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Linguistic Strategies for the Realisation of Face Work in Italian Tweets

1. Introduction

The Social Media communication platform Twitter was launched in 2006 and has grown exponentially since 2008 (cf. Marwick/Boyd 2010: 4). Nowadays, Twitter can be considered as the most popular micro-blogging platform (cf. Java et al. 2007: 3; cf. also Moraldo 2009: 249), replacing quite often email communication (cf. Crawford 2009: 526). The research focus of studies that have been carried out on the micro-blogging service covers a wide range of questions, for example the characteristics of the language use or the formal characteristics of messages posted to Twitter (*tweets*). Nevertheless, the accent of most of the studies is put on journalism, political communication and market communication via Twitter, and only few analyses concentrate on its role in private communication (cf. Tremayne 2007; Messner/Di Staso 2008; Park/Thelwall 2008; Keren 2009; Böhringer et al. 2009; Puschmann 2010; Schmidt 2011: 3). One of the few studies that are dedicated to personal communication via Twitter is the one carried out by Stefanone/Jang (2007). Furthermore, there do not exist many studies about Twitter communication in Romance languages; especially smaller languages such as Italian have not yet been studied in

depth. The aim of this article is to close this gap by analysing strategies of face work in Italian tweets.¹

Our research focus is laid on face work strategies due to the “multiple audience” (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 1) in Twitter communication. As “Tweets [...] are messages presented to a virtual audience who ‘follow’ by subscribing to another user’s feed [...]” (Zappavigna 2011: 3), users are never sure who will read their messages. In this sense, “Twitter [...] involves negotiating these multiple audiences to successfully maintain face and manage impressions” (Marwick/Boyd 2011: 145). The questions which we will try to answer in this paper are the following: which linguistic techniques do the users apply to handle the multiplicity regarding their addressees, and how do they specifically realise their face work with an imagined audience?

Our study is based on a corpus of 50 Italian, private tweets (without commercial purposes, accessible only for followers and therefore semi-public²), that have been collected (and chosen randomly within our corpus, nevertheless covering different topics) in May 2012. Our research is mainly based on the framework of politeness

¹ During the terminological discussions at the conference “Face Work and Social Media” which took place in May 2013 at Hildesheim University, the participants suggested alternative designations for the term *face work*. While some researchers prefer speaking about *relational work*, (cf. Locher/Watts 2008: 96) others highlight the function of *identity building* or of *social positioning of self and other* (cf. Bucholtz/Hall 2005: 586). As we do not have the space to go into detail concerning this terminological question, we keep the term *face work*, pointing out cross-references to the alternative concepts when describing the function of selected linguistic strategies throughout this article.

² This restriction means a limited degree of accessibility of the messages to the public which can result in a specific use of linguistic strategies and influence what kind of communicative activities are expected or considered as “normal”. On the other hand, different levels of openness to the public can determine which communicative behaviour is perceived as inappropriate and therefore sanctioned by the members of the discourse community.

and face work of Brown/Levinson.³ After a short discussion of the characteristics of Web 2.0 applications, the main communicative parameters and the functions of Twitter communication, we will reflect about the general role of face work in the micro-blogging service. This theoretical part of the paper is completed by a discussion of some selected examples (containing different categories of linguistic face work strategies) taken from the corpus.

2. Functions and communicative parameters of Twitter

In this chapter, we will briefly discuss the characteristics of the Web 2.0, the functions of the micro-blogging service Twitter, and central communicative parameters of the micro-blogging platform.

With Schmidt (2011: 2), we define blogs

[...] as frequently updated websites that display content in a reverse chronological order. Single blog entries ('postings') [...] can also usually be commented on by other users. Micro blogs usually impose a limit on the number of characters in a single posting: Twitter, the most prominent if not generic example of a micro blogging service, allows for 140 characters within one 'tweet'. Micro blogs can also rely on articulated social connections for the structuring of conversations and audiences, because other users explicitly establish connections amongst themselves by 'following' or 'being followed by' other users, and by explic-

³ As we suppose that our readers are familiar with the notions of face work and politeness strategies, we do not discuss the theoretical framework in depth in this article. For a more detailed summary of Brown and Levinson's approach, cf. Arendholz in this volume. Newer approaches discussing, for example, the concept(s) of (im)politeness, can be found in Bousfield 2010, Culpeper 2011 or Watts 2003, whereas Park/Thelwall 2008 focus their research on face-threatening acts in computer-mediated communication.

itly referring to other users by replying to or retweeting (i.e., 'retweeting') their postings. (Schmidt 2011: 2)

Twitter, as well as other forms of weblogs,

[...] [is] a prototypical application of the Social Web. They lower the barriers for participating in online conversations and the dissemination of information, blurring the basic dichotomy that is at the heart of traditional mass communication: the separation of roles between sender and receiver or between producers and users of information. (Cosh et al. 2008: 723)

Therefore, Twitter is part of the Web 2.0 as a form of reciprocal communication where users can directly react to and actively participate in the generation of contents. In this way, the Web 2.0 offers a new form of interactivity that puts the user in the center, with the users' power and influence rising considerably compared to the Web 1.0 (cf. Stanoevska 2008: 15; Moraldo 2009: 262).

When referring to the growth rates of Twitter as a micro-blogging platform, one has to discuss its advantages compared to "conventional" blogs as they existed long before the emergence of Twitter. This leads us to the discussion of the functions and the communicative parameters of Twitter communication, helping to distinguish it from face-to-face communication and from other forms of computer-mediated communication. The main argument seems to lie in the increase in speed of the communication, reducing the expenditure of time, and allowing at the same time to realise updates more frequently. One central communicative parameter that characterises Twitter communication is the semiotic code. Tweets are realised in the written code, with a reduced possibility of using non- and paraverbal resources. Nevertheless, tweets show some characteristics of spoken language on the conceptual level:

[...] dass sich viele der Kurznachrichten gerade im privaten Bereich an Mustern und Strukturen gesprochener Sprache orientieren. Tweets sind zwar textbasiert, also medial schriftlich, aber

das Spezifische der Kommunikation via Twitter ist ihre konzeptionelle Mündlichkeit, die einen hohen Grad an kommunikativer Nähe suggeriert. (Moraldo 2009: 267)

Further communicative parameters based on which Twitter communication can be classified are the medium (tweets are posted from desktop computers, laptops, mobile phones, smartphones or third party devices; the length of each message or tweet is 140 characters), the asynchronous character, e.g. the lack of co-presence of the users in time and space, the uni-directional character of the communication,⁴ and the number of interlocutors. Concerning this last aspect, we state that Twitter can be considered as *one-to-many*-communication (for a more detailed discussion, cf. the chapter about the multiplicity of addressees), or as a *many-to-many*-communication “through which individuals conceptualise an imagined audience evoked through their tweets” (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 1).

While in the early stages, Twitter users answered the question ‘What are you doing?’, the micro-blogging platform aims nowadays mainly at “[...] forming communities of shared value” (Zappavigna 2011: 1) and at the articulation of social connections. With Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 587), who state that identity “is intersubjectively rather than individually produced and interactionally emergent rather than assigned in an a priori fashion”, we highlight the importance of the interpersonal and relational aspects of Twitter communication. By following Bolander and Locher (this volume), we understand identity and identity building “as funda-

⁴ Despite of the growing use of Twitter as interactive, conversational form of communication (cf. Honeycutt/Herring 2009: 9), Twitter, in contrast to other forms of online communication (for example SMS communication), is not in all cases reciprocal and dialogic, as there is no necessity to react to a posted tweet, at least “no social expectation of such” (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 3). This can be explained by the fact that a tweet is not addressed to a few persons the user knows, but to a disperse audience (cf. Moraldo 2009: 266).

mentally in flux and shaped in interaction”, or, with other words, “identity on Twitter is constructed through conversations with others” (Marwick 2011: 7):

In other words, self-presentation is *collaborative*. Individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners, through strategies like maintaining (or ‘saving’) face, collectively encouraging social norms, or negotiating power differentials and disagreements. (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 10)

As a consequence, strategies of face work become more and more important on Twitter, as they allow the user to avoid communicative problems in the context of community building and identity management. This means that users “[...] must formulate tweets and choose discussion topics based on imagined audience judgment” (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 11). As the number of addressees or followers is theoretically unlimited, this encourages the interlocutors to employ (more or less explicit) strategies of self-presentation or self-promotion. Marwick designates this phenomenon as “personal branding” and “self-commodification” (2011: 1).

To sum up, we state that it is mainly the “new” functions of the micro-blogging platform Twitter (identity management, community building and personal branding) that claim face work strategies.

3. The multiplicity of the addressees in Twitter communication and audience awareness

We have already mentioned that Twitter users never know exactly who will read their tweets, but that “they nevertheless have cer-

tain assumptions of their readership” (Schmidt 2011: 10).⁵ As a consequence, both the content as well as the form of the messages is adapted to this imagined or intended audience. The linguistic adaptation of the messages is what Schmidt designates as “audience awareness”: “Like many writers, bloggers write for a ‘cognitively constructed’ audience, an imagined group of readers who may not actually read the blog. [...] The imagined audience exists only as it is written into the text, through stylistic and linguistic choices” (Schmidt 2011: 11). However, the real or empirical audience might be different from this intended or addressed audience (cf. Schmidt 2011: 12):⁶

As in much computer-mediated communication, a tweet’s actual readers differ from its producer’s imagined audience. Twitter allows individuals to send private messages to people they follow through direct messages, but the dominant communication practices are public. [...] these tweets can be viewed by anyone through search.twitter.com [...]. (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 4)

It therefore becomes necessary to negotiate “[...] these multiple audiences to successfully maintain face and manage impressions” (Marwick/Boyd 2011: 145).

⁵ The difference between Twitter and SMS or email is that “the latter is primarily a directed technology with people pushing content to persons listed in the ‘To:’ field, while tweets are made available for interested individuals to pull on demand. The typical mail [and SMS] has an articulated audience, while the typical tweet does not” (Marwick/Boyd 2010: 7).

⁶ “Given the various ways people can consume and spread tweets, it is virtually impossible for Twitter users to account for their potential audience [...]. Yet, this inability to know the exact audience does not mean that tweets are seen by infinite numbers of people. [...] nearly all tweets are read by relatively few people – but most Tweepers do not know which few people. Without knowing the audience, participants imagine it” (Marwick 2010: 4).

4. Project outcomes

In this chapter, we will discuss different strategies of linguistic face work that can be observed in Italian tweets. Other strategies than linguistic ones (e.g., structural means such as retweets) are not taken into account. At the present, the quantitative analysis of face work strategies in our corpus is not yet finished. We applied a corpus-driven approach, and a first statistical approach reveals that the following five categories are frequently used in our corpus: hedging phenomena,⁷ metacommunication, questions to the audience, the expression of gratitude, and apologising. Mostly, these strategies can be considered as “[p]ositive comments [or reactions to previous tweets] [that] can express approval, sympathy, attention, interest or solidarity with the other. Negative comments, on the other hand, can be perceived as face-threatening and therefore tend to be mitigated in order to be socially acceptable” (Thaler, this volume). The strategies that we have identified in our corpus very often aim at realising positive face, a fact which can be explained by the users’ wish to promote themselves and to be accepted by the micro blogging community.

⁷ It is not always evident whether hedging phenomena have to be attributed to the realisation of the positive or the negative face. For Brown and Levinson, hedging phenomena are the expression of negative politeness, allowing saving the face both of the sender and of the addressee. For the presentation of the examples taken from the corpus, we took the context of the tweet into account in order to determine the function of this linguistic strategy. We furthermore have to deal with the double or even multiple labeling of linguistic strategies which can be assigned different functions, depending on the context of the virtual discussion; the form of the tweets may also be influenced by the real identity of the tweeters, meaning that besides the Twitter communication, they might interact in the “real world” (cf. Locher/Bolander, this volume). This methodological problem is a challenge for future research on online communication.

4.1. Hedging phenomena

In the analysed corpus, users frequently employ hedging strategies. Hedging reflects the linguistic presence of an author in an utterance who expresses their uncertainty or their doubts, in this way complying with the language and culture-specific conventions of politeness in the respective online discourse traditions. The promotion of one's meaning in the context of Social Media communication bears a particular risk of face loss, so the users tend to present themselves as careful when they express conclusions drawn from real-life events or from foregoing tweets. In contemporary research, hedging phenomena are mostly analysed in discourse analysis, speech act theory and pragmatics where its core function is described as the "qualification and toning-down of utterances or statements [...] in order to reduce the riskiness of what one says" (Wales 1989). Lindeberg claims that "[a]ny [knowledge] claim can be potentially face-threatening and is therefore often phrased in a tentative way for reasons of politeness and caution" (Lindeberg 1997: 695). The main motivation for using hedging phenomena is the "mitigation of what may otherwise seem to forceful may be one reason; politeness or respect to strangers or superiors to another" (Wales 1989).

The hedging devices discussed below serve the authors to minimise the risk of a loss of credibility should their point of view be falsified by other members of the Twitter community. The use of the hedging devices may be the result of genuine uncertainty about the validity of the conclusion, of an apprehension of coming criticism for putting forth this conclusion, or of an apprehension of future falsification by their followers.

In a certain number of tweets, the Tweeters use tentative verbs (*sembrare* and *parere* ('seem')), pointing out that the (positive or

negative) criticism regarding a previous tweet is based on their individual competence.

The examples (1) to (5) illustrate the use of tentative verbs:⁸

- (1) **Mi sembra** decisivo capire se il #movimento5stelle vuole uscire dall'euro. Ma #putti non ha dato risposta chiara #omnibus

It seems decisive to me to understand if #movimento5stelle wants to leave the euro. But #putti has not yet given a clear answer #omnibus

- (2) @Nowandthen appunto. Ma ora non **sembrano** esserci alternative, ed e' su quello che conta #monti

@Nowandthen exactly. But at the moment, there seems to be no alternative, and it is these alternatives that #monti counts on

- (3) @SalvatoreMerlo @PierluigiBattis ha **in parte** smentito (in effetti non aveva usato il termine suicidi) ma **mi sembra** una risposta legittima

@SalvatoreMerlo @PierluigiBattis has partly disclaimed (in fact he had not used the word suicide), but to me, it seems to be a legitimate answer

- (4) #newtwitter sono d'accordo con la maggior parte di voi, **mi sembra** ben fatto e non vedo l'ora di provarlo

#newtwitter I share the opinion of most of you, it seems to be well done to me, and I can't wait to try it

- (5) #hollande puo' rinegoziare il #fiscalcompact, ma il six pack e' gia' in vigore. Quindi **mi pare** si tratti soprattutto di demagogia.

#hollande he can renegotiate the #fiscalcompact, but the six pack is already in force. So it seems to me as if this was mainly demagogic

Besides tentative verbs, we identified the modal verb (*potere* ('can')) in the corpus. In example (6), the author of the tweet hides behind their comment by combining two hedging strategies. On the one hand, they use the impersonal *si* ('one'), and combine it

⁸ In the discussed examples, the relevant linguistic strategies are highlighted in bold face. This typographic accentuation does not appear in the original tweets as they are found in our corpus.

with the conditional form of the modal verb *potere* ('could'). Using the modal verb *potere*, the author of the tweet makes explicit that they consider their conclusion just as an option among others ('one could say that [...]'), being aware that there exist alternative ways of interpreting facts:

- (6) @GiovanniCocconi i soldi prima delle notizie, **si potrebbe dire**. Ma l'hanno fatto in tanti...

@GiovanniCocconi Money is more important than the news, one could say. But so many have done it...

Another strategy to weaken a claim in Italian tweets is the use of the verb *credere* ('believe'), which is combined with the negation of the verb *sapere* ('know') in example (7) ('I don't know, I think that [...]):

- (7) @rdsorriso **non lo so, credo** sia una chiacchieraata generale, esodati, riforma pensioni ecc.

@rdsorrisoni I don't know, I think that this is a general blabber, reform of the pensions etc.

The author of the tweet represented in example (8) underlines that the opinion expressed in the tweet is based on their personal point of view. By using a prepositional phrase ('To me, this is a mystery because [...]), they do not claim that their point of view should be adopted by the Twitter community:

- (8) **Per me** e' un mistero perche' la stampa italiana non si occupa del caso di #BoXilai

To me, this is a mystery because the Italian press does not deal with the case #BoXilai

The degree of certainty can also be downgraded when authors add adverbs such as *forse* ('perhaps') to their claims:

- (9) #amato e' persona degna. Ma uno che stava con craxi ai bei tempi **forse** non era la persona più adatta a occuparsi di finanziamento ai partiti

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#amato is an equal person. But someone who was with craxi in the good times perhaps this was not the best person to deal with the fundraising of political parties

The author of example (10) reduces the validity of their claim by using a conditional clause (*Se ho capito bene*. 'If I got it right/If I understood well'):

(10) **Se ho capito bene** la #fornero dice che non hanno avuto tempo di calcolare gli effetti della riforma dell' #articolo18

If I understood well, la #fornero says that they did not have the time to think about the effect of the impacts of the #articolo18

In the last example we want to discuss in the chapter of hedging strategies, the user downgrades their doubt about the authenticity of a Twitter account with the adjective *piccolo* ('small/little') ('I have a little doubt on [...]):

(11) anche @Four_P: ci segnala @fabiocannavaro (**io ho un piccolo dubbio** sull'autenticità dell'account)

also @Four_P: we want to signal @fabiocannavaro (I have a little doubt on the authenticity of the account)

4.2. Metacommunication

In the following examples, Twitter users make explicit meta-communicative comments on the ongoing conversation and the facts discussed in the tweets. In many cases, they apply this strategy, rectifying or explaining the intention of their tweet, in order to avoid misunderstandings:

(12) #monti "**non ho parlato di suicidi ma** di conseguenze umane della crisi"

#monti "I did not talk about suicide but about the human consequences of the crisis"

- (13) **Per chiarire:** per #monti la linea della crescita in europa da seguire NON e' quella di #hollande. Si cresce con l'offerta, non col deficit

Just to clarify it: for #monti the strategy of growth to follow in Europe is NOT the one of #hollande. We can grow with the offer, not with the deficit

Both examples (12) and (13) concern the designation level, with the Tweeters discussing the appropriate lexical choice in order to describe a real world event. In example (12), the user underlines that they did not speak of suicide (*suicidi*) in a previous tweet, but of the human consequences of the (financial) crisis (*conseguenze umane della crisi*). It seems that one of their followers misinterpreted the preceding tweet. In order to save their face, and at the same time the face of the follower, the user explains the intention of their tweet (*Non ho parlato di [...]. 'I did not talk about [...]'*). In example (13), the author uses the explicit metacommunicative formula *per chiarire* ('to clarify'), underlining the correct way of interpreting a fact.

In examples (14) to (16), the Twitter user underlines that they are of the same opinion as one of their followers, granting them positive face. By means of this strategy, the Tweeter promotes, on the one hand, their positive self-image, and expresses that they appreciate the personality of the follower on the other hand. Granting expert status to themselves as well as to their partner allows them to realise the core function of community building and identity management on Twitter. It is important to state that the following examples are addressed directly to another user, which is marked by the "@". Compared to the tweets discussed above which are addressed to a multiple audience, the fact of directly addressing one person reduces the potential audience:

- (14) @InductivistTurkquesta **e' una giusta osservazione**, e' pericoloso in questo momento dire che solo il lavoro da' dignita'

@InductivistTurkquesta this is a right observation, in this moment, it is dangerous to say that it is only the work granting dignity to a person

(15)@mausassieh, la stessa cosa che ho pensato anche io. Ma alfano non lo so

@mausassieh *I thought the same. But alfano I don't know*

(16)@StefanoCeccanti sono **d'accordo**, e' una cosa assurda. Su questo nessuna differenza tra berlusconiani e tecnici

@StefanoCeccanti *okay, this is a strange thing. In this context, there is no difference between Berlusconi and the technicians*

In the examples cited above, the author of a tweet indicates that their interlocutor made a correct observation (ex. (14): *questa è una giusta osservazione*), that they were thinking the same (ex. (15): *la stessa cosa che ho pensato anche io*), and that they are of the same opinion (ex. (16): *sono d'accordo*).

In example (17), the user tries to keep their face, by claiming that they do not take part in any kind of speculations (ex. (17): *non partecipo alle speculazioni*), pointing out their moral integrity. In example (18), they criticise one of their followers who did not respect the politeness conventions of conversation (*non ti hanno insegnato a dire per piacere?* 'Did no one teach you to say please?'). This is one of the rare examples of potential face-threatening acts in our corpus. In example (19), the author tries to avoid face loss by applying humor, stating that their followers should take them as they are (ex. (19): *prendetemi come sono se mi volete bene*), and asking their followers not to blame them (ex. (20): *non date la colpa solo a me*). These examples reflect the Tweeters' concern of being accepted by the community:

(17)La #merkel: **non partecipo alle speculazioni** su monti all'eurogruppo

#merkel: *I do not take part in speculations on monti in the Eurogroup*

(18)@CESARECROSIGNAN nn ti hanno insegnato a dire "per piacere"? :)) buona fortuna a te cesare

@CESAREGROSIGNAN *has no one taught you to say "thank you"?*
Good luck to you, cesare

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(19)@igorrisani io sono io. prendetemi come sono se mi volete bene :)

@igorrisani I am as I am. Take me as I am if you want to be nice to me

(20)per ora direi 95% danno l'Italia vincente. **poi non date la colpa solo a me ;)**

at the moment, I would say that 95% estimate that Italy will win. So do not blame only me

In the last two examples, the Twitter user asks their followers to excuse their silence. They try to explain the fact that they did not tweet for a time period because of a high workload (*scusate ma ieri non ho potuto twittare* ('Sorry, but yesterday, I did not have the time to post anything on Twitter'); *qui si lavora tanto e si twitta poco. Mi perdonerete* ('A lot of work needs to be done here; this is why I cannot tweet very often. Please forgive me.')):

(21)mi sono svegliata adesso grazie dei bei commenti **scusate ma ieri non ho potuto twittare :))**

I just woke up thanks for the nice comments sorry but yesterday I could not tweet

(22)qui si lavora tanto e si twitta poco. **mi perdonerete**

we have a lot of work here, and we cannot tweet a lot. Excuse me

In tweets of this kind, the author shows that they are concerned about their positive self-image, underlining that they know and respect the unwritten rules of the communication on a micro-blogging platform, concerning the reciprocal and relational character of the exchange. Furthermore, they express their appreciation for their followers by not making them wait too long for a reply.

4.3. Questions to the audience

In some tweets, the users ask their audience questions. This strategy is used for different face saving purposes. In example (23), the user likes to have some kind of feedback from their followers,

asking them if they liked something (*Vi è piaciuto? Cerco feedback.* 'Did you like it? I need some feedback.'). While the user in example (24) wants to know the opinion of the audience concerning a new twitter service (*Che ne pensate? 'What do you think about it?'*). By asking this question, they show that they appreciate the point of view (the expertise) of the community, granting their members positive face:

(23) il libro #marchionnemente allegato col #fattoquotidiano l'avete comprato? **Vi e' piaciuto?** Cerco feedback.

did you buy the book #marchionnemente linked to #fattoquotidiano? Did you like it? I am looking for some feedback.

(24) avete sbirciato il nuovo twitter? **Che ne pensate?**

Have you had a peek at the new twitter? What do you think about it?

(25) **Che dite**, lo facciamo oggi il #pronostico #ita #slo? Io evito :P

What do you say, should we do it today, the #pronostico #ita #slo?

(26) **finito di mangiare?** aggiungi anche il tuo #pronostico #ita #Nzl Li stiamo raccogliendo qua <http://ow.ly/20Pph>

Have you finished eating? Add also your #pronostico #ita #Nzl We are about to collect them here

In example (26), the author wants to know if their followers have finished eating (*Finito di mangiare?*). They are very polite, asking their interlocutor before starting or continuing the conversation. The example also shows how strongly interrelated online communication and virtual identity on the one hand and the "real world identity" may be: while the communication takes place in the virtual world, the fact of having a meal belongs to the real world.

4.4. Expressing gratitude

Another verbal strategy, aiming at saving one's face, consists in expressing gratitude to one's followers:

(27) @maudilucchio **grazie**

@maudilucchio thank you

(28) #Buongiorno a tutti e buon giorno @tvblog e **grazie del sostegno** <3

#Buongiorno to everyone and hello @tvblog and thank you for the support

(29) #FF a tutti quelli che mi seguono. oggi siamo a 250mila! **grazie grazie di cuore**<3

#FF to all those who follow me. Today we are 250 000! Thank you, thank you very much

(30) @nunziapenelope **grazie a te**. piacere di conoscerti ora ti seguo :)

@nunziapenelope thank you. It was a pleasure to know you. From now on, I follow you

(31) **Un grande ringraziamento** a @pandemia che nel suo libro "comunicare con twitter" ha segnalato TwitterItalia.it

Big thanks to @pandemia who in her book "how to communicate on Twitter" has signaled TwitterItalia.it

This is realised in a very standardised form, by using the expression *grazie* ('Thanks'), the verb *ringraziare* ('to thank someone') or the noun *ringraziamento* ('thank'). With the expression of gratitude, Tweeters express their appreciation towards their followers, aiming at intensifying the process of community building.

It is interesting to note that the speech act of expressing gratitude seems to underlie significant intercultural differences between cultures in Southern Europe, in face-to-face communication as well as in online communication. While thanking another person explicitly occurs quite often in the Italian culture (which can be confirmed by our empirical analysis), speakers of Spanish make less use of these expressions in everyday communication (cf. Hickey 2005: 320). Nevertheless, this tendency has to be confirmed for Twitter communication by carrying out systematic, contrastive research.

4.5. Apologising

In the case of having tweeted a link that does not work, or in case of technical problems affecting the conversation, Twitter users apologise for the inconvenience (ex. (36): *Scusate per il disagio e grazie a chi ha segnalato i problemi*. 'Sorry for the inconveniences and thanks to the follower who indicated the problem.'). In example (35), the user apologises for them being late due to technical problems (*scusate il ritardo non mi funzionava internet*. 'Sorry for this delay, but my internet did not work.'). In this tweet, the user highlights that the relationship between them and their followers is in no way at risk:

(32) **Mi sono perso** \$ #giarda sta parlando della repubblica cisalpina.

I am a bit lost #giarda is talking about the repubblica cisalpina

(33) @ErwanKerzanet @ilmanifesto2012 ciao **scusa** sai che non ho capito... che vuol dire?

@ErwanKerzanet @ilmanifesto2012 hello excuse me you know that I did not understand... what do you want to say?

(34) @aureliomancuso be' mi era sfuggito allora **scusa**

@aureliomancuso well, so I missed that, sorry

(35) #buongiorno scusate il ritardo nn mi funzionava internet

#buongiorno sorry for the delay my internet did not work

(36) <http://www.twitteritalia.it> è tornata a funzionare **grazie** a @thecocce
Scusate per il disagio e **grazie** a chi ci ha segnalato i problemi

*http://www.twitteritalia.it is back and works for free thanks to @thecocce
sorry for the inconveniences and thanks for the person who signaled this
problem*

In most of the recent studies on face work, the speech act of "apologising" is considered as a strategy to avoid face-threatening acts (cf. Park/Guan 2006). Nevertheless, one has to differentiate the results, at least at two levels. First of all, it seems to play a crucial

role *when* and under *which conditions* the apology occurs in a verbal exchange. The research literature differs between apologies given freely by someone who is “willing to acknowledge ineptitude” (Hodgins/Liebeskind 2003: 298) and apologies that are expected by the discourse community. In the second case, offenders who do not apologise will feel the social consequences of their behaviour. So, as Hodgins and Liebeskind (2003: 309) state, apology given during predicaments is viewed favourable and can help avoiding face-threatening acts: “Apology has the almost miraculous ability to reconcile people as if an event had not occurred [...]” (Hodgins/Liebeskind 2003: 314). As we don’t know the complete context of the single tweets in our corpus, we can only state the hypothesis that it seems that most of the apologies are given freely by the users (as they mainly concern “harmless” predicaments such as twittering a false link). The second aspect concerns the fact that the function of apologies in the context of face work is culture-specific. While apologising can be considered as restoring face work in some cultures, in others, it does not play the same role. To sum up, the interpretation of the function of apologising has to be judged extremely carefully.

5. Conclusion and outlook

Our empirical study of Italian tweets shows that Twitter users employ different linguistic strategies for “doing” face work on the micro-blogging platform. The focus of our study lies on the qualitative analysis of selected face work strategies, and we state that Tweeters use them mainly for the purpose of relation building and identity management. Explicit strategies of boasting and self-branding can be found less frequently.

In the context of relational work, we observe a high frequency of hedging strategies.⁹ Under hedging strategies in the Italian Twitter corpus, we subsume certain tentative verbs, such as *sembrare*, *parere* ('seem'), *credere* ('think; believe'), the modal verb *potere* ('can'), adverbs like *forse* and *magari* ('perhaps'), or more complex formula of modesty (*Se ho capito bene*. 'If I got it right. '), in order to weaken a criticism. Adjectives like *piccolo* ('small; little') also serve to weaken a user's claim or criticism.

Another linguistic strategy consists in metacommunication, which manifests itself in the corpus in forms of comments with direct reference to previous tweets. By means of these metalinguistic comments, users rectify or explain the intention of their tweet, in order to avoid misunderstandings and to keep their face (or the face of their interlocutor). In our Italian corpus, metacommunication also aims at relation building on Twitter, when one user claims that they share the same point of view as their interlocutor, granting their positive face. A third function of metacommunication strategies consists in informing the addressees about the reasons of a communicative absence. In tweets of this type, users often apologise for not having tweeted for a certain period of time because they know that Twitter is a quasi-synchronous form of communication, not allowing too long intervals between two turns.

Besides hedging phenomena and metacommunication, users in our Italian Twitter corpus ask their followers explicit questions for "doing" face work. On the one hand, they claim their followers' feedback on certain contents and opinions, in order to know whether they share their point of view. Usually, they attribute their followers the status of an expert by asking those types of

⁹ Nevertheless, we have to take into account the methodological problem of double labeling, concerning the functional classification of linguistic means in our corpus.

questions. On the other hand, asking questions aims at being polite when respecting the addressees' activities and needs outside the micro-blogging platform, in the "real world". Before posting a tweet, and before invading into their followers' real life activities, users may ask for permission, signaling that they respect their privacy and their right of personal freedom which they do not want to restrict with any kind of communicative activity.

We close the discussion of face work strategies in our Italian Twitter corpus by referring to two further phenomena: the expression of gratitude towards the community, and apologising. Users quite often apologise when they have posted an incorrect link or when technical problems have occurred in a previous tweet, as this may have caused inconveniences to their followers. By using this strategy, they show their general esteem for their addressees. Furthermore, they do not want to put at risk their self-image as experts in a certain domain.

Our empirical analysis has shown that users apply different linguistic techniques to handle the multiplicity regarding their addressees and in order to realise the face work with this imagined audience. The analysis of tweets addressed to selected users indicates that the strategies used in the context of a multiple audience do not differ from the linguistic phenomena used in messages dedicated to the totality of the followers. As our database is composed of tweets that are only accessible to a limited numbers of followers (semi-public), it will be interesting to investigate whether Twitter messages addressed to an unlimited number of recipients contain varying linguistic means for realising face work. A statistical analysis, based on a corpus-based approach which will allow an exhaustive classification of linguistic face work strategies on Twitter has to remain open for future studies.

As it has been mentioned in the introduction of this paper, we did not take into account other languages than Italian. By analysing

one single language, we do not claim that our results can be considered as universal for Twitter communication. In order to describe language- and culture-specific characteristics of Twitter communication, more empirical analyses are needed.

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