Using the Notion of Business Relationships in Exploring Frames at an Italian Company's Meetings of its International Distributors

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study exploring discourse and the business relationship at an Italian company's meetings of its international distributors, attended by approximately 25 distributors from 12-15 different countries in Europe, Asia and North America and by some of the company's Italian staff and management. Data for the study come from audio recordings of the twice-annual meetings, held in Italy and normally lasting two to three days, while supplementary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and field notes taken during observations of the meetings. The study used a series of analytical approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, which were drawn together into a discussion of frames (Goffman 1974, 1981), providing indications of how particular interactional strategies work together to position meeting participants. After briefly describing the rationale for using certain categories of linguistic and interactional features, the article uses data extracts to illustrate the analysis and to show how common ground is built up at the meetings and how language use by participants reflects and construes the business relationship. This relates to roles at the meeting as well as 'outside' of the meeting during the rest of the year.

A number of recurring themes emerged from the study's examination of the multicultural meetings. One is that the meetings seem to have their own culture, or at least their own character and sense of 'groupness', not necessarily linked to national cultures. Another theme concerns conflict, as evidenced, for example, by the use of negative evaluation in interchanges between the main company speaker and distributors: if conflict is observed, it involves factors not necessarily related to the different national cultures of participants. A final theme concerns how this culture or groupness comes about. The analysis highlights how the main company speaker in particular does a lot of work to construct common ground,

involving people who are present and others who are not. Other speakers do so as well, but to a lesser extent.

1. Introduction

In the business world today, not only large multinational corporations but also increasing numbers of small- to medium-sized firms participate in the international marketplace. In this scenario, people who meet to conduct business often come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Despite the range of cultures represented in many business encounters today, much of the research on intercultural business communication has been limited to communication between members of two different cultures, one of which is often "English speaking" (e.g. Halmari 1993; Murata 1994; Wilson et al. 1996; Lim 1997; Spencer-Oatey and Xing 1998; see Poncini 2002a and 2003b for a discussion and some recent exceptions). In addition, many studies on intercultural business communication focus on miscommunication or differences in discourse conventions (Ulijn and Li 1995 refer to many such studies, see also e.g. Yamada 1990), and present cultural differences as the cause of difficulty in the business relationship or within the corporation (see e.g. Trompenaars 1993). Moreover, popular business literature (e.g. Hill 1994; Lewis 1996) highlights national cultural differences to the extent there is risk of creating or perpetrating national stereotypes.

Naturally it is important to be aware of possible negative effects resulting from differing discourse strategies, as discussed by Gumperz (1982), and it can sometimes be useful to analyze difficulties (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Xing 1998 discuss a problematic business visit). However, not all "miscommunications" are problematic, and "trouble spots" (Ulichny 1997) are often repaired. The importance of investigating how business interlocutors manage to communicate successfully is recognized by Firth (1990, 1995, 1996), who studied international trading negotiations between Danish export managers and their international clients. The issue of success in intercultural business encounters also surfaces when Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (1999: 26) point out that "the construction of meaning taken from two sets of intercultural data (Firth 1995 and Loos 1997) appears to happen *despite* the different cultural backgrounds (and languages) of the actors. However, business values can on occasion, override cultural norms and expectations" (original italics).

Looking specifically at intercompany encounters, the importance of investigating the extra-

linguistic context and in particular the business relationship has been highlighted in work by Lampi (1986) and Charles (1994). Charles (1994) has shown differences in negotiating discourse connected to the age of the business relationship when data from British negotiations were divided into old relationship negotiations (ORNs) and new relationship negotiations (NRNs). Less procedural language, for example, was used in ORNs compared to NRNs. This demonstrates that in approaching discourse, the insights people bring from business lead them to look at data in ways they would not have necessarily done without such knowledge. In the case of Charles (1994) it led her to divide the data in different ways in relation to the business relationship.

These points indicate that business relationships, values and practices play a role in intercultural settings; national culture is not the only factor affecting communication. Besides investigating national cultural differences as reported in his 1980 study, Hofstede (1991) has also given attention to what he calls "levels of culture" and "layers of culture", listing some examples of levels: national, regional and/or ethnic, religious and/or linguistic, gender, generation, social class, and an organizational or corporate level for those who are employed. Hofstede (1989: 393-394) also describes how business units in the same country can vary in cultural practices along six dimensions, stating it is "not easy to ascribe an unambiguous 'corporate culture'" to two corporations he examined. Linguists investigating business discourse have also given attention to the notion of more than one level of culture. For example, Harris and Bargiela-Chiappini (1997: 2) recognize a company can consist of several cultures, and in their view (1997:15), corporate cultures can be viewed as consisting of discourses which "often reflect particular sets of ideas or interests of certain groups of employees, which may or may not be associated with ethnicity or national culture." They contrast this with viewing corporate culture as a "homogenous entity".

A question thus arises as to which aspects of culture and context may be important in approaching business discourse in intercultural settings. Sarangi (1994: 411) has referred to "analytical stereotyping" and argues that in analyzing intercultural encounters, too much emphasis has been placed on cultural differences as a cause of miscommunication and not enough on participants' societal and institutional roles. Similarly, Meeuwis (1994: 393) points out that in most interactionist research on intercultural communication, studies on the influence of extra-situational parameters on the structure of conversation are missing. In his view, criticisms of cultural background to explain intercultural communicative difficulties are

overgeneralized and unproductive. In addition, intercultural scholars Asante and Gudykunst (1989: 178-179) observe that it can be problematic when researchers use cultural categories to differentiate groups without measuring the individual participants on the relative cultural variable. For instance, if individualistic and collectivistic cultures are chosen, participants' individualism/collectivism would have to be assessed. Individualism describes a cultural tendency and not the individual, and a cultural tendency does not predict the individual's behavior. If we return to a business setting, Charles (1994), in comparing sets of British and Finnish negotiations, suggests that "caution should be exercised in attributing causality to cultural factors, as the differences and similarities identified may well be due to the conventions prevailing in the discourse communities concerned".

In sum, although it is sometimes justified to look at breakdowns in communication, focusing on miscommunication in intercultural business settings is limiting because this approach assumes intercultural interactions are problematic and consequently tends to ignore factors possibly contributing to successful intercultural communication. In addition, when a breakdown does occur, it tends to be ascribed to cultural differences even when this is open to debate. Furthermore, this approach often does not even consider how such breakdowns are resolved. This raises doubts about approaches to intercultural data that focus on problematic interactions and then attribute difficulties to cultural and linguistic difficulties without considering other factors. This is not to say that cultural differences do not exist. Cultural differences have been reported by researchers, as discussed earlier, and it is also important to be aware of possible differing discourse strategies. In today's business world, however, it can be pointed out that interactants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are often successful in establishing, maintaining or enhancing their business relationships despite the difficulties often reported to be associated with intercultural communication.

This paper reports on a study exploring discourse and the business relationship at an Italian company's meetings of its international distributors, attended by approximately 25 distributors from 12-15 different countries in Europe, Asia and North America and by some of the company's Italian staff and management. Data for the study come from audio recordings of the twice-annual meetings, held in Italy and normally lasting two to three days, with two half-day segments chosen for transcription and analysis. The study used a series of analytical approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, which were drawn together into a discussion of frames (Goffman 1974, 1981), providing indications of how particular

interactional strategies work together to position meetings participants. The article uses data extracts to illustrate the analysis and to show how common ground is built up at the meetings and how language use by participants reflects and construes the business relationship. This relates to roles at the meeting as well as "outside" of the meeting during the rest of the year.

2. The implications of research of the Industrial Marketing Purchasing (IMP) Group for examinations of intercompany business meetings

The notion of different "levels of culture" reaffirms the question of which cultural differences matter when investigating discourse in a multicultural business setting. It would be limiting to view participants in such settings as representatives of "homogenous" national cultures, without considering other factors such as the business context. It is therefore interesting to review some of the research of the Industrial Marketing Purchasing (IMP) Group (e.g. Ford 1997; Ford et al. 1986; Håkansson 1982; Håkansson and Johanson 1992; Håkansson and Snehota 1990, 1992, 1995). This research has implications for examinations of intercompany business meetings because it indicates some of the factors encompassed by the wider business context, especially in terms of business relationships.

Ford (1997) traces the development of research into buyer-seller relationships, describing two aspects of the IMP Group's approach. One involves viewing the task for the buyer and the seller as similar. For example, both companies need to decide how much to adapt their products, processes, or administrative procedures to meet the requirements of the other party. The second aspect, especially pertinent to the present study, is that relationship management is not limited to the single relationship. Instead, each company manages a portfolio of relationships, both buying and selling, keeping a distance with some and cooperating with others, depending on factors such as trust, advantages, and so on. More recent research has gone beyond the portfolio and sees each business as part of a more complex network of relationships, consisting of direct relationships with suppliers and customers as well as with other organizations such as banks, research services, and so on. Such discussions illustrate the changing relationships between firms supplying and firms buying, so that business-to-business relationships develop in a manner that can blur the boundaries between selling firms and buying firms. For example, Håkansson and Snehota (1995) build on the research of the IMP Group, and in taking a "relationship view" of business markets focus on relationships between companies over time, rather than on single exchange transactions. They (1995: 2-3)

also adopt a "network approach", thus viewing relationships as part of a broader structure of networks and not as isolated entities.

Structural characteristics discussed by Håkansson and Snehota (1995) include continuity, complexity, symmetry and informality. First, continuity relates to the fact that major relationships of a company are characterized by continuity and stability, with some indications that the age of the relationship is tied to more extensive use of the relationship by parties involved. The second and third characteristics, complexity and symmetry, involve the number, type and contact pattern of individuals involved in the relationships with individuals generally having different status, organizational roles and personal background; e.g. technicians, administrative and logistics personnel besides sales and purchasing staff interact with counterparts. Finally, informality, or informal bonding, is common in most business cultures, with some informal mechanisms closely related to the age of the relationship. Of these four structural characteristics, the notions of complexity and symmetry are particularly interesting to the present study, as they recognize the existence of different roles and personal backgrounds of individuals involved in relationships. In addition, the age of the relationships is linked to certain kinds of behavior, such as more extensive use of the relationship and some informality.

The process characteristics Håkansson and Snehota (1995: 9) identify are pertinent to research into multiparty meetings because they involve the interaction processes within business relationships. Process characteristics include adaptations, cooperation and conflict, social interactions and routinization. Technical adaptations in products typically involve the production as well as administrative and logistic processes, and they generate and reflect mutual commitment. The authors indicate that cooperation and conflict co-exist in any business relationship and specify that although not all conflicts must be definitively resolved and some might be healthy, in the end a cooperative posture is necessary to make the relationship work for both parties. They (1995: 10) also point out that business relationships are built up like a social exchange process, so that commitment goes beyond the task content: "The individuals involved in a business relationship tend to weave a web of personal relationships, and this appears to be a condition for the development of interorganizational ties between any two companies". Finally, routinization relates to practices becoming institutionalized over time. Routines, explicit and implied rules of behavior and rituals of conduct emerge in the more important relationships a company has with its customers and

suppliers.

There is a noticeable difference when the literature on cross-cultural management in business organizations is compared to the literature on business markets. When difficulties are noted in cross-cultural management literature, the reasons are often attributed to cultural differences. The literature on business markets, in contrast, indicates a number of factors as conditions for relationships that develop and those that do not (e.g. market characteristics). Cultural differences are not excluded; the literature on business relationships points out that cultural proximity or distance plays a role; but it is not a sole factor. This implies that a range of factors are involved in creating conditions for the development of business relationships and that the interplay between them needs to be at least recognized. For example, in a case study of one relationship involving an Italian company and Japanese company, reported by Håkansson and Snehota (1995), some Italian interviewees focused on cooperative elements and how the relationship developed; those working closely with the Japanese did not consider cultural differences to be an issue. The case indicates that when there were different degrees of acceptance of the relationship development on the part of Italian respondents, they depended on the degree of contact with the Japanese company, which in turn differed according to the functional area of the respondents. Italian production personnel most involved with the Japanese company were favorable, while marketing personnel were concerned about both the Italian company and the Japanese company having to compete for the same customers in the European market. This case highlights the influence of other business-related factors in perceptions of the business relationship.

Further research into circumstances favoring the development of business relationships indicates that these relationships are characterized by connectedness and a number of interdependencies (Håkansson and Snehota 1995: 12-13). Each individual's social network of personal relationships can be used in various ways to enhance or develop the business relationships in which the individual is engaged. This highlights the fact that different kinds of relationships can characterize participants in interorganizational business meetings. Relationships can be "direct", for example, if they are between parties who do business with each other, while a "connected" relationship is said to exist between two parties who do not have a direct relationship with each other but rather have a direct relationship with the same

third party.[1]

To summarize, the characteristics of business relationships presented above have important implications for the present study because they provide an indication of the multiple factors encompassed by the wider business context at business meetings. Such factors go beyond membership in a national cultural group. Relationships are characterized by varying degrees of cooperation and conflict, for example, that may be due to factors unrelated to cultural differences. The literature supports the notion that the group at the meetings represents a variety of relationships, each characterized by certain features. The literature also suggests that business-to-business relationships may develop so that the boundaries between the seller and the buyer are blurred. This raises implications for the analytical approach adopted here, which should try to take into account the connection between language use and the business relationship in terms of the group present but also in terms of the individual relationships between each distributor and the company.

In examining interactions in multicultural business settings, it is therefore of interest to take into consideration contextual factors not limited to linguistic and national cultural differences. For the present study, it is valid to focus on the nature of the multicultural group at the meetings rather than viewing each meeting participant as a representative member of a national culture. In this sense the group at the meeting can be viewed as a kind of "level of culture". In addition, rather than focusing on miscommunications, it is justified to focus on what seems to work at the meetings. This could shed light on features of interactants' language use that may contribute to overcoming or diminishing the difficulties often associated with intercultural communication. This in turn could allow a greater understanding of the characteristics of successful business communication in multicultural settings and the role of other situational factors.

3. Data Selection and Analysis

Data for the study come from an Italian company's meetings of its international distributors. The company, which has been given the pseudonym *Alta*[2], was founded in 1984 with a single product, ski wax, and subsequently expanded its product lines to include technical eyewear

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[1] For example, if there is a direct relationship between A and B and a direct relationship between A and C, there will be a "connected" relationship between B and C.

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and helmets for skiing and cycling, and sportswear for outdoor sports. In the early 1990s, *Alta* started to organize a meeting for its international distributors, to present and discuss the next season's product collection, strategy and other issues. These meetings normally last two to three days and are attended by approximately 25 distributors from 12-14 different countries located in Europe, Asia and North America, by some of the company's Italian staff and management (usually at least eight to ten individuals; also called "company members" in the study), and by a few other participants such as consultants or suppliers. The distributors are not *Alta* employees or agents; most own their own companies, and some work for larger distributors. Some distribute only *Alta* products, while others also distribute other companies' products for similar markets. In some cases distributors contribute to product development. The meetings, held twice a year in Italy, are conducted mainly in English, which represents a common language for the group. The main purpose of these meetings is to present the international collection and discuss strategy and business issues. In some cases distributors decide at the meeting which versions of product models to include in the international collection. While at the meeting or shortly thereafter, distributors place their orders for the season in question, and they may decide how much of each product model to stock.

I observed and audio recorded meetings in November 1996, June 1997 and June 1998. Two half day segments from the June 1997 and June 1998 meetings were chosen for transcription and analysis, with transcribed data totaling eight hours and 47 minutes. Speech events consisted mainly of monologues/presentations, group discussions and small group discussions[3]. At these two meetings I sat at the U-shaped table with distributors and several company members seated near those distributors with whom they had contact during the year (Appendix 1 provides a seating chart for the June 1998 meeting). I took notes for contextual information and during breaks engaged in informal conversations with distributors, company members and other participants. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with several company members outside of the meetings for a greater understanding of contextual factors related to the meetings. Starting with the June 1998 meeting, colors and models had been "pre-selected" by a smaller group of the most important distributors before the main meeting, so fewer choices had to be made at the 1998 meeting compared to 1997.

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[2] This article also uses pseudonyms for people and product model names.
[3] During "small group discussions", distributors spoke amongst themselves and/or with company members. These speech events usually took place between presentations, while products were being set up in the front of the room, or while product models circulated for examination at the distributors' table.

4. Analytical methods and categories

The approach developed to investigate discourse at the meetings allows certain features to be quantified without problems of overlap in order to compare speakers and language use in parts of the meetings, and at the same time it allows other features to be examined from a more qualitative perspective. The discrete categories of selected linguistic features are connected to general categories of observations (i.e. facilitating participation, claiming common ground; see Poncini 2002a and 2002c). The approaches are listed below and followed by a brief indication of their relevance to the present study.

1. certain personal pronouns (*we, you, I*);
2. specialized lexis / terminology (e.g. *POP material*, double injection, brand names);
3. evaluation (or "stance") as discussed by Thompson and Hunston (2000: 6-7), focusing on explicit evaluative lexis (e.g. our *success*, a *good* result) as well as other selected kinds of evaluation indicating relevance (e.g. *important*) and expectedness (e.g. *of course*) and the use of negatives (e.g. it was *not* easy);
4. evaluation in interchanges between the company speaker and individual distributors, taking into consideration Goffman's participant roles (1979/1981);
5. frames and participation frameworks (Goffman 1974, 1979/1981).

The first two areas, personal pronouns and specialized lexis, involve a quantitative[4] as well as qualitative approach, while the next two, which consider evaluation, involve a qualitative approach. The final area draws insights gained from analyzing the categories of linguistic features separately into a discussion of frames, footing and participant roles (the fourth area also considers participant roles). This approach provides a richer picture of how linguistic and interactional strategies can combine to "position" participants in different roles at the meeting and in the business relationship during the year.

4.1 Selected features and rationale

The categories of features examining the use of the personal pronouns *we*, *you*, and *I* allow their use to be linked to the negotiation of individual and group identity and the alignments that participants take up with respect to themselves and others. Pronouns are thus connected to the aims of the present study; they provide important indications of the nature of the group at the meeting and the relationships among distributors, company members and other

participants. Specialized lexis, the second area, is of interest to the present study because the use of specialized lexis is a way to claim in-group membership, and its use contributes to common ground (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987: 102) and shared knowledge. In addition, knowledge and use of specialized lexis is one way to display knowledge of a profession or area of expertise (Drew and Heritage 1992).

An examination of how evaluative language, the third area, is used in the meetings can illustrate how it reflects and constructs group values. Thompson and Hunston (2000: 2-5) use *evaluation* as a cover term "for the expression of the speaker's or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any number of other sets of values". Such an examination is significant as it provides indications of the ideology or values underlying a text (Hunston 1993; Thompson and Hunston 2000) and is closely tied to social interaction (Hyland 1999). Because evaluation is pervasive in text (Thompson and Hunston 2000), the study limits the examination of evaluation to explicitly evaluative lexis (e.g. items such as *good* or *problem*, which are inherently evaluative), certain kinds of implicit evaluation, and selected kinds of evaluation not expressed by evaluative lexis, including selected manifestations of expectedness (e.g. *of course*, *as you know*); selected uses of negatives; selected lexical items indicating importance or relevance, such as *important*.

In particular, investigating how the company speaker deals with negative and positive evaluation in interchanges with individual distributors can shed further light on group values and where the values of the company and the distributors conflict. Such an examination provides indications of how evaluation is used at the meetings in managing participation and construing roles, and involves giving attention to participant roles, especially reception roles (Goffman 1979/1981). Goffman (1979/1981) distinguishes different roles which participants in a situation can take on, as opposed to a single category of speaker and a single category of hearer, intended in the acoustical sense. His *participation framework* involves hearer roles and distinguishes between ratified and unratified participants. These roles are summarized by Levinson (1988), who prefers to use the term *reception roles* to avoid confusion. A ratified participant can be, for example, an addressed recipient or an unaddressed recipient (other official hearers who may or may not be present), while an unratified participant may be a bystander or an overhearer (inadvertent, non-official listener) or an eavesdropper (engineered

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[4] Quantitative results are reported in Poncini 2002a and Poncini Forthcoming.

non-official follower of talk). Thus the intended recipients of an utterance might not necessarily coincide with a group of hearers as a whole, and the group of hearers may include "official hearers" as well as "unratified participants". *Production formats* relate to the role of the speaker, who can be animator, author and principal. Levinson (1988) refers to these as *production roles*. The animator is the individual physically uttering the word(s), the author represents the origin of the beliefs and sentiment (and perhaps also composes the words), and the principal is the person whose viewpoint or position is expressed. The speaker's role may involve all three. Levinson (1988: 169) points out that in addition to recognizing some ambiguity in the categories, Goffman (1981) uses the term *participation framework* so that sometimes it seems to refer to hearer roles only and at other times seems to include both hearer and speaker roles. In addition to speaking of *hearer roles* and *speaker rol*es, this study will follow Levinson (1988) and use the terms *reception roles* and *production roles*. The present study takes into consideration participant roles in order to explore evaluation in interchanges with distributors. The examination does not aim to perform a fine-grained analysis of all possible hearer roles, but rather it focuses on those role shifts of interest at the meetings. For this reason, Goffman's categories are considered appropriate for the aims of the study, even if at times further distinctions are possible (see e.g. Levinson 1988 and Thomas 1986).

Insights gained by analyzing the above areas separately are drawn together into a discussion of frames (Goffman 1974, 1981). Goffman's (1974, 1981) notion of frames relates to the way participants define the social activity they are engaged in: what is being done, what the situation is, and what roles are adopted by participants. This study uses the term *frame* as developed by Goffman, although there are other terms expressing similar concepts. Scholars in a range of disciplines have used terms such as *frame*, *script* and *schema* to express similar concepts, as reviewed by Tannen (1993: 14-21). Tannen (1993: 16), following Ross (1975), refers to these concepts as "structures of expectations": "on the basis on one's experiences of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures) one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences". Goffman's notion of footing (1979/1981) is related to frames because both involve the participants in a social activity. Goffman (1979: 4-5) roughly summarizes footing as involving the "participant's alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self" at issue; the projection can be held over stretches of behavior of various length, code-switching and prosody may be involved, and changes can be gross or subtle. A

change in footing implies a change in the alignment taken up by participants to themselves and to others present, as expressed by the way the production or reception of an utterance is managed by participants. Thus production roles and reception roles are involved in shifts in footing. The notions of frames and footing are of particular interest for examining multiparty talk at work (see e.g. Bennert 1998 and Tannen and Wallat 1983).

5. The analysis: Selected examples

The examples in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate the significance of examining pronouns and evaluation separately, with examples drawn from presentations made by company members. Additional examples in Sections 5.3-5.5 involve interchanges with distributors and expand the discussion to include shifts in footing and frames, which are the main focus of Section 5.6, which shows how the analytical approaches can be drawn together, and Section 5.7.

5.1 Complexity, ambiguity and fluid relationships: Personal pronoun use at the meetings

Unlike most studies on pronoun use, the present analysis draws attention to the issue of ambiguity by illustrating the complexity in determining referents for uses of the pronoun *we*. Giving close attention to ambiguity when analyzing referents is supported by Zupnik (1994) and De Fina (1995). Including a category in the system that somehow encompasses unresolved ambiguity allows a more in-depth analysis of possible consequences of pronoun use[5]. For example, what is coded as ambiguous may be inclusive in tone even though it is not clearly inclusive. In a sense, it thus serves a function: it is a way of creating solidarity where it may not exist. A statement such as "we had a good result" or "we have to change this model" is both truthful and solidarity-building at the same time.

Extract[6] 1 illustrates how focusing on ambiguity can reveal the complex nature of the relationships and roles of individuals connected to *Alta* and its meetings. Uses of *we* are in bold, and the five occurrences of *we* that will be discussed are underlined. Speaker E, the

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[5] The complete analysis used categories of *we* as follows: *we* that clearly excludes the distributors; *we* that explicitly includes the distributors, and *we-ambiguous*, i.e. uses of *we* that could include or exclude the distributors. In addition, whether or not referents had to be present at the meeting was also considered.
[6] Transcription conventions are available in Appendix 1. Symbols for pauses, e.g. (+), have been left in the extracts because they represent a kind of punctuation, making it easier to read and understand transcribed speech.

marketing director, is presenting the sports eyewear model *Iceberg Extra* at the June 1998 meeting.

Extract 1 - Speaker E: Ambiguous uses of *we*

4530	E	((to entire group)) <u>**we**</u> can (++) continue? (+)
4531		Iceberg Extra (3) Extra Iceberg (3)
4532		when <u>**we**</u> are (.) at the Olympic Games (.) **we** really improved (++) very much (+) ((E laughs))
4533		and uh (+) because (.) <u>**we**</u> have a prototypes (+) parts (.) and <u>**we**</u> have to change it every day Jean Claude (+) he have (+) to work to work very hard (+)
4534		but the result (.) **we** want to reach (.) we (.) **we** reached that (.)
4535		**we** had a very good (++) exposure (+)
4536		<u>**we**</u> get a lot of uh (+) medals (+) with **our** racers (.)

Referents for *we* in unit 4530 must be present at the meeting. However, this occurrence could conceivably refer to different sets of participants: the entire group present, or the company speaker and company members changing the display on the table who together present the collection. In shifting to people present at the Olympics, the first occurrence of *we* in unit 4532 shows a range of possible referents that may have been present at the Olympics: this could involve unspecified individuals physically present at the Olympics. Only one person is specified as having been present, *Alta*'s service technician for cross-country skiing World Cup races, Jean Claude, who is present at the meeting but not necessarily known by all participants. Some distributors may be aware that Speaker E was also present. This occurrence of *we*, however, could also refer to the company and its products in general because as a sponsor of Olympic athletes, the company name and brand is visible on certain athletes' equipment and attire. The use of *we* in 4533, in contrast, seems to refer more specifically to Jean Claude plus other unidentified individuals present at the Olympics and working with product prototypes. Processes connected to *Alta*'s presence at the Olympics are also open to interpretation in units 4534 and 4535, and referents remain ambiguous for *we* used in relation to an earlier defined objective. In such cases, interpretation depends on the hearers; it does not depend on the speaker's intentions.

Interestingly, in unit 4536 the speaker uses *we* to refer to group or an entity that "gets" medals with its racers (i.e. athletes sponsored by the company). In this case, sponsored athletes, who are neither "internal members" of the company nor distributors, cannot be excluded from a possible set of referents for this use of *we,* at least initially. It could be argued, nevertheless, that the remainder of the clause, *with our racers*, seems to indicate the athletes are not

included. In any case, the linguistic context does not disambiguate *we* and the effect is that the sponsored athletes are presented as affiliated with *Alta* at the Olympics and linked to exposure and results. Such uses are ambiguous not only for the analyst; different hearers can interpret referents differently. This highlights the difficulty in assigning specific referents to pronouns, and it also reflects the nature of the business relationship and activities involving the company and related actors.

5.2 Building consensus for image and strategy: The use of evaluation at the meetings

An examination of evaluation in the data shows a number of functions and features. Although functions at time overlap, it is possible to group them into four main categories: (1) image-building, (2) pre-empting possible criticism, (3) connotation-building and (4) managing participation and construing roles. A major function of evaluation at the meetings is to construct a positive image and build consensus for this image. The company speaker uses evaluation strategically to create a shared image of the company, its products, product models, activities and strategy so that the image comes to represent what is highly valued by the group. At the same time, what is highly valued by the group can also be associated with *Alta*, contributing to the positive value of the image.

Extract 2 from the 1997 meeting illustrates how E uses evaluation strategically to build consensus for a new procedure. Rather than using directives requiring the distributors to change their behavior, E uses both positive and negative evaluation that takes into account what is of value to the distributors. He also presupposes agreement through the use of *of course* and *as you know*, and by evoking this shared knowledge he further builds group solidarity. In addition, he uses words that begin to accumulate a connotation of positive or negative evaluation at the meetings (in particular *same* takes on a positive connotation).

Extract 2 is divided into two parts. Part 1 below illustrates how E uses language to influence a change in distributors' behavior by presupposing agreement with the procedure and its goals. Where he does specify actions, he assumes cooperation (295) from the distributors, who are positioned as independent businesspeople who can choose whether to cooperate (303-304). These items are shaded and in bold; other items discussed are in bold, and indicators of relevance are underlined). In unit 289 below, E takes over the floor from company member F, who is presenting the brand manual. In E's opening statement, *this* refers to what could be

called a new "reciprocal procedure" outlined by F in response to a distributor's question about whether the promotional material presented was available in other languages besides Italian.

Extract 2. Part 1 of 2, Speaker E: Using evaluation to build consensus for change

287	F	ok (.)
288		then you have all the captions (+) about the=
289	E	=well I think this is <u>very important to explain</u> (+)
290		and everybody (of them) they have to to (.) **understand** it (4)
291		**<u>the point</u> it's (.) now it's to try to coordinate worldwide the image** (+)
292		of course (+) what makes sense in Italian (.) not necessarily makes sense in Spanish (+) in (++) in Japanese in English (+) in Finnish (+) in- (+)
293		the <u>very important</u> thing it's to understand the sense (++)
294		and (.) what we can do (++) the possibility we have (++) it's (++) to (.) send to you (++) in a English language (2) the sense (++)
295		and then of course (.) everybody of **you** (.) **have to adapt it** (.) for (.) your market (+)
296		and what we can change it's only the black (++) the black (.) part (+) the black text (++)
297		after that we can send to you (++) or (.) we can send to you the come si dice l'impianto? eh? *how do you say l'impianto ? huh?*
298	F	the films (+)
299	E	the films (.)
300		or (.) if it's (.) collecting (.) more than one countries (2) uh and agree (.) on the same (.) on the same (2)
301	?	language ((sounds like company member G))
302	E	language (1.5) we can make it (.) for (.) all of you (++)
303		**this is up to your- up to you** (+)
304		**it's your choice** (++)

In Part 1 above, E identifies a goal in 291, so that in terms of evaluation, whatever contributes to reaching this goal can be considered positive (Hunston 1985, 1989). He indicates his expectation (*of course* in 292) that there is shared understanding of what is to be presented, so that this can represent a bid for solidarity. As a result of his presupposing common knowledge and agreement, the steps in the reciprocal process take on implicit positive evaluation, with the effect of building greater consensus around them. Finally, he also builds solidarity by showing awareness of distributors' roles and independent activities. Although the focus of this discussion is evaluative language, it can be noted that pronouns use in Part 1 above shows an alternating pattern for *we* (excluding the distributors) and *you* (referring to the distributors). Rather than reflect or construe an "antagonistic" situation, however, the alternating use reflects reciprocal roles related to a new procedure.

Part 2 below highlights how E uses both positive (in bold) and negative (shaded) evaluation in relation to the new procedure. He evaluates the procedure in terms of benefits for the distributors by evoking shared knowledge and by implicitly attributing negative evaluation to

doing things differently. He also uses hedges to minimize the imposition on the distributors or to leave them options (e.g. *just* in 312 in relation to the only directive "you have to just understand…" in the entire extract). It can be seen that *same,* in bold and underlined, starts to take on a positive connotation (one occurrence in 314, and six in Part 3). Other items discussed are underlined.

Extract 2. Part 2 of 2, Speaker E: Using evaluation to build consensus for change

305	E	what I think was a **very good job** (.) made from Mr. Albertini (2) it's to have a <u>possibility to change</u> (+) only (+) the black (.) field (2)
306		this is **much easier** (+) for all of you (++) to use it (+) because <u>as you know</u> (+) to make (.) a page means make the picture (++)
307		and it's a **lot of cost** around that (+)
308		if you want to do it **different** (++) it's (.) **extra cost** for you (++)
309		so (.) we have to <u>agree in generally</u> (+) what (.) we have (.) what we want to advertise (++)
310		helmets (+) ski goggles (++) clothing line (+) whatever (++)
311		send to you the English text (++)
312		you have to <u>just to understand the sense</u> (++)
313		and send back the translation in your language (++)
314		I think that this permit (++) to Alta (+) and to you (+) to have the <u>**same** image **worldwide**</u> (2)

Thus rather than use directives, E uses both positive and negative evaluation that takes into account what is of value to the distributors. The goal initially announced in 291 is paraphrased in 314 (*the same image worldwide*) and announced as the outcome of the steps outlined. Through the use of *you* and *Alta*, E connects the group of distributors and the company to a single, common goal. E's use of evaluation and reciprocal language contributes to positioning the distributors as independent businesspeople; thus he reflects and contributes to maintaining this aspect of the business relationship, even though his aim is for them to follow the procedure. For example, in assuming their knowledge of what is involved in making a full-page advertisement (*as you know* in 306), he evokes their roles as being responsible for promotional efforts in their markets. He associates the negative outcomes of greater cost with doing something different. In more general terms, not following the new procedure (308) is presented as hindering goal-achievement and as such is negatively evaluated. In addition, the use of *possibility* in 305 and *if* in 308 also serve to position the distributors as a group of independent businesspeople because it implies their freedom of action. E also uses some hedging (i.e. *in generally* in 309, *just* in 312) or vagueness (i.e. *whatever* in 310, *understanding the sense* in 312) to minimize possible impositions. The units that follow, not shown, are also interesting because E uses evaluation to construct a positive

image for doing things differently in Italy, though he does not actually use the lexical item *differently*.

5.3 Reception roles and shifts in footing: Evaluation in interchanges with distributors

An examination of how the company speaker deals with evaluative comments made by distributors during interchanges can yield important insights into the nature of the group at the meeting and the way group members manage the business relationship. The fact that the distributors can or do "speak up" and are involved in choosing models for the international collection rather than remaining silent for the entire meeting in itself provides an indication of the nature of the group at the meeting, the business relationship and the roles of participants. The room set-up and the small group discussions at certain points of the meetings mean that the company speaker can deal with an individual, a small group or the entire group, making it interesting to consider hearer roles (Goffman 1979/1981) during evaluative interchanges.

Investigating how the company speaker deals with distributors' evaluations represents an opportunity to further examine group values because at times participants present may hear a distributor's evaluative comment. Such comments can be explicitly positive or negative, so there is potential for conflict or ambiguity to "spread" through the group. In addition, a distributor's contribution can also be an "observation" or a question, which may be a request for information or an implicit challenge or criticism. The main company speaker's use of evaluation in his responses to distributors can also serve the purposes identified earlier (e.g. general consensus building). However, in interchanges with distributors, the company speaker is dealing with evaluations made by others. Although he can manage participation and respond to the evaluation, he cannot exercise "control" over the evaluation itself. The usefulness of examining such interchanges is illustrated by Extracts 3 and 4.

Extract 3. The Finnish distributor (FinM) and E: Changing a distributor's negative evaluation into a question

		((Distributors try on and examine eyewear models. E speaks with someone on the side of the room opposite the microphone/recorder and then in Italian to L, a director. The Norwegians near the recorder speak in Norwegian, and other "small group discussions" take place in different languages.)) 11.57.24
1246	FinM	Edo (++) if you keep this one (+) **it's (.) disturbing (.) a little bit** (.)
1247		the **red is very strong** (.)
1248		I mean (.) **up from here** (.)
1249		try it
1250	E	((to the Finnish distributor)) that's why we put two piece

1251	FinM	because if you try to put=
1252	E	((to the Finnish distributor)) =yeah that's why we put two piece because ((E's voice gets louder as he addresses the wider group and not just the Finnish distributor's area))
1253		((to entire group)) yeah uh Tom (.) he said a very good (++) **he can ask me a very good question** because we already analyzed that (.)

In Extract 3 above, the distributor's negative evaluation, hedged, concerns "this one," which refers to an eyewear model's aerator pad, which is a piece located above the nose of the wearer, between the lenses. Lexis that is not explicitly negative takes on negative evaluative status in this context (*very strong* in 1247). The distributor further hedges or at least limits the negative evaluation (1248). E initially keeps discussion at "small group" level by addressing the Finnish distributor in a low voice (1250 and 1252). Only nearby distributors are able to hear, and they themselves may be participating in small group discussions. E then expands the discussion to entire group (1253), changing the distributor's negative evaluation into a question and using it to explain the company's purposeful decision to include two pieces and not just the one evaluated by the distributor. In the units that follow, not shown, in response to a question about a minute later E again refers to the distributor's comment, again referring to it as a question without using explicitly negative evaluation.

5.4 Taking up positive evaluation expressing implicit criticism: The 888 vs. a clear lens

Extract 4 is an example of how positive evaluation representing implicit criticism is taken up, acknowledged and acted upon by the company speaker in 1998. It illustrates particularly well how the way the company speaker deals with the distributor's evaluation can reflect and construe roles in the wider business relationship. In this extract, divided into three parts, the Finnish distributor uses a series of explicitly positive lexical items to evaluate the availability of the 888 lens for a certain eyewear model version, which the company had planned to remove from the international collection (earlier, the Swiss distributor had asked for and received confirmation that the 888 was "cancelled"). E takes up the Finnish distributor's point and asks a question (4403), permitting the distributor to add more positive evaluation. E then shows he has taken the distributor's comments into consideration by initiating a series of shifts in participant roles. More specifically, E addresses the group of distributors to elicit their reactions, speaks to company members in Italian while distributors speak amongst themselves, and addresses the entire group of distributors to announce the version will be kept in the international collection, thus showing that he acknowledged the distributor's

evaluation.

In Part 1, the Finnish distributor first signals awareness of floor management issues (4391, 4393, 4394) while new displays are being set up. Interestingly, this interchange begins just over five minutes after the same distributor's attempt to introduce negative evaluations of the new boxes, which E deferred by referring to the agenda. This kind of explicit "bid for the floor" was not observed in other parts of the meetings. The distributor asks for permission to speak and to ask something, and E explicitly responds *yes*. The distributor refers to his contribution as a question (*asking* in 4396, shaded).

Extract 4. Part 1 of 3, E and the Finnish Distributor: The 888 lens vs. a clear lens

		((company members are setting up; small group conversations take place))
4389	E	ok? (++) ((to staff)) dai vai (cosi')
		come on (like that/the way it is)
4390		((to ?)) no no no no no this one
4391	Fin	can we speak or not?
4392	E	eh?
4393	Fin	can we speak (.) discuss or not?
4394		can we be polite or can we ask something?
4395	E	yes
4396	Fin	**now we are asking about the 888**=
4397	E	=yes=
4398	Fin	because for us **it's better** than the clear
4399	E	yes
4400	Fin	but **it's** still **something more** (+) than a transparent lens
4401		and (.) **we really prefer (it)**
4402		and we **sold this year very (.) good the 888** (+)
4403	E	in uh this in this model?
4404	Fin	yes **especially (+) only in this model**
4405	P	anziche' clear ((picked up by recording equipment))
		instead of clear
4406	Fin	**it's very good for biking in the evening** and ( )
4407	E	**((to G))** Buzz richiesta (+)
		request

Unit 4405 above is an example of how company member P, seated near the German-speaking distributors (and near the recorder), follows interchanges and comments made by distributors, in this case ready to paraphrase part of the request. In unit 4407 above E initiates a shift in participant roles by addressing a company member in Italian. He shifts again, addressing the entire group in English as shown in Part 2 below. He then uses Italian with company members for about one minute (the longer description of contextual information between units 4409 and 4410 has been cut in the extract below). Distributors speak in small groups, and comments in German picked up by the recorder indicate these distributors were discussing the

lens in the eyewear model, with company member P ready to assist as necessary.

Extract 4. Part 2 of 3, E and the Finnish Distributor: The 888 lens vs. a clear lens

4408	E	**((to group)) so all of you (.) agree** (+) (ing) to have (.) Plus (.) 888 (.) instead of (.) clear (.) lens
4409	Ger	yes (+) but it but it
	E	15.12.28 ((to staff)) (effettivamente)
		actually
		((E speaks to company members in Italian about the distributors' request to keep the lens. Some distributors discuss in small groups. A group can be heard speaking in German "ist besser als clear ganz clear" - *is better than clear very clear*.)) 15.03.08

After discussing the request with company members in Italian, E addresses the entire group of distributors to inform them their request has been granted (shading in 4410, 4414 and 4415), shown in Part 3 below. He evokes the sales role of distributors and his own role in monitoring sales (boldface in 4411-4412).

Extract 4. Part 3 of 3, E and the Finnish Distributor: The 888 lens vs. a clear lens

		15.03.24
4410	E	ok (++) ((room completely quiet)) no problem for the for the (2) Plus 888 (3)
4411		then (+) **of course (++) I also like to see (.) some numbers (++)** ((he laughs)) because (.) now everybody's (all) Plus 888((he shows the eyewear model))
		(sold)
4412		and then when if **I can go to see how much we have we sold** (+)
4413		I I don't know (+)
4414		anyway **this is not a problem**
4415		**you can get also Plus 888** ( ) (3)
4416		ok?

In summary, by taking up the distributor's evaluation and initiating shifts in participant roles so that not only the Finnish distributor but also company members and other distributors participate in the process, E acknowledges the roles participants play in company activities. These roles are ratified by the meeting participants themselves. When the Finnish distributor speaks, it is not clear if he is speaking for himself or for a group; he is the only Finn present in 1998, and his use of *we* at the beginning of the interchange is ambiguous. However, both his role as speaker and his role in evaluating products – and in influencing decisions – is acknowledged when E takes up the evaluation. Because E chooses to address a question to the wider group of distributors, he recognizes the validity of the Finnish distributor's evaluation and the group's role in contributing to decisions about the international collection. There is evidence that at least some distributors ratify this role when they discuss the lens in small groups in their own languages while E discusses it with company members in Italian. The use

of evaluation in the interchange and the way it is handled thus reflects and construes the roles of distributors as active participants at the meetings and within the business relationship.

5.5 Potential conflict at the meetings: Pricing and colors

The investigation of evaluation in the wider study showed that pricing and product model colors represent potential areas of conflict between the distributors and the company. For example, the company speaker was seen to use evaluation to construct an imaginary dialogue to pre-empt possible criticism about pricing. He also was seen to use language taking on positive connotations during the meetings and to make linguistic choices to minimize changes in product colors to build consensus for the colors in the collection. This section provides an example of how the company speaker deals with evaluation related to one of these two areas of potential conflict: pricing.

One way of dealing with price complaints is to defer discussion to outside the group meeting, at a meeting with the individual distributor. The issue of pricing is consequently relegated to business during the year: if prices are to be negotiated, they are normally negotiated with the individual distributor and not with the entire group. Extract 5 provides an example of an interchange about pricing between the Finnish distributor and E in 1998. Items of interest are shaded.

Extract 5. The Finnish distributor and E: Deferring a discussion of pricing

5211	Fin	(if) you have the price this year go down
5212		and you **increased again** no inflation=
5213	E	=no=
5214	Fin	=no reason to say (.) why is this (different the price**) (.)** why **it's much higher than last year**
5215	E	**our price (+)** they are **(+) higher than last time** (+)
5216		**and our price (+) will be (+) discussed (++) by (.) each single (+) distributors (++) in a program (+) of a year** (5)
5217		the price (.) we have here (+) they are (+) the price (+) considering the volume (.) we sell (.) now (6)

In this case, although E uses the same implicitly negative term as the distributor (*higher*), he does not recognize the comparative element the distributor uses (*much* in 5214). By deferring discussion to the dyadic business relationship, E's response does not acknowledge the negative evaluation of pricing as an issue to take up at the meeting. On one occasion, however, he was seen to confer with company members about the distributors' questions

about the different pricing for similar versions of the same product model, and later in the meeting he announced that the price would be the same for both versions.

5.6 Drawing the approaches together

This section provides an example of how insights gained by analyzing features separately can be drawn together to provide a richer picture of how linguistic and interactional strategies work to position meeting participants. Pronouns in the first part of Extract 6, from the June 1998 meeting, have already been discussed. In Extract 6, pronouns are in bold and shaded, evaluation and evaluated objects are in bold, and specialized terminology is underlined. The "at-meeting" frame (4530) shifts when E refers to the Olympics (4532), held earlier that year.

Extract 6. Part 1 of 2, Speaker E: Shifts in frames and the positioning of participants

4530	E	((to entire group)) **we** can (++) continue? (+)
4531		<u>Iceberg Extra</u> (3) <u>Extra Iceberg</u> (3)
4532		when **we** are (.) at the <u>Olympic Games</u> (.) **we** really **improved (++) very much** (+) ((E laughs))
4533		and uh (+) because (.) **we** have a <u>prototypes</u> (+) parts (.) and **we** have to change it every day Jean Claude (+) he have (+) to work to work very hard (+)
4534		but the **<u>result</u> (.) we want to reach (.) we (.) we reached that** (.)
4535		**we** had a **very good (++) <u>exposure</u>** (+)
4536		**we** get **a lot of uh (+) <u>medals</u>** (+) with **our** <u>racers</u> (.)
4537		so (+) was a **very good (+) <u>result</u>**

In units 4532-4537 above, the distributors are positioned as stakeholders interested in the positive performance of the company, the group and affiliated parties such as racers. The use of *we-ambiguous* allows distributors to include themselves as part of the group whose performance is evaluated positively by means of implicit (underlined in 4536) and explicit evaluation. The repetition in 4534 represents positive evaluation as it indicates goal achievement (Hunston 1985, 1989). Implicit values are also involved, for example, as indicated by an instance of "instantial" or "local" evaluation, positive for the group: "getting a lot of medals". The use of specialized terminology from different categories – sports, business, and technical product features – reflects the multifaceted nature of the business activity, and at the same time it construes the business activity and people's roles in relation to it. For example, *Alta's* connection to the Olympics concerns not only commercial aspects such as exposure but also product testing and development at the actual event. This relates to aspects of group identity and corporate culture. In fact, the company works closely with athletes to develop innovative and technical products for competition; the founders of the

company are former ski technicians, and distributors are usually former athletes or coaches with close ties to national teams.

In the second part of Extract 6 below, there is a shift to the present (4538) and more specifically to the meeting frame (4539) as E shows the eyewear model *Iceberg Extra* on a poster. E also signals expected agreement (underlined in 4538) with his evaluation of the product as *perfect*, and in the units that follow (4538-4547), meeting participants − distributors, company members and the company speaker − are positioned as technical experts, knowledgeable about technical aspects of products.

Extract 6. Part 2 of 2, Speaker E: Shifts in frames and the positioning of participants

4538	E	so <u>of course</u> (+) today the **product** it's o- it's **perfect** (+) **let's** say (++)
4539		**we** modified also (+) the **frame** (++) ((he points this out on big poster))
4540		**we** modified the **frame** (2)
4541		so (.) Iceberg Extra **we** have the (+) **interchangeable elastic band** (2) ((company member P says something to distributor sitting near her; it seems someone is waiting for samples to circulate))
4542		**we** have the frame in **grimalid** (3)
4543		the **lens** (++) it's a (.) **shield** (++)
4544		also (.) this- in this one (.) it's with the treatment (++) uh (+) **antifog treatment**? (.) giusto? *right?*
4545	J	sì sì Iceberg Extra ( ) *yes yes*
4546	E	Iceberg Extra (.) they are (+) **antifog treatment** (+)
4547		and also (+) uh water **water repellent** in the (.) outside part (++)
4548	J	((overlap)) water ( )
4549	E	so these they are very **important** things to know (.) because when **you** can go to **sell** (+) because (.) **our** **price** (.) they are **not cheap** (.)
4550		**you** have to (.) explain the reason why (4)

The poster used as a visual aid by the speaker also contributes to creating or increasing shared knowledge for the group of participants. There is a shift in footing as E checks with a staff member in Italian about technical features of the product model (4544-4545), underlining the role of company members present, who follow presentations and are ready to contribute. Because E has linked perfection to modifying the frame, *modified* takes on positive evaluation. He uses specialized lexis to list technical features without explicitly evaluating them (4541-4547), but because they are included, it can be assumed they are of importance to the group. In the last two units, 4549-4550, E evaluates knowledge of these features as *important* in connection with prices (4549), and he uses terminology from the business

category combined with *you* to refer to distributors. He thus shifts frames in these units, evoking the sales role of the distributors outside of the meeting.

Extract 6 thus shows how individual points emerging from the analysis of different features can be combined to show subtle shifts in frames and footing, providing a richer analysis of the way language reflects and construes the roles of participants at the meeting and in the business relationship. People not present at the meeting are also drawn into the network of relationships involving participants.

5.7 Strategic evaluative summaries

The analysis shows that in certain parts of the meetings, E conducts a series of short interchanges with individual distributors or subgroups of distributors. These particular interchanges are often characterized by the use of evaluative language by both E and distributors, with the interchange acting as a summary and closing for the preceding part of the meeting. E manages participation by initiating shifts in participant roles, normally while moving along the inside of the table, stopping to speak with individual distributors or subgroups of distributors. Reception roles are affected when he sometimes uses languages other than English and when he varies his volume, affecting who understands or hears the interchange. At times he expands the interchange to the entire group, and in this case evaluative responses may be forthcoming from distributors. An examination of the data shows that strategic evaluative summaries normally occur at a major boundary such as a break for lunch or at the end of the day. They may also take place while a new set of product models is being prepared for the next presentation.

Extract 7 illustrates part of such a series of interchanges, with the column to the right commenting on each interchange. The extract shows how E manages participation and how in many cases distributors respond with positive evaluation, even though E explicitly refers to problems and the need to discuss them. He sometimes repeats the same lexical items used by the distributor or paraphrases their comments, which illustrates the strategic role of the speaker in prompting this kind of event: E "picks up on" the distributor's stance and if it is advantageous to the company's activities and goals at the meetings, he manages participant roles so that other people present take on the status of unaddressed recipients, in hearing range of all or part of the interchange, including the distributor's positive evaluations.

The time of day of the recording is included in Extract 7 to provide an idea of how long the interchanges last. The overall event lasts just under five minutes, with individual interchanges lasting a total of four minutes (units 5983-6026; the equipment did not pick up final interchanges at the more distant end of the table). Toward the end, E expands his comments to the entire group (6027-6030) to make plans for dinner and then shifts frames (6031-6040) to elicit their reaction to the collection, with distributors responding with positive evaluation. Shading indicates paralinguistic and other nonverbal behavior of interest and address terms. Evaluation is in bold and underlined.

Extract 7. Part 1 of 2, Example of a strategic evaluative summary

5983	E	18.32.56 ((E addresses group of distributors)) ok (.) ok (+) other questions?	At-meeting frame. Near the end of the first day. E starts to address individual groups of distributors.
5984		but I like to talk now about- if it's any question about the (.) eyewear product (4)	
5985	E	eh? (+) Japan? 18.33.09	Frame shifts to distributors' own activities in relation to company activities.
5986	E	18.33.14 ((near Japan area, up front)) **no problem** (+) delivery (+) **ok ( ) ok**	E positions each distributor / subgroup) as part of a dyadic relationship, with the company playing a helpful role.
5987	?	when is the catalog (ready)?	Field notes indicate that after addressing Japan (5985), E moves to the next places, where the Swedish distributors are seated (see Appendix 3 for 1998 seating) Unclear whether one country or a group of distributors are involved.
5988	E	twenty (+) around twenty of July (4)	
5989		anyway (it's) earlier than last year 18.33.29	
	US M?	(catalogs at the same time)?	
5990	E	catalogs ( ) but they are working already ( )	
5991	?	end of July ((overlap with "catalogs"))	
5992	E	I'm I'm already ( )	
	?	((laughs))	
5993	Fin	the line for me is **much more than (++) much better than before**= 18.33.50	This interchange can be clearly heard on the opposite side of the room. The Finnish distributor positively evaluates the line, and E takes it up, rephrasing the distributor's implicit positive evaluations. The distributor positions himself and E as stakeholders interested in the group's performance and as experts on the product line.
5994	E	=the line is **good?**	
5995	Fin	((overlap with "line")) this it's **simple** (+) **much more simple** and	
5996	E	if you can see (+) they are **less color** and so on (+) except (.) uh Iceberg (2)	
5997		but we really **cut very much**	
5998	Fin	**I like it (.) a lot (.) very much** because it's **not so many possibilities** anymore	
5999	E	exactly (++) you know (.) **it's there eh (+) (all) the collection** (for)	Evaluation is used by the Finnish distributor at the boundary closing the interchange.
6000	Fin	**very good (++) compliments** 18.34.14	

6001	E	18.34.17 ((approaches Spanish group / area)) tutto a posto *everything all right*	E uses Italian to address the Spanish distributors, and the Spanish distributor defers discussion to the dyadic business relationship. The use of Italian also positions E and the distributor as members of a multilingual group at the meetings.
6002	Sp	dopo parliamo (con)(i pares) *after we'll talk* (with)( )	
6003	E	a posto ***all right /settled***	
6004	Sp? -E?	sì (.) *yes*	
6005	E	((to same group but a little more loudly)) no ma in generale (.) problemi sul prodotto su *no but in general (.) **problems** with products with*	After using positive lexis, E uses negative lexis (6005, 6007), positioning the company as interested in helping to solve any problems, and the distributors as having to keep the company informed. (*They* in 6007 refers to people present to review possible problems.)
6006		cioè questo (qua) sono qua loro *that is this (here) they are here*	
6007		devono sapere adesso (+) se avete avuto problemi *they must know now (+) if you have had **problems***	
6008	Sp	(per me) Iceberg (*for me*) *Iceberg*	
6009	E	Iceberg (.) adesso (+) l'hanno sistemato (vabbe') vabbe' *Iceberg (.) now (+) they have **taken care of it** (all right) all right*	
6010	E	18.34.39 ((low voice, closer to microphone)) Pierre (+) toi? (+) tu? (.) you? *you (+) you?*	E addresses the native French-speaking Swiss distributor (CH) by first name and with the second person familiar pronoun, in French, Italian and English. E recognizes the linguistic background of this participant, who sometimes switches from English to French (noted during observations, less frequent in transcribed data).
6011	CH	I think it is (because)	
6012	E	((overlaps after "because" in inaudible part)) ok **very good**	
6013	E	18.34.45 ((moving to next part of table)) Patri ok	E addresses the Austrian distributor by shortened first name.

In the units that follow (6014-6026, not shown) E continues moving along the inside of the table. He uses Italian with the three Belgian distributors attending for the first time (at least one speaks Italian and two Spanish). This use of different languages and shifts in participant roles serve to underline the dyadic business relationship with each distributor and allow face-to-face contact on a smaller scale, thus building common ground more easily. In unit 6027 below, E once again addresses the entire group, and a shift in frames occurs as a result.

Extract 8. Part 2 of 2, Example of a strategic evaluative summary, cont.

6027	E	18.36.55 ((to entire group from the front of the room)) ok (.) so (+) now (+) first day (.) it's over (.)	Shift to at-meeting frame coincides with a change in the speech event, with the entire group addressed. The

6028		we can meet each other (.) where (4) ((can still hear a few voices, he gets details from someone))	company is positioned as hosts and distributors as guests, as the company has made arrangements for the dinner to be attended by distributors and participants from the company.
6029		we can (.) leave (.) the hotel (.) together (.) here at 8 o'clock (+)	
6030		we can go dinner together (2)	
6031	E	ok (.) Alfredo called (.) me (.)	E uses a first name reference to position the CEO, not present, as "principal" of the question about distributors' reactions to the collection. E thus positions himself as animator and author.
6032		and he asked me (+) what (+) is the reaction (.) to the collection (+)	
6033	?	**good good**	
6034	?	**great**	After some distributors make positive evaluations (6033-6034), E uses a question (6035, shaded) to take on a future animator role: he will report distributors' reactions to the CEO. Distributors respond with positive evaluation and applause (6036 – 6038, roughly 6 seconds, up to time of recording for 6039)
6035	E	what I have to say?= 18.37.22	
6036	USM	**=excellent excellent** ((at the same time as USM responds, people start to clap, while other comments can also be heard))	
6037	?	**whoo hoo**	
6038	?	very ( ) ((more clapping))	
6039	E	thank you very much (++)	
6040	E	so see you 8 o'clock here (.) eh? 18.37.31 *all right?*	This refers to 6029-6030 reference to dinner plans, thus E closes by referring to that evening's dinner.

In the final part of the extract, the distributors are thus in Goffman's (1979/1981) terms "authors" of the positive evaluation acting as a boundary in the meeting, with all participants able to hear. E has positioned them as "principals" – the party to whose position the words attest or the sources of the evaluation that he will relay to the CEO outside of the meeting.

6. Concluding comments

The analysis suggests that aspects of the business relationships and values play an important role in interactions at the meetings. The ambiguity in pronoun use reveals the complex nature of the relationships and roles of meeting participants. Because ambiguous pronoun use may be inclusive in tone, it can also contribute to solidarity among members of the group. During the meetings, at times the distributors and company members are presented as having a cooperative relationship, which can encompass reciprocal roles in processes such as promotional material preparation. At other times, the distributors are positioned as independent businesspeople who make decisions and are concerned with sales in their markets. There may also be shifts in roles connected to more of a collective identity, for example the relationship with *Alta*'s athletes. Thus actors not present at the meetings are often included in a network of relationships, bringing to mind issues discussed in the review of literature on business relationships, which suggests that business markets can be seen as a

network of relationships, both direct and connected. The analysis also shows how interchanges between the company speaker and the distributors may include positive as well as negative evaluation. The speaker's approach to handling distributors' evaluative comments and managing participation – for example by initiating shifts in participant roles – can be very useful in such meetings, where participants' contributions can enhance international business activities but at the same time must be handled in such a way as to prevent a possible erosion in consensus regarding a particular decision or image.

A number of recurring themes emerge from the examination of the multicultural meetings. One is that the meetings seem to have their own culture, or at least their own character and sense of 'groupness', not necessarily linked to national cultures. The meetings are characterized by participants' shared 'cultural practices' and can be viewed as a series of speech events and shifting frames. The various activities of the meetings, along with factors such as the seating arrangements, allow for different configurations of interaction among the group. Participants share knowledge of the business activities, relationships and roles, although the level of knowledge may vary according to the age of the relationship and experience attending the meetings. This knowledge increases as participants interact and speakers build on common ground.

Another theme concerns conflict. Much research on intercultural business communication would lead one to expect conflict to be the product of intercultural communication. However, the findings of the study contradict this view. Conflict, evidenced for example by the use of negative evaluation in interchanges between the company speaker and distributors, was related to specific aspects of business such as pricing and changes in product models. The conflict observed thus involved factors not necessarily related to the different national cultures of participants but rather to different views of how to approach the group's common goals, or else divergences between the company's and an individual distributor's priorities.

A final theme concerns how this culture or groupness comes about. The analysis and discussion highlight how the main company speaker in particular does a lot of work to construct common ground, involving people who are present and others who are not. Other speakers do so as well, including company members and a distributor, but the main speaker in particular combines a variety of language options to build common ground, reflecting and construing a range of roles and touching upon different aspects of the company's activities.

The different personae he creates for himself, especially when initiating strategic shifts in frames during particular speech events, contribute to shaping the character of the group at the meetings. Organizational aspects of the meetings, for example the range of speech events and opportunities for distributors to examine products, also contribute to the way groupness comes about, in that they allow ample opportunity for face-to-face interaction.

In such a multicultural setting there would clearly be limits in viewing each meeting participant, for example, as a representative of a "homogenous" cultural group. Other factors besides cultural differences must be considered when investigating intercultural business communication. The study has shown that using the notion of business relationships is a particularly fruitful way to gain additional insights into the complexity characterizing intercompany meetings with multicultural participation.

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Seating Arrangements and Room Set Up, Hotel Conference Room, June 1998

BACK OF ROOM

Sample display case	Product displays on tables

Indoor exit
to right →

	Switzerland	Austria	Austria	Alta (P)	Researcher	
Germany						Holland / Day 1 *Alta* Service technician
Spain						
Spain						Belgium
Finland						Belgium
Norway						Belgium
Norway						Slovenia
Sweden						France
Sweden						France
Sweden		Speaker / Table with displays located in this area. Speaker at times approaches or turns towards parts of table. Company members may assist.				France (not always occupied) France
Japan (5 places; 1 for Italian member)						U.K.
Japan						C. & S. America
Japan						U.S.
Japan						*Alta*/consultant

People
modeling
attire enter
here.

← Door
/outdoors

Alta	*Alta*	*Alta*	*Alta*	*Alta*	*Alta*	Door and changing room →
Places at this front table are not always occupied. The table appears "off stage". At times, attire is displayed in front of the table.						

FRONT OF ROOM

Participation and seating arrangements may vary slightly from day to day. Some company members stay in the front of the room to assist with product displays.

APPENDIX 2

Transcription Conventions

Pauses: (.) short pause under 0.3 seconds
      (+) about 0.4 – 0.7 seconds
      (++) about 0.8 – 1.7 seconds
      (no.) no. of seconds in parenthesis, rounded to the second (if 2 or more)

Translations into English are in *italics*
?: indicates upward intonation
? in the speaker column indicates an unidentified speaker
= adjacent to a word: word= =word indicates "latched speech" between two speakers
Contextual information is in double parenthesis (( )).
Square brackets [ ] are used when a proper name has been changed or deleted: [Eyewear Model 3].
Inaudible or unclear speech is indicated by parenthesis ( )
Transcription with a degree of uncertainty is in parenthesis   (some)
Alternative transcriptions are placed one above the other in parenthesis (sun)
Capitals indicate speaker emphasis: OUR products.

Names and identifying features have been changed or deleted: [I-athlete LN] means an Italian athlete's last name has been deleted. [FN] = first name

Alta is a pseudonym for the company name and brand.
Time - from DAT recording, indicated in hour, minutes, and seconds: 9.12.05 = five seconds after 9:12 a.m.

Units are roughly the equivalent of Halliday's (1994: 215) clause complex, a head clause together with related clauses. Data were divided into units to facilitate the quantitative analysis of the wider study and the use of spreadsheets. Occasional gaps in the numbering system because of simultaneous speech are not considered problematic because the purpose of the units is convenience.

Units 1-1798 refer to the 1997 transcribed segment.
Units 4000-6052 refer to the 1998 transcribed segment.