

CULTURAL CODES IN WRITING POLITENESS FORMULAS. A STUDY IN FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Résumé:

Cet article se propose de présenter un éclairage sur la manière dont les étudiants roumains en sciences économiques rédigent des formules de politesse en français, en prenant en compte la problématique des codes de politesse dans les interactions écrites et les problèmes liés aux substrats culturels. Nous nous intéressons à la rédaction de ce type de formules dans plusieurs contextes, en milieu universitaire, plus précisément en situation d'examen écrit de français des affaires. Notre hypothèse générale est qu'il y a un haut degré de difficulté dans la rédaction des formules de politesse en français, et dans le respect des normes de politesse française. Ceci a pour effet que les étudiants étrangers (Roumains, dans notre cas) auront tendance soit à inventer des formules de politesse (empruntées à leur langue maternelle ou bien à l'anglais, première langue étrangère étudiée) ou bien à mélanger les différents styles de communication (formel et informel).

Mots clé : enseignement/apprentissage d'une langue étrangère ; codes culturels ; Français commercial ; interlangue ; formule de politesse ; étudiants roumains.

Abstract:

Taking into consideration the problematic of politeness codes in French commercial letters, this article analyzes the way Romanian students write politeness formulas in French as a Foreign Language in several written contexts. We deal with the specificity of writing commercial letters, as they appear in Business French manuals published in France and we discuss a brief theoretical approach to politeness, stressing the specificity of politeness formulas.

Our analysis' object is represented by Romanian students writing productions during the evaluation exams of a Business French seminar. This analysis endeavours to verify to which extent students can fit into the schema of different contexts. Our hypothesis is that there is a high degree of difficulty in the writing of politeness formulas in French Business communication, and in accordance with the French politeness norms. The results show that Romanians student have a tendency to make up politeness formulas (influenced by their native language-Romanian- and their first foreign language-English) or to mix several communication styles.

Key Words: Foreign language education; cultural codes; Business education; Interlanguage; French; politeness formulas; Romanian students.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the way that Romanian students in Economics write politeness formulas in French. We take into consideration the problematic of politeness codes in written interactions as well as the issues regarding the cultural substrata. We are interested in the way these particular types of formulas are used in several written contexts, in an academic environment, more precisely during a Business French written examination.

In the first part of this contribution, we deal with the specificity of writing commercial letters, with their typologies and characteristics as they appear in the Business French manuals published in France. We also discuss a brief theoretical approach to politeness, stressing the specificity of politeness formulas used in Business French communication.

The second part of our contribution is dedicated to the analysis of the politeness formulas used by Romanian students at the end of their commercial letters.

By « politeness formulas », we refer to the final phrase that ritually ends any type of correspondence and whose aim is to transmit a sort of conventional empathy and civility. They are also called “courtesy formulas” by certain authors (Brahic, 2004).

Politeness formulas at the end of any letter, especially, if it is a commercial and/or administrative letter, are the mark of a certain type of communication adapted to the context and to the type of text, but also to the speaker, to his/her culture and personality.

Our analysis endeavours to verify to which extent students can fit into the schema of different contexts, which sometimes causes conflicts (as in the case of complaint letters). Above all we look into the way they adapt their expression and building of politeness formulas, and adjust them to the given communicative situation, to the specific addressee, as well as to the type of text, in a context that is governed by the French rules of practice.

Our hypothesis here is that there is a high degree of uncertainty in the writing of politeness formulas in French, and in accordance with the French politeness norms, especially due to the influence of the native language (Romanian) as well as of the second foreign language (English). The result lies in foreign students’ (Romanian in our case) tendency to build politeness formulas, using the model of the Romanian or English ones, or to mix several communication styles (formal and informal).

2. The context of teaching/learning commercial letters in Romania

Commercial letters (requests, purchase order letters, offer letters, complaint letters, etc.) are part of the French syllabus for the second years,

second semester of the French seminar within the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. French commercial correspondence is studied either at the same time with English commercial correspondence (during the speciality courses), or afterwards. Thus, in most cases, the English style is the first that students come into contact with.

Moreover, the students do not study commercial letters in Romanian, so they do not learn how to write such letters in their mother tongue. The study of this writing style is not considered necessary, because all the students are thought to be implicitly familiarized with it.

Therefore, the writing of these types of letters is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Students face a totally new situation, which consists of writing the letters in three languages (and cultures), without really knowing their characteristics. It also entails the uncertain and unpredictable risks that this situation presupposes. This leads to a mixture of the three styles – two of them being taught at university, the third being implicit. The students are considered to be familiarized with it. Consequently, we participate in the emergence of what one could perhaps call the inter-language of commercial correspondence.

3. The writing of commercial letters in French as a Foreign Language

The practices of teaching/learning writing in a foreign language very frequently meet functional needs. It is the case of the epistolary writings in the syllabuses for teaching Business French in an academic environment.

Commercial correspondence is related to the professional activity that students are going to develop after their graduation. This is a part of the social framework created by the institutional and professional exchanges that companies engage in with their partners or clients:

*Commercial, administrative, military or private, the correspondence must be **clear, precise** and **concise, courteous without flattery** and **faithful** to the item of information that it is meant to convey (Brahic, 2004 : 97).*

Writing a commercial letter presupposes not only that the student has a good command of the language, but also of certain discursive strategies and cultural norms, specific to the professional environment and to the foreign language in which s/he writes.

In order to write a piece of this type of written communication, the learner must be able to use not only specific writing processes, but also lexical, syntactic and orthographic knowledge in the foreign language; the learner must be capable of putting himself/herself in the position of the sender, as it appears in a written situation.

We consider that, for a learner, writing a text in a foreign language requires a considerable mental overload (Barbier, Piolat, and Roussey, 1998). This requires that he/she not only manages the possible issues regarding the superficial level of the text and adapts his writing to a model provided by the language-culture in which s/he writes, but more particularly, that he/she controls the linguistic aspects, the organization of his/her ideas, the structuring of the content. The linguistic activities carried out in a foreign language lead to cognitive overload, even for advanced learners (Gaonac'h, 1991). At the same time, students-writers must manage to put into place several markers: shaping (which is not entirely similar to that of their mother tongue), the grammatical correction, compliance with certain formal communication rules, discursive and cultural particularities of the type of text to be written in a foreign language.

The study of commercial correspondence in a foreign language is an area where languages and cultures meet. It is an environment where the features of these cultures are highlighted by different institutional, communicative and/or cultural norms. It is an area for intercultural encounters and therefore, an area for culture shock. This can be seen especially at the level of politeness markers, namely at the level of the direct address to the other person.

Commercial correspondence (and, in this particular case, French correspondence) must always end with a politeness formula which functions according to a strict protocol that must be followed. These formulas show the attention that one has for his/her business and for his/her correspondents and are, at the same time, the mark of belonging to a cultural community. They are marked by certain, almost sacred, specifications which stand for a set of interpersonal skills and for a know-how.

4. A theoretical overview of politeness

Politeness has become one of the most important fields of research in the last two decades. The politeness studies are developed in connection with other domains such as sociolinguistics, socio-pragmatics, ethnography of communication, second language teaching, conversational analysis or psycholinguistics.

A big majority of studies approaches politeness particularly in dialogue and oral expression (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2010; Watts, Ide, and Ehlich, 1992; Watts, 2003; Wauthion & Simon, 2000), but during the last years, the interest for the written expression has gradually increased: Biesenbach-Lucas, (2007) proposes an examination of e-politeness among native and non-native English students in writing emails to faculty; Upadhyay (2010) is studying the identity and the impoliteness in computer-mediated reader responses. In this article, we

are interested in observing the construction of the politeness formulas in writing French commercial letters among Romanians students.

According to different authors, politeness is considered “a complex system for softening face threats” (Brown & Levinson, 1978), or a “strategic conflict avoidance [which] can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation” (Leech, 1980 : 19). For Lakoff (1979: 64), politeness is “a device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction”. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005: 189), we define politeness as a

[...] set of techniques that the speaker uses in order to protect or accord value to one's interaction partner.

The function of politeness consists in preserving the harmonious atmosphere of the interpersonal relationship. It is a fundamental phenomenon of interpersonal relationships, a “fundamentally adaptive” phenomenon.

4.1. Politeness as a norm

Politeness, a phenomenon which is located on the interpersonal relationship level, is governed by a set of norms. In this particular case (and for the administrative letter), politeness is the norm, and the hierarchical relationships that separate the two interlocutors are marked in relation to this norm (a superior or inferior status, a vertical or horizontal relationship).

Our approach to the norm relies on the theories of Py (1993, 2000) who defines it in relation to the notion of “the learner's territory”, in reference to the foreign-language learners and to the foreign languages acquisition. First, the notion of “learner's territory” is defined in relation to three areas: the construction of a linguistic knowledge system, the adjustment to the *norms* of the target language (the evolutionary norms of the foreign-language speaker being confronted with the restrictive ones of the native speaker) and the accomplishment of specific tasks. This system represents the inter-language (“the more or less organised and constant set of linguistic knowledge of the learner”), whereas the norm designates:

- all the external pressures exerted on the system: linguistic pressures, on the one hand, through the different confrontation methods of the learner's products to those of his native-speaker partners; on the other hand, social pressures through the relationships (educational and other) that the learner has with these same partners (Py, 1993);
- the prescriptions that define an idealised target language (oversimplification of the real language for educational or social purposes), or the actual models of the target language that the native

interlocutor embodies and shows to the learner through his own verbal interventions (Py, 1993).

The notion of *task* is defined as being the set of communicative activities which are related to the target language.

Obviously, the norm has the function of guiding inter-language in relation to the target language, in accordance with the officially prescribed forms in the target language and in relation to the usages of this language by the native speakers. This adaptation to the norm of the target language “prevails over the cohesion of the system and over the effectiveness of communication”.

Politeness, as it is described by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1996, 2005, 2010) or as it appears in the theoretical system of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), as well as any other form of politeness which relies on a norm, is influenced by the cultural specificities (Delbecq, 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár, 2011; Hickey & Stewart, 2005).

Within intercultural communication, the foreign speaker is likely to be interpreted as being tactless or even impolite, if certain target language expressions are transferred literally or if he tries to invent some expressions, following the “patterns”² that he uses in his maternal tongue.

4.2. Politeness routinised formulas

The degree of politeness required in different communication situations strongly varies from one culture to another. A French commercial letter must always end with a politeness formula, and this is not a mark of stylishness, but a matter of education and of *know-how*; it functions according to a strict protocol that must be followed.

These formulas are absolutely essential. They are the mark of the attention one has for his/her business and for his/her correspondents (the customer is king; therefore he must be treated with consideration...). They humanise, even if in an extremely codified manner, a correspondence a little bit cold and material that pays little attention to individuals.

Many companies are still using very convoluted politeness formulas, the most frequent ones being employed, for instance, in response to a complaint letter, *Nous vous prions de croire, Messieurs, en notre entier dévouement* (“Please be assured of our entire faithfulness”), *Nous vous renouvelons nos excuses pour le dérangement que nous avons pu vous causer. Nous vous prions de croire, Messieurs, à l’assurance de nos sentiments les meilleurs.* (“Once more, we apologize for the

² We define *pattern*, after Nuchèze (1998), as a “cognitive complex made of the discursive style, the type of enunciator, the framework for communication and the language employed”.

trouble that we could have caused to you. Please be assured of our best regards.”) (Bas and Hesnard, 1994).

At present, it is true that there is a tendency towards simplification. We can find more and more often very simplified politeness formulas, similar to the ones employed by native English speakers: *Cordialement vôtre* (“Cordially, Yours”), *Sincèrement* (“Sincerely”), *Respectueusement* (“Respectfully”), *Respectueusement vôtre* (“Respectfully. Yours”), *Amicalement* (“Best wishes”), *Votre dévoué* (“Yours truly”). However, “the Anglo-Saxon turns of phrase such as “*sincèrement vôtre*” / “Sincerely yours” or “*cordialement*” / “cordially” can only be used at the end of a message or of a fax.” (Brahic, 2004).

4.3. Politeness in the Business French manuals and in professional communication: politeness formulas

Politeness formulas convey cultural and linguistic information. They are the mark of a certain type of communication adapted to context and to the type of text, but also to the speaker, to his/her culture, to his/her personality. These types of politeness formulas are governed by norms which promote “the most cooperative language practices, thus preventing pragmatic conflicts between the speakers” (Berrendonner, 2007).

Nowadays, an abundant literature on the types of personal or/and commercial correspondence accompanies, Business French manuals during FLE/FFL (French as a Foreign Language) and FOS/FSP (French for Specific Purposes) courses. Politeness formulas are always adapted to the speaker and to the type of personal or professional relationship that the addresser (the writer, transmitter) has with the addressee (the recipient); therefore, the majority of manuals or anthologies provide long lists of examples.

We will focus on the examples provided by two French manuals, first a professional communication manual (Danilo & Penfornis, 1993) which prepares students having completed a 150 hours, French course for the exams of the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and then a French for Specific Purposes manual (Gillman, 2007), intended for the A1/A2 levels (according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). Our choice is based on the frequency of usage of these two manuals in class, within the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies.

In the first manual, published in 1993, we can find the politeness formulas in tables of linguistic instruments called « *Comment dire pour* », together with the concluding formulas pertaining to any type of letter:

For this particular manual “to conclude, is generally”:

- attendre (wait for): *En attendant...*; *Dans l'attente...*
- espérer (to hope): *Nous espérons...*; *"Dans (avec) l'espoir de..."*;
- souhaiter (to wish): *En vous souhaitant (bonne réception)*;
- remercier (to thank): *Nous vous remercions de...*; *En vous remerciant...*
- regretter (regret): *En regrettant de...* ; *Avec le regret de...* ;
- présenter des excuses (present apologies): *Je vous prie d'excuser ce retard...*; *Veuillez nous excuser...*;
- rester à la disposition (remain at one's disposal): *Restant à votre disposition pour....*

The politeness formulas proposed can begin with *Je vous prie de...* ("Please..."), *Veuillez...*, *Agréez...*, or by *Croyez...* ("Please...", "Please accept..." or "Please believe..."). The most frequently employed verbs are: *agréer* /accept (*l'assurance de/the assurance of*); *recevoir*/receive (*l'expression de/the expression of*); *accepter*/accept (*mes sentiments respectueux /my best regards*); *croire*/believe.

The *French for Specific Purposes* manual, published in 2007, gathers, at the end, thematic portfolios where examples of politeness formulas are proposed, according to the type of letter that must be written (Gillmann, 2007): for instance, letters addressed to a colleague or to a friend end with *Bonne journée* ("Have a nice day"), *À bientôt* /"See you soon", *Salut* , or *A+*, or *Cdt* (for *Cordialement*), whereas in order to express a business relationship we use *Cordialement* or *Très cordialement* ((Very) Cordially). As far as the letters addressed to public services are concerned, this particular manual prefers formulas such as: *Salutations distinguées* or *Meilleures salutations* ("Yours sincerely"), whereas for a client, the politeness formula is standardised: (...) *nous vous prions d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de nos sentiments les meilleurs*, or (...) *nous vous prions d'agréer, Monsieur, nos meilleures salutations* ("Best regards").

The most frequently employed verb in the politeness formulas is *agréer*, accompanied by the specific imperative form of the verb *vouloir* (*Veuillez*) or by this formula: *Je vous prie de, Nous vous prions de*. This verb is solemn and very respectful, at the same time, it marks the distance, and it is used together with the following words: *sentiments* or *salutations*.

According to Weinrich (1989), the modal verb *vouloir* (to want) goes very well with the polite expression of the imperative, through the agency of the specific form it has developed: *Veuillez*. The closing formulas that are introduced by *veuillez* vary, according to the same author, depending on the type of letter:

- *Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, mes salutations distinguées* ("Please, accept, Sir..., my distinguished salutations") (Neuter) ;
- *Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de la (plus) haute considération* ("Please, accept, Sir...the expression of the highest consideration") (Formal) ;

- *Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments (très) respectueux* ("Please, accept, Sir..., the expression of my (very) sincere sentiments") (Reverent).

A specific mark of the formal politeness formula is the use of the "apostrophe terms of address", the "appellatifs d'apostrophe" (Weinrich, 1989) or "address terms", "termes d'adresse" (Traverso, 1999) which are used without the noun, known or unknown: in the singular form, *Madame/Madam, Monsieur/Sir*, in the plural, *Mesdames/Ladies, Messieurs/Sirs*. Apart from their deictic value (designation of the addressee), these terms convey social and relational information.

Politeness formulas are stereotyped and more or less "desemantised". According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992 :173)

[...] it is absurd to reduce ritual formulas to their informational content, and, even more, to their literal meaning: their significance is first of all relational, and their main common function is that of standing for the speaker's social goodwill.

5. Corpora analysis

The corpus subject to our analysis consists of several politeness formulas written by 2nd Year Romanian students at the Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages (Bucharest Academy for Economic Studies), during a written examination in French, within the examination sessions held in May 2007 and May 2008. The specificity of the Faculty of Business Administration is due to the fact that all the courses are delivered in foreign languages: English, French or German. French language a subject is taught to students two hours per week, for the three specializations, during the first two years of study. The main objectives of these courses are the acquisition of Business French and its usage within a professional context.

Our corpus relies on 196 students with French as a Second Foreign Language and English as their First Foreign Language. Their language competence level in French is estimated to be somewhere between advanced elementary (A2) and intermediate (B1), in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).

We are going to deal with the writing of politeness formulas following two different work tasks. Students must produce politeness formulas in context (at the end of a response to a given complaint letter) and out of context (politeness formulas imagined for four types of letters).

Our general hypothesis is that there is a high degree of difficulty in writing politeness formulas in French, as well as in complying with the French

politeness norms. This particular issue entails different tendencies – foreign students (Romanians, in this particular case) will either invent politeness formulas, or adopt them from their mother tongue or from the first foreign language they master.

A first work task (written examination, May 2007) required Romanian students in French as a Second foreign Language (from now on **Group A**), to write a response to a complaint given as an example.

In a situation taken from the context of the business world, a client's complaint letter triggers a written response from the supplier which is meant to provide the discontented client with explanations and even justifications. The response to the complaint should try to defend the company's position and to save its image at the same time, as well as do all that is necessary in order not to lose the respective client.

This type of letter conveys more obvious cultural information than the other types of commercial correspondence, due to the fact that the interests and personalities of the two speakers (companies or individuals) are implied in a conflictual or quasi-conflictual situation:

A letter in which the addresser expresses a critique, an objection or a refutation is likely to offend the addressee and therefore constitutes a threat to his or her positive face. [...] A letter in which the sender apologises constitutes a threatening act to his own positive face. (Whittaker, 2001).

It is a letter which aims at presenting apologies if need be and providing an explanation for a poor service. While explaining the causes of reasons why the error has occurred, the writer insists on the attention given to the client's complaint, proposes compensation, solicits the client's understanding and promises to avoid committing that particular mistake again. (Bas & Besnard, 1994).

Our hypothesis here is that the construction of the politeness formula is influenced by the dominant illocutionary purpose of the letter in response to a complaint where one must solicit leniency and promise a compensation for the error.

A second work task (written examination, examination session held in May 2008) asked students in French as a Second Foreign Language (from now on **Group B**) to write politeness formulas adapted to four different contexts: a letter to a friend; an application letter for a job within a French-speaking multinational group; a request letter addressed to the Dean; a purchase order letter to a supplier. This type of task was supposed to check to what extent students were able to situate themselves in different contexts and especially adapt their manner

of constructing their politeness formula to the given communicative situation and to the particular addressee, within a context governed by the French business practice.

Our hypothesis here is that there is a mixture between the formal and the informal styles in the writing of politeness formulas. The risk surrounds the fact that the presence of the standard formula in the letter addressed to a friend (thus an informal letter and an informal style), for instance, influences the writing of the other three more formal types.

5.1. Results for Group A

The first corpus on which this study is based is made up of 115 letters in response to a complaint, produced during a written end of term examination in May 2007, by second year students at the Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages, Bucharest Academy for Economic Studies.

The work task asked students to answer a complaint. For the purposes of the current study, we will focus on the politeness formulas they have employed in writing their response letter.

The first approach of the corpus consists in a thematic classification of the politeness formulas written by students, according to the verb selected for the beginning of the politeness formula (*recevez, veuillez, nous vous prions, nous espérons, nous souhaitons* etc.), and according to the choice they make between « salutations » and « sentiments ». The standard formulas by which we have determined this classification are the ones presented by the manual *Le Français de la communication professionnelle*; these formulas had been studied during the French courses and we have discussed them in this study in the part dealing with the complaint letters in manuals.

Table 1 shows a quantitative approach of the introductory verbs chosen by students for the ending formulas of the letters they write. Under “Other” we note the politeness formulas built without the standard formulas which have served us as a model in drawing up this table: *Nous vous remercions par avance* (“Thank you in advance”), *Toutes mes excuses* (“All my excuses”), *Nous vous remercions de nous avoir signalé l’incident. Cordialement* (“Thank you for pointing out the incident. Cordially”). They represent examples of deviance from the norm pertaining to the French commercial correspondence.

Other ending formulas, built with verbs such as *regretter* (to regret), *souhaiter* (to wish), *espérer* (to hope), are considered to be deviations from the norm stipulated by the Business French manuals, since they are not politeness formulas, but rather closing formulas. Nevertheless, we take them into account in our analysis, given their significant occurrence in our corpus and their significance for our analysis and for the verification of our hypotheses.

Type of introductory verb	Occurrences
"Recevez"	16
"Veuillez "	11
"Nous vous prions"	19
"Nous espérons"	34
"Nous regrettons"	6
"Nous souhaitons"	5
Other	24
TOTAL	115

Table 1: Endings formulas in Romanian student's letters

Total letters	Formulas with <i>recevez, veuillez, nous vous prions</i>			Formulas with <i>nous espérons, nous regrettons, nous souhaitons</i>			Other
115	46			45			24
Occurrences	Recevez	Veuillez	Nous vous prions	Nous espérons	Nous regrettons	Nous souhaitons	
	16	11	9	34	6	5	

Table 2: Group A: choice of verbs employed at the beginning of the politeness formula

After performing this thematic analysis, we notice that 45 students (or half of the students having built ending formulas for their letters) produce politeness formulas expressing *l'espoir* (hope) (hope for understanding regarding the incident which occurred during the service delivery process, hope for a future collaboration, etc.), or *le regret* (the regret) (for instance regret for not having ensured the quality service required) and *le souhait* (the wish) (for instance wish for a future collaboration). In fact, they are false politeness formulas. Rather they are closing formulas that should have been followed by ending politeness formulas. Here are some examples, such as written by our students:

1. "*Nous espérons que vous acceptez nos excuses pour ce problème*" (We hope you will accept our apologies for the damage caused) ;
2. "*Recevez, Monsieur, nos plus sincères salutations*" (Please, receive, Sir, our most sincere salutations);

3. “*Dans l’attente d’un prochain contact, recevez, Monsieur, nos salutations distinguées*” (We look forward to hearing from you soon and please, receive, Sir, our distinguished salutations);
4. “*Nous vous prions d’agréer Monsieur, l’expression de nos sentiments les plus distingués* » (Please accept, Sir, the expression of our most distinguished sentiments).

Table 3 presents the choice of the students between the politeness formulas containing *salutations* (*distinguées, les plus distinguées, les meilleures, respectueuses*, etc./distinguished, the most distinguished, the best, respectful etc.), or expressing *sentiments* (*distingués, les plus distingués, dévoués*, etc./distinguished, the most distinguished, devoted, etc.).

GROUP A (115 students)			
Salutations (53 occurrences)		Sentiments (35 occurrences)	
Distinguées	23	Distingués	20
les plus distinguées	3	les plus distingués	1
Meilleures salutations	19	Dévoués	12
nos salutations les meilleures	5	les plus dévoués	1
Respectueuses	2	les meilleurs	1

Table 3: Group A: the choice of politeness formulas containing the expression of *salutations* and *sentiments*

We notice that students use formulas that express salutations (*distinguées* and *les meilleures*), which corresponds to a certain distance and objectivity required by the business world, but also many politeness formulas that express sentiments (*distingués* and *dévoués*).

The pattern of any response to a complaint letter ends in asking the client for leniency and promising to prevent a similar incident – a potential source of conflict – from happening in the future. Several situations can be noticed in the construction of the conclusions of the letters and of the politeness formulas, as well as in the choice of introductory words or expressions employed by students:

- The lack of politeness formulas:

5. “*Nous vous prions d’accepter nos excuses et nous espérons que notre collaboration ne sera pas affectée de ce problème*” ;
6. “*Encore une fois mes excuses*”;

7. *"Nous vous prions d'accepter nos excuses et l'assurance que nous pourrions collaborer dans les meilleures conditions dans le futur"*.

- The presence of double politeness formulas:

8. *"Nous restons dans l'attente de votre réponse et nous vous prions d'agréer nos salutations distinguées. Cordialement"*;

9. *"Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, nos meilleures salutations. Cordialement, ..."*.

The construction of the closing formulas and/or of the politeness formulas in the 1st Person Singular:

10. *"Je vous demande une nouvelle fois de bien vouloir nous excuser et je vous prie de recevoir l'expression de mes meilleures salutations"* ;

11. *"Acceptez monsieur, mes excuses et mes meilleures salutations"* ;

12. *"Avec respect, je vous prie Monsieur, agréez mes sentiments de haute considération"*.

The change in the pragmatic effect regarding the construction of the closing and/or politeness formulas:

13. *"Je vous remercie que vous êtes précise et je vous demander à postuler les réclamations potentielles sur [www. Stream.com](http://www.Stream.com). Meilleures salutations"* ;

14. *"Nous vous remercions de nous avoir signalé l'incident. Cordialement, ... "* ;

15. *"En espérant la résolution de votre problème, nous vous prions, Monsieur, d'agréer nos sentiments distingués"* ;

16. *"Nous vous remercions pour votre lettre et nous vous souhaitons bonne réception de nos excuses"* ;

17. *"Nous espérons que vous apporterez une solution à ce problème. Veuillez agréer, Messieurs, nos salutations distinguées"*.

Deliberate or accidental loan words

18. *"Je répète, je m'ai scouzé pour le problème. Meilleures salutations"* ;

19. *"Je vous remercie que vous êtes précise et je vous demander à postuler les réclamations potentielles sur [www. Stream.com](http://www.Stream.com). Meilleures salutations"* ;

20. *"En espérant que notre solution va vous enchanter, je vous prie, Mss, d'accepter mes salutations les plus distinguées"* ;

21. *"Merci pour avoir choisi nos produits et acceptez, s'il vous plaît, l'expression de nos sentiments distingués"*.

5.2. Results for Group B

The second part of our corpus consists of four types of politeness formulas, a formula from an informal letter addressed to a friend, and three formulas from formal politeness letters (one addressed to the Dean of the Faculty, the other to an employer and the last one to a supplier). These politeness formulas were written in a written examination context by 81 Romanian students in the second year of study.

Here we put forward a thematic analysis of the politeness formulas according to the type of letter required by the work task and according to the extent to which they are adapted to the norm of French politeness. In the following, we quote the formulas that we consider to be the most interesting, keeping the form that students came up with. Furthermore, like we did with the first part of the corpus, we suggest a quantitative analysis according to the verb introducing the politeness formula and to whether they express *sentiments* or *salutations*. The two introductory verbs presented here are *Veillez* and *Je vous prie de...* They occur frequently in this second corpus.

5.2.1. The Students' referenciation in the letter addressed to a friend

We notice here the students' preference for formulas such as "À bientôt", "Je t'embrasse", but also the presence of some newfangled formulas:

21. "*J'attends avec impatience ton lettre et je te prie d'accepter mes meilleures salutations. Avec amitié....*" ;
22. "*Veillez agréer, mes salutations.....Avec amour,....*" ;
23. "*Veillez agréer, Monsieur, mes salutations amicable*" ;
24. "*J'espere ta lettre plus vite/ Ecrives-moi! Je t'embrasse*" ;
25. "*J'attends ton réponse. Je t'envoie mes sentiments loyaux*" ;
26. "*Avec amour. J'espere ton letter*" ;
27. "*Au revoir mon camarade!*"

In these examples (e.g. 21, 22, 23), students tend to mix informal and formal styles; this confirms our initial hypothesis; this is a case of hypercorrection, caused by the preoccupation of complying with the norms.

Apart from the grammatical mistakes (verbs conjugation, the gender of nouns), we notice the use of the verb *espérer*/to hope (e.g. 24, 26) instead of the verb *attendre*/to wait, an interference from Spanish, in our opinion.

5.2.2. The Students' referenciation in the application letter for a job in a French-speaking multinational group

28. *"Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expressions de mon sentiments sincères" ;*
29. *"En entendent de votre response, je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments très distinguées" ;*
30. *"Dans l'attente d'une prompte réponse de votre part, veuillez agréer, Messieurs, mes salutations distinguées " ;*
31. *"Je vous prie d'agréer, Messieurs, l'expression de mes sentiments loyaux" ;*
32. *"Je vous pris d'angager, Monsieur, mes salutations les plus distinguées" ;*
33. *"Veuillez agreer, Messieurs, mes salutations loyaux" ;*
34. *"Je reste à votre disposition pour un entretien. Je vous prie d'agrér, Madame, l'expression de mes sentiments les plus distinguées".*

These politeness formulas distinguish themselves by the expression of sentiments (*"sincères", "très distinguées", "loyaux", "les plus distinguées"*/sincere, very distinguished, faithful, the most distinguished) (e.g. 28, 29, 31, 34) and to an equal extent by the expression of salutations (*"distinguées", "les plus distinguées", "loyaux"*/distinguished, the most distinguished, faithful) (e.g. 30, 32, 33). Even if they have been almost correctly adapted to the norm, we notice grammatical, orthographical and syntactical mistakes: *"en entendent de votre response", "sentiments distinguées", "je vous pris d'angager", "salutations loyaux", "entretien", "agrérer", etc.*

5.2.3. The Students' referenciation in the request letter addressed to the Dean of the Faculty

35. *"Voudriez bien de recevoir, Monsieur mes remerciements" ;*
36. *"Veuillez bien de recevoir, Messieurs, tout ma reconnaissance" ;*
37. *"Avec mes remerciements anticipes, je vous prie d'agréer, monsieur, mes meilleur salutations" ;*
38. *"J'espere que je n'ai pas adressé cette lettre plus tard et veuillez agréer l'expression de mon respect"- "Je crois que vous pouriez resolvé mon situation. Merci pour votre effort" ;*
39. *"Avec mes remerciements anticipés. Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expressions de mes sentiments dévoués" ;*
40. *"Je vous remercie, anticipé" ;*
41. *"Je vous prie d'agréer, l'expressions de mes remerciements sincères" ;*
42. *"J'espere que vous me repondriez immédiatement. Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expressions de mes sentiments sincères" ;*

43. *"Avec respect et cordialité!"*

This type of politeness formula, addressed to the Dean of the Faculty, seems to be a lot more difficult to write for Romanian students than the other types of formulas. In this particular situation, these students have to comply with the politeness norms but, at the same time, they have to express respect, deference³, in accordance with the formal style that has been taught in their mother tongue. This leads to the presence of many interferences⁴ by their mother tongue (Romanian), where politeness formulas are reduced to *"Cu respect"* (With respect) or *"Cu stimă"* (With esteem/regard). Thus, we notice the presence of formulas such as *"veuillez agréer l'expression de mon respect"* (Please accept the expression of my respect) (e.g.38) or *"Avec respect et cordialité!"* (e.g.43), but also *"Voudriez bien de recevoir, Monsieur mes remerciements"*.

5.2.4. The Students' referenciation in the purchase order letter addressed to a supplier

44. *"Messieurs....Je vous remercie en avance."*

45. *"Voudrez bien de recevoir, Messieurs, mes remerciements anticipés."*

46. *"Veuillez agréer, Messieurs, l'expressions de nos sentiments."*

47. *"Priez d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations les plus distingués."*

48. *"Merci par avance. Meilleures regards,...."*

49. *"Je vous remerci pour votre services et j'esperer que la commande arrive sans probleme. Y'attend la confirmation de votre compagnie."*

50. *"J'espere recevoir une reponse d'urgence. Veuillez agréer, Messieurs, mes sentiments sincères."*

This type of politeness formulas reveals a lot of blunders, which are due to the selected formulation (*"Voudrez bien de recevoir, Messieurs, mes remerciements anticipés"*), to the choice of words (*"Je vous remerci pour votre services et j'esperer que"*

³ We define *deference*, after Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992), as a "particular type of politeness, whose specificity lies in the fact that it reflects the hierarchical status of the participants, and that it consists in the manifestation of a symbolical subordination to the others".

⁴ *Interference* is defined by Pendanx, (1998), as "the erroneous form in a foreign language whose origin comes from a sort of calques, a loan translation of a word from the mother tongue".

la commande arrive sans probleme.Y'attend la confirmation de votre compagnie"), or the mixing of styles and cultural influences. For instance, we witness interference by English (First Foreign Language studied and mastered), in the following formula: *"Merci par avance. Meilleures regarades,..."*.

The quantitative analysis that we have performed and that we present in Table 4 is supposed to account for the frequency of the different types of verbs introducing politeness formulas, or the expression of sentiments and/or in the corpus representing the Romanian students of our Group B. Special importance has been attached in this table to the presence of the formula *"Cordialement"/"Cordially"*; it is specific to informal politeness and to fax or e-mail exchanges, but it is used more and more frequently for the formal exchanges as well.

Type of letter Formula employed	Group B (81 students) 324 politeness formulas reviewed				
	Letter addressed to a friend	Application Letter	Request Letter	Purchase Order Letter	TOTAL
Veillez...	1	26	28	36	91
Je vous prie de...	3	31	26	15	75
Salutations	10	34	23	31	98
Sentiments	3	21	27	33	84
Cordialement	-	6	0	0	6

Table 4: Group B: Verbs introducing politeness formulas

We notice that the first type of letter, addressed to a friend, contains formal constructions. In our opinion, this is due to the over-adaptation to the sometimes cumbersome style pertaining to the French formal politeness. Three students construct their politeness formula using *"Je vous (te) prie de..."*, and one student uses the verb *"Veillez"*; 10 students express their *"salutations"* and 3 students their *« sentiments »*. In this table we have only presented these types of politeness formulas, taking into account their new-fangled and clumsy character for a friendly letter. As we have already pointed out during the analysis of our corpus, the formulas preferred by students for this type of letter are *"À bientôt"* or *"Je t'embrasse"*.

The politeness formula selected for the application letter has specific features as far as the students' choice for the formula *"Cordialement"* (*Cordially*) is concerned. The letter addressed to the Dean of the Faculty reveals an inaccurate choice of the politeness formula, which proves the fact that the students from our

corpus select almost equally the expression of « sentiments » and that of « salutations » in writing this type of letter. The last politeness formula, for the letter addressed to a supplier, reveals the expression of “salutations” (31) and « sentiments » (33) for the students, and no occurrence of the formula “*Cordialement*”, which could be used in this type of letter, especially when the order is made via Internet.

6. Discussion

Both of the corpora we have used here confirm our initial hypothesis. On the one hand, in order to answer to a complaint, the students from Group A tend to construct politeness formulas that are apologies or even wishes for continual good business. As far as this group is concerned, we have noticed the richness and the formal variety of the ending constructions and of the politeness formulas. On the other hand, as far as Group B is concerned, we have noticed that students tend to mix formal and informal styles in the construction of the politeness formulas. In our opinion, this is due to an over-adaptation or even to a hypercorrection, especially when students use formulas like “*je te prie d’accepter mes meilleures salutations. Avec amitié...*”, “*Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, mes salutations amicale*” in the letter addressed to a friend, or the expression of sentiments in a purchase order letter.

Our examples show several possibilities in relation to the production of politeness formulas – they adapt to norm, observe it or reject it, according to the extent to which students command it correctly or sometimes make it up:

- the total absence of the politeness formula in letters of response to a complaint;
- the omission of the address formula (*Monsieur, Madame, Messieurs/Mister, Madam, Misters*) within the politeness formula;
- the presence of the personal pronoun in the singular form within the politeness formula; this situation is specific to the two levels of language command and, as we have already noticed, its cause could be the difficulty of integrating at cognitive and language level the role of the moral person “we” , standing for the company;
- the presence of incomplete politeness formulas – the loan from Romanian as the mother tongue, of the politeness formula: “*Cu respect*”;
- language mistakes and clumsiness in constructing formulas.

The questions which can be raised concern less the level of language command and more the level of acceptance and integration at cultural and language levels of the norms prescribed by the French commercial correspondence. When faced with so many attitudes consisting in rejecting the norms, in accepting them unfailingly, in learning formulas by heart or even in

making them up, in translating them literally from their mother tongue, the French as a Foreign Language and Business French teacher finds it more often than not difficult to teach a norm which does not accept any deviations. She comes up against questions which cannot always be answered in a clear and immediate manner: when obeying the norms, is it all about a mere adhesion to a professional and institutional rule? Is it all about submitting oneself unconditionally to the dogma of Business French correspondence? Or should the teacher obey to his/her teaching practice? Or is it an opportunist adhesion for the students who refuse to take risks in an examination context?

In addition, could we possibly explain the fact that they do not obey the norm, by a refusal to learn a rule that pertains to the culture of the other? Can we talk about a resistance to the culturally formal aspect of business correspondence? Or is it all about the identity that the student does not want to negotiate? For want of anything better, is it all about a mere language difficulty attributable to the system of the language which has to be learned?

7. Conclusion

Formal writing is a source of multiple difficulties. Commercial and/or administrative correspondence is no exception and the writing difficulties affect several levels. As we have shown in this article, one of them is the difficulty that Romanian Business French students encounter in writing politeness formulas complying with politeness norms, as they are imposed by the doctrine of French correspondence. We have proved in a different article [*name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process*] the fact that almost the same difficulties were encountered by French students when asked to write politeness formulas in formal letters. As far French as a Foreign Language learners are concerned, the cognitive effort is great and the difficulty of complying with the norms even greater. This is because, on the one hand, they have to integrate with “dialectic of the otherness” and communicate in the language of the other and, on the other hand, they have to acquire a different socio-cultural competence which is not necessarily synonymous with linguistic competence. Furthermore, they have to be able to identify their own culture with the culture of the other, to accept the differences in sight of joining another pattern, the one pertaining to the other, the stranger, together with its linguistic strangeness.

Several questions remain open. In general terms, is the erroneous and/or clumsy construction of politeness formulas the mark of a voluntary choice or of a difficulty in complying with the style of business French politeness, or is it just the expression of a language mistake? Does it mean renouncing their mother tongue’s societal and cultural code or learning these formulas by heart; or is it an integration of the new textual and language pattern, when the formulas are

correctly written? Is there a conflict between the two (even three) languages-cultures when it comes to the writing of these formulas?

Politeness formulas are completely desemanticised. However, following the example of Geoffroy (2000), we think that the notions these formulas are contrived from are revealing of cultures which value, from the point of view of conventions, a more or less important orientation towards the correspondent.

The formal features do not keep the same value from one language to another, languages are more or less direct in their expression, and the degrees of formality are not similarly interpreted in two different cultures (Grandcolas, 2005). This leads us to notice the influence of the mother tongue, for the Romanian students, in formulas such as "*Avec respect*" / "*With respect*", "*Recevez Monsieur, l'expression de mon respect*" / "*Please receive the expression of my respect*", and which proves furthermore the identity function of any norm, but also the influence of English (as the First Foreign Language), "*Merci par avance. Meilleures regarades...*" / "*Thank you in advance. Best regards*".

The politeness formulas are in the image of a cultural and/or professional community and they are governed by norms that the writer must comply with. Native students have to follow these norms, in accordance with the communication style and the hierarchical relationship that exists between them and the addressee. As far as foreign students are concerned, the cognitive effort is great and the difficulty to comply with these norms even greater. On the one hand, foreign students must integrate "dialectic of otherness" (Noyau and Porquier, 1984) and communicate using the language of the other; on the other hand they must acquire a socio-cultural competence which is not necessarily synonymous with a linguistic competence. Moreover, they have to be able to integrate and best combine their own culture with the culture of the other, to accept the differences in order to integrate another pattern, the one of the other, the foreigner, with his/her linguistic peculiarity.

All these analyses lead us to undeniably state the influence of the subject's communicative, cultural, linguistic and cognitive system. Language behaviours are influenced by a complex system and they also undergo changes entailing choices induced by aesthetic reasons. But communicating in the language/culture of the other imposes the compliance with this particular language and its culture's principles and rituals. Not complying with politeness rules, especially in a setting as formal as commercial correspondence, would mean ending in failure.

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