Are you being served?
A genre analysis of American and Dutch company replies to customer inquiries

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Abstract

More and more companies now rely on the benefits of e-mail communication as a means of ensuring customer service. To date, very few publications have explored the role of this medium in the establishment of an interpersonal relationship between customer and company. In a descriptive study, the e-mail replies of producers were investigated with respect to the proliferation of rhetorical and interpersonal strategies in their answers. In an inductive process, the nature of the genre, its discourse structure and textual realizations are established. In the same process, it is considered whether questions regarding the typicality of electronic communication and generic transcendence of cultural boundaries can be solved. To this end, the replies of Old and New, and Dutch and American producers were compared. It appears that American companies were in general relatively careless in their response policy: only 60% of all companies approached bothered to reply to the Dutch inquiry. American customer service via e-mail differs from Dutch customer service via e-mail, in that American producers more often express gratitude and Dutch producers are more often sorry to decline a request. Old producers differ from New producers with regard to the invitation to stay in contact with the company.

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1. Introduction

In this study, we propose inductive sample analysis as a method to determine the prototypicality and structure of a genre. By means of a simple elicitation technique of responses (a customer’s inquiry), a sample of e-mail replies is analyzed for generic characteristics. Whether these responses constitute a distinct genre will be determined inductively.

In a discussion of whether or not messages in electronic format should be considered as a genre distinct from paper-based counterparts, Louhaila-Salminen (1997) suggests that ‘business letters’ and ‘business faxes’ are to be seen as ‘overarching pre-genres’ under which more specific genres operate. In this respect, ‘business e-mail’ must also be considered an overarching pre-genre (Louhaila-Salminen, 1997). In their analysis of interactions between team members on the working floor, Yates and Orlikowski (2002) found that members of a team typically import existing genres and genre systems to the new medium (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). On the other hand, the electronic format can also be viewed as a distinct channel or medium, which imposes its own register characteristics. This seems to be the point of view adopted by Bhatia (1997), when he describes the set of promotional genres in a flow chart and classifies ‘medium of discourse’ as a channel choice (Bhatia, 1997). Gains (1998) also argues that, apart from a number of surface adaptations, there are no essential differences between the paper-based and the electronic format. He believes that e-mail is one of the several choices of medium through which customer service is operationalized. The phrase ‘medium of discourse’ indicates that he too allows for standardized medium characteristics, such as typical openings and closings in e-mail communication, without labeling them as a distinct genre (Gains, 1998). The prototypicality of electronic replies to customer’s inquiries constitutes our first research issue.

Graves (1997) addresses the question of to what extent the genre of marketing letters may transcend cultural borders, in this case the American–Canadian border. Several authors have pointed to the importance of culture as an essential element for understanding communication in a genre (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Swales, 1990). As Nickerson (2000) has shown, a corpus-based analysis of e-mail replies within genre-analysis may be useful for the exploration of differences across cultures. Sims and Guice (1992), Akar and Louhiala-Salminen (1999), Rowley-Jolivet (2002), and Pinto dos Santos (2002) used genre analysis as a method for discriminating cultures. Martín Martín (2003) also shows that detailed genre-analysis of direct marketing letters may reveal subtle differences between cultures. With respect to genre theory, we will try to determine whether a difference in cultural preference obliges us to distinguish two separate sub-genres, or whether there is only one genre, with regional idiosyncrasies. This constitutes our second research issue.

The sequence of customer inquiry and company reply will serve as the domain in which we will try to explore the issues raised on genre definition and transcendence of cultural boundaries. In order to investigate if the interpersonal relationship between company and customer established by e-mail contact can be considered a distinct genre and whether there are cultural differences between Dutch and American
companies, a corpus analysis was performed. Dutch and American companies were approached by a customer, who asked several informative questions.

1.1. Customer e-service

In the era where ‘competition is just a click away’, customer e-service has become an important issue in marketing policies. Many customers that buy on-line goods, base their opinions of the company on the way their inquiries are responded to (Zemke & Connellan, 2001). From a marketing point of view, Internet based contact between (potential) customer and company can be a very cost-effective means of getting to know the individual customer’s wishes, and at the same time informing them of a company’s latest developments (Hanson, 1999). However, in the Netherlands, e-commerce sales figures remain disappointing. One reason may be a lack of service from the Dutch shopping websites (Sanders, 2001). Garbarino and Johnson (1999) have shown that for customers, trust and commitment are of the utmost importance for future contact and future intentions. Trust in the company and trust in the representative of the company influence the buyer’s anticipated future interaction with the producer (Doney & Cannon, 1997). One way to improve the relationship between customer and Web-based company is through one-on-one communication via e-mail, for ‘[...] personalization is the most straightforward way to uplift the shopper’s experience’ (Zemke & Connellan, 2001).

In quality management, customer service plays an important role in the establishment of a close relationship between the company and the individual customer. E-service may be seen as a means to increase loyalty and customer satisfaction and to stay competitive at the same time. Although the process of building customer trust is expensive, time-consuming, and complex, its outcome in terms of forging strong buyer-seller bonds and enhanced loyalty are of critical importance to (supplier) firms (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Boyer, Hallowel, and Roth (2002) found that e-loyalty is a critical, albeit intangible, economic asset in e-services. They claim that attracting new customers and customer retention is up to 40% more difficult than in traditional brick-and-mortar services (Boyer et al., 2002).

Because of the Internet, it is now possible to deliver ‘off-site’ highly personalized services, even virtual ‘face-to-face encounters’ more efficiently. The descriptive study discussed below looks at the one-on-one interactive communication between customer and producer. To date, a regular e-mail does not allow the sender to attach any of the traditional aspects of non-verbal communication. There are no systematic means of conveying the important affective and interpersonal aspects of communication. Some of these non-verbal cues can be compensated for by using ‘emoticons’, or so-called smiley faces (:-), and the use of capitals or a bold font for emphasis. Many users, however, find these inappropriate in more formal e-mail communications (Mulholland, 1999).

Zemke and Connellan (2001) are among the few authors to give advice on the shaping of customer friendly e-contact. They present five e-mail musts for building customer connections online: respond quickly, attend to presentation, be personal, be concrete, and do not be presumptuous. It is interesting to know whether all
companies take these considerations to heart. Large companies have generally developed a well-defined policy on quality management; start-ups on the contrary are known to pay less attention to communication strategies (Van der Bij, Broekhuis, & Gieskes, 1999). Companies with a relatively long tradition, prior to the emergence of computer-mediated communication, generally have an established customer policy and they will therefore be more likely to accommodate customers by e-mail. On the other hand, new companies, which came into existence in the era of electronic communication, may have integrated the intrinsic possibilities of e-mail in a more effective way.

We are therefore interested to know to what extent New producers differ from Old producers in their attempt to establish a relationship with the potential customer. The answer to this question is relevant to the discussion about the proliferation of genres. If company replies to customer inquiries are to be considered as a distinct sub-genre within the promotional discourse genre system, then it is to be expected that Old producers, with a long tradition, copy the communication strategies they use in the paper-based or oral communication with customers. New producers, on the other hand, probably do not carry the heavy burden of tradition, and they will therefore create a company reply, which demonstrates its own prototypicality. This assumption remains to be tested, of course, but we take it that lack of differences in move structures in the replies from the Old and New companies can be taken as an indication that electronic replies are not distinct from paper-based replies, and this outcome may serve as a basis for further research.

1.2. Intercultural communication

The Internet and e-mail communication are not bound by geographical limitations like other media. The cost and effort to produce an e-mail bound for someone in one’s own country is the same as that for an e-mail to someone on the other side of the globe. This confronts companies with intercultural dilemmas which, until now, have traditionally concerned only those involved with intercultural negotiations and international job applications. The customer service department of a producer is likely to receive intercultural ‘confrontations’ via e-mail, especially if that producer hosts a global company website. A growing trend toward globalization induces companies to consider a transcultural e-service policy (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998). The need for such a policy is also stressed by De Mooij (2004), who shows that lack of knowledge of separate cultures makes people see more similarities than there actually are. For example, in international marketing, Americans tend to view all Europeans as similar.

To date, there have been relatively few studies that reflect upon the difference in stylistic preferences between the USA and the Netherlands. Abelen, Redeker, and Thompson (1993) compared the rhetorical strategies used in American and Dutch fund-raising letters and found that American letters were more overtly persuasive. In addition, American letters preferred a much more direct linguistic style than the Dutch letters. The rhetorical structure of the American letters was dominated by interpersonal relations, which played a much less prominent role in the Dutch let-
ters (Abelen et al., 1993, p. 343). We expect to find similar differences between American and Dutch companies in their electronic communications.

What effect does a difference in cultural values have on the way in which producer companies react towards customers inquiring about their products? And how will American companies approach these inquiries compared to their Dutch counterparts? Cultural differences suggest that American and Dutch companies will differ in the way they respond to and via e-mail to customers about their products or services. On the other hand, universalism has led to the application of Anglo-American marketing theories worldwide (De Mooij, 2004) and this may have erased the possible regional differences between the Dutch and American e-services style.

The answer to these questions is also relevant with respect to the above mentioned issue raised by Graves (1997), of whether genres are able to cross cultural boundaries. In order to investigate whether or not cultural subgenres should be distinguished in customer service via e-mail, we pose the question: do American and Dutch companies differ in their replies to customer inquiries via e-mail?

2. Inductive genre analysis

In order to determine whether e-mail replies to customer responses should be considered a distinct genre, we first determined the place of company replies in the promotional discourse framework. A customer inquiry is part of a genre system of ‘promotional discourse’, in the sense that it is part of a sequence of interrelated communicative actions. In particular, it constitutes a reply to a request and may be followed by a new interaction from the customer. Yates and Orlikowski (2002) state that genre systems can also be a particularly powerful means of structuring electronic interactions and this is exactly what we are doing here. Fig. 1 proposes a discourse flow chart for the ‘customer request – company reply’ within promotional discourse.

A customer’s request and the company’s reply constitute phases in the pre-order sequence, which makes part of the commercial transaction genre system (cf. Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). In such a sequence, the form of the initial action is a crucial one: choices of channel, form of address or level of formality are unlikely to change in the following interactions. Here, we focus on the second interaction: the company’s electronic reply. The communicative purposes that motivated the exchange of e-mails are the customer’s need for information and the producer’s interest in engaging in friendly contact with a possible customer. The reply can be described as informational and sometimes even promotional.

An e-mail inquiry was sent to 40 different American and Dutch companies. By this means, we created a typical rhetorical ‘situation’ in order to identify, in the answers, typical regularities of organizational and structural forms, which give shape to a generic construct (cf. Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). We sent an e-mail request to 20 Old producers, i.e., companies with a long tradition, and to 20 New producers, i.e., companies with a relatively young tradition. The determinant of ‘Old’ or ‘New’ company was the year the producer’s company was founded. A producer that was founded before 1990 was considered ‘Old’, and ‘New’ producers were founded after
1990. We sent the same message to 20 Dutch and to 20 American producers. This resulted in four subgroups: 10 Dutch New producers (DN), 10 Dutch Old producers (DO), 10 American New producers (AN) and 10 American Old producers (AO). The message to both national categories of respondents was exactly the same.

We focused on a potential foreign customer asking for some general information. Either a Dutch person or an American approached the respondents, i.e., the American companies received a request from a Dutch customer and vice versa. In both requests, English was the language used. The message implied interest in the product before purchase. The message itself did not contain complicated questions, in order to facilitate a reply from the producer. Furthermore, the customer inquiry contained several questions, which were designed to stimulate the producer to send a more substantial text in the reply.

The level of formality in the language used by the customer could have been an important determining feature of how the company replied. For example, a request containing very formal language use may be more likely to elicit a formal reply than a very informal request. The aim in the customer inquiry was to use a language type that was as neutral as possible. In a pre-test, judges were invited to choose the most...
neutral letter out of three versions containing the same request. Unanimously, all raters picked out the present e-mail request as shown in Fig. 2.

The e-mail messages were sent to 40 manufacturers of products to be used with personal computers. These companies were selected because they produced similar products (such as speaker sets or wireless keyboards) and because they were likely to be familiar with e-mail communication, since they are all active in the computer industry. The participating companies were deliberately not notified beforehand about the survey, which was decided upon to achieve the most reliable data. ‘Mr Petersen’ posed as a potential customer, asking a few informal questions that are likely to occur with other possible customers unfamiliar with the company and their products. The inquiry was simple and straightforward in nature, which negated any serious burden on the participating organization.

The e-mail message sent to all of the selected American producers was as appears in Fig. 2:

Hello
I visited your website and am curious if you have a distributor in my country (the Netherlands). If so, could you direct me to his address, or provide any other contact information? I also wonder if you can indicate the average cost of shipping from the US to the Netherlands, if I choose to order over the Internet? Furthermore, what guarantee do you offer on your products for a potential international customer like myself? Thank you,

John Petersen

The Netherlands

Fig. 2. Message sent to American companies.

In all, 24 messages were received. Six Dutch New, seven Dutch Old, seven American New and three American Old companies replied. With one exception (one company posted its answer on an Internet web page), all messages were sent via electronic mail to the e-mail address of the customer. All the e-mails returned by the producers were included in the analysis; both automated and personally produced responses. Attachments were also reviewed.

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1 Automated messages are easy to recognize because they auto-identify themselves: ‘This is an automated message, please do not reply’ (AO_1).
Fig. 3 presents an example of the replies in our sample. The brackets and italics have been added in order to illustrate our analysis. Companies and references to proper names were anonymized. Every element in the letter was labeled with a 'move tag'. The reply in Fig. 3 answers only one question.

We opted for an essentially inductive way of determining genre: we let the data—a sample of responses, written by members of one discourse community that share ‘structure, style, content and intended audience’ and that share text characteristics decide on their generic properties (cf. Bhatia, 1993; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Swales, 1990; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). In this essentially iterative process, we defined the most common denominator for company replies via e-mail, i.e., we looked for ‘family resemblances’. Of course, the prototypicality and the standardized forms of genres do not necessarily imply that no deviations or variation may occur. The dynamic character of genre, so justly stressed by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), allows for subtle differences, as long as the communicative purpose of the entire construct remains the same. As a rule, we included a move in the company reply move structure if 75% of all replies presented this move and if the move seemed characteristic of the communicative action in question. If moves seemed typical, but were present in less than 75% of all replies, then this move was considered a subsidiary move. This is the process that Paltridge (1995, p. 404) has called ‘genre assignment, [which] happens on the basis of both pragmatic and perceptual conditions of “sufficient similarity”. Other moves were considered idiosyncrasies—the so-called class of Unexpected Moves. This iterative process stops, when all moves in the whole corpus have been classified and labeled.

In response to the customer’s request, many producers not only answer the customer’s questions but they also slightly change the communicative purpose of the reply, in adding promotional purposes to the answer: they try to establish credentials
by the presentation of the company and they invite the customer to keep in touch. Table 1 presents the moves that typically combine to serve the overall purpose of the genre, the establishment of a customer friendly contact.

These moves may be viewed as discriminative for the present genre, i.e., they are non-optional elements that characterize the rhetorical structure of the genre and were present in more than 75% of all replies in our sample. Salutation and Close serve as a frame for the other moves and are of course typical of written business communication. Answer and Further Contact are responsible for the content of the message. Salutation is sometimes followed by subsidiary moves: Presentation of Self and Thanks. Answer may be followed or preceded by a Justification. Table 1 summarizes the move structure and provides examples found in our corpus.

Table 1
Move structure in customer service via e-mail responses (corpus reference codes are given in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Subsidiary move</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salutation</td>
<td>Thanks</td>
<td>Salutation</td>
<td>Dear John (NA_4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thanking the customer</td>
<td>Thank you for your e-mail enquiry (OA_1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation of Self</td>
<td>Presentation of the producer’s company or contact person</td>
<td>Graag introduceer ik hierbij mijzelf... (NA_5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reply to the customer’s enquiry</td>
<td>I would go to <a href="http://www.europe.companyname">http://www.europe.companyname</a> and see if they can help you. (NA_4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Providing background information or reasons for denial</td>
<td>Unfortunately, we don’t have a distributor in the USA (OD_17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Contact</td>
<td></td>
<td>Invitation for further contact</td>
<td>If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to ask (NA_4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
<td></td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Regards (OD_12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA, New American; OA, Old American; ND, New Dutch; OD, Old Dutch.

In order to answer our two research questions, we checked for differences between the four subgroups. Only one Old company (out of 10) makes use of the move...
Presentation of Self, as opposed to four New companies (out of 14). It is interesting to note that three of these New companies are Dutch. This might be due to the fact that these companies are rather small and need to develop a close relationship with a potential customer in order to gain possible orders. This contradicts Teh’s findings in her research on multinational and local Singaporean companies, where she points out that companies that do not enjoy a longstanding reputation rarely establish credibility in a sales promotion letter (Teh, 1986, reported in Bhatia, 1993, p. 69).

Only two of the 13 Dutch companies thanked the customer (and both companies are Old companies), whereas practically all the American companies expressed their gratitude for the contact (only two exceptions). Expressing Thanks seems to be a typically American move. However, it is conceivable that with the emergence of customer service policies and quality management in the Low Countries, the use of this move will increase. In her analysis of rhetorical moves in Chinese sales genres, Zhu (2000) has a similar tendency in the increase of western (i.e., British and US) moves in Chinese sales letters.

No differences between Old, New, American or Dutch companies were found for the inclusion of a Justification. New companies were generally more eager to invite to Further Contact than Old companies (7 out of 14 versus 2 out of 10). Two Dutch companies apologized for being unable to answer several of the customer’s questions. In the following section we will further address this issue.

We see then that there are no intrinsic differences between Old and New or Dutch and American companies with regard to the move structure. The occurrence of a move is not restricted to one or more subgroups. We note that New companies more often make use of Presentation of Self and Invitation to Further Contact, and American companies have a more pronounced preference for the move Thanks. We now turn to the general response properties and the textual realizations, i.e., the rhetorical formulations, of the moves.

3. Customer friendly e-contact: general response

As mentioned above, 24 of the 40 producers that were approached responded to the customer inquiry. This implies that 16 companies (i.e. 40%) did not reply. Only three of the 10 American Old Producers replied. The reason for this may be that the foreign location of the inquiries led the producers to the conclusion that the customer would not be an interesting client, and was therefore not worth investing time in. Nevertheless, as these companies ignored a potential customer who contacted them, they failed to meet the basic requirement of ‘customer friendliness’, i.e., to reply.

All subgroups of respondents were equally fast in their response (i.e., 0.9 days on average for American producers and 1.3 days for Dutch producers). In general, response time appears to be a good indication of customer service. According to Zemke and Connellan (2001) ‘speed counts’ in a customer friendly approach. The reply time standard for business e-mails is 1–2 h, according to Zemke and Connellan (2001), and 24 h according to Sterne (1996).
Automated acknowledgements of the receipt of the inquiry also count as a token of customer service (Sterne, 1996; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Most of the Old Companies, either Dutch or American, used an automated message (‘Your reaction has been successfully processed!’). Three (of the 24) companies only replied automatically without a personalized follow-up. One New Dutch company even sent two automated messages. Two American New producers suggested contacting their company by telephone, a somewhat surprising solution as it would be a transcontinental call and a laborious and time-consuming customer contact. Nearly all of the Old producers made on-line visitors to their websites fill out an on-line form to submit messages. The great majority of New producers listed their customer service e-mail address on the homepage of their website.

A further indication of customer friendliness is the completeness and concreteness of the replies (Sterne, 1996). Four companies replied but did not provide an answer to the customer’s question; they simply provided promotional information in an automated message or in an e-mail (‘Good morning, […] All the information about XX products is available on our site.’ DO_16). On average, Old Companies scored slightly better on the number of questions they discussed (they answered 1.6 questions on average versus 1.5 questions answered by New Companies).

As Planken (2002) points out, accommodation to the sender’s language can be an indication of ‘rapport’ building, and that is why the use of Dutch by companies of American provenance can be seen as an indication of a personalized approach (Planken, 2002). Six companies used Dutch, in spite of the English language used by the customer. Three of these companies were American and forwarded the original message to their Dutch-speaking counterpart based in the Netherlands. Their response was therefore both in English and in Dutch. This can be interpreted as a sign of ultimate customer service. An Old American Company writes for instance: ‘Geachte heer Petersen, Dank u voor uw informatie-aanvraag. Verzendkosten verschillen per internetbedrijf, […] AO_2 (Dear Mister Petersen, Thank you for your inquiry. Shipping costs differ per Internet company). One Dutch company only sent an automated message and this in Dutch! This can be viewed as an example of failure of customer service policy.

It is not very extraordinary that English is used by a Dutch company. In the Netherlands, English is often used as a corporate language in companies with international subsidiaries and English is also the most important lingua franca in communication with almost every other foreign country. English is taught at primary schools. The English in our corpus is sometimes suspect or incorrect (‘I hope I gave you a bit of a picture of who we are’ DN_20; ‘I hope hearing from you soon’ DN_20; ‘However in some cases we could correspondent by the internet, therefore though, it is important to know more about your business and your interests.’ DN_19).

4. Textual realizations of customer friendly e-contact

Interpersonal rhetorical strategies contribute to the development of a relationship between the company and the customer. These strategies can therefore be seen as
operationalizations of Zemke and Connellan’s (2001) exhortation to be personal. In this section, we will focus on the various ways writers have tried to engage in a more personalized relationship with their readers. With the help of these strategies, respondents can create the impression of an individualized customer service, and this may contribute to the development of customer relations. The textual realizations of the moves tell us how customer friendly e-contact is put to words. Hyland (1998), Collot and Belmore (1996), Van Mulken (1996) and Nickerson (2000) have proposed sets of strategies associated with these formulations. On the basis of these sets and the inductive analysis of our corpus as described above, we looked at several rhetorical features (not necessarily restricted to one particular move).

Collot and Belmore (1996), Hyland (1998) and Nickerson (2000) mention the roles and interplay of the first person pronoun and the company name. In the process of creating the impression of a corporate image, the use of the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to the company and the writer indicates that the respondent identifies him- or herself with the company in question. Absence of a first person pronoun, either ‘I’ or ‘we’, is rare. In our corpus, we found only one example: ‘The xx-store is unable to ship items (AO_1).’ The use of ‘I’ may indicate that the speaker feels more personally responsible within the company and may therefore be viewed as a more individualized reply. If respondents referred to the company by explicitly using the corporate name instead of ‘we’, then there is the impression of a more formal relationship between the writer and the company, and the customer. Old as well as New companies sometimes combined the first person singular with a corporate ‘we’, where ‘we’ refers to the respondent’s company. ‘John, We do not have a distributor in the Netherlands, but we do have many customers. [...] Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. Regards, Name (AN_7).’ Both American and Dutch respondents showed a similar preference for the first person plural ‘we’. On three occasions, respondents referred to the company by using the company name. ‘Hallo John. Alle Company_Name producten worden in de grote winkelketens als XX aangeboden (AN_10) (Hello John. All Company_Name products are sold in large shopping centers such as XX).’

Hedges such as ‘I would like to apologize’ allow the respondent to appeal to the customer and influence his or her opinion of the corporation (Hyland, 1998). Collot and Belmore (1996), Van Mulken (1996) and Nickerson (2000) also mention hedges as a rhetorical means of mitigation. ‘This minimizes damage to personal credibility while simultaneously conveying a professional ethos of openness and honesty (Hyland, 1998, p. 237). In our data, hedges are often suggestions or mitigations, as in ‘I would go to Company’s X website (AN_4), ‘You may wish to try www.company-name.com (AO_1). However, there was no difference between the Old versus New, or American versus Dutch companies with regard to the use of hedges or politeness markers. Politeness markers are lexical down-graders like ‘please’ in English and ‘graag’ in Dutch. Their occurrence may be considered as an indication of a more (inter)personal relationship between the correspondents (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Examples in our corpus include: ‘Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. (AN_7)’, ‘Graag introduceer ik hierbij mijzelf (AN_5)’ I would like to introduce myself.
The use of passives may be considered as an indication of a more formal or impersonal relationship with the customer: The writer distances him- or herself from the propositional content of the utterance (Nickerson, 2000, p. 120). In an attempt to mitigate the denial of the sender’s request, the passive allows the respondent to decline responsibility for this possible threat to face (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 273–275). With regard to the use of passives, there are no differences between the groups, but it is striking that all three American companies that forwarded the customer’s question to their Dutch-speaking counterparts used the passive construction (in a Dutch reply) (‘In bijna elke electronicawinkel worden Company_name producten verkocht. […] Garantie kan gewoon in Nederland afgehandeld worden’ (AO_2) (Company_Name Products are sold in almost any hardware shop. [...] Guarantee questions can be treated in the Netherlands as usual).

Collot & Belmore (1996), Hyland (1998) and Nickerson (2000) all suggest emphatics as an indication of the degree of directness of the sender. Emphatics emphasize force or writer’s certainty in the message (Hyland, 1998). In our corpus, emphatics were rarely used, but sometimes respondents tried to avoid responsibility for the fact that they had to deny one of the sender’s requests and then ‘put the blame on the sender’. They provided answers that may well count as certainty markers. ‘We do not have a distributor in the Netherlands, but we do have many customers. We support them largely through e-mail and fax, and that seems to work pretty well’ (AN_7). The use of this kind of emphatic can be considered as an indication of the directness of the sender, and therefore as an indication of informality. The few emphatics used in our corpus all originated from American producers.

Nickerson (2000) mentions attitude markers as rhetorical operationalizations of interpersonal relationships. Attitude markers are used to express the writer’s attitude to the propositional content of the message (Nickerson, 2000). They can be signaled by attitude verbs (’hope’, ‘am sorry’) and adverbs (’unfortunately’). Again, most of the attitude markers in our data are used to mitigate the threat to face caused by the denial of the request (‘I am sorry to inform you, that we don’t have a distributor in the USA’ (DN_19)). Dutch companies, more often than American companies, expressed the fact that they were sorry. Furthermore, two Dutch companies presented their apologies (i.e., Unexpected Moves). ‘First of all I would like to apologize for not having any information written in English’ (DN_20); ‘unfortunately, we don’t sell products in the US’ (DN_23). This means that more than half of all Dutch companies expressed in words that they were sorry to decline the customer’s request. It might be the case that American companies are reluctant to explicitly phrase a negative formula or use a speech act that may be viewed negatively. To remain as positive as possible in the relationship with the customer seems to be a device that many American companies have taken to heart. Refusals and denials are viewed as negative speech acts, which may provoke a negative attitude with the customer.

Sentence length and number of sentences in the overall reply can be viewed as an indication of verbosity, and thus of the formality of the respondent’s reply (cf. Gimenez, 2000; Van Mulken, 1996). People tend to use more words and sentences to write a formal text, as opposed to an informal text like a note or a memorandum. Business letters tend to be more formal, and longer, in that they require different conventions
to be followed. Following the Flesch-Readability Test (Flesch, 1974), a sentence was deemed short if it consisted of an average of eleven words or less per sentence. A sentence was considered long if it contained an average of 12 or more words per sentence. However, with regard to the elaborateness and verbosity of the responses, no substantial differences can be observed between the Old versus New companies or between the American versus Dutch replies.

Gimenez (2000) notes that the informal and personalized style of e-mail communication is also marked by the use of first names. The address can be quite formal, by including titles or honorifics, or relatively informal, when even the first name is left out. In our corpus, an address was considered informal if only a first name was used (‘Dear John’ (AN_4)) or if no name was mentioned at all (‘Hello’ (DO_12)). Old companies tended to use a more formal address, with five (out of 10) Old companies using a formal address whereas only four (out of 14) New companies did so (‘Dear John Petersen’ (AO_2); ‘Good morning sir Petersen (sic)’ (DO_16)). The same holds true for the Dutch replies. Dutch replies contained more often a more formal address, in the sense that the titles, honorifics, and first name in combination with family name were used more often than in American replies. The sole formal address in the American Old group was in one of the replies that had been sent by the Dutch counterpart (‘Geachte Mijnheer Petersen (AO_2)’ – which counts as a very formal form of address, even in Dutch).

5. Conclusion

The results from this study suggest some tentative conclusions.

The first research issue identified at the beginning of this paper was: ‘Is it necessary, in terms of genre, to distinguish e-mail replies to customer inquiries from their paper-based counterparts?’ In order to answer this question, we checked whether New Producers, with no long-standing tradition in customer service, developed a different style of reply. Since the move structure does not differ intrinsically between the two groups, and since variation in customer friendly behavior and rhetorical interpersonal strategies concern only minor differences, we conclude that there is no necessity to distinguish the electronic company replies from their paper-based counterparts. The electronic format is therefore a channel choice, a medium of discourse, and this format entails register consequences: the style is informal, salutations and closings are often omitted, and form of address is direct and straightforward, as is characteristic for electronic communication in general (Gains, 1998; Gimenez, 2000; Mulholland, 1999). We also suggest, on the basis of these findings, that in order to assign genre, one has to abstract from register, i.e., medium characteristics imposed by the channel choice. It is conceivable that medium characteristics have implications for the move structure, in the sense that moves are omitted (such as openings and closings in e-communication) or added (such as literal citations in e-mail, often preceded by ‘>’). These channel variations allow the move structure of the overarching genre to become more flexible and more dynamic. Bhatia (1997) remarked that with the emergence of professional and public service commu-
nication on a massive scale, many new hybrid (partly) promotional genres are created (Bhatia, 1997, p. 636). Here, the established generic structure of paper-based communication has been exploited in electronic communication, but since no intrinsically idiosyncratic moves occur in the e-mail reply to a customer’s request, there is no need to define a sub genre.

However, our data do not include traditional paper replies. We assumed, perhaps too prematurely, that older companies, with a long standing customer service tradition, have a customer policy for electronic correspondence similar to the one developed for paper-based replies. This hypothesis needs to be tested. In future research, an experiment in which half of the companies is approached with a paper inquiry and the other half with an e-mail, should shed light on this. In this respect, it is advisable to select a business sector other than the computer industry. The respondent has to use the same channel as the inquirer. The sector of home appliances would therefore be a good alternative, because both paper-based and electronic correspondences are likely to occur.

The second research issue concerned the generic transcendence of cultural boundaries. To explore this issue, we investigated whether American and Dutch companies differ in their reply to customer inquiries via electronic mail. We have seen that there are some culturally different preferences, but these concern proportional differences: some moves are more favored than others. We found no idiosyncratic moves. We therefore have reasons to believe that De Mooij (2004) is right in suggesting that globalization, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, allows genres to cross borders. It is nevertheless advisable to verify this for other North-Western European countries such as Germany or Denmark. Whether this also holds true for other cultures, such as Mediterranean countries or African or Asiatic cultures certainly deserves to be investigated.

This study has shown that it can be fruitful to determine genre in an inductive way, by eliciting data with the help of a prototype e-mail. The rule of the common denominator in combination with the evaluative judgment of the researchers is a useful tool in analyzing genre. We have applied this method to the study of company e-mail replies to customer inquiries, as part of a sequence in the pre-sales promotional genre system.

In future research, it would also be interesting to set up an experiment to investigate how Dutch and American customers appreciate this type of customer service. Do Dutch customers expect another type of customer policy than American customers? How do Dutch customers respond to a prototypical American customer service reply and vice versa?

On the basis of this study, we may conclude that, in an era where ‘(international) competition is just a click away’, a detailed analysis of customer service policy is worthwhile in the battle for customer retention.

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