LETTERS OF REJECTION: THE UNWELCOME NEWS
Cartas de Recusa de Pedido de Emprego: Notícias Indesejáveis

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Abstract

The study examines the politeness phenomenon of 'unwelcome news letters'. We try to formulate the ways in which writers express their needs to repair the possible damage caused to an applicant for having his/her job application rejected. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's work (1978; 1987), thirty letters of rejection are examined – sixteen of them being analysed in detail – in terms of the addressors' concerns to avoid face-threatening acts.

Key-words: *gender; letter; politeness; communicative strategies.*

Resumo

O estudo examina o fenômeno da polidez em 'cartas que fornecem notícias indesejáveis'. Buscamos formular as maneiras pelas quais os autores das cartas expressam sua necessidade de amenizar o possível dano causado a uma potencial candidata por ter seu pedido de emprego recusado. Com base na obra de Brown e Levinson (1978; 1987), trinta cartas são examinadas, das quais 16 são examinadas detalhadamente, em termos da preocupação do remetente em evitar atos ameaçadores à face.

Palavras-chave: *gênero; carta; polidez; estratégias comunicativas.*

1.   Introduction

The article examines the usage of linguistic politeness for minimizing the impact of "unwelcome news" on addressees. In our study, two central concepts have dominated discussions on the use of politeness strategies: (i) strategies as a means for minimizing the impact

of their rejections and (ii) affective bonds for establishing harmonious rapport with the addressees.

The paper presents data from 30 letters which are the replies to an applicant's request for the post of Spanish assistant lecturer, or part-time tutor (see original job application letter in the Appendix). At first glance it seemed that all the replies from the universities were alike: a negative response to the solicited post. However, we could observe, after careful analysis, that although the emphasis of some letters was on the negative response, other replies displayed more subtle discourse strategies for maintaining smooth verbal communication.

After this short introduction, in the second section of the article two central concepts have dominated theoretical discussions. Firstly, research which focuses on linguistic politeness, more specifically, on resorts to avoid direct confrontation through more sympathetic devices toward the applicant. And secondly, the study of the theory of moves which also plays a fundamental part in the way discourse is organised. These key considerations provide the basic framework for our study. The third section is dedicated to analyse 16 letters of rejection in detail, illustrating the findings and bringing up the discussion about the use of the most influential politeness strategies which appear in the corpus: mainly apologies as expression of negative politeness and some other verbal realizations conveying positive politeness. Finally, the last section illustrates, by means of three distinctive letters, this range of variation accomplished by the writers' choices. For the analysis of the corpus we have been able to count on the help of several native speaker informants who, at the time of the analysis of the corpus, read the letters and gave an assessment of their impressions.

2.   Theory on politeness and communicative purpose

2.1.   Politeness strategies: rapport and tact

The study considers a description of mechanisms that prevent addressors from offending addressees when delivering the unwelcome news contained in a letter of rejection for employment, *i.e.* what linguistic

forms enable a writer to be more or less polite with the reader. We base
our study partly on Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987),
whose roots can be traced loosely from the Chinese and from the work
of Goffman (1967:5), for whom face, an image of self-delineation in
terms of approved social attributes, is the motivation behind an
interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987) – extending on this model –
build up a two-dimensional interactional model. The authors suggest
that "face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be
lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in
interactions" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:66). This face is articulated
as (a) "negative face": the need to be unimpeded by others, the freedom
of action and freedom from imposition, that is to say 'defensive' of
one's own face, and as (b) "positive face": the positive self-image or
personality that each one wants the others to appreciate and approve,
that is to say 'protective' of others' face. These authors also state that a
threat to a person's face is termed a Face Threatening Act (FTA) and
argue that these acts require a mitigating statement or some verbal repair.
Brown and Levinson (1987), accordingly, interpret the behaviour of
speakers on the basis of a taxonomy of linguistic strategies which
modulate the strength of utterances according to the degree of familiarity,
respect, relative social roles of the interlocutors and the impact that the
contents of these acts might have on the interlocutors (Brown and
Levinson, 1987:68-72). Politeness can be analysed, according to their
theory (1987:75), in two groups: (i) positive politeness ("where the
speaker wants hearer's wants by treating him/her as a member of an in-
group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known
and liked"), and negative politeness ("which is essentially avoidance-
based").

In the last decade, Politeness Theory has enjoyed a great deal of
pragmatic attention as it has not only been studied and analysed by
many authors but also criticised from many quarters (see bibliography
compiled by DuFon et al., 1994). As Bargiela-Chiappini (2003:1461-
1462) points out, in her recent article, as early as 1985 findings from
experimental research appear to expose a 'British cultural bias' in the
typology originally presented by Brown and Levinson in 1978. Towards
the end of the nineties, establishing 'conceptual equivalence', uncovering
the multiple meanings attached to the construction of 'face' that are

shared across cultures, remained the fundamental aim of a (universal) theory of 'face' (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998:216). The Chinese notions of 'face' remain, today, a primary focus of interest and indeed it is Chinese scholars who have provided some of the most developed and consistent critiques of Brown and Levinson's work (Gu, 1990; Chen, 1993; Mao, 1994). However, as Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) notes, despite the variety of studies that focus on linguistic politeness, the field still lacks an agreed definition of what 'politeness' is (see criticisms by Eelen, 2001).

Pilegaard (1997) suggests that politeness theory has mostly focused on face-to-face interactions in professional and non-professional settings. However, as Pilegaard and some other authors see it (e.g. Maier, 1992; Myers, 1989), "few studies have so far applied politeness theory in studies of written language for specific purposes" (Pilegaard, 1997:224). In more recent years, however, considerable amount of work has been published in the field of the language in specific settings (Longacre, 1992; Mauranen, 1993; Bosch, 1996, 2001; Bosch & Giménez, 1997; Salager-Mayer, 1994 and 1998; Hyland, 1996 and 2002).

2.2.   Theory of moves: the communicative purpose

As we have seen, politeness involves a great amount of verbal 'work'. However, as Holmes (1995) notes, politeness cannot be said to reside only within linguistic forms. It needs to be analysed, not only at a sentence or phrase level, but also at a discourse level (i.e. linguistic analysis together with the broader framework of discourse analysis). In our analysis we will look into politeness as occurring over long stretches of writing (the letter) whose product could, possibly, be traced down to a community practice[1] , as we will argue later in this paper. Following

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[1] The term "community of practice" has been used since the 90s, by specialists such as Lave and Wenger (1991), to refer to the shared learning and communal use of certain agreed practices by particular social groups (see for further, and more updated, information on the subject Hildreth and Kimble, 2004). In linguistics this concept has been expressed through the terms "discourse community" and "language community" (see Swales 1990). Currently the concept is also applied to numerous disciplines, including social work, social sciences, urban planning, social and economic development, etc. (see the *Journal of Community Practice*).

Pilegaard (1997), we analyse our data not only at a sentence level but will also try to see how strategies operate on a broader textual level: the opening section, propositional section and closing section. We will also base our analysis of the corpus on the work developed by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) by examining the data in terms of the schematic structure. It is interesting to note that a lot of research has been carried out in this field (Swales & Feak, 2000; Flowerdew, 2002; Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans, 2002).

As Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans (2002) observe, genre analysis has moved on quite a distance since the early work on the journal article introduction and the sales promotion letter. Today, there is a wider concern, both in the discourse community and the expectations of that community, and in how writers manipulate the genre conventions to achieve their own individual professional purposes "by means of establishing harmonious connections with the readers, taking their views, beliefs and expectations into account and strategically addressing them as intelligent equals in a shared interdisciplinary endeavour" (Hyland, 2002: 215).

The notions of 'schematic structure' or 'macro-structure' are paramount in linguistic approaches to genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). According to these approaches, genres are defined after their communicative purposes. Texts are broken down into moves observing the different functions they display. Extensive research has been carried out in the area, with Swales' work on the introductions of research articles (1990) as pioneer in the study of genre. Swales (1990) considers the introduction of a research article as having three main sections: the writer (i) establishes a territory (makes topic generalizations, reviews items of previous research, etc.); (ii) establishes a niche (indicates a gap, etc.); (iii) occupies a niche (outlines purposes, announces present research, etc.). Bhatia (1993), on the other hand, analyses the sales promotion letter by breaking it down in various moves: the addressor (i) establishes credentials; (ii) introduces the offer (offers the product/service, details the offer, values of offer); (iii) offers incentives; (iv) encloses documents; (v) solicits response; (vi) uses pressure tactics; (vii) ends the letter politely. Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans (2002), more recently, exemplify the schematic structure of the

genre of the editorial letter in four basic moves: the editor of the journal (i) prepares the reader for the decision (refers to submission, apologizes for delay, etc.); (ii) conveys decisions (accepts, rejects); (iii) makes recommendations for revision/improvements (refers to reviewer's recommendations, etc.); (iv) signs off (confirms decision, mitigates bad news, apologizes for delay, presents a deadline, gives encouragement, etc.).

3.   Model of analysis, findings and discussion

After studying the initial 30 letters of the corpus, we selected the most distinctive 16 letters of the genre to be analysed in detail according to Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987), also using as parameters the mentioned contributions to the genre tradition of Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993) and Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans (2002). As for linguistic politeness, we will focus on negative and positive politeness strategies that can be found in the text with its various verbal realizations. Among positive politeness strategies in the first move ("acknowledgement of the letter"), which will be presented latter in this article, we will see those which help build a cooperative atmosphere, thus paving the ground for the coming FTA. The "propositional section" of a letter (which generally coincides with the middle paragraph/s) expresses the unwelcoming act of the 'unavailability of the vacancy'. The strategies in this section are usually negative, paying deference by means of conventional indirectness, hedging, politeness markers, impersonalization of sender and receiver, nominalization and passive constructions (e.g. "unfortunately", "I am sorry to …"). In the closing section of the letter there is again the need of paying face redress: future cooperation, catering for the applicant's needs, and expressing optimism about his or her future success. We will see the realization of these moves through linguistic mechanisms paying close attention to the way of expressing the 'unavailability of a vacancy' for Spanish assistant. We consider this statement a central piece of information extremely discouraging for the reader. We will analyse this act at a textual macro-level and discuss the potential threat it carries redressed by other global face-considerations.

From this perspective, the macrostructure of the analysed letters can be outline in three different moves, closely related to the paragraphs:

  (i)   salutation and acknowledge of letter (opening section)
  (ii) rejection (propositional section, middle paragraph)
  (iii) rounding off the letter (expressing concern/cooperation and giving encouragement)

(i)   Salutation and acknowledge of the letter

The opening of a letter usually identifies the receiver and the sender by stating their addresses. It provides a salutation, makes reference to previous correspondence and gives clues to the sender-receiver relationship (the modes of reference may mark asymmetry in status). They may threaten the addressee's face indicating that he/she is not entirely respected by the addressor.

The salutation is generally expressed by the neutral basic formula *'Dear Ms González'* (showing remoteness). This formality is a negative politeness strategy displayed to pay deference to the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 70). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this deference is, at times, tarnished by the claim of a superior status, found right at the beginning in the formal greeting *'Dear Madam'*. This straightforward salutation can, at times, cause uneasiness to the reader of the document who may feel the unwillingness of the addressor to care for his/her face needs by using more bald-on-record strategies. Conversely, informality and openness in the greetings is a way of paying positive politeness to the addressor's face needs (*'Dear María'* - by using the first name, the addressor is treating her more as a friend). It is interesting to note that out of 16 letters, drawn from our data, only few greetings coincide in their mode of reference (*'Dear Ms. Gonzalez'* is expressed in four letters), the rest being variations, more or less formal, of the formulae 'Dear plus the name': *Dear Miss Gonzalez Molina*; *Dear Ms. Gonzalez Molina* (twice); *Dear Miss Gonzalez*; *Dear María Gonzalez*; *Dear María*; *Dear Ms. Gonzalez* (the name handwritten); *Dear Ms. Molina*, *Dear María Molina* (confusion of the surname); *Dear Miss González* (twice, the correct graphic stress has purposely been

added); and *Dear Madam*. Note that, although the great majority of addressors works in departments of modern languages, most of them do not seem aware of the regular Spanish usage: *Dear Ms. [surname]* (being the first surname the important one).

Almost all the letters in the corpus start by thanking for the enquiry about the post: *Thank you for your application, Thank you for your letter …* (see Letters A and B at the end of this section). This expression of thanking is part of a ritualized way of acknowledging. It should, however, be underlined that such expressions undergo different degrees; some being more positively-affective (*Thank you for your application; Thank you for your letter of 1ˢᵗ March which reached me yesterday*) and others less affective (*Further to your enquiry for part time teaching…*). We can consider the more positively-affective ones a basic strategy for putting the addressee at ease right from the beginning.

Close attention to the letters indicates that there is always some acknowledgement by means of using the standard formulae, '*Thank you for your recent letter*; *Thank you for completing the form*, or *Thank you for your application*'. Some others express closeness and make the paragraph a bit more descriptive by adding the personal pronoun, uptoners or emphasizers, the date, specifying the post and the department and even insisting on thanking for the interest at the end: '*Thank for your interest in appointment to this Department*; *Thank you very much for your recent letter about X*; *I thank you for your letter of X*'. Only two letters aim at a more 'efficient communication', following the Gricean's maxims (Grice, 1975: 41-58) of quantity (be brief), quality (be sincere) and relevance (be relevant); for example, we find in one of them, '*I acknowledge receipt of your completed application form to become part time tutor*' [Letter 16]

(ii)   The propositional section: expressing unavailability for the vacancy

The next paragraphs define the propositional content of the letter: the unavailability of the vacancy. We have observed that most of the letters use the quite predictable structure of apologizing for the

disappointment caused and giving encouragement and hence expressions of deference and solidarity, occurring almost simultaneously ('*I am sorry that I cannot offer you any teaching at the moment but I shall keep your form on file for future reference*'; '*I regret there are no vacancies at the moment but I will keep your letter on file for future references*'). This negative politeness strategy serves, mainly, to minimize the particular FTA of rejecting the candidate's application. That is why most of the addressors apologize as a means of displaying reluctance to what it is seen as an FTA and hence, hedging phrases, indirectness, words and other particles which signal the addressor's attention to the addressee's face are used for softening the unwelcome nature of the news (for example, the corpus contains many of these expressions: '*I am sorry to say…*'; '*I regret to say...*'; '*I am afraid that…*'; '*Unfortunately we do not…*') Addressors are, in this way, trying to maintain a good relation with addressees by being deferential. These distancing mechanisms that redress face-threatening acts with linguistic deference are part of the negative politeness strategy.

Conversely, positive politeness strategies "serve the wider purpose of building and maintaining a friendly, cooperative business atmosphere", as Pilegaard (1997:228) points out. He observes, they dominate the external position of the letter, opening and closing sections, serving, thus, the addressor's purpose to cater for the addressee's needs. Observations in our data reveal the occurrence, particularly, of the above-mentioned strategies, specially the ones referring to:

a) negative politeness: minimizing the imposition (hedging mainly through apologies and stating the reason for the 'unwelcome news') and,

b) positive politeness: focusing on cooperation (giving hope, encouragement and ending with an optimistic tone; however, tarnished by expressions of pessimism, as will be seen in the analysis).

The body of the letters, which displays the propositional content (the applicant's rejection), is quite short (two to three sentences); however, it is in this part of the letter that the addressors display polite

addressives to fulfil the purpose of minimizing that rejection. In our data, as we show below, the force of the rejection (negative politeness) is basically toned down by the four main apologetic formulae: (a) *I am sorry*, (b) *I regret*, (c) *I am afraid*, (d) *unfortunately*, which are perceived as relating to the unpleasant content. These strategies are supported by other strategies focusing more specifically on maintaining a friendly and cooperative atmosphere (positive politeness).

We have considered the analysed letters as stretches of discourse where strategies of positive politeness (+) and negative politeness (-) combine, creating a clear communicative tactic. For a better comprehension of how this combination of moves operates, we have divided the letters into two groups, emerging from the description of the study. As we show below, the first group of letters –letters from [1] to [13] – illustrates the different moves comprised within the four main apologetic formula: *I am sorry*, *I regret*, *I am afraid* and *Unfortunately*; however, the second group of letters –letters from [14] to [16] – includes relatively sparse strategies to redress the act of stating the rejection: only *but* and s*hould*.

(1)   Apologetic formulae

(a) I am sorry

Letter[1]	(-)	*I am sorry to say that we don't foresee any vacancies in Spanish (...)*
	(+)	*However, we will certainly keep your details on file (…)*
	(-)	*should the situation change and a suitable post become vacant .*
	(-)	*I regret that I cannot give you a more positive reply.*

| Letter[2] | (-) | *I am sorry but we do not have any vacancy* |
| | (+) | *I do hope that you will be successful in obtaining a post elsewhere* |

Letter[3]	(-)	*I am sorry that I cannot offer you any teaching at the moment, but*
	(-)	*if you would care to complete the enclosed form (...),*
	(+)	*I would like to keep your details on file for future reference.*

| Letter[4] | (-) | *I am sorry that I cannot offer you any teaching at the moment,* |
| | (+) | *but I shall keep your form on file for future reference.* |

| Letter[5] | (-) | *I am sorry but there is no vacancy for a Language Assistant (…).* |

(b) I regret

| Letter[6] | (-) | *I regret there are no vacancies at the moment,* |
| | (+) | *but I will keep your letter on file for future references.* |

Letter[7]	(-)	*I regret to say that we have no openings at present,*
	(+)	*but I have placed your Curriculum Vitae on file and*
	(-)	*if anything suitable should arise,*
	(+)	*I will be in touch with you.*
	(-)	*Thank you once again for your interest.*

Letter[8]	(-)	*I regret that we do not have a vacancy for an assistant in Spanish.*
	(+)	*However, I shall keep your letter on file and write to you further*
	(-)	*If this seems likely to be useful.*

(c) I am afraid

| Letter[9] | (-) | *I am afraid I am therefore not in a position to offer you such a post.* |
| | (+) | *I wish you success in finding an appointment.* |

Letter[10]	(-)	*I am afraid that at the moment we do not have a vacancy*
	(+)	*but have put your letter on file and*
	(-)	*will be in touch if such a vacancy arises.*

Letter[11]	(-)	*I am afraid that we have already appointed a <u>lectora</u> for (year).*
	(+)	*We will, however, keep your letter on file,*
	(-)	*in case a vacancy should arise.*

(d) Unfortunately

Letter[12]	(-)	*Unfortunately the language Centre is not looking for staff (…),*
	(-)	*nor is it likely to do so in the foreseeable future.*
	(+)	*I shall, however, keep your details on file and*
	(+)	*in the meantime I shall pass your letter and C.V. on to colleagues*
	(-)	*who may possibly be able to help you.*
	(+)	*I wish you every success in finding a position as language assistant.*

Letter[13]	(-)	*Unfortunately we do not recruit assistant staff direct.*
	(-)	*If you would like to send your CV to the (...)*
	(-)	*They will be able to send you more information.*

(2) Little Redress

Letter[14]	(-)	*We usually employ staff with substantial teaching experience,*
	(+)	*but have added your name to our reserve list.*
	(+)	*We will contact you*
	(-)	*Should an appropriate vacancy arise.*

Letter[15]	(-)	*At the moment we have no vacancies for Spanish teachers*
	(+)	*but will contact you*
	(-)	*should any vacancy occur.*

Letter[16]	(+)	*Your name will be kept on record and*
	(+)	*I shall be in contact with you,*
	(-)	*Should a suitable vacancy arise.*

As we can see above, the act of apologizing can be executed in various ways. We can observe how addressors apologize by expressing the apology or regret with a phrase '*I am sorry*' or '*I regret*'. These face-saving items may involve the addressors taking the blame in order to avoid implying that the addressee is at fault. The apologetic expressions are frequently followed by others denoting a wish to mitigate: '*no vacancies at the moment/ at present*', stated in almost all the letters.

In some cases, reasons (by which the addressor dissociates him/ herself from the FTA) are given for redressing the FTA by means of an attitude marker '*Unfortunately*', which serves both to express the addressor's attitude to the proposition and to tone down the stretch that follows: *Unfortunately the Language Centre is not looking for staff* [Letter 12]; *Unfortunately we do not recruit assistant staff direct* [Letter 13]. Or by a highly used mitigation device articulated through the phrase 'I'm afraid', by which the addressor expresses the desire of diminishing the force of the coming utterance followed by a justification: *I'm afraid I am therefore not in the position to offer you ...* [Letter 9]; *I'm afraid we have already appointed a lectora* [Letter 11].

Little redress can be seen in Letters [14], [15] and [16]. In these cases, the addressor seems to give little attention to the addressee's face needs which are only mitigated by downtoners and intensifying modifiers (such as *usually* or *at the moment*)*: we usually employ staff with*

substantial experience [Letter 14]; *at the moment* [Letter 15]. The passive structure is preferred in: *Your name will be kept on record* [Letter 16]. This is a distancing mechanism by which the sender dissociates him/ herself from the act.

Also interesting are some supportive modalized moves and if-statements with which the sender acknowledges distance from the receiver. The addressor pays deference but also shows pessimism in some hypothetical, receiver-oriented mechanisms: *any vacancy which would interest you* [Letter 2]; *if anything suitable should arise* [Letter 7]. The receiver's freedom of action is stressed in some requests through conventional indirectness: *if you would care to complete* [Letter 3].

Other distancing devices are carried out by means of nominalizations (a/no/any+vacancy/ies, teaching, post, etc.) and pronominal reference ('I' shifts to 'we' in many examples: *I am sorry... however, we will …* [Letter 1]; *I regret to say that we have no vacancies* [Letter 7]; *I regret that we do not have a vacancy* [Letter 8]; *Our arrangements... I am afraid,* [Letter 9]; *I am afraid that at the moment we do not have a vacancy* [Letter 10]; *I am afraid that we have already ...* [Letter 11]. Other letters prefer the exclusive use of the generic 'we' for expressing detachment [Letters 14 and 15].

(iii) Rounding off the letter

The main focus of positive verbal strategies is generally on cooperation and showing interest. It is, thus, the wish of most of the senders to round off the letter positively. However, surprisingly, only three letters – Letters [3], [4] and [6] – focus on future cooperation by means of the sentence *I would/shall/will keep your details/form/letter for future reference(s)*. Two of the letters – Letters [2] and [9] – show interest in the candidate's finding a job elsewhere. This interest is even emphasized by an uptoner and predicative adjective: *I do hope that you will be successful in obtaining a post elsewhere* [Letter 2]. As we show in the list below, the remaining letters – Letters [1], [5], [7], [8] and from [10] to [16] – display a combination of strategies: on the one hand, the sender wishes to cooperate and show interest (positive

politeness strategies); for example, *we will certainly keep … and contact you* [Letter 1] but, on the other, casts doubts on the statements, by means of various degrees of modality, conditional clauses and other attitude markers; for example, *if such a vacancy arises* [Letter 10]. Senders are, thus, trying to end the letter in a positive tone ("we want to help you"), but at the same time, they cannot avoid showing some kind of pessimism ("we do not know whether we will have the chance to help you" or "we cannot help you").

> Letter [1] *However, we will certainly keep […] and contact you should the situation change and a suitable post becomes vacant*
>
> Letter [7] *if anything suitable should arise, I will be in touch with you*
>
> Letter [8] *I shall keep your letter on file […] if this seems likely to be useful*
>
> Letter [10] *and will be in touch if such a vacancy arises*
>
> Letter [11] *We will, however, keep your letter on file, in case a vacancy should arise*
>
> Letter [12] *I shall pass your letter and C.V. on to colleagues who may possibly be able to help you*
>
> Letter [13] […] *they will be able to help you*
>
> Letter [14] *we will contact you should an appropriate vacancy arise*
>
> Letter [15] *but will contact you should any vacancy occur*
>
> Letter [16] *I shall be in contact with you, should a suitable vacancy arise.*

Note that only Letter [5] is not rounded off by positive politeness. It is quite a straightforward letter, being the bad news only hedged by *I am sorry*.

As we have previously mentioned, most of the letters follow the recurrent schematic structure comprising an opening salutation, propositional section and closing salutation. All the letters, in the last closing section, incorporate the complimentary close, which, with no exception, is the formulaic expression 'Yours sincerely' and the written

signature. The name and title of the addressor is prominent in all the letters but for three, which, interestingly, are extremely short: Letters [6] and [10] show three lines, and Letter [11] only two lines.

The graphic representation of the logo (name of the institution) in different sizes of print (some emphasized by boldfacing) together with the addressor's and addressee's mailing details are present in all of them, except for one letter which is on unheaded paper [Letter 6]. In our data, the different paragraphs express the writer's purposes in two or three different units in which, as we have observed, special emphasis has been placed on redressive measures, foreseeing, thus, the addressor's reaction to unpleasant news. However, six documents, out of the sixteen, state the news in a single paragraph paying, consequently, little attention to the addressee's face wants, i.e., *At the moment we have no vacancies for Spanish teachers but will contact you should any vacancy occur* [Letter 15].

Another interesting point of variation among the letters is the date of the reply. This feature was pointed out by our external native informants who considered this fact to be a relevant set of information regarding politeness since it may show the writers' concern with the addressee's waiting time. The largest group of letters are replies to the initial request letter which was dated the 1st of March. Most of the replies were sent back during March; however, there were some others sent in April, May, June, August and November of that year.

Finally, we would also emphasize the importance of hand writing in this type of letter. All of them are typed and the only information written by hand is just the signature, with two exceptions, where the addressee's name is also handwritten.

As we have analysed and reviewed in the previous section, this genre of 'letters of rejection' or *'unwelcome news letters'* shows a great degree of variation that may considerably affect the addressee's face. In this last section, we would like to round up and summarize the writer's choices by showing three letters in full – Letters A, B and C – that from our perspective – and our informants' points of view – best illustrate the extreme sides of that range of choices. The three of them meet their two main informative objectives – acknowledging the application and denying availability – correctly by using the adequate formal register

(for example, *Thank you for your application* [Letter A] and *Unfortunately the LC is not looking for staff at the moment* [Letter B]). However, the first letter – Letter A – shows very little face work (very low interest in pleasing the reader), whereas the second – Letter B - and the third – Letter C – may be seen as prototypes regarding adequate deference and tact in this genre of letters, as we explain below:

7th November 199_

Dear Ms Gonzalez

Thank you for your application.

At the moment we have no vacancies for Spanish teachers but will contact you should any vacancy occur.

Yours sincerely

Letter A: Example of little redress

Although this type of letter – Letter A – follows the expected moves, it shows an almost total lack of politeness. This lack of politeness can be interpreted as impoliteness by the reader, who might think that the addressor does not care much about his/her feelings. The sender prefers overwhelming clarity and brevity, overruling face concerns.

19th March 199_

Dear Ms Gonzalez Molina,

Thank you for your letter of 1st March which reached me yesterday.

Unfortunately the Language Centre is not looking for staff at the moment, nor is it likely to do so in the foreseeable future. I shall however keep your details on file and in the meanwhile I shall pass your letter and C.V. on to colleagues who may possibly be able to help you.

I wish you every success in finding a position as language assistant.

Yours sincerely,

Letter B: Example of concern and interest combined with deference and tact

In this second example, Letter B, the sender takes pains to phrase the unpleasant news by means of a hedging device (*unfortunately*), which conveys the decision move. This strategy is followed by his/her caring about the addressee's needs (*I shall however keep your details on file…*); however, tainted by certain pessimism in the fulfilling of such an act (*who may possibly be able to help you*). In the last paragraph the sender shows, again, concern about the receiver's needs (*I wish you every success in finding…*). The letter displays positively-affective speech acts thus showing solidarity. It also displays negatively-deferential speech acts, thus expressing tact. This combination of negative and positive politeness, of formal and casual register, of deference and concern has been regarded by our informants as the most adequate and satisfactory type of reply.

Date: 17 June 199_

Ref: SMH/twp

Dear Ms Gonzalez,

Part Time Tutor

Further to your enquiry for part time teaching with X* Language Centre, I am enclosing an application for which I should be grateful if you would fill in and return to me. Your name will then automatically be added to our mailing list for any vacancies in which I think you may be interested.

As our pool of tutors is reviewed annually, it would help us greatly if you would let us know of any changes in your circumstances, i.e. change of address, unavailability for teaching due to long-term leave or the taking up of another post, etc., otherwise we shall assume that we may approach you should any posts become available.

Yours sincerely

Letter C: Example of deference and tact

* Name of the University

Finally, Letter C is considered (specially, by our native speakers informants) as the most conventional and adequate prototype of letter of rejection for employment, where politeness dominates over propositional information. The most prominent feature is the display of negative politeness through numerous distancing mechanisms which show deference and tact: (i) mood and modality: *I should be grateful if you would…/ it would help us greatly if you would…/ we may approach…*, (ii) the sender's dissociation from the act by means of the passive structure and impersonals which is also a recurrent politeness strategy: *your name will then automatically be added…/ our pool of tutors is reviewed annually, it would help us…*(iii) Conditionals are also used as a form of hedging so as to minimize the force of the decision move: *if you would fill in.../if you would let us know…/ should any post become available*. It is also (iv) writer-oriented with high-frequency occurrence of the personal pronoun *I/me/we/our/us*, aiming more at clarity than at emotional appeal.

4.   Conclusion

According to Swales (1990), the schematic structure of a particular genre is the result of conventions of a specific discourse community. However, within the overall structure (which points at a 'hidden genre'), writers make their own specific choices elaborating more or less on the face work of their contribution. In this sense, the present contribution tries to emphasize the importance of current Genre Analysis regarding the many ways of communicating in professional and academic settings, in particular regarding specific types of letters of frequent use, such as the letters of rejection for employment.

Although these documents are of considerable brevity, an analysis of them bears out the value of the categorizations developed by our predecessors in the analysis of genre and politeness. Given the increase in mobility of the pan-European labour force, there is a large amount of letters of application and therefore of rejection for employment. That is why there is a tendency for the use of set formulae or set letter forms; however, as we have observed, writers also make their specific contribution by displaying more or less face work in their

texts, especially when approaching the 'touchy issue'. Thus, accordingly, as the study demonstrates, both of them set forms and tailor-made letters display specific linguistic choices that affect the way the reader (applicant or addressee) may interpret the information. As Callow & Callow (1992:14) point out, "The communicator's awareness of the attitudes and values of addressees may colour the discourse from the beginning to end". In the case of this type of letters, the subtle attempts to colour such a delicate discourse have deserved special attention and analysis.

Through the analysis of our corpus, we have seen that this particular genre tends to start by using negative politeness when breaking the news and end with positive redress, but surprisingly, we saw on closer examination of the letters that this move carries certain degree of pessimism (felicity conditions may be suspended by these final 'if clauses'), hinting at a break in future communication.

The research reported here therefore provides further insight into understanding politeness phenomena at a text macro-level analysis in academic settings. It also provides a basis for cross-cultural language comparison as "a discourse in one language may be directly compared with its counterpart in another language, no matter how different their surface structure form" (Callow & Callow, 1992: 37).

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APPENDIX

Original Job Application Letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is María González Molina[2] and I am writing to you to apply for any vacancy available in your Department as assistant teacher, conversation assistant or any other similar post that you might find suitable for me.

In 1990 I completed my Degree in English Studies at the University of X in Spain. After that, I came to England where I have been working in several university related jobs while studying a Master's Course in Linguistics and Modern Languages offered by the University of X. As well as speaking Spanish and Catalan –my mother tongues- I have good knowledge of English and also speak some French and German.

My main priority at the moment is to find a job inside the educational world that would allow me to carry on my research on the socio-cultural aspects which intervene in current professional and academic communication in English. Therefore, I would be extremely grateful to you if you considered my application if a suitable post became vacant.

I enclose my Curriculum Vitae for current or future reference. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further details. I would be available for an interview at your convenience. I thank you very much for your attention in advance.

Looking forward to hearing from you

Yours faithfully

(Full Name)

Elena Bosch Abarca has been teaching EFL since the 1980s. In 1990 she became a Senior Lecturer at the University of Valencia (Spain) teaching mainly Business English. Her major areas of research lie in Text Linguistics and Business Communication. elena.bosch@uv.es

Rosa Giménez Moreno is a lecturer in Professional Communication Studies at the University of Valencia (Spain). She does research mainly into discourse production in the area of English for Academic and Business Purposes. rosa.gimenez@uv.es

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[2] The writer's name is fictional and the name of the universities is hidden under 'X' : the owner of the letters prefers to remain anonymous.