related problems of understanding, or, as is claimed here, for other reasons and purposes that are inherent to the dynamics of business communication. Indeed, the analysis of the corpus has identified three CSs that appear to be used for reasons other than that of tackling language-related problems of mutual intelligibility, as the selected extracts provided hereunder show. The first one is metalinguistic comments (Planken 2005), the second is code-switching (Deterding 2013), and the third is small talk (Pullin 2010). In fact, to the knowledge of the author the latter has not yet been classified as a communication strategy in the several categorisations produced so far (see Björkman 2014 for a comprehensive overview). Still, if we adopt the above mentioned broad definition of 'communication strategy' provided by Dörnyei and Scott (1997, p. 179) as "a plan of action to accomplish a communication goal", and if we agree that communication goals may include interpersonal goals, as argued in the previous sections, then it seems reasonable to claim that small talk is a 'planned' form of interaction, whose main aim is to create a smooth environment between interactants as the necessary precondition to carry out successful business transactions.

⁴ PRIN 2015 Prot. 2015REZ4EZ, "English as a Lingua Franca in domain-specific contexts of intercultural communication: A Cognitive-functional Model for the analysis of ELF accommodation strategies in unequal migration contexts, digital-media virtual environments, and multicultural ELF classrooms".

⁵ Only the initial letter was retained.

⁶ The companies were specifically asked to provide a list of the information appearing in the e-mails that they regarded as confidential.

⁷ This seemed a reasonable assumption, although offering no certainty about the actual L1s of the writers.

The first example⁸ (Example 1) is an extract from an exchange between an Italian male speaker (I) and a Chinese female speaker (C).⁹ The two interactants are dealing with the issue of a contract that the Chinese interlocutor seems to need for her company to pay for the order they have just received from Italy. Below is the extract:

Example 1

- (C) Thanks for you sent me our order, for payment we need a contract, and sorry we can't understand French, so would you please sent me the contract for English, thanks *and my name is Y :)
- (I) [...] Concerning the contract, of course we are very happy to start a cooperation with you and we want to make it easy and correct for both of us, however it is not very clear what you do mean with it. [...] Thank you in advance for your cooperation and understanding.
- (C) Sorry I didn't say clean enough, I mean u send me the excel in Franch, but we don't use France at all, although I can understand what is this mean, but we wish all the excel and contract can be in English, and when we pay you, we need a contract, do you have it? [...] sorry to confuse you [...]
- (I) I understand you prefer English, no problem we will send you all documents and information in English, we also use English.

The extract starts with the interactants trying to negotiate the meaning of 'contract'. To this purpose, (I) asks for clarification about what is meant by 'contract' ("it is not clear what you do mean by it"). Interestingly, this request for clarification comes only after (I) having remarked his willingness to cooperate with the business partner (C) to make things smooth for both ("of course we are very happy to start a cooperation with you and we want to make it easy and correct for both of us"). In itself, this can be seen as a hint to the fact that (I) is particularly concerned with the establishment of good relationships from the very beginning ("start a cooperation"), in this case by explicitly offering cooperation (Caleffi forthcoming). The same concern is shared by (C), as can be seen in the first words of her reply ("Sorry I didn't say clean enough") as well as in the final ones, at the end of the same turn ("sorry to confuse you"). Indeed, the interaction goes on with (C) providing what is supposed to be an explanation of what she means by 'contract' ("I

⁸ All examples are verbatim.

⁹ (C) is actually named Y., where Y. is the abbreviation of the real name to guarantee anonymity.

mean [...]”), but in reality is not. The Asian partner only speaks about an Excel document (“the excel”), an explanation that does not appear to actually clarify what is meant by ‘contract’, and therefore does not seem to explicitly respond to the Italian interlocutor’s request. Instead, (C) moves on to comment on the language of such ‘contract’ (“u send me the excel in Franch, but we don’t use France at all”), and soon remarks she would have the linguistic proficiency to understand it (“although I can understand what is this mean”), the real problem being, however, the apparent corporate’s (“we”) need to have a document in English (“we wish all the excel and contract can be in English”). This metalinguistic comments are promptly responded to by (I), who seems to let the negotiation of the actual meaning of ‘contract’ pass, and to focus, instead, on the partner’s metalinguistic comments (“I understand you prefer English, no problem we will send you all documents and information in English”), soon specifying that English is his company’s (“we”) business language too (“we also use English”), thus establishing a common ground which generates ‘solidarity’ (Caleffi forthcoming; Köster 2006).

What emerges from this exchange is that the two interactants seem more concerned with rapport management, namely, the management of “the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people” (Spencer-Oatey 2005, p. 96), than with meaning negotiation. This is particularly evident in their use of metalinguistic comments. Interestingly, by dealing with the issue of the contract language, they appear to be willing to make each other aware of their companies’ business practices, that is, in this specific case, the practice of doing business in English. English as the working language of both companies becomes the interlocutors’ common ground: neither of them is a native speaker of English, and still it is English that allows them to conduct business, despite their remarking their knowledge of other L2s, French here. And this is another component of the common ground they share and which they want to point out: they are both multilingual non-native speakers of English who come from different cultural-bound ways of doing business, and are yet interested in adapting to each other’s business culture. As Planken (2005, p. 397) puts it, “by pointing out and acknowledging cultural differences, participants try to create a temporary 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”.

The second example (Example 2) is an extract from an exchange between an Italian male speaker (I) and a British female speaker (B).¹⁰ The two interactants are dealing with the topic of a delivery from Italy to Britain. Below is the extract:

Example 2

- (I) Hello M.,
Tutto OK?
P.
- (B) Ciao P. Tutto OK. Grande P.!
Please could you ask them to book in slot AM or PM?
All the best,
M.

The extract is from a longer exchange in which the Italian and the British interactants arrange for the delivery of goods from Italy to the UK. In the extract, (I) wants to make sure that the delivery of the goods to the British partner's company has been carried out successfully. While the rest of the exchange is in English, this extract starts with a short e-mail written by (I), whose beginning is in English ("Hello, M."), but which soon switches to Italian ("Tutto ok?"). The Italian phrase is a very common formula, which in itself suggests some kind of 'fellowship', in the sense that it is a very direct and informal way of asking about how things are, and in fact it is especially used in interactions amongst friends and fellows. Quite interestingly, (B) adopts the same strategy, though inverting the direction of the switch: she starts in Italian ("Ciao P. Tutto ok. Grande P.!") and then shifts to English ("Please could you ask them to book in slot AM or PM? All the best.").

In this example, code-switching is not used to handle any problems of understanding. Instead, it appears to be aimed at maintaining a smooth relationship between the two interlocutors. This is obtained by the two interactants showing each other respect for and acknowledgement of their reciprocal languages. More than that, the British partner also shows an understanding of the pragmatics of the phrase "Tutto OK?", as she appears to be perfectly 'tuned in' to her interlocutor's register by adopting the same expression in her reply ("Tutto OK") and, even more tellingly, the expression "Grande P.!", which, again, shows a certain degree of 'fellowship'. This seems to support Deterding's (2013) claim that code-switching may also be

¹⁰In the original examples, the names were anonymised using only the initial letters of the writers, as explained above. They were respectively P. (for the Italian writer) and M. (for the British writer).

successfully used to build rapport between two people in ELF interaction. In this particular case, code-switching helps the two business professionals to maintain rapport by maintaining smoothness (Spencer-Oatey, Xing 2003), a goal which is achieved thanks to the British interlocutor's adaptation to the Italian partner's informal and 'friendly' register, and in the partner's own language, before shifting to English.

The third example (Example 3) is an extract from an exchange between an Italian female interlocutor (I) and a French male interlocutor (F).¹¹ The extract corresponds to the first move in the exchange, which appears to be the first contact after the participation of both interactants, seemingly separately, in an exhibition in Munich. Below is the extract:

Example 3

- (I) Hello C., I'm back from Munich.
How was the end of the show for you? Something interesting?
Do you think it's possible to make [...] in size [...]?
- (F) Hello A.,
yes, thanks. And for you?
In attached you can find a XXL diagram.
What do you think about this?

As we can see, the two business partners have a task that they need to carry out. Indeed, (I) asks about the possibility to realise a certain product in a certain size ("Do you think it's possible to make [...] in size [...]?"), and (F) provides a relevant answer by sending a diagram, and asking for the partner's opinion ("In attached you can find a XXL diagram. What do you think about this?"). Yet, in their exchange they do not go straight to the specific business task. Instead, they ask each other about the exhibition they have both been to, with (I) informing (F) she has just come back from the fair ("I'm back from Munich") and asking her interlocutor about how his visit to the fair was, rather than about the exhibition itself ("How was the end of the show for you? Something interesting?"). To which (F) replies very briefly, but still formulating the reply in a way that shows his interest in (F)'s experience *with* the exhibition, rather than in the exhibition as such ("yes, thanks. And for you?"). The decision of starting the exchange with some small talk seems to be aimed at 'preparing the ground' for the task to be performed by creating a relaxed atmosphere, and showing each other's concern about the degree of

¹¹ In the original examples, the names were anonymised using only the initial letters of the writers, as explained above. They were respectively A. (for the Italian writer) and C. (for the French writer).

enjoyment of their visit to the exhibition. In other words, the two interactants seem to share the belief that just a few words not directly related to the task at hand can be useful to create that sense of belonging to a community of practice (in this case, the community of practice of the fellow business people who work in the sector, and therefore went to the fair in question) that will help each other be more willing to cooperate in the fulfilment of the business task. Indeed, studies on small talk (Holmes 2000; Köster 2006, 2010; Pullin 2010) have shown that “rather than being peripheral to the workplace, ‘relational talk’ provides a space for business interlocutors to liaise, [...] thus contributing to the success of the business” (Caleffi forthcoming). Small talk is therefore a prime means to foster rapport between business professionals. In fact, it increases the probability of avoiding or successfully overcoming communication problems (Pullin 2010).

The relational function of small talk is even clearer in the fourth extract (Example 4), where an Italian male speaker (I) and a Swedish male interlocutor (S)¹² begin their exchange with a comment on (I)’s apparent recent trip to Sweden. Below is the extract:

Example 4

- (S) Hi M.,
How are things with you? Did you miss Sweden yet? 😊
I need your help with.
- (I) Hi A.,
Not missing Sweden yet...😊 I feel pretty fine here down in Italy...
Yes, no problem.

Also in this case, the interaction begins with small talk before moving on to the ‘actual’ business (“I need your help with.”). (S) wants to know if (I) is fine, and whether (I) misses Sweden (“How are things with you? Did you miss Sweden yet?”), from which we understand (I) has just come back from (S)’s country. The emoji (“😊”) at the end reinforces the relational dimension. Indeed, (I) also includes the same emoji, and replies by ‘reassuring’ (S) that everything is ok. Interestingly, in this case the Italian interlocutor seems not to be fully aware that his presumably humorously saying “I feel pretty fine here down in Italy” could be interpreted by the Swedish partner as a hint to the fact that (I) may not have liked Sweden, the south (“here down”, in this case Italy) being more enjoyable than the north (in this case Sweden). This

¹²In the original examples, the names were anonymised using only the initial letters of the writers, as explained above. They were respectively M. (for the Italian writer) and A. (for the Swedish writer).

suggests that some aspects of small talk, like the use of humour (Di Ferrante 2013) – which is often employed to convey solidarity, especially in some cultures, like Italy's, but not necessarily in all – may deserve more attention in a multicultural setting, and require a higher degree of strategic competence. As a matter of fact, humour may be expressed in multiple ways, and these may change depending on a number of factors (e.g. Holmes *et al.* 2001), including the cultural background of interactants. In fact, a misuse of humour may affect the relational dynamics of business interaction, rather than supporting them. In the example examined here, it seems that any possible, and presumably unintentional, 'pragmatic gaffe' in the use of humour is mitigated by (I)'s repetition of the same emoji (a smiling face), and by (I)'s addressing the business task at hand, namely, providing his business partner with help, with a "no problem" reply.

5. Concluding remarks and pedagogical implications

This study was conducted with the aim of addressing two interrelated core questions: (1) Are CSs employed 'only' to handle language-related problems of understanding?; (2) Is successful business communication 'only' the achievement of shared understanding? The examples presented above, which were examined within the framework of BELF research, specifically research concerning CSs in BELF interaction as a means to prevent, signal or repair mis- or nonunderstanding, seem to suggest (1) that CSs can be used also as a conscious and planned technique for the construction of rapport; (2) that successful business communication is also the achievement of "harmony and smoothness of relations" (Spencer-Oatey 2005, p. 96). This is especially true of CSs strategies like metalinguistic comments (Example 1), code-switching (Example 2), and small talk (Examples 3 and 4). As the examples provided seek to show, these strategies appear to be used not so much to tackle language-related problems that may lead to the failure of mutual intelligibility (a situation which in reality does not occur frequently in (B)ELF interaction); instead, they are consciously employed in the awareness of the crucial role of the interactional component for the achievement of transactional goals, the interactional and transactional dimensions being inextricably intertwined in business communication. This is even more so when it comes to *global* business communication, where the diverse cultural backgrounds on which business practices are based may require a higher degree of strategic competence for business professionals to share their common ground as a community of practice. CSs strategies aimed at rapport building thus become particularly important in the context of BELF communication, in that they help the establishment of good working relations amongst partners who need to adjust to one another not only linguistically, but also culturally. A

broadening of the notion of ‘communication strategy’ may therefore offer a new perspective for the analysis of CSs in BELF, by looking at them not only as a means for the negotiation of meaning, but also as a tool for the negotiation and ‘tuning’ of business practices. In this perspective, the construction of harmonious business relationships through rapport building plays a fundamental role, as it is the springboard for successful business, which is the ultimate goal of business communication.

This broadening of the notion of ‘communication strategy’ also has pedagogical implications. It implies the need for business professionals to be trained in how to exploit the potential of CSs – whose fundamental role is acknowledged by professionals themselves (Franceschi, forthcoming) – as a means to adjust to other ways of doing business, and not only as moves to overcome asymmetries in language proficiency and backgrounds. Research on ELT business materials (Caleffi, Poppi 2019; Chan 2009; Faucette 2001; Kankaanranta 2012; Nickerson 2005; Vettorel 2018, 2019; Vettorel, Franceschi 2020) has shown that CSs are only partially and inconsistently dealt with, and “when examples are provided, they are rarely accompanied by reflection tasks” (Vettorel 2019, p. 79). All this may lead to the fossilisation and automation of ‘routinised’ strategies which clashes with the fluid and unpredictable nature of BELF communication. For a consistent and relevant inclusion of CSs in ELT in the business domain there needs to be a shift from linguistic prescriptivism to reflection on what successful communication is, and how this can be achieved by a conscious exploitation of strategic socio-pragmatic competence.

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