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English for Specific Purposes: Reflections and Perspectives

Guest Editors:

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE STUDIES

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"Please accept my apologies": English, food, and identity in TripAdvisor discourse[1]

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Discourse on food offers interesting viewpoints on diasporic identities. In the wake of previous research (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019), this paper investigates the multi-layered relationship between food, digital discourse and identity in the Loughborough Italian Community. New technologies are transfiguring social interactions and negotiations of social identities. In particular, the exponential growth of the Internet urges us to carefully explore digital networked environments, where people can communicate with each other with no space and time limits. The Web offers new interesting perspectives on the use of English for specific purposes (ESP), a broad research area that, according to Posteguillo (2002), should be sustained by related electronic fields, in order to gain better insights into cyberspace and its users. Our paper considers cross-cultural communication in online discourse and identity in migration contexts. It investigates TripAdvisor interactions in food-related practices through the CMC framework, by taking into account managers' replies to negative reviews. In particular, we consider digital discourses to provide innovative perspectives on Loughborough Italians' identity-marking processes in public asynchronous communication, by looking at how pragmatic strategies may be significantly culture-sensitive and how they may reveal cross- cultural differences and/or alignments. Specifically, we investigated two main categories, identified as our variables: *apologising* and *denial of apologies*.

Keywords: Anglo-Italians; Apologies; Online Discourse; TripAdvisor

1. Introduction

Research in sociology and anthropology has widely demonstrated that food is a crucial bonding factor in cultural practices, as it contributes to maintaining social relationships and defining eating communities (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002,
p.109). Besides, food is often central to the transmission of cultural heritage, as it is strongly related to family traditions and, more generally, to ethnic ones. Therefore, food and all social practices within food frameworks are key to the

reinforcement of the connection "between [the] nuclear family and the extended family and indeed between the nuclear family and the wider community" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 75). When it comes to Italian communities, who are well-known for their dense family networks and tight family bonds, food and eating practices are thus undoubtedly essential predictors of both intra-community and inter-community expressions of *Italianness*.

In addition, the growing prominence of Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth CMC) urged us to explore new cyberspaces, as they are evolving at an incredibly rapid pace, thus influencing social practices and interactions. Not only do online social media already offer virtual places where people can communicate with no physical limit and negotiate their digital identities (cf. Balirano & Guzzo, 2011), but what also makes CMC so atypical is the hybrid nature of its messaging system. In CMC, no clear separation between written and oral communication is possible, but rather a continuum between asynchronous and synchronous communicative levels has been suggested (Herring, 1996, 2005, 2007; Vásquez, 2010, 2012). In particular, asynchronous communication is related to writing, as the writer is given more time to reflect upon the content of their messages, while synchronous communication is associated with oral interaction, with it being more immediate and generally less formal. In this respect, despite belonging to the field of online interaction, TripAdvisor provides a form of asynchronous communication, i.e. not real-time interaction, particularly as users have to wait for their comments to be approved and published in order to guarantee authenticity and adherence to the rules.

On a pragmatic level, in Austin's terms (1962), utterances can do things, instead of just saying things. Besides, pragmatic analyses may reveal cultural differences (Montserrat, 1992; Suszczyńska, 1999; Válková, 2014), inasmuch as pragmatic strategies may often vary according to linguistic and cultural patterns. Apologies are particularly interesting as they involve the person who is apologising to lose face and that person, indeed, admits a certain violation of the code of conduct or social norms, by attempting to make amends (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206). Although "apologies have a tendency to be ambiguous" (Lakoff, 2005, p. 204) and despite people using a limited number of main verbal strategies (Suszczyńska, 1999, p. 1056), such choices are not only context-specific, but also culture-sensitive. For instance, previous projects such as the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) revealed significant cross-cultural variability in the distribution of pragmatic patterns such as requests and apologies. Complaints have been widely investigated both in conversations and in written forms (Vásquez, 2010, p. 1707), despite the latter being rarer. However, while discourse strategies in apologetic behaviours have been so far

investigated in several contexts (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Montserrat, 1992; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, 1989; Suszczyńska, 1999), there has been little research into asynchronous CMC. With reference to recent investigations concerning TripAdvisor, Zhang and Vásquez (2014) analysed Chinese hotel managers' responses to negative hotel reviews in China, which were written in English. In their study, they looked at various prominent categories, such as *expressing gratitude*, *invitation for a 2nd try* and *providing an apology*. Interestingly, they discovered that Chinese managers mostly tend to *thank* their customers and *apologise* for their negative experiences. Moreover, cross- cultural investigations were recently carried out by comparing TripAdvisor replies in the UK and in Italy (Napolitano & Aiezza, 2017; Napolitano, 2018). Napolitano (2018) recently compared attitudes towards critical reviews in the UK and Italy by sampling restaurants in London and Rome, by looking at the main categories that managers use to reply to customers. What is worthy of note is that Italian and English managers resort to different pragmatic and rhetorical strategies to advocate their position and defend their reputation. Napolitano's study (2018) highlights that Italians state that negative reviews are untrue significantly more than the English do, while English managers express gratitude and apologise much more frequently.

Taking all of the abovementioned factors into consideration, our paper provides an experimental approach to the investigation of Anglo-Italian communities, through some preliminary analysis of asynchronous online communication in TripAdvisor replies, providing innovative insights into the identity-marking process in asynchronous communication. Food-related practices have already been proven as crucial in the definition of Loughborough Italians' (henceforth LIs) identity (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019) and in other Anglo-Italian contexts (Balirano & Guzzo, 2011). Guzzo and Gallo (2019) have already observed that the relationship between heritage languages and identity is still strong among LIs, pointing at the usage of multimodal resources to convey their identity and to provide hints of Italian experience. Therefore, we questioned whether apologies in online asynchronous interactions could reveal additional features in LI's discourse. We thus wondered to what extent LIs position themselves as Italian or English in terms of online asynchronous communication and, more specifically, how *Italianness* and *Englishness* may be defined in terms of pragmatic features and specific uses of English in TripAdvisor replies to negative reviews.

2. TripAdvisor: A few insights

TripAdvisor was created in early 2000 to provide unbiased consumer-to- consumer suggestions and advice for catering services, accommodation and travel destinations worldwide (Law, 2006). Its increasing importance in cyber communication often plays a significant role in people's daily life. TripAdvisor

has more than 260 million monthly visitors and over 125 million reviews (Schuckert, Xianwei & Law, 2015, p. 143) and it is a leading company in 2.0 Web. More specifically, it has been estimated that about 80% of web-users check TripAdvisor and thus it has a great impact on consumers' decision- making processes (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Vásquez, 2010).

The extensive growth of TripAdvisor over recent years has been attributed to the system of trust that it inspires via eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) practices (Jeacle & Carter, 2011), its system of mutual impressions and opinions and comments (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Lei & Law, 2015; Vásquez, 2012). Overall, TripAdvisor offers a rather democratic scheme of opinion- sharing processes. In the case of catering services, alongside personal experiences, TripAdvisor members are asked to provide an inclusive four- level system of rating, i.e. food, service, value and atmosphere (Lei & Law, 2015, p. 2), which supplies detailed feedback written by and for its users, who are in turn reviewers and customers. Thus, TripAdvisor would appear to be a promising platform to investigate cross-cultural, social and linguistic variation.

3. Corpus and methods

3.1. Loughborough Italians

Loughborough has a population of 59,932 inhabitants (Office for National Statistics, Census 2011) and it is situated in Leicestershire, not far from Bedford and Peterborough, well-known for hosting two large Italian communities. Although a significant number of Italians settled in the South East of England, many reached the towns of Bedford, Peterborough, Loughborough, Bletchley, and Nottingham (Tubito & King, 1996). The post WWII Italian migration towards the UK was mainly fostered by an agreement between the Italian and the British governments (Guzzo, 2007). Workers arrived from the poorest Southern Italian regions (i.e. Campania, Calabria, Apulia, Sicily) and were largely employed in brick factories (Guzzo, 2011; Tubito & King, 1996).

Likewise, migrants mostly reached Loughborough after WWII (1950s-1960s) from Southern Italy. A considerable number of Loughborough Italians were from Busso, a small town in Molise, while some others arrived from Campania and Lazio (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019). They were employed as bricklayers by the Brick Society and some other similar factories (e.g. Brushes). However, following a general trend (Guzzo, 2007, 2011), after their contract had expired, a number of them decided to change job in favour of self-employed positions in the food industry, leading to many catering services, such as restaurants, pizzerias and Italian cafés flourishing in Loughborough and its

surroundings (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019), all of which contributed to the development of the Loughborough Italian Community (henceforth LIC).

Just as kinship and family bonds are fundamental in transnational Italian communities (Zontini, 2004, pp. 12-13), family has always played a key role in the social definition of the LIC. Indeed, some informants reported racist behaviour directed towards LIs, which contributed to strengthening intra- community ties, at least in the past. Regardless of the expected language shift towards the host society, LIs still preserve their culture and heritage (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019). While Italian classes have unfortunately disappeared over time, their Catholic Church still provides a weekly Italian Mass (Guzzo & Gallo, 2019), reinforcing some community engagement.

3.2. Methodology and corpus

To provide a multi-dimensional angle on LIs language behaviour in TripAdvisor replies, both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed, and a multi-layered investigation was performed by drawing on a combination of different approaches. Information concerning the LIC was collected ethnographically, by means of participant observation as well as spontaneous conversations with 1st and 2nd generation informants (April, 2014) which revealed to be particularly useful to gather background information concerning the LIC. Most of the participants involved in the fieldwork worked in the catering services selected for our online collection. Our preliminary dataset consists of three corpora of online replies to negative reviews. Replies in our corpora were, in the first instance, uploaded between January 2012 and February 2016, and later, between November 2017 and March 2018. A sample of 20 replies to 1-to-3-star reviews left by the LIC managers (2160 words) was collected and followed by two control corpora, consisting of comparable data taken from both Italian and English catering services. The former includes owners' replies (25 replies, 4372 words) to negative reviews for an equivalent number of restaurants in Benevento, which is a Southern-Italian town easily comparable to Loughborough in terms of population size, geographical location, and local economy (e.g. the presence of a university). The same procedure was followed for our English control group (50 replies, 7295 words), which includes replies left by managers of comparable English businesses in Loughborough and its surroundings. Finally, the LIC managers' online replies were compared to our two control corpora resulting in trends which will be expressed in form of percentages and discussed below.

Previous literature (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, 1989) provided enlightening and detailed models in order to compare apologies cross-culturally, showing that other strategies are also fundamental in the expression of apologies. Specifically, five recurrent semantic formulas were

identified, i.e. expression of apology, explanation/account of the situation, acknowledgment of responsibility, offer of repair and, promise for forbearance (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, p. 22). However, as is typical of oral interactions, speech-act-set models and apology strategies have mainly been applied to conversational contexts, as these are also associated with L2 learning processes and with the acquisition of socio-pragmatic competences (Lipson, 1994; Montserrat, 1992; Válková, 2014). For instance, Montserrat (1992, p. 8) focused on native/non-native social interaction, with broad strategies such as minimisation of the offense, whereas Suszczyńska (1999, p. 1056) investigated cross-cultural behaviours, providing a more structured and multi-layered model. We tried to apply such models to TripAdvisor replies; nevertheless, both models were used in conversational contexts and indeed provide some (sub)categories which are particularly frequent in dialogues (e.g. request for forgiveness, concern for the hearer), but not necessarily relevant in asynchronous communication.

Therefore, drawing on previous literature (e.g. Montserrat, 1992; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Suszczyńska, 1999) we provided an innovative apology model, suitable for a TripAdvisor application, as a synthesis of the two aforementioned models. As such, our model offers general categories following Montserrat's model (e.g. denial of apology) combined with more culture-sensitive references as in Suszczyńska's model (e.g. being offended and sorry/apology). In addition, some new apology strategies were introduced to our model, which also follows in the footsteps of research studying responses to TripAdvisor complaints. Strategies such as *expressing pride*, *thanking the reviewer* and *inviting personal/private discussion*, but also *explanation/accountability*, *taking responsibility*, *offer of repair*, promise as an *invitation to a second try* (not hereby investigated) are context-specific and relevant to TripAdvisor cyberspace. In this paper, we decided to focus on two main variables, namely *apology* and *denial of apology*. The former is further examined in terms of regret and offers of apologies, while the latter includes the variables of *being offended*, *blaming the reviewer* and *the accusation of lying*. As no two situations are completely alike, especially across cultures (e.g. the Italian and English contexts), contextual variability was also considered in terms of assumed communicative elements. In this respect, client-owner or client-manager asynchronous interactions took place in the food domain and reviews to which replies were provided all fell into the same categories, i.e. 1 to 3 stars.

4. Analysis and results

Overall, apologies tend to be considered as "a speech act set which will consist of a number of semantic formulas" (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, p. 21), and apology strategies as reactions to offensive situations, where the subject

expresses regret for something done against another subject (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206). However, apologies are more likely to be reactions after failing to meet customers' expectations in TripAdvisor interactions. Although it is generally acknowledged that some universals in apologetic behaviours do exist, specific cultural features and linguistic differences between L1 and L2 may influence the performance of speech acts set in cross-cultural studies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). For instance, Cohen and Olshtain (1981, pp. 126-130) discovered that while an offer of apology was not as frequent among English speakers as they had expected, Hebrew speakers were overall less likely to offer an apology on some specific occasions. Although EFL speakers adopted the same (universal) semantic formulas as native speakers, results did not always align, due to both cultural and linguistic influences. In this respect, we wonder whether *Italianness* might have an impact on the way LIs apologise and reply to their customers.

It is necessary to highlight that all replies from English and LI managers were provided in English, while Italian was uniquely used by the Italians. This is, however, quite expected, if we consider that English has now become the Internet language par excellence. Furthermore, managers are expected to accommodate their online interlocutors, displaying audience design (cf. Bell, 1984) when replying. Moreover, it is worth remembering that catering managers may belong to 2nd and 3rd generations and are likely to be English-natives already.

4.1. Apology strategies

It seems problematic to accurately understand "speech acts and other verbal behaviours" without reference to cultural heritage, values and attitudes (Suszczyńska, 1999, p.1055). Despite the obvious challenges, sociocultural contextualisation has so far proven to be extremely relevant in research. By means of cross-cultural analyses, researchers have suggested that apologetic strategies are very much subject to cultural values and attitudes (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Lipson, 1994; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). Specifically, cases of sociolinguistic transfers leading to deviation and failure in communication have been discovered in a number of apology-related contexts. This is due to the fact that

> languages tend to conventionalize the use of some of the specific or performative verbs. Thus in English, for instance, the verb 'apologize' […] is used in more formal situations, while 'I'm sorry' is very frequent across situations. (Olshtain & Cohen, 1989, p.55)

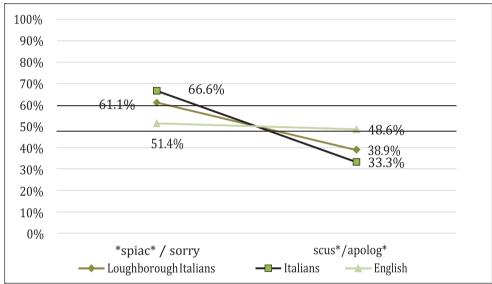In contrast to "sorry", the verb "to apologise" tends to be more frequent in

writtenforms(Suszczyńska,1999,p.1058).However,thisisnotthecasewith alllanguages.In this respect, based on her study in Bologna, Lipson (1994) advocated the hypothesis that "sorry" is used for offenses of variable severity, while its Italian equivalents, namely "mi dispiace" and similar expressions, are used when the offense is perceived as highly severe. In contrast, apologetic formulas such as "to apologise" may have stronger connotations in English than in Italian.

Hence, we wondered which categories are displayed by LIs and whether there are some similarities to either their Italian or English fellows. Although formulaic expressions such as "be sorry" and "apologise" can indeed be included in the same Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) category (Suszczyńska, 1999, p.1056), we also looked at the distribution of two types of performative phrases, i.e. regret and offer of apology. As suggested by Lipson (1994), "mi dispiace"/"sono spiacente" have a stronger connotation in Italian compared to English, in terms of *unkindness* and degree of the offense. In contrast, "scusa(mi)" and "ti chiedo scusa" (the Italian equivalents for "to apologise") are perceived as less powerful and used in situations with varying degrees of severity. We examined the Italian "mi/ci dispiace" and sono/siamo spiacente/i, and their English equivalent "to be sorry". Moreover, we singled out tokens of "apologise" and "apologies", as well as their Italian equivalents "scusa(mi)" and "ti chiedo scusa". In order to search through our data, a corpus linguistic tool was used. Specifically, we investigated the frequency of apology strategies by means of AntConc (Anthony, 2014). We ran very general searches with open inputs to maximise the number of examples gathered and obtain truthful and comprehensive results. In particular, we chose the key words **spiac** and *scus** for the Italian sub-corpus, *sorry* and *apolog** for the English and the LI sub-corpora.

Some remarkable elements emerged from our investigation of apologies.

Figure 1 shows that while frequencies for both regret and apology are relatively balanced in the English group (51.4%, 18 occurrences, and 48.6%, 17 occurrences), quite surprisingly, regret occurs almost twice as much as the offer of apology both in the Italian and the LI subgroups. The most visible divide occurs among the Italians, where the frequency of **spiac** is almost twice as high as the offers of apologies, but LIs immediately follow. Frequencies of occurrence for both *regret* and *offer of apology* in the LI corpus are more in line with the Italian subgroup. Regret occurs at a rate of 61.1% (11 occurrences) amongst LIs and 66.6% (12 occurrences) amongst Italians, while the offer of an apology appeared at a rate of 38.9% (7 occurrences) amongst LIs and 33.3% (6 occurrences) amongst Italians. Therefore, LIs link with the Italians. Nonetheless, some considerations must be made. Regret may have stronger connotations in Italian than in English, whereas the

opposite seems to be true for forms such as "I apologise" (cf. Lipson, 1994; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). This last phrase tends to be preferred in written forms, of which TripAdvisor is an example. Yet, despite using English, LIs use lower percentages of offers of apology, preferring to express regret. While LIs' perceptions of complaints seem to go towards the English direction, yet offers of apologies are not as common, meaning that probably LIs do not perceive those negative reviews as particularly threatening. However, LI heritage and socio-cultural inclinations arise in apologetic behaviours, to the extent that they may be influenced by their Italian experience.

Figure 1. Distribution of occurrences for **spiac*/sorry* and *scus*/apolog** across all subgroups.

From qualitative observation, sometimes LIs strengthen self-responsibility by intensifying apologetic phrases. *Apolog** and *sorry* occur twice with adjectives (sincere) and three times with modifiers such as "very/extremely", respectively:

(1) Please accept *my sincere apologies* and be assured that this will never happen again. Bruno – LIG

In example (1), the owner provides his "sincere apologies" and introduces a *future promise* ("be assured that this will never happen again"), also included in our apologising model. Interestingly, Italians 'counterattack' their customers four times (example 2), in line with Napolitano (2018). Despite accepting the negative review, the manager clearly disagrees on the
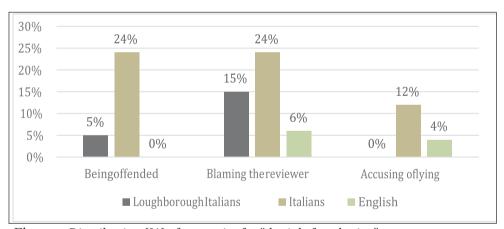
customers' last opinion. This could be interpreted as the Italians being particularly prone to defensiveness:

(2) *Ci dispiace ma* sull'ultimo punto siamo in completo disaccordo […] – IG [*We are*

   sorry but we completely disagree on the last point]

By contrast, English managers frequently adopt various modifiers, more than Italians and LIs. They are likely to use even powerful adverbs, such as "truly" and, though rare, "profusely".

4.2. Denial of apologies

This section deals with *denial of apology* and shows to what extent this variable occurs in our LI dataset, by comparing and contrasting results with our two control corpora. *Denial of apology* encompasses three main sub- strategies, not necessarily mutually exclusive, as we observed that managers could (a) show a certain degree of offense towards their customers, (b) contradict their reviewers by blaming them for the bad experiences, (c) accuse their reviewers of lying. Broadly speaking, LIs align to neither English nor Italians, rather positioning *in-between* the two groups.

Figure 2. Distribution (%) of strategies for "denial of apologies" across groups.

Overall, Italians appear to deny an apology more frequently than LIs and English business owners do. As shown in Figure 2, Italians lead in all the three strategies. However, it is interesting to notice that LIs again seem to show a composite behaviour. All catering managers across the three corpora tend to highlight their customers' faults more often than using the other two strategies. "Blaming the reviewer" is indeed the only sub-category appearing

in all groups, though with different results:

(3) We look forward to hearing from you soon, regarding the refund. Or *when you've saved up to enjoy a meal without the compromise of embarrassing* your wife/girlfriend – LIG

By not taking full responsibility and blaming their reviewers 15% (3 out of 20) of the time, LIs position themselves *in-between* the two control groups. Again, qualitative examples clarify our quantitative findings about LIs. Example (3) illustrates a LIC member blaming the reviewer. While the manager uses quite standard formulas in terms of arranging a refund, he suddenly changes the subject and, quite sarcastically, stresses his disapproval of his customer's behaviour. In particular, the manager implies that his customer has provided a negative review because of his attitude. He plays with humour on his being rather stingy, even mentioning his partner's embarrassment. This feature only marginally arises in the exchanges of English managers (6%; 3 out of 50), while Italians reach a peak of 24% (6 out of 25).

Finally, contrary to all expectations, a peculiar trend was detected for *accusing of lying*. Interestingly, LIs seem to diverge from both the English and Italian subgroups, as this category does not occur in their replies. It should be observed that this might reflect the size of the corpus used for this preliminary analysis. Nonetheless, it might also suggest that they are likely to accept their shortcomings, without necessarily highlighting their customers' unfairness. Although larger dataset may yield different results, our preliminary results would suggest a closer connection between LIs and English owners:

(4) Le dico solo di *vergognarsi* e di trovare un altro modo *per fare pubblicità ai suoi amici* –IG

[I'll only tell you *to be ashamed of yourself* and that you should find another way to *promote your friends*"]

(5) Whilst we respect your opinion with due respect you were not present and *believe this to be an unfair review* – EG

Despite being less frequent than other strategies, Italians (12%; 3 out of 25) and a small share of English (4%; 2 out of 50) owners display some sort of accusation against their customers, thus confirming Napolitano's (2018) results, i.e. Italians accuse their reviewers more than English. In extract (4), the Italian manager openly accuses his customer of disparaging them only to advertise their friends' better catering service. In example (5), even though

the expected English politeness is shown, conveyed by means of deferential expressions ("Whilst we respect your opinion", "with due respect"), one English manager highlights their customers' unfairness in commenting on their restaurant. Unfortunately, it is impossible to comment on LI's data, as they do not discredit customers' credibility at all.

5. Discussion

Our analysis considered the language of LIs from an innovative perspective, which helps to understand how they position themselves in online discourse and whether their mixed-identity may have an impact on the way they use pragmatic tools in their TripAdvisor replies. Our analysis then examined apologetic formulas in detail, by investigating two broad variables encompassing the duality *apology* vs. *denial*. Statistical significance will be tested in a second phase of our investigation, as present results are preliminary. However, it is undeniable that a few interesting sociolinguistic trends have emerged that could lead to further and broader investigations in this research field.

Firstly, LIs always use English in their replies, this probably being the result of audience design (cf. Bell, 1984). From a more detailed analysis, LIs seem to define their unique way of using apology-set strategies. For instance, with 15% of criticism, LIs position themselves *in-between* their Italian and English fellows also in reprehending their customers. Instead, if LIs express less aggressiveness than Italians, it is nonetheless worthwhile noticing that being offended is characteristic for Italians and, though only slightly, it may also occur in the LI corpus. Finally, LIs seem to distance themselves from both control corpora as they never openly accuse their reviewers of lying. As Anglo-Italians, we expected LIs to position themselves halfway between the Italians and the English, particularly because this was considered a prerogative of Italians and extremely rare amongst the English (Napolitano, 2018).

As for regret and offer of apologies, LIs prefer formulas which generally convey a lower degree of severity in English, namely regret. With reference to this, LIs tend to conform with the Italians, sharing very similar results for both regret and offer of apology. Yet, it is true that if they show similar percentages to the Italians, a possible divide should be discussed. If *apolog** conveys a stronger sense of self-blame, it means that LIs may feel less concerned about a negative experience, contrary to the English trend, which in contrast is extremely balanced. Such a neat divide is missing in our English corpus, but data would support a certain influence from their Italian side. Data may thus suggest LIs being rather consistent with Italians' behaviour. Besides, the qualitative investigation of intensifiers revealed that apology

strategies occasionally do not suffice and LIs may strengthen them, this being particularly in line with the English managers' behaviour.

That said, it seems fair to consider that cultural alignment may also contribute to LI's language choices in TripAdvisor replies. As proposed by several scholars (Sect. 1, 3.2 & 4), our analysis thus suggests that apologetic strategies can indeed be influenced by cultural norms and rhetorical styles. The nature of such differences is, however, hard to detect. Politeness and bluntness might result in the outcome of cultural norms being acquired socio-culturally by Anglo-Italians. Moreover, our data also illustrates that Italians seem less capable of tolerating negative reviews, thus displaying a more evident tendency of denial of apology and declaring negative reviews as untrue, while English managers provide apologies almost twice as frequently. All being considered, it is evident that cultural differences among Anglo-Italians can be displayed in apology strategies in food-related online communication and that they play a key role in understanding how language is used in all its manifestations.

6. Conclusion

Our research takes some distance from traditional studies of the use and acquisition of pragmatic strategies in conversation. With a focus on online discourse and asynchronous communication, our analysis falls into the new field of investigations of TripAdvisor communication (e.g. Napolitano & Aiezza, 2017; Napolitano, 2018; Vásquez, 2010; 2012; Zhang and Vásquez,
2014).

Our investigational analysis of TripAdvisor replies shed some more light on the construction of *Italianness* and *Englishness* by LIs, which allowed for in- depth investigation of their identity-marking process. Our attempt to explore TripAdvisor replies from a pragmatic perspective revealed a certain degree of alternation between Italian-oriented and English-oriented behaviour, which partly met our initial hypotheses. Their mixed behaviour becomes more complex when looking at specific apologetic strategies. As for regret and offer of an apology, LIs align to the Italian style in some respects, while moving towards the English style in others. LIs show comparable results to Italians for both expressing regret and apologising, as opposed to English trends. LIs are more inclined to "be sorry" and, though to a much lesser extent, to "be offended", like Italians. By contrast, LIs stand halfway as far as the general use of *denial of apology* is concerned. This trend of *in-between* positioning, even in apologetic strategies, seems to be in line with previous investigations in the food domain among LIC members, where LIs already displayed mixed tendencies in their linguistic and multimodal choices (see Guzzo & Gallo, 2019).

Interestingly, they also display unexpected trends, diverging from both the Italian and English paradigm, when it comes to *accusing* customers *of lying*.

To conclude, our investigation highlighted the hybrid nature of interactions in online discourse on platforms such as TripAdvisor. It further revealed and supported the idea that LIC members express and preserve their transnational identity in online food-related discourse, in terms of specific apology strategies. In this respect, *TripAdvisor*'s apologies proved to be a fruitful field of research to explore in order to tackle new insights into the use of language in online discourse and communication involving socio-cultural differences. Future research in online users-to-users asynchronous communication in the field of migration studies is strongly encouraged, for which our preliminary findings could act as a valuable springboard. Particularly, a larger corpus will be considered in the future to contrast the preliminary trends emerged in the present study. Besides further strategies deserve closer consideration, which could contribute to gathering precious evidence concerning the LIs' online identity construction.

Notes:

1. The authors conceived the article together. In particular, Siria Guzzo is responsible for Sections 1, 2, 3, 3.1, 3.2 and 6; Anna Gallo for Sections 4, 4.1, 4.2, and 5.
2. IG = Italian Group; EG = English Group; LIG = Loughborough Italians Group.

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