

Costanza Cucchi

*BELF and National Cultures on European Corporate Websites:
A Cross-cultural Investigation*

ABSTRACT:

The present study explores website discourse in English in a corpus of national companies. The companies are located in four European countries, selected with reference to Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

Following on a qualitative analysis, which confirmed that the English used in the website texts can be qualified as BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca), a corpus-assisted approach was adopted for the study of the noun phrase 'our + [members of the company]'. The findings revealed that some aspects of the field of discourse (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) may be interpreted with reference to Hofstede's framework, thus further illuminating the relationship between language and culture.

Introduction

In her chapter in the *Handbook of Business Discourse*, Louhiala-Salminen (2009: 311), who first introduced the acronym BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) in the literature (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005), stated that «the majority of international business is done in English, but not in native-speaker English». In writing, the growing popularity of English among non-natives within the business domain was enhanced by the use of faxes and e-mails. In the 1990s, faxes were reported to be «the most frequently used» channels for written business communication (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996: 46), while at the beginning of the new millennium e-mails were defined as «crucial» in shaping the discursive activities in a multinational company (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002: 217). In oral interaction, English was increasingly used by non-native speakers due to the rise of multinationals as a result of mergers and acquisitions (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005), since it was the language most business professionals mastered as a second or foreign language.

Two important issues raised in the literature on non-native English in the business domain were the specific purpose for which English was used and its lexico-grammatical features. With respect to the purpose, English was found to be more used in internal business communication as compared to external business communication. For example, in the mid-nineties internal written communication was estimated to account for 55% of the overall business communication conducted in non-native English (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996: 44). A decade later and in a different context, internal communication, both oral and written, was estimated to account for 80% of the overall communication among non-native speakers (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005: 406).

When asked about the form of English, non-native English informants reported that it did not always conform to native speaker models. Discussing non-standard features of English, Kankaaranta and Planken (2010: 402) formulated what they defined «an interesting question», namely:

«is the domain of written BELF restricted to nonpublic communication products such as emails, company-internal product specifications and protocols and if so, can we expect it to ever cross over into the public domain, and to corporate websites, for example?».

A partial answer to this question was offered in Aaltonen (2005), who found deviations from Standard English in the English versions of websites of Finnish export companies.

Another main concern of the literature on non-native English in the business domain is culture. Non-native informants working in various Finnish firms defined English as used in the business context as ‘cultureless’. As they put it, communication in the business domain was «pure business», «100% subject matter, the culture behind [...] [the message] cannot be seen», «the text is the same, wherever it comes from» (Louhiala-Salminen 1996: 44). However, when business professionals from different countries interacted regularly in English, they became aware of differences in cultural discourse practices (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005). For example, the Finnish were perceived by the Swedes to be more direct and more economical with words, while the Swedes were considered by the Finnish to be more wordy and more dialogic (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005: 413; 417).

The present study intends, firstly, to determine whether the English used on national corporate websites of selected European countries can be qualified as BELF and, secondly, to contribute to the study of cultural traits in non-native English discourse. Rather than investigating national discourse practices, the present research focuses on the field of discourse,

namely «the general sense of what is going on» (Halliday and Hasan, 1989: 24). In particular, by using a corpus-assisted approach, it is attempted to unveil whether any of the national cultural tendencies illustrated in Hofstede's model, the most utilised one in intercultural communication, emerge in the field of the discourse of European corporate websites.

Despite various applications to linguistic research (e.g. Bjørge, 2007; Clyne, 1994; Cucchi, 2010b; Guillén-Nieto, 2009; Hatipoğlu, 2006; Katan, 2006; Lukianenko Wolfe, 2008; Poppi, 2012), to the best of my knowledge Hofstede's model has not been used for the study of corporate websites in linguistics, except in Cucchi (2010a, 2012). In my previous research, the model proved useful in accounting for linguistic and communicative differences observed in an Italian and a comparable British corporate website (Cucchi, 2010a). The model was also helpful for predicting some formal and content differences in two comparable corpora of websites, respectively from Greek and Swedish companies (Cucchi, 2012). The present study aims to extend my previous findings with a corpus-assisted investigation of four comparable corpora of websites from other selected European companies. In order to explore whether any of the national cultural tendencies illustrated in Hofstede's model emerged from the corpora, it was decided not to start from predetermined hypotheses. The analysis began from an examination of the collocates of 'our', since it was assumed that they might shed light on the aspects which companies considered so important as to refer to them in a personalised way and that these aspects may well vary across cultures.

1. Study design and methodology

Before discussing the criteria underlying the compilation of the website corpora, a short explanation of Hofstede's model is appropriate. The model, devised in the 1970s on the basis of questionnaires given to IBM's employees in various nations, aims to provide a way to compare different cultures along four dimensions, to which two dimensions were later added (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). In the present study reference is made to Hofstede's original four dimensions, since most linguistic works rely only on them (Cucchi, 2011).

The cultural dimensions represent basic human issues, to which Hofstede's model assumes that people from a specific nation tend to respond in similar ways. The first issue is the extent to which people perceive themselves as independent individuals or as members of a group. On

this basis, nations are scored along the dimension Individualism (IDV) versus Collectivism (COL). The second issue is the degree of tolerance of inequalities in the distribution of power, for example between parents and children, teachers and students, bosses and employees, and the corresponding cultural dimension is Power Distance (PD). The third issue is the degree of tolerance of uncertain and unknown situations, which is associated to the dimension termed Uncertainty Avoidance (UA). The fourth issue is the degree of assertiveness or tenderness which is generally considered desirable. Since assertiveness and tenderness are traditionally seen as, respectively, masculine and feminine values, the corresponding dimension is termed Masculinity (MAS) and is opposed to Femininity (FEM). In the model, nations were scored along the dimensions on a scale from 0 to 100: scores below 50 are intended as comparatively low, while scores exceeding 50 are intended as comparatively high. A few countries, which were added later to Hofstede's research, score above 100 on a dimension, since their score was found to be above the one obtained by the countries already included in the model.

It is worth mentioning that the validity of Hofstede's work has been the object of scholarly debate. For example, McSweeney (2002) rejected Hofstede's model, arguing that the methodology used has a number of unacceptable shortcomings, such as the conflation of the concept of 'culture' with 'nation', which causes the model to fail to consider individual and ethnic differences within nations. Williamson (2002: 1374) warned both against the dangers of disregarding Hofstede's model, stressing that «[t]he considerable knowledge built on [...] [it] may be rubbished», and the dangers of ignoring McSweeney's criticism, for example by «[a]ssuming that all members of a culture homogeneously carry the same cultural attributes, that a culture can be uniform» (Williamson, 2002: 1391). Jones (2007: 5), after examining arguments against and in support of Hofstede's work, concluded: «While the level of controversy surrounding this work is still quite high, it remains the most valuable piece of work on culture for both scholars and practitioners».

For the present investigation, Hofstede's model was referred to for the selection of four European countries, which were meant to represent different scores along the cultural dimensions as well as different geographical areas. Austria was selected because, among the 76 countries considered in Hofstede's research, it has the lowest PD score, which is related to a tendency to equality. The Netherlands were chosen because of their very low MAS score, a feature which they share with other Northern European countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and which sets them

apart from other European countries, Portugal being the only exception. A low MAS score is associated with caring for the quality of life and people's well-being. The Netherlands also have, with Hungary, the highest IDV score in Europe, which suggests an emphasis on single individuals rather than on groups. On the contrary, Portugal is the Southern European country which scores the lowest on IDV. Portugal also has a particularly high UA score, exceeded only by Greece, which is related to a tendency to avoid unpredictable situations. Poland's score is also very high, and the highest in Central Europe, while its scores on the other dimensions are not particularly high, although they are all above 50. [Table 1](#) illustrates the four countries' scores on the four dimensions.

Table 1 – Country scores on Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede's scores	Austria	Netherlands	Poland	Portugal
IDV	55	80	60	27
PD	11	38	68	63
UA	70	53	93	104
MAS	79	14	64	31

A corpus was compiled of ten corporate websites per country. On the basis of the assumption that the food and drink sectors are particularly suitable for the study of national cultural values as portrayed on websites (Turnbull, 2008), companies were chosen in the food sector. Due to its importance for European food cultures¹ and for the EU cheese market², the cheese sector was selected. An essential requirement for inclusion in the corpus was the national or local character of the companies, since national values were assumed to be more visible on national corporate websites, as opposed to the websites of multinationals. Another requirement was, clearly, the existence of an English website version, along with a version in the national language.

The process of finding national websites with an English version was not straightforward and involved following various search paths. In addition, many corporate websites of national companies could not be considered since they did not have an English version. [Table 2](#) lists the companies whose websites were included in the corpus.

Table 2 – National companies included in the corpus

<i>Austrian companies</i>	<i>Dutch companies</i>	<i>Polish companies</i>	<i>Portuguese companies</i>
Käsehof	Bastiaansen Bio	Ceko	Indulac
Käsemacher	Bettine	Lactima	Insulac
Käsebellien	Eyssen	Lazur	Lactinios Paiva
Pinzgaumilch	Hekkingkaas	Michowianka	Lourenço
Rupp	Henri Willig	OSM Gizycko	Monforqueijo
Schärdinger	Kaaspack	Rotr	Monte da Vinha
Sennerei Zillertal	Noordhoekkaas	Sertop	Queijaria Nacional
Vorarlberg Milk	Schippercheese	Serwar	Saloio
Wiesner	Visser Kaas	Spółdzielnia Mleczarska Ryki	Senras
Woerle	Veldhuyzen Kaas	TMT Lomza	Tété
74, 659 tokens	29, 552 tokens	29, 552 tokens	27, 811 tokens

The website texts were first analysed qualitatively to verify whether they could be considered as BELF texts (Section 3) with reference to the features of BELF established in previous literature, which are illustrated in Section 2.

2. Features of BELF in previous studies

The acronym BELF derives from the ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) paradigm, pioneered by such authors as Seidlhofer (2001), House (2002), Meierkord (2002) and Mauranen (2006), being transferred to the business context. Interestingly, in 2011 the ELF paradigm attracted attention at European level, where multilingualism is traditionally guaranteed. *Lingua Franca: Chimera or Reality?*, the resulting publication by the Directorate General for Translation of the European Commission (2011: 29), summarises the principles of the ELF movement as follows:

«Under the ELF approach, English becomes a global asset belonging to all users, regardless of whether it is their mother tongue. [...] It belongs to everybody and nobody at the same time and no longer embodies a single culture».

Since English is regarded as a global asset, non-native speakers are

granted the right to appropriate the language and shape it. English may thus deviate from native speaker norms, provided that the users' communicative purposes are achieved. In other words, communicative effectiveness becomes more important than native-like command of English.

With reference to the business context, Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* (2005: 403) claimed that the fact that «none of the speakers can claim [...] [English] as her/his mother tongue» made BELF 'neutral'. The claim for neutrality was supported by European businesspeople interviewed about the oral use of BELF. As reported by Kankaaranta and Planken (2010: 388) «[t]he interviewees hardly ever associated English with any specific native speaker model or with a national culture or its values such as the United Kingdom, the United States, or Australia; rather, the majority saw it as global and *neutral*» (emphasis added).

Beside neutrality, sharedness is another property postulated as pertaining to BELF, «in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community» (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005: 404). Therefore, although they have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, BELF users «share the 'B', i.e. the context and culture of business» (Kankaaranta, 2008). Interestingly, summarising the key findings on oral BELF interaction, Kankaaranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) have recently suggested that the acronym BELF, which they had originally intended as «“Business English as Lingua Franca” should [...] be understood as “English as Business Lingua Franca”». The authors (Kankaaranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2013: 17) specified that: «[w]ith this change we want to emphasize *the domain of use* rather than the type of English» (emphasis added).

According to this interpretation, the function of being a common code, performed by English within the business community, is considered to be more important than the form which English takes for it to be labelled BELF.

3. BELF on national corporate websites

The reason why national and local companies provide an English version of their corporate websites is arguably to target international customers. Since this function clearly pertains to the business domain, the English used on the websites included in the corpus can certainly be considered as BELF from a functional point of view. In Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*'s (2005: 404) terminology, the English used on the websites in the corpus is 'shared' by the companies and the potential customers.

With respect to the form of the English used on the websites, a qualitative observation of the texts revealed that they did not always fully conform to native standards. Examples 1 to 3 show deviations in spelling, which may result from the way the misspelled words are actually pronounced.

(1) «Traditional values such as faith, *responsability* and *trustworthyness* are practiced to this day. On the other hand Mario Wiesner also adopts new *approches*. Workmanship is *develloped trough inovation* spirit, the sense for business and personal *envolvememt*». (Wiesner, Austria)

(2) «Welcome on the website of Ceko company
Cheese producer *witch* 20 years of experience». (Ceko, Poland)

(3) «‘The best in Poland’ is one of the oldest and most prestigious competitions, *wich* promotes producers and their products». (Lactima, Poland)

Various morphological deviations were also observed. Examples 4 to 6 regard articles, which are missing where they would be necessary or inserted where they are not necessary according to Standard English norms.

(4) «Veldhuyzen Kaas is a well known name in *Æ* cheese business since 1884». (Veldhuyzen Kaas, Netherlands)

(5) «On August 15 1957, fifteen members established *Æ* District Co-operative Dairy Plant in Michów. In *Æ* first few years of its business activity, there was a gradual augmentation of its property by erecting new production buildings and milk purchasing centers» (Michowianka, Poland)

(6) «*The* ISO 22000 is the first of a set of international standards relating to food security and was published in July 2005. This standard establishes the requirements for any company operating in the food chain. *The* Insulac considers the awarding of this certificate as a “milestone” for *the* company that operates fourteen years in the dairy market». (Insulac, Portugal)

Other morphological deviations regard the use of relative pronouns (Examples 7 to 9) and tenses (Examples 10-11).

(7) «As time passed, the trade in cheese began to grow, *what* eventually led to the opening of the first cheese warehouse of Visser Kaashandel in 1959». (Visserkaas, Netherlands)

(8) «1956 was the first year *that* Austria produced an excess amount of milk, meaning more milk was produced than was needed for domestic use» (Käsehof, Austria)

(9) «Our production capabilities are flexible *it* means that we can fully come up to customers expectations and easily can manage with their fancy orders». (Osm-Gizycko, Poland)

(10) «As the first in Poland *we has started* the production of processed cheese in slices, basing on the most modern technology and equipment» (Lactima, Poland)

(11) «Follow Saiolo. *Became* a cheese lover» (Saloio, Portugal)

Some syntactic deviations are also observed (Examples 12-13):

(12) «In 1878 *it were already twelve* farmers and in the course of the years the number grew and grew». (Käserebellen, Austria)

(13) «In spring 2008 the area of the “Anderswelt” was acquired, *there will be (in the year 2012) opened a cheese experience world*, our products were enjoyed already in over 38 countries». (Käsemacher, Austria)

It is noted that many of these deviations were described by Seidlhofer (2004) as being typical of non-native users of English in oral communication. Since they do not fully conform to native speaker standards, the texts included in the corpus can be qualified as BELF from a formal point of view. In Louhiala-Salminen's (*et al.*) terminology (2005: 403), they can be considered as 'neutral'.

4. Cultural attitudes on national corporate websites

In an attempt to verify whether national cultural attitudes were represented in the field of the discourse of national corporate websites, the collocates of 'our' were examined with *Wordsmith Tools 4.0* (Scott, 2004). [Table 3](#) shows the five most frequent full words which collocate with 'our' in the four corpora.

Table 3 – Full words collocating with ‘our’

Austria	Netherlands
1 products/farmers	1 Hekking
2 new	2 cheese/own
3 cheeses	3 customers
4 nutrition/production/delicious/customers	4 sales
5 hay/dairy/team/Schärdinger	5 product/company
Poland	Portugal
1 products	1 products
2 offer	2 cheese
3 company	3 cheeses
4 cheeses/cuisine	4 customers
5 e-mail	5 values

Unsurprisingly, some of the collocates, such as ‘product/s’, ‘cheese/s’, ‘customers’, appeared in more than one corpus, since the website texts shared the same field of discourse. The fact that ‘farmers’ appeared only in one corpus invited further investigation, considering that Hofstede’s dimensions were devised on the basis of attitudes related to work. It was thus decided to focus on the noun phrases ‘our + [people who worked for the company]’ in the four corpora and to explore their co-text, so as to observe how workers were portrayed in website discourse. The descriptions of the workers were then compared to national tendencies with reference to Hofstede’s model.

4.1 ‘Our farmers’

While there were thirteen occurrences of ‘our farmers’ in the Austrian corpus, this phrase never occurred in the other national corpora. All the occurrences of ‘our farmers’ belonged to five companies – Käsehof, Käeserebellen, Pinzgaumilch, Schärdiger, Woerle. An examination of the co-text of ‘our farmers’ revealed, in ten out of thirteen cases, words belonging to the lexical field of quality, freshness and naturalness of the cheese (Examples 17 to 26).

(17) «The *quality* cheeses from KÄSEHOF exist strictly because of their most important element: milk. And because traditional, *naturally pure* cheese can only be produced with *top quality* milk, *our farmers* only produce “*natural goodness in white*” par excellence: HAY MILK». (Käsehof)

(18) «Hay milk (also called pasture milk) - a premium product of dairy farming - requires silage-free fodder, meaning that *our farmers* have pledged to only feed their cows *fresh* grass (in the summer) or tasty hay (in the winter). The bulk of the fodder must come from *natural* sources (*with only a minimal amount of concentrated feed*)». (Käsehof)

(19) «*Our farmers* pay close attention to *quality, purity* and *native-ness* and each gives an individual, unadulterated flavor to our pasture milk». (Käsehof)

(20) «All *our farmers* dedicated themselves to feed their cows according to the “*natural* hay-milk regulations” only with *silage-free food*, i.e. *non-fermented food*, and *100% GMO-free*». (Käserebellen)

(21) «Our products are made exclusively from *fresh* milk. The cows of *our farmers* graze [...] on the numerous mountain pastures full of *full-flavoured mountain herbs* and meadow flowers». (Pinzgaumilch)

(22) «Pinzgau Milch focuses on taste and pleasure! Our products are made exclusively from *fresh milk*. The cows of *our farmers* graze from May to September on the numerous mountain pastures full of full-flavoured mountain herbs and meadow flowers». (Pinzgaumilch)

(23) «*Our farmers* only give their cows feed that is produced *without genetically modified ingredients*». (Schärdiger)

(24) «*Our farmers* supply around 60,000 litres of *high-quality* milk to Woerle every year». (Woerle)

(25) «All *our farmers* are located within a 50 km radius of the cheese dairy. This ensures that you can taste the *freshness* of the Salzburg milk in every single piece of Woerle cheese». (Woerle)

(26) «All *our farmers* are from the regions of Salzburg and Mondsee, renowned for their succulent and nutritional grass meadows. This has to be the real foundation of our *high-quality* milk production». (Woerle)

In two cases, the co-text of ‘our farmers’ did not exhibit words belonging to the lexical field of naturalness, but indicated the origins of the milk, which came from Austria or Germany. Quality, freshness and naturalness may therefore be implied by the farmers’ proximity. (Examples 27-28).

(27) «Where our products are produced, ripened and packed
Sulzberger Käsebelln Sennerei GmbH
Dorf 2 - 6934 Sulzberg - Austria
Here, the milk from *our farmers* from *Germany* and *Austria* comes
together». (Käsebelln)

(28) «*Our Farmers*
Our milk comes from approx. 60 suppliers from the *surrounding
region*». (Woerle)

The search was extended to ‘our * farmers’, of which there were five occurrences in the Austrian corpus, two in the Dutch corpus and none in the other two national corpora. The Austrian occurrences, which belonged to two companies, confirmed the association of the noun phrase ‘our farmers’ with quality, freshness and naturalness (Examples 29 to 32).

(29) «*Our Dairy Farmers*
Our dairy farmers deliver the *foundation and starting point* for our entire cheese production or what we consider our *white gold: milk*. Our farmers pay close attention to *quality, purity* and *nativeness* and each gives an individual, *unadulterated flavor* to our pasture milk. Whether it’s an organic or a conventional farmer, each takes great care to farm as *naturally* as possible». (Käsehof)

(30) «All *our Bio farmers* produce milk according to the “*natural hay-milk regulations*”, as well as *Bio regulations* of the European Union and additional regulations of national *Bio associations*». (Käsebelln)

(31) «*our Bio farmers* committed themselves to run their farms according to the regulations of national *Bio associations*». (Käsebelln)

(32) «Hay-milk from *our Alpine farmers*
It is for a good reason that hay-milk is called the *purest* milk. No other milk is produced in such a *natural* and traditional manner». (Käsebelln)

Instead, the two Dutch occurrences of ‘our * farmers’, on the website of Bastianseen, had a different collocational profile as compared to the Austrian occurrences. The farmers were portrayed as being invited to act responsibly and stimulated to increase their awareness of environmental issues (Examples 33-34).

(33) «we [...] stimulate *our member cattle farmers* to work in a *responsible way* at their own company development on the farmyard». (Bastianseen)

(34) «[...] *our member cattle farmers* are offered to join *workshops about animal welfare, energy and climate, landscape and environment*». (Bastianseen)

Significantly, one of the key differences between low and high PD societies is that, in the former, «[m]anual work has the same status as office work» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 76), while in the latter «[o]rganizations centralize power as much as possible in a few hands» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010:73) and «[w]hite-collar jobs are valued more than blue collar jobs» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 76). This could explain the mention of ‘our (*) farmers’ only in the corpora of the countries which score low on PD – Austria and the Netherlands – and its absence in the Polish and Portuguese corpora. In particular, the portrayal in the Austrian corpus of the farmers as valuable collaborators who have the essential task of guaranteeing the freshness and high quality of the cheese is in keeping with Austria’s extremely low PD, which reflects an egalitarian attitude, implying that «subordinates and superiors consider each other as existentially equal» in the workplace (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 74). This attitude clearly emerges in Example 35, taken from the Austrian corpus, where the close, symmetrical relationship between the company and the farmers is stressed.

(35) «Good *Co-operation!*
We personally know and look after our farmers. This personal relationship with milk suppliers is as important to us as the best quality milk.» (Woerle)

Despite the fact that the Netherlands also have low PD, the farmers’ portrayal in the Dutch corpus seems more in keeping with the Netherlands’ very high IDV score. Indeed, the only company which mentions ‘our farmers’ describes itself as being engaged in enhancing the individual responsibility of the farmers for their own work. In addition, the mention by the company of itself as concerned with developing the farmers’ environmental awareness is in keeping with the Netherlands’ low MAS score, associated with concern for the quality of life, rather than with «challenge, earnings, recognition and advancement», typical values of high MAS countries (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 155).

4.2 'Our employees/team/staff'

The attitude to the company employees was explored by observing which words, collocating with 'our', were used to refer to them. Table 4 shows that various synonyms of 'employees' occurred in the four national corpora, the number of the occurrences is indicated in parentheses.

Table 4 – Synonyms of 'employees'

Austria	The Netherlands	Poland	Portugal
staff (2) team (2)	employees (3) personnel (2) sales department (3) sales people (5) salesteam (1) team (1)	sales department (1) staff (1) personnel (1)	employees (4)

Interestingly, the Dutch corpus contained the higher number of words referring to the company's employees, in keeping with the Netherlands' high IDV, which suggests more emphasis on single individuals. In addition, 'team', which suggests equality among its members, only appeared in the Austrian and the Dutch corpora, the countries whose PD is lower, while it was absent in the website discourse of the other countries, whose PD is higher.

In the Austrian corpus, Example 36 mentions both experts and employees as a guarantee of quality, thus suggesting a certain equality among them, which reflects Austria's very low PD. In Example 37 an egalitarian attitude is particularly evident: All the members of the team, referred to as 'coworkers', are described as having the same concerns, no matter what their difference in status is.

(36) «Our Staff

Well trained dairy experts and 130 motivated employees ensure that the quality of our products is guaranteed from our production facilities through to the customer.

Pinzgau Milch has been certified pursuant to IFS (at a higher level) and ISO 9001:2000.

Our staff is of course available at all times to provide you with more detailed information!» (Pinzgaumich)

(37) «*Our team* covers today, divided on our locations, approx. 130 coworkers, who worry passionately from the apprentice to the quality manager about „the taste experience». (Käsemacher)

In Examples 36 and 38 the staff is portrayed as always available, thus suggesting low PD between the company and the consumers.

(38) «During the winter months, *our team* from Käsewelt are *waiting to welcome you from Monday to Saturday*, from 8 – 12 a.m.». (Käsehof)

In the Dutch corpus, the mention of various channels to get in contact with the staff – e-mail, telephone and face-to-face (Examples 39 and 40) – suggests that it is extremely easy to get in touch with the employees, in keeping with the Netherlands' low PD. In addition, most occurrences of the words referring to the staff in the Dutch corpus are found in sentences containing one or more relational markers (Examples 39-41). These are «devices that explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or to include them as discourse participants» (Hyland, 2004: 113) and include second person pronouns, imperatives and questions. In other words, the company gives «the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual» (Fairclough, 2001: 52), which seems in keeping with the Netherlands' very high IDV score.

(39) «Would *you* like to know more about our assortment? Please *email our sales department or call +31 (0)0528 - 26 82 46* to make an appointment». (Kaaspack)

(40) «For more information about our quality system, please *contact our sales team* on +31 (0)528 - 26 82 46. They would be happy to tell *you* all about it during a *telephone conversation or guided tour* of our factory».

(41) «Are *you* interested in one of our products, or do *you* have a suggestion or comment? Please *feel* free to contact one of *our employees*». (Visserkaas)

One Dutch company, Noordhoekkaas, also mentions a possible collaboration between the company staff and the customers, so as to create a personalised product (Examples 42 to 44). This may reflect the Netherlands' low PD, suggesting equality between company's experts and the customers, and their very high IDV.

(42) «Is *your specific product* not listed on our site? Please *contact our sales people*. We gladly [sic] would develop a product that suits all your needs». (Noordhoekkaas)

(43) «Also, a mix of several cheese types are possible. *Our salesteam* [sic] *will help you to make the perfect mix*». (Noordhoekkaas)

(44) «*Our team* of qualified *employees* is perfectly capable of bringing you the best *tailor-made products* [...]». (Noordhoekkaas)

The mention of ‘our + employees’ in the Portuguese and Polish corpora occur in completely different co-texts. In the Portuguese corpus company activities targeted at the families’ of the employees (Example 45) reflect the importance recognised to belonging to groups which is typical of high COL countries, as does commitment to the surrounding community (Example 46).

(45) «Examples of motivational activities amongst *our employees* are recipe competitions for dishes which include cheese and some *activities involving parents and their children*». (Saiolo)

(46) «Our *essential operating value* is the *commitment to the community*. SALOIO has been developing a sustainable project in the area of social accountability. In 2007 Saloio was awarded the prize for “equality in diversity” of the region, for the good practices of social accountability which we have been implementing since the beginning of October 2008, which was named “Project 2Live”, with the *mission of promoting interaction with the local community and our employees*».

In the Polish corpus high expertise and qualifications are stressed (Examples 47 to 49), in keeping with Poland’s very high UA, which implies «[b]eliefs in experts and technical solutions» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 217) in the workplace.

(47) «The base of quality system in our firm is *our staff*. Their *qualifications* are brought up through permanently training system». (Lomza)

(48) «The *high qualifications* of *our personnel* and continuous *introduction of modern technology* and solutions enable us to compete with the *best producers* at home and abroad». (Spółdzielnia Mleczarska Ryki)

(49) «Since many years we have been cooperating with networks producing goods as their trademarks. Having *enormous experience* in this domain we also offer other parties the possibility of cooperation. If you are interested please contact *our Sales Department*». (Rotr)

4.3 Other workers

Apart from farmers and employees, other workers were qualified as ‘our’ in the national corpora, albeit rarely (Table 5).

Table 5 – Other workers mentioned in the corpora

Austria	The Netherlands	Poland	Portugal
cheesemakers (1) cheese maker (1)	Cheese makers (1)	Engineers (1)	Cheese mongers (1)

In the Dutch corpus, ‘our cheese makers’ were portrayed as loving and caring, typical feminine values which reflect the Netherlands’ low MAS score (Example 50).

(50) «The cheese is produced with *a lot of love and attention from our cheese makers*». (Bastianseen)

Instead, in the Austrian corpus the cheesemakers were portrayed as experts, as shown by the use of the premodifiers ‘master’ and ‘experienced master’, which may reflect Austria’s high UA (Examples 51 and 52), linked to «[b]eliefs in experts and technical solutions» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 217).

(51) «*Our master cheesemakers* in Voitsberg, Styria *make sure that only the best possible ingredients* make their way into our cheese». (Schärdiger)

(52) «*Our experienced master cheese maker* allows it to mature for 4 months under his care, so that the Rahm-Emmentaler can develop its *unmistakeable taste*». (Woerle)

Interestingly, the cheesemakers’ high expertise emerged even more markedly in the Portuguese corpus, where the cheesemakers are depicted as carrying out a very specialised task, which is, in turn, described using

highly specific terminology (Example 53), thus mirroring Portugal's very high UA.

(53) «Reserve cheeses are the ones which, after manufacture, undergo a *specific maturation process*. This maturation culminates with a last *organoleptic examination* done by *our cheese mongers* to assess whether this *batch* is to be considered Reserve». (Indulac)

In the Polish corpus, the cheesemakers were never mentioned but there was a mention of 'our engineers' who, rather curiously, were responsible for the creation of new types of cheese (Example 54). This is in keeping with Poland's high PD, reflected in the fact that «[w]hite-collar jobs are valued more than blue collar jobs» (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 76), combined with its very high UA (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010: 217).

(54) «*Our production engineers* have developed *several kinds of cheese* among which the greatest acclaim has been won by Rycki Edam, Ramzes, Zamojski wedzony (smoked Zamojski) and a cheese with a very low fat content called Hit z Ryk (Hit from Ryki)». (Spółdzielnia Mleczarska Ryki)

5. Conclusions

The present study has shown that English, already proven in previous literature to be widely used for internal communication in European multinationals, is also used for external communication by national European companies. From the point of view of the function it performs, the English used on the corporate websites in the corpus can be referred to as BELF, as intended in Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013), because it has the specific function of making communication possible in the business domain, between companies and potential customers who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

From a formal point of view, the qualitative analysis of the texts has revealed that deviations from Standard English are sifting through business oral communication and written internal communication through national corporate websites, a form of external, public communication which grants companies potentially limitless visibility. The presence of grammatical deviations from Standard English suggests that the website texts were written in English, or translated into English, by non-natives who are not language experts and that the latter did not have their texts

edited by native speakers or by specialists in English. In turn, this implies that non-specialists in English mastered English well enough to write intelligible website texts, albeit with some inaccuracies.

From a cultural point of view, although based on a limited number of occurrences, the examination of the co-text of 'our + [members of the company]' in four national website corpora has shed light on different attitudes, which it was possible to explain with reference to Hofstede's model. Therefore, the model has proven useful not only for predicting specific linguistic and communicative cross-cultural differences in websites (Cucchi, 2012), but also for accounting for aspects of the field of discourse which emerged from the corpus analysis.

While Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* (2005: 404) had already made it clear that culture pertains to BELF because of the different «discourse practices stemming from [BELF users'] respective mother tongues», the results of the present investigation indicate that, despite globalisation, national cultures affect the very field of discourse of apparently similar BELF texts in subtle ways, which corpus tools can help unveil.

¹ <<http://www.eufic.org/article/en/nutrition/salt/artid/Cheese-European-tradition/>> (last access 02.02.2016); <http://www.euromilk.org/eda/content_html.aspx?cid=426> (last access 02.02.2016).

² <<http://www.thedairysite.com/articles/2875/european-cheese-market>> (last access 02.02.2016).

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CORPORA

AUSTRIAN COMPANIES

Käsehof <www.kaesehof.at>; Käsemacher <www.kaesemacher.at>; Käserebellen <www.kaeserebellen.at>; Pinzgaumilch <www.pinzgaumilch.at>; Rupp <www.rupp.at>; Schärtinger <www.schaerding.at>; Sennerei, Vorarlberg Milk <www.vmilch.at>; Wiesner <www.wiesner.at>; Woerle <www.woerle.at>; Zillertal <www.sennerei-zillertal.at> (last access 09.02.2016).

DUTCH COMPANIES

Batiaansen Bio <www.bastiaansen-bio.com>; Bettine <www.bettine.nl>; Eysen <www.eysen.eu>; Hekkingkaas <www.hekkingkaas.nl>; Henri Willig <www.henriwillig.nl>; Kaaspack <www.kaaspack.com>; Noordhoekkaas <www.noordhoekkaas.nl>; Schippercheese <www.schippercheese.com>; Visser Kaas <www.visser-kaas.nl>; Veldhuyzen Kaas <www.veldhuyzenkaas.nl> (last access 09.02.2016).

POLISH COMPANIES

Ceko <www.ceko.pl>; Lactima <www.lactima.pl>; Lazur <www.lazur.pl>; Michowianka <www.michowianka.pl>; OSM Gizycko <www.osm-gizycko.com.pl>; Rotr <www.delik.com.pl>; Sertop <www.sertop.com.pl>; Serwar <www.serwar.pl>; Spółdzielnia Mleczarska Ryki <www.smryki.com.pl>; TMT Lomza <www.tmt-lomza.pl> (last access 09.02.2016).

PORTUGUESE COMPANIES

Indulac <www.indulac.pt>; Insulac <www.insulac.pt>; Lacticínios, Paiva <www.lacticiniospaiva.pt>; Lourenço <www.queijarialourenco.com>; Monforqueijo <www.monforqueijo.pt>; Monte da Vinha <www.queijaria-montedavinha.com>; Queijaria Nacional <www.queijarianacional.pt>; Saloio <www.queijosaloio.pt>; Senras <www.queijosenras.com>; Tété <www.tete.pt> (last access 09.02.2016).

