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## ON THE PRAGMATICS OF HORTATORY SUBJUNCTIVE IN ITALIAN BUSINESS LETTER DISCOURSE

### **Abstract**

This paper is a pragmatic account of the use of the Italian hortatory subjunctive in business letter discourse. According to traditional descriptions of the Italian subjunctive mood which mostly focus on the use of this mood in dependent clauses, the hortatory subjunctive is one of the few remaining examples of subjunctive use in independent clauses. In business letter discourse it is used in independent clauses, always as a formulaic modal expression with the modal verb of volition *volere* (will). In this paper it is argued that (i) the rare examples of its use seem to confirm that in the Italian language the hortatory subjunctive survives only in very formal (and formulaic) types of writing, business letter discourse being a case in point; and that (ii) in this type of genre the dynamic modality expressed by the subjunctive mood is used only in specific moves within the text for negative politeness reasons. The findings also suggest the need to take a “discourse-approach” to politeness, i.e. to rethink and analyze politeness as a holistic phenomenon which is the result of a number of acts intricately wound together in the text, both at the micro and macro level.

### **Keywords**

Hortatory subjunctive, politeness, politic behavior, business letter, modality.

### **1. Introduction**

It is always difficult for linguists to deal with a “colossus” (Stewart 2002: 106) like the Italian subjunctive mood. In discussing some of the most distinguishing

features of the Italian language, in the section devoted to the verb phrase, Simone (1993: 80) says

Eredità del latino, il congiuntivo è più sviluppato in italiano che in tutte le altre lingue romanze (specialmente il francese), e svolge una varietà di funzioni che difficilmente può essere ridotta a regole semplici.<sup>1</sup>

And indeed, faced with such a variety of uses, scholars have reacted mostly by developing empirical lists of its syntactic and semantic contexts of use (Schneider 1999: 26). Moreover, it also appears that behind all traditional definitions of the Italian subjunctive there seems to lie a tacit presupposition according to which there is only one value for such a mood (Prandi 2002). In most cases, one of the main features of this finite mood seems to be its non-assertiveness and, as such, it is mainly found in subordinate clauses. As a consequence, it is difficult to find research dealing specifically with the subjunctive mood as used in main clauses. In business letter discourse it is however possible to find examples of one of these independent uses, i.e. the so-called hortatory subjunctive. What seems most interesting is that the choice between this tense and the imperative or the indicative seems to be governed by pragmatic principles of politeness, i.e. face concerns.

In this paper we will follow Lepschy-Lepschy (1981: 202, cit. in Stewart 2002: 118) according to whom

In un esame del congiuntivo sembra opportuno non tanto presentare una formulazione generale sul suo valore (esprimere incertezza, o indicare subordinazione) quanto precisare alcuni dei contesti in cui esso compare.<sup>2</sup>

We will therefore describe one of its uses in a specific context, i.e. business letter discourse. It is our aim to show that such a use can be explained within a pragmatic approach by face considerations. Indeed, in the genres analyzed in this work, the dynamic modality expressed by the subjunctive mood is used in specific moves within the text for negative politeness reasons.

It is in fact acknowledged that modality choices are also a resource for structuring the interpersonal relationship between the participants. Indeed, they can be used as a way of introducing other people into the discourse and have an addressee-oriented function, especially when used for the expression of politeness. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the huge amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Inherited from the Latin language, the subjunctive is more developed in Italian than in any other Romance language (particularly in French), and it has a variety of functions which only with difficulty can be reduced to easy rules.

<sup>2</sup> In an examination of the subjunctive mood, it would seem convenient not so much to present a general formulation of its value (to express uncertainty or to denote subordination), as, rather, to specify some of the contexts in which it appears.

bibliography on the notion of modality. Suffice it to say that we follow Palmer (2003) in the definition of modality as consisting of the two sub-categories of mood and modal system. It is generally accepted that modality is the expression of the speaker's stance towards the truth value of his/her proposition. Traditional approaches to the analysis of modality (see Perkins 1983; Palmer 1986) have mainly relied on semantics to provide the entire gamut of meanings communicated by the modal system. In the last fifteen years research (Bazzanella 1990; Coates 1990; Klinge 1993; Groefsema 1995; Turnball and Sexton 1997; Papafragou 2001) has mainly drawn on pragmatics (i.e. issues of politeness, illocutionary force, etc.) to account for modality. In this paper we accept Palmer's (2003) distinction of modality in epistemic, deontic and dynamic,<sup>3</sup> and will use a discourse perspective on it, considering how modal expressions (of volition, in this case) dynamically interact in the texts.

The paper is organized as follows: first an overview of the research carried out on the Italian subjunctive is given. It will clearly emerge that scant attention has been given to the independent use of the subjunctive. Secondly, Brown and Levinson's model of politeness will be revisited to account for politeness phenomena in genre analysis. Then the data and the analysis will be discussed and, finally, an explanation will be proposed.

## 2. An overview of the Italian subjunctive mood

Stewart (2002) gives a historical overview of the way in which the subjunctive has been analysed in modern grammars, from the Latin ones to those written in vernacular languages.<sup>4</sup> The syntactic perspective, i.e. the perspective that looks for those predicates and conjunctions that automatically trigger the use of this mood, prevailed in the Latin grammar tradition where the subjunctive was analyzed as a mood only used in subordinate clauses. And as such it continued to be defined, the optative being considered *the* subjunctive used in independent clauses. In the sixteenth century, Ruscelli accounted for the presence of the subjunctive mood in independent clauses, but until the first half of the nineteenth century only subordinate clause use was taken into account.

Ruscelli, la cui grammatica fu completata nel 1556 ma pubblicata dopo la morte dell'autore, non solo si sbarazza dell'ottativo, un relitto della tradizione

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<sup>3</sup> According to Palmer (2003: 7) deontic and dynamic modality are both directive. However, whereas in the case of deontic modality the event is controlled by circumstances external to the subject of the sentence, with dynamic modality the control is internal to the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the grammars quoted are written in Italian. Stewart (2002) underlines that apart from Lepschy (1988) the contributions on the subject in English are simplistic.

grammaticale latina e un semplice impostore nella grammatica italiana, ma poi libera il *soggiuntivo* dalle catene della tradizione, riconoscendo la sua presenza anche nelle proposizioni indipendenti (Stewart 2002: 108).<sup>5</sup>

It was only during the second half of the nineteenth century that in the definition of the subjunctive the semantic value came to the foreground. In this new perspective efforts were focused on reducing all the uses of the subjunctive to one or two common denominators which were to explain its essential value. Consequently, the Italian subjunctive was defined as one of the finite verb moods, used to present an action as uncertain, desirable, subjective, both in main and subordinate clauses, the second case being the most recurrent one.<sup>6</sup>

As a finite verb mood, within the semantic perspective the Italian subjunctive is always defined in opposition with another finite verb mood, i.e. the indicative,<sup>7</sup> defined as the mood expressing certainty, reality, objectivity. A look at some descriptive grammars of the Italian language will clarify this point. It is symptomatic how Peruzzi (1963: 116) introduces the chapter devoted to this subject.

A noi, ora preme di stabilire come sia sentita in italiano, oggi, l'opposizione tra indicativo e congiuntivo, in modo da suscitare una sensibilità che è la premessa per acquisire quel gusto personale che solo attente letture possono formare.<sup>8</sup>

The author explains the different value of the two finite moods in dependent clauses by using the opposition objective/subjective. According to Peruzzi, behind the use of the subjunctive lies a shifting of the clause center of gravity from the object to the subject. Therefore, in

(1) *Essi sono certi che la terra è rotonda*  
“They are certain that the earth *is* round”

(2) *Essi sono certi che la terra sia rotonda*

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<sup>5</sup> Ruscelli, whose grammar was completed by 1556 but only published after the author's death, not only gets rid of the optative, a remnant of the old Latin grammar tradition and merely a “swindler” in the Italian grammar, but also releases the *soggiuntivo* from the chains of tradition, accounting for its presence also in main clauses.

<sup>6</sup> See Stewart (1996 and 2002) for a more detailed analysis of the grammars of the Italian language, from the Latin tradition up to modern and contemporary grammars.

<sup>7</sup> See Schena (2002) for French and Garzone (2002) for English for an interesting explanation of the opposition indicative/subjunctive within the framework of Guillaume's psychomechanical theory.

<sup>8</sup> We are now interested in ascertaining how in the Italian language the opposition between indicative and subjunctive is perceived so as to foster a sensitivity which will be the premise to acquiring that personal taste which only arises from attentive readings.

“They are certain that the earth *be* round”

what changes is not the fact that the earth is round, but how a certain state of affairs is perceived by the subject. Only half a page is devoted to the “independent” use of the subjunctive mood. The author underlines that in its present tense this mood is used to express a command, a wish or a desire but adds nothing to this definition, focusing mainly on its semantic value in subordinate clauses.

The same holds true for Battaglia and Pernicone (1980 [1951]) for whom the semantic value of the subjunctive, mostly used in subordinate clauses, basically lies in the expression of uncertainty and possibility.

È il modo della possibilità e della incertezza. Si adopera, per lo più in proposizioni dipendenti, quando l'azione o lo stato indicati dal verbo si presentano alla coscienza di chi parla o scrive, come possibili, desiderabili, probabili, incerti.<sup>9</sup>

Only a single mention is dedicated to the independent subjunctive. In fact, according to the authors, given that the very function of the subjunctive mood is that of expressing uncertainty, eventuality or possibility, often it is not possible to state precisely how and when it must be used. However, there are cases, especially in spoken language, in which using this mood becomes mandatory because it is the most natural way to codify a wish, an exhortation, an order, an optative statement (Battaglia and Pernicone 1980: 536).

To give a final example, Dardano and Trifone (1997), in defining finite moods and before giving their syntactic characterization, say that

L'*indicativo* è il modo della realtà, della certezza, della constatazione e dell'esposizione obiettiva o presentata come tale: [...]. Il *congiuntivo* è il modo della possibilità, del desiderio o del timore, dell'opinione soggettiva o del dubbio, del verosimile o dell'irreale; viene usato generalmente in proposizioni dipendenti da verbi che esprimono incertezza, giudizio, partecipazione affettiva: [...].<sup>10</sup>

Prandi (2002) criticizes this way of describing the Italian subjunctive in grammars<sup>11</sup> in that, according to him, this opposition between what is *realis* and

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<sup>9</sup> It is the mood of possibility and uncertainty. It is used, mostly in subordinate clauses, when the action or the state of affairs expressed by the verb are perceived by the speaker or writer as possible, desirable, probable, uncertain.

<sup>10</sup> The *indicative* is the mood of reality, certainty, objective proof and statement, or presented as such: [...]. The *subjunctive* is the mood of possibility, desire or fear, subjective opinion or doubt, likelihood or unreality. It is generally used in clauses that depend on verbs that express uncertainty, judgment, emotional involvement: [...].

<sup>11</sup> This criticism is shared by Stewart (1996: 242) who defines twentieth century semantic approaches as “characterized by a penchant for simplistic and categorial semantic labels.”

what is *irrealis*, even if reasonable, is not systematic as shown by factive or implicative verb behavior. As shown in examples (3) and (4) (Prandi 2002: 31), the subjunctive is not a sufficient condition for the non-factuality of the proposition.

(3) *Mi dispiace che tu abbia perso il treno*  
“I am sorry that you *missed* the train”

(4) *Mi sorprende che Luca abbia lasciato il suo lavoro*  
“I am surprised that Luca *left* his job”

The author’s conclusion (2002: 33) is therefore that

Il congiuntivo non ha un valore–o una costellazione coerente di valori–che accompagnerebbero tutti i suoi usi. Ci sono casi in cui il congiuntivo ha un suo valore, che rientra in linea di massima nel ventaglio di valori che gli sono attribuiti da sempre, e dei casi in cui è inutile cercare di identificare un valore perché questo valore non c’è. [...] L’ipotesi che intendo avanzare è la seguente: il congiuntivo ha un suo valore, che contribuisce attivamente a codificare il valore modale della proposizione che lo contiene, solo in un numero limitato di casi, e cioè nei casi in cui la sua scelta è libera, e quindi alterna realmente con l’indicativo.<sup>12</sup>

Moving from descriptive grammars to more theoretically oriented research, this “quest” for a value, be it one or more than one, seems to be a *leitmotiv*. Schneider (1999: 27-34) sums up the research carried out in the field grouping the studies into three main approaches. According to the “correlative subjunctive” hypothesis, it is not possible to associate a value (semantic or non-semantic) to this mood that does not reflect the value of the main clause. Therefore, in this perspective, the subjunctive mood is nothing but an additional element of the main clause structure. However, this perspective does not explain sentences like (5) where the subjunctive is completely independent from the meaning of the superordinate predicate (Schneider 1999: 25).

(5) *A: [...] il fatto che ieri Mosca abbia vissuto una giornata così tormentata e di altissima tensione politica prova che questo colpo in parte è andato a bersaglio [...]*

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<sup>12</sup> The subjunctive does not have one value–or a consistent constellation of values–which would define all its uses. There are cases in which the subjunctive has its own value that, in general, is consistent with the range of values that have always been attributed to it. But there are cases in which it is useless to try to identify one value because it does not actually exist. [...] The hypothesis I intend to put forward is the following: the subjunctive has its own value, actively contributing to codify the modal meaning of the proposition containing it only in a limited number of cases, that is, in those cases in which its choice is free and, therefore, it actually alternates with the indicative.

“A: [...] The fact that yesterday Moscow *lived* such a tormented and \_ politically, highly tense day, *shows* that this blow partially hit the mark [...]”

Dualist theories, on the contrary, hypothesize a semantic as well as a pragmatic subjunctive. According to them, in addition to the semantic meaning, there exists a pragmatic meaning for the subjunctive mood. Example (5) can thus be explained as the theme of the sentence. It would work as a support for the assertion expressed in the main clause.

Unitarist theories share the perspective that defines the subjunctive as the mood of non-assertiveness ([-assertiveness]) when compared with the indicative. And indeed Schneider (1999: 33) underlines the fact that these theories are generally defined as “non-x theories” because the subjunctive is defined as the mood lacking some components of the indicative.

According to the author, however, what characterizes the subjunctive is its multiplicity of functions. Being the result of a diachronic evolution, it is useless to try to find some kind of value for them. On the contrary, it would be much more useful to record them.

### 3. Politeness revisited

Linguistic politeness, i.e. the expression of politeness through the use of language, has become an important issue in pragmatic studies. To date there have been many models of politeness put forward in the literature. In his 1990 paper, Fraser reviewed what he called “four current approaches to an account of politeness” (1990: 219): the social-norm view,<sup>13</sup> the conversational-maxim view (Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983), the face-saving view (Brown and Levinson 1978 and 1987) and the conversational-contract view (Fraser and Nolen 1981). In the final part of the paper Fraser foresees that, inasmuch as the Brown and Levinson approach is the most fully articulated and the most thoroughly worked out, it would seem to be the one to be the most challenged.

And indeed it was. Brown and Levinson’s framework has had a continuing influence over the years and, notwithstanding criticism, it still remains “the” framework on politeness, especially because of its claims of pancultural validity and therefore its use in cross-cultural comparisons. Eelen’s *A Critique of Politeness Theories* (2001), for example, includes other models of politeness. More specifically, Ide’s, Blum-Kulka’s, Gu’s, Arndt and Janney’s and Watts’. All the

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<sup>13</sup> Watts et al. (1992: 4) point out that politeness characterized by the notion of Discernment (Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1988) corresponds to what Fraser calls the social-norm view of politeness.

politeness models, more or less openly, have Brown and Levinson's theory in the background.<sup>14</sup>

As is well known, central to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework is the notion of face that the authors borrowed from Goffman<sup>15</sup> and further elaborated linking it to Durkheim's notion of positive and negative rites. Thus they define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61) and claim that it has two sides: a positive and a negative one. Positive face is the desire to be liked by others whereas negative face is the desire to act unimpeded by other people.<sup>16</sup> These two face-wants give rise to corresponding types of interactive behavior, i.e. positive and negative politeness. Five strategies are then outlined that a given speaker can employ to avoid or minimize the effects of carrying out a face-threatening act (FTA). Strategies are realized at the level of speech acts and are chosen depending on the relative weighting of two competing motives: to communicate efficiently in accord with Grice's maxims (rationality), and to manage the face. The weightiness of the threat is based on the speaker's perception of the weightiness of the act. This is based on a computation that the speaker makes, taking into account three (high-level, abstract) variables that determine the weightiness ( $W_x$ ) of face-threatening acts in a communicative event: (i) the social distance between participants ( $D_{S,H}$ ), (ii) the power relation between them ( $P_{H,S}$ ), (iii) the rank of imposition they are negotiating ( $R_x$ ). These variables are assumed to be assessed simultaneously in determining act weightiness, and this can be illustrated by the formula ( $W_x$ ) = ( $D_{S,H}$ ) + ( $P_{H,S}$ ) + ( $R_x$ ).

Although few would argue with the claim that politeness exists in all cultures, one of the main problems in Brown and Levinson's theory is their claim of universal validity for the existence of positive and negative face and the principle of face-threat. Moreover, the idea that all these are cross-culturally constant and thus universally valid has been much criticized, especially with reference to non-western cultures, or cultures in which the emphasis on individual autonomy is not as strong as in Western cultures. Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) argue that in the Japanese culture interactants orient towards their relationships more than emphasizing individual rights. In this sense there is a difference between

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<sup>14</sup> The comparative analysis of the other politeness theories is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. See Eelen (2001) for a thorough analysis of all of them.

<sup>15</sup> In a recent paper, Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) underlines the very social nature of Goffman's notion of face which seems to get lost in Brown and Levinson's cognitive concept of face and rational actor mostly "obsessed" with protecting his own personal territory from potentially harmful interpersonal contacts.

<sup>16</sup> My repetition of "other" is symptomatic of Brown and Levinson's bias towards other-politeness. Notwithstanding the fact that their notion of politeness does not exclude politeness to self, this aspect is neglected in their work. See Chen (2001) for a framework of analysis for self-politeness.



Discernment and Volition. Discernment refers to the automatic observation of socially-agreed-upon rules and is thus realized by the use of formal linguistic forms. It is generally considered as the static aspect of politeness. Volition allows the speaker a more active choice, is realized mainly by verbal strategies and is generally referred to as the dynamic aspect of politeness. According to Ide, Discernment and Volition are points on a continuum and in most actual language usage one finds that most utterances are neither purely one nor the other, but to some extent a mixture of the two.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Rosaldo (1982), in her analysis of Ilongot speech acts, argues that directives in Ilongot are not particularly threatening, referencing as they do group membership, and hence they will usually not be performed politely. Mao (1994) and Yu (2003) argue that the two aspects of Chinese face, i.e. *miànzi* (the individual's desire to achieve public recognition of his/her reputation or prestige) and *liǎn* (respect of the group for the individual who can meet both social and an internalized standard of moral behavior) have little to do with an individual's need for unhindered freedom of action or attention. The apparent role played by negative face in the Chinese case is due to a desire for *miànzi*. *Liǎn* appears to bear some resemblance to positive face but it encodes a moral overtone about the speaker's everyday behavior that positive face does not. Nwoye (1989) argues that face has no place in Igbo society in which politeness arises from an awareness of one's social obligations to the other members of the society rather than from an individualistic means-to-an-end reasoning. De Kadt (1998) tests the applicability of face to an African, Southern Bantu language, Zulu. As in the Nigerian example of Igbo, the collectivist nature of Zulu culture, she says, casts doubts on Brown and Levinson's model. However, instead of rejecting the model, she retains a modified notion of face based on Goffman's conceptualization of it which accommodates both volitional and social indexing aspects of politeness.

Within western cultures Hernández-Flores (1999) has argued that some of the cultural values that inform Spanish face wants present problems as far as their inclusion within the universal notions of positive and negative face are concerned. O'Driscoll (1996) has, on the other hand, attempted a defense and an elaboration of Brown and Levinson's universal dualism of positive and negative face, arguing that its apparent non-applicability rests on false assumptions about what it entails. According to O'Driscoll, the constituents of positive and negative face cannot vary because they are inherent in the human condition. Thus (1996: 13)

Positive face is not the desire for merging/association/belonging itself, but rather the need for some symbolic recognition of this desire by others. [...] Similarly, negative

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<sup>17</sup> Recently, Pizziconi (2003) has challenged the Japanese scholarship on linguistic politeness, arguing that the principles regulating the use of honorific devices in Japanese are not substantially different from those operating in English, both being similarly strategic.

face is not the desire for independence/disassociation/individuation itself, but rather the need for some symbolic recognition of this desire by others.

In a similar vein, in Haugh and Hinze's (2003) simplified metalanguage for explaining face (and politeness), a person's face is assessed in terms of what others think of him/her; the assessment does not include what a person thinks of him/herself, but may include what he/she thinks others think of him/her.

The last two quotations from the research that has already been carried out on this subject, slowly lead us to the core of the main claim of this paper which we shall now turn to.

Consistent with the speech act basis of their model, for Brown and Levinson the speaker seems to have the main responsibility of politeness. Indeed, there are two sides in politeness behavior: the production of behavior by a speaker and the evaluation of that behavior by a hearer. However, in Brown and Levinson's model the focus is on production and originates what Eelen (2001: 96) calls "the speaker behavior bias." According to Eelen (2001: 96)

The speaker behavior bias is clearest in Brown and Levinson's theory, where one of the main prerequisites for politeness (and thus one of the main assumptions of the framework) is that the speaker is endowed with rationality, a specific kind of means-ends reasoning based on the hierarchical ordering of different politeness strategies. Politeness is thus an aspect of speech act production, where the speaker anticipates the hearer's reactions and formulates his or her utterances in such a way that any threat to the hearer's face is either removed or redressed.

According to Eelen, this bias is also shared by all the other politeness theories he analyzes and has the consequence of producing what he calls "the elusive hearer," i.e. the theories take the place of the hearer in that their theoretical models are designed to replicate the hearer's judgment. They incorporate the evaluative moment and thus that moment is lost as an object of analysis.<sup>18</sup>

It seems to us that Eelen's criticism gives support to the claim of the present paper, i.e. the need to take a "discourse-approach" to politeness, i.e. to rethink and analyze politeness as a holistic phenomenon which is the result of a number of acts intricately wound together in the text, both at the micro and macro level.

Indeed Pilegaard's (1997) seminal work on politeness in written business discourse analyzes face-redress strategies in a discourse-dynamic perspective, i.e. hearer-oriented and text-based, with politeness seen as "[...] pragmatic manifestations which operate on the text level" (1992: 241).

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<sup>18</sup> The other two biases that Eelen (2001) claims all politeness theories share are the one towards the polite side of the polite-impolite distinction, and the one towards the production of behavior rather than its evaluation.

Glick's criticism (1996) of Brown and Levinson's theory takes its cue from a basic consideration, i.e. "[...] that every utterance unavoidably includes motives and conditions associated with other social acts" (1996: 154) and thus any utterance instantiating a speech act type is never independent of all the other linguistic (and non-linguistic) facts of the context. In this perspective, the interpretations the two authors give of their examples are just possible interpretations that can be justified only by presupposing a specific co-text and context of use.

In his study of the use of Japanese honorifics for the expression of politeness, Okamoto (1999) claims that politeness has to be studied as "situated politeness," i.e. an adequate account of linguistic politeness requires a close examination of the relationship among linguistic expressions in discourse, speakers' ideas about politeness, and social contexts. Thus "[...] politeness, [...] not only involves all utterances in discourse rather than merely certain types of acts (e.g. face-threatening acts), but also requires monitoring them carefully and coordinating them with each other" (1999: 70).

Finally, Watts (2003) develops a more fine-grained model of politeness based on Bourdieu's concept of social practice. Stating that no linguistic structure can be taken to be inherently polite, he distinguishes between politic behavior and politeness. Politic behavior is made up of linguistic expressions that are expected by both the speaker and the interlocutor, and in this sense it is highly ritualized and conventional. Politeness, on the other hand, goes beyond politic behavior to include strategic choices aimed at achieving a specific purpose. Obviously, to make such a distinction,

We need to know something about the situation in which linguistic structures occur in order to evaluate whether or not they are part of the politic behavior of a situation or are beyond what can be reasonably expected of it and are thus potentially open to interpretation by participants and commentators as "polite" (2003: 198).

The results of the study quoted seem to suggest that politeness is a holistic phenomenon which is the result of a number of acts intricately wound together in the text, both at the micro and macro textual level. Indeed, the need to move beyond utterance level, speaker-oriented analysis of politeness towards an investigation of politeness in discourse is widely recognized in politeness research. Following a socially oriented pragmatic approach, our research has focused on analyzing the use of the hortatory subjunctive in Italian business letter discourse. The research procedure and the discussion of the results will be the focus of the following paragraphs.

#### **4. Data**

The corpus used for our research consists of 120 authentic Italian business letters, belonging to three sub-genres of the genre business letter (sales promotion, for your information (FYI), money chasing)<sup>19</sup> that can be representative of the three main stages of a business transaction (Pilegaard 1997).<sup>20</sup>

Table 1. Overview of the business letters typology distribution

Letter typology	1st stage	2nd stage	3rd stage	Tot. 120
	Making contact	Negotiating	In conflict	
	SALES PROMOTION	FOR YOUR INFORMATION	MONEY CHASING	
	45	44	31	

The letters in the corpus were mostly collected from companies based in the area where the author lives.<sup>21</sup> The letters are representative of different organizations and this choice was made specifically to arrive at an initial first valid generalization. Analyzing the correspondence of just one company would tend to lock us into the mind set and idiosyncratic rhetorical preferences of a single user (i.e. the company, constituting a micro discourse community) within the target culture.

As for content, it has been considered secondary. The primary criterion was indeed the communicative goal to be achieved. In this choice our research strategy followed that of Bhatia (1993) and Connor and Mauranen (1999).

To identify the three sub-genres within the broader category “business letter,” social and cognitive approaches to language comprehension and production have been used. The social perspective given to genre analysis (Miller 1984; Swales

<sup>19</sup> Earlier analyses of the rhetoric of Italian and English money chasing, sales promotions and for your information letters have been published by the author respectively in *Journal of Pragmatics* (34, 2002, 1211-1233), *English for Specific Purposes* (23/2, 2004, 181-207), and *Discourse Studies* (7/1, 2005, 109-135). The number of letters in the present samples is different due to the obvious fact that the corpora have grown since the initial publication. The acronyms at the end of each excerpt (ILP, IPVI, ISP) are to be read as follows: the initial *I* is referred to the corpus and stands for *Italiano* (Italian). The other letters stand for the initials of the Italian translations of, respectively, sales promotion (*Lettere Promozionali*), for your information (*Per Vostra Informazione*), money chasing (*Solleciti di Pagamento*). The number is the number the letters have been given in the corpus.

<sup>20</sup> The letter distribution pattern in the corpus covers a period that goes from 1990 to 2004. However, most of the letters were written between 1999 and 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Central Italy.

1990) has been integrated with the pragmatic view of genre proposed by Paltridge (1995).

## 5. Data analysis and results

In the sales promotion corpus,<sup>22</sup> only two examples of the hortatory subjunctive mood were found and the both of them contain the modal verb *volere* (will).

(6) *Voglia gradire, con l'occasione, i miei più cordiali saluti*  
(ILP20)

“Be willing to accept, with the present, my most cordial greetings”

(7) *Rimango a sua disposizione per ogni ulteriore informazione che ritenesse utile ricevere e con l'occasione, Voglia gradire distinti saluti*  
(ILP37)

“I remain at your disposal for any further information that you think useful, and, with the present, be willing to accept my deferential greetings”

As the examples show, the two hortatory subjunctives are both contained within the END POLITELY move. Such a move is to be found in the post-propositional part of the text, i.e. in that portion of the text in which no information about the content is to be found and, as such, is highly formulaic in nature. Nevertheless, the author does have a choice here because, in both cases, it would also be possible to say *gradisca* (“accept, like, appreciate”), thus without the modal verb *volere*.

However, even if the presence of the modal verb makes the END POLITELY move more polite, it does not seem plausible that there is any strategic choice behind such a use. The letter closure is so conventionalized and formulaic that probably *gradisca*, even if possible, would be perceived as unexpected.

This hypothesis is supported by the distribution of the modal verb of volition throughout the texts. In fact, all the examples of its use could be found within the same move, i.e. the END POLITELY move.

(8) *RingraziandoVi anticipatamente per l'attenzione che ci vorrete riservare, ci è gradita l'occasione per porgerVi i nostri più cordiali saluti*

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<sup>22</sup> A sales promotion letter is a type of business letter whose goal is that of finding a buyer for a commodity or a service the seller wants to sell. Of course, the buyer is simply a potential buyer and the seller will have to whet the buyer's appetite to persuade him to respond favourably to the letter. From a linguistic point of view, in many cases, the underlying illocutionary act of sales promotions, i.e. to make a request, is covered by the perlocutionary effect, i.e. the desirable effects. This means that the text is conceived as an offer rather than a request.

(ILP32, 10)

“Thanking You in advance for the attention that you will be willing to reserve us, we are happy to have the opportunity to extend to You our most cordial greetings”

(9) *Grati dell'attenzione che vorrete rivolgere alla presente, ci è gradita l'occasione per porgere i ns. più cordiali saluti*

(ILP12)

“Grateful for the attention that you will be willing to reserve to the present letter, we are happy to extend our most cordial greetings”

(10) *Vi ringraziamo fin d'ora per l'interesse e l'eventuale preferenza che vorrete accordarci e Vi salutiamo distintamente*

(ILP9)

“We thank you in advance for the interest and the eventual preference that you will be willing to accord us and we greet You deferentially”

There appears to be only one example of the use of the verb of volition “will” within a move different from the one mentioned above. In fact, one of the letters in the corpus contains it in one of the opening moves of the texts, i.e. the INTRODUCE THE PRODUCT/OFFER/SERVICE move. In sales promotion, such a move, especially when it is placed before the ESTABLISH CREDENTIALS move, is characterized by the use of high-level modality markers to minimize the weight of imposition on the addressee and thus to redress what can be perceived as a face-threatening act. Indeed, in example (11), the introduction of the modal verb clearly has the strategic function of minimizing the imposition by recognizing to the addressee the freedom of choice.

(11) *Oggetto: Lettera di presentazione**Egregi Signori,*

*Con la presente ci pregiamo rimettere alla Vs. cortese attenzione la presente lettera di presentazione, nella speranza che vorrete annoverarci tra i Vs. più stretti collaboratori.*

(ILP11)

“Object: Letter of presentation

Dear Sirs,

with the present [letter] we beg you to apply Your courteous attention to the letter of presentation [herewith included], in the hope that you will be willing to include us among Your closest collaborators”

Moving on to the “negotiating” phase of the business transaction, FYI letters<sup>23</sup> present only three examples of hortatory subjunctive mood and all of them appear within the REQUEST move.

(12) *Vi rammentiamo che la durata della registrazione in merito avrà termine alla data su indicata e pertanto se deve essere mantenuta la protezione sul marchio, sarà necessario provvedere al deposito di una domanda di rinnovo.*

INFORMATION

*Vogliate comunicarci le Vostre decisioni in merito con cortese sollecitudine.*

REQUEST

(IPV23)

“We remind you that the length of the above mentioned entry will end in the above mentioned date and, therefore, if brand protection has to be kept, it will be necessary to provide for the depositing of an enquiry for renewal.

Be willing to communicate Your decisions in [this] regard, with courteous solicitude.”

(13) *Vogliate dunque modificare i riferimenti giuridico/fiscali come segue:*

*RAGIONE SOCIALE* \*\*\*

*SEDE LEGALE* \*\*\*

*PARTITA IVA* \*\*\*

*CODICE FISCALE* \*\*\*

(IPV30)

“Be willing therefore to modify the giuridical/fiscal references as follows:

*TRADE NAME* \*\*\*

*LEGAL OFFICE* \*\*\*

*VAT* \*\*\*

*FISCAL CODE* \*\*\*”

(14) *Con la presente Vi comuniciamo che, a seguito di delibera della nostra assemblea straordinaria del 29 luglio 1999 omologata con decreto 24 agosto 1999, la R\*\*\* Italia S.p.A. ha assunto la seguente denominazione:*

*M\*\*\* - Italia S.p.A.*

INFORMATION

*Vogliate provvedere affinché tutta la corrispondenza, e quant'altro relativo ai rapporti in corso, risulti intestato a M\*\*\* - Italia S.p.A.*

*Per quanto riguarda ogni Vostra comunicazione Vi preghiamo di fare riferimento agli indirizzi già in Vostro possesso.*

REQUEST

(IPVI35)

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<sup>23</sup> A FYI has the goal of informing the addressee about something (change of address, management prices, etc.) that will affect the way in which the business transaction will be carried out in the future. The addressee is therefore required to “record” the information contained in the text and to use it in the future.

“With the present [letter] we inform You that, according to the resolution of our assembly dated 29<sup>th</sup> July 1999 ratified with the 24<sup>th</sup> August 1999 decree, R\*\*\* Italia S.p.A. has assumed the following denomination:

M\*\*\*- Italia S.p.A.

Be willing to arrange so that all the correspondence, and anything else related to the present relationship, is addressed to M\*\*\*- Italia S.p.A.

As for Your communications, we beg You to refer to the addresses You already have.”

Apart from example (13) in which the move REQUEST is embedded within the move INFORMATION, in the other two examples the REQUEST move appears in the text immediately after the INFORMATION move.

It appears that also in this corpus the hortatory subjunctive is used for negative politeness reasons. However, differently from the sales promotion corpus, the choice seems to be more strategic. In fact, in all the cases an imperative mood (*modificate*, i.e. modify, *comunicare*, i.e. communicate, *provvedete*, i.e. arrange) would not be completely unexpected and would not sound inappropriate.

As for the distribution of the verb of volition “will,” only the following two examples of this phenomenon could be found in the corpus:

(15) *Siamo certi che comprenderete i motivi di questo nostro intervento e*

ASSERT COMMON GROUND

*nel ringraziarVi per la preferenza che sino ad oggi avete voluto accordarci,*

THANK

*cogliamo l'occasione per porgerVi i nostri più cordiali saluti*

END POLITELY

(IPV11)

“We are certain that you will understand the reasons behind our intervention and in thanking You for the preference that you have been willing to accord us up to date,

we take the occasion to extend You our most cordial greetings”

(16) *Con l'occasione, allo scopo di consentirci di disporre di informazioni corrette e complete, la preghiamo di volerci trasmettere, se disponibile, una copia dell'ultimo bilancio della Sua azienda, inserendoci, altresì, per il futuro, nella lista di distribuzione di questo documento.*

REQUEST

(IPV18)

“With the occasion, to allow us to have at our disposal correct and complete information, we beg you to be willing to send us, if available, a copy of your firm's latest balance. We also beg you to insert us, for the time coming, into the distribution list of this document.”

If example (15) seems more formulaic (see example (10)), in example (16) the author obviously chooses to be very polite. This is clearly signalled by the use of *la*



*preghiamo* (we ask/beg/request you) followed by *volerci trasmettere* (to be willing to send us). The all verb group would work perfectly and be negative politeness-oriented without the verb of volition. However, the semi-formulaic *la preghiamo di* + VP is given supplementary force through the insertion of “will” which clearly signals that the act of sending the information is completely left to the discretion of the addressee.

The money chasing letter corpus<sup>24</sup> is the one in which the use of the hortatory subjunctive is most interesting. Of the three levels of money chasing, it is especially in the first that most examples of hortatory subjunctives can be found. This, obviously, does not come as a surprise. If one thinks of the “philosophy” behind each level of chasing, it will be clear that at the beginning payment is solicited trying to convince the addressee to co-operate. Therefore, the imposition is minimized and the receiver is given freedom of action by basing the request on his willingness to comply. Even if the ultimate goal of any type of money chasing letter will be that of receiving the due amount, as the situation gets more complicated, no strategy is used to minimize the act of soliciting the payment and, as a consequence, negative politeness strategies based on the other’s willingness to comply tend to disappear.

The hortatory subjunctive is therefore introduced for negative politeness reasons within the SOLICIT PAYMENT move where, as has been already said, it has the covert function of asking the addressee to comply without making him/her feel the writer is imposing on him/her.

(17) *Vogliate verificare e, se con noi d'accordo, vi invitiamo a disporre per il pagamento di tutto lo scaduto con la massima sollecitudine.*

SOLICIT PAYMENT

*Qualora invece abbiate già provveduto, vogliate considerare nullo il presente sollecito.*

END POLITELY

(ISP4)

“Be willing to check and, should you agree with our findings, we invite you to remit full settlement of the overdue account.

In case you have already arranged it, be willing to consider the present chasing money null.”

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<sup>24</sup> Within the business communication sequence, a money chasing letter is a feature of “in conflict” situations, typically appearing at a later (sometimes final stage) of a business dealing. Its goal is that of asking the buyer to respect his or her obligation towards the seller. Depending on the debtor’s position, money chasing letters are usually sub-divided into three levels of seriousness, from the lightest to the heaviest. The Italian corpus consists of 19 letters belonging to the first level, 4 belonging to the second and 8 belonging to the third.

In example (17) the hortatory subjunctive also appears in the END POLITELY move. Indeed, there are various examples of such a use in our money chasing letter corpus and we think that they should not be analysed as cases of politeness understood as strategic choice.

(18) *Qualora aveste già provveduto al pagamento, vogliate considerare la presente quale ringraziamento.*

END POLITELY

(ISP10, 14)

“In the case that you have already arranged payment, be willing to consider the present [letter] as a thank you.”

Yes, the addressee will feel that *vogliate considerare* (i.e. subjunctive) in both examples is more polite than *considerate* (i.e. imperative), but, again, as in the cases seen in sales promotions, they are so formulaic that trying to find any strategy behind them would be far fetched. It is instead our claim that only when used within the SOLICIT PAYMENT move is such a mood introduced for negative politeness reasons.

(19) *Vogliate provvedere, con sollecitudine, qualora non l'abbiate già disposto nel frattempo, al pagamento di quanto scaduto.*

SOLICIT PAYMENT

(ISP5)

“Be willing to arrange, as quickly as possible, in the case that you have not done so yet, to the payment of the overdue account.”

That, for obvious reasons, the writer tries to convince the reader to co-operate making him/her feel that any action is not imposed but is in the final analysis based on his/her will, is supported by the kind of modality used in these texts. In his seminal work on narratology about the use of time and tenses within literary texts, Weinrich (2004 [1978]: 7) states “[...] le forme temporali concorrono a fornire interessanti profili temporali a un testo determinato.”<sup>25</sup>

We would add that those same forms contribute to another type of profile, i.e. the modal one and, given that verbal forms are not used in an isolated way, it is only within such a global profile that it is possible to draw any conclusion as far as the use of one single form is concerned. In no specific category of letter typology could it be possible to find such a concentration of modals of volition realizing a kind of modality that is dynamic more than deontic. The following example is a case in point.

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<sup>25</sup> Temporal forms contribute to constructing interesting temporal profiles to a specific text.

(20) *Vi invitiamo, pertanto, a volerci inviare a stretto giro di posta l'importo in questione, i cui termini di pagamento sono scaduti rispetto a quanto pattuito contrattualmente.*

SOLICIT PAYMENT

*Qualora questa nostra incrociasse Vostra rimessa, Vogliate<sup>26</sup> ritenere la presente nulla.*

*Nel frattempo Vi ringraziamo dell'attenzione che Vorrete riservare a questa nostra e Vi porgiamo distinti saluti.*

END POLITELY

(ISP18)

“We therefore invite you to be willing to send us quickly in the mail the amount in question, the payment of which is overdue with respect to our agreement.

In the case that our [letter] arrives after Your payment has been made, Be willing to consider the present [letter] null.

In the meantime we thank You for the attention that You Will be willing to reserve to our [letter] and we greet You deferentially.”

Moving on to the second type of money chasing letter, only one example of hortatory subjunctive was found within the END POLITELY move.

(21) *Se nel frattempo avete già provveduto al pagamento vogliate ritenere la presente quale ringraziamento.*

END POLITELY

(ISP12)

“In the case that you have already arranged payment, be willing to consider the present [letter] as a thank you.”

No verbs of volition seem to be present in these documents.

In the third type of money chasing letter, no examples of the hortatory subjunctive could be found. There are however two examples of the use of dynamic modality—similar to the ones found in the first type of money chasing letters—in which the author is making what might be called the last effort to push the addressee to settle the overdue account.

(22) *In relazione alle partite scoperte, segnate in calce,*

ADDRESS THE ISSUE

*già sollecitate,*

REFER TO PREVIOUS COMMUNICATIONS

*Vi invitiamo a voler provvedere entro sette giorni da oggi*

SOLICIT PAYMENT

*tenendo conto che, nulla ricevendo, affideremo l'incarico al legale per il recupero crediti.*

WARN [LEGAL ACTION]

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<sup>26</sup> In the original document *vogliate* and *vorrete* are written in capital letters.

(ISP25)

“With respect to the unpaid sums, underlined,  
that have already been notified,  
we invite You to be willing to arrange payment within seven days from today  
keeping in mind that, receiving no payment, we will engage our lawyer to recuperate  
the sum.”

(23) *Sono certo che vorrà evitarmi di iniziare una spiacevole azione giudiziaria nei  
suoi confronti*

WARN [LEGAL ACTION]

*e, in attesa, porgo distinti saluti*

END POLITELY

(ISP13)

“I am sure that you will be willing to avoid me to undertake an unpleasant legal  
action against you  
and, waiting for your reply, I extend a deferential greeting.”

## 6. Conclusion

According to Watts (2003), a scientifically useful theory of politeness should make a distinction between what must be analyzed as politic behavior and what comes under the scope of politeness. Given that no linguistic structure is inherently polite, in a socio-pragmatic perspective it does not seem to be proper to consider all the instances of the use of the hortatory subjunctive realized via the modal verb of volition *volere* as cases of politeness. To be more precise, the politeness value of these VPs has to be somehow refined.

In fact, certain instances of the use of the hortatory subjunctive in the corpus are so conventional and ritualistic that it would seem more appropriate to classify them as politic behavior than as politeness. Indeed this is confirmed by two factors, i.e. the kind of move within which the subjunctive can be found and the relationship between this mood and the modal configuration of the texts.

In sales promotion letters the use of the hortatory subjunctive + *volere* only appears in the END POLITELY move. This move does not partake in the propositional part of the text, although it contributes to the general polite flavor of it. Due to its nature, the subjunctive within this move is perceived as so conventional and ritualistic that it is probably more appropriate to analyze it as politic behavior than as politeness.

Things seem to change in For Your Information and money chasing letters. In these two corpora, the examples of the use of the hortatory subjunctive found mostly appear within the propositional part of the text and, more specifically, within moves that, by their nature, are intrinsically face-threatening. The REQUEST move of For Your Information letters is not so threatening as the SOLICIT PAYMENT

move—which is merely a more specific type of request—of the money chasing letters, but both imply a threat to the addressee’s face. Here it seems more plausible to see a strategic politeness choice whose aim is that of making the addressee feel that his/her freedom of action is not impinged upon, with the (hoped) consequence that the business transaction will reach the desired end. This strategy—focused on the addressee’s willingness to comply—is supported by the modal profile of some texts, especially those belonging to the first level of money chasing in which *volere* seems to be used dynamically more than deontically. It would therefore seem sensible to claim that, even within such a formulaic and ritualistic type of writing as that found in business letter discourse, some uses of the modalized hortatory subjunctive are still analyzable as thoroughly pragmatic, i.e. occurring “[...] in precisely those areas where speakers have something to gain or lose by their addressee’s acceptance or rejection of what they are saying” (Hoye 2005: 1484).

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