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# Cultural Values and their Correlation with Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies in Spanish and US Business Websites

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The present paper explores the way in which the cultural dimension of individualism is reflected in the interactional discourse of Spanish and US business websites. This cultural dimension is concerned with the way individuals from a particular culture define their own identity and their relationship with other people. Considering the scores of Spain and the US on the individualism index, the objective of this study is twofold: (a) to analyse the type of interactional metadiscourse strategies used on the presentation pages of Spanish and US toy company websites, and (b) to determine whether the individualism index scores of Spaniards and North Americans are reflected in different interactional metadiscourse strategies when companies establish a social relationship and persuade a potential customer to purchase their products. The results obtained confirm that there are important differences in the interactional discourse of this digital genre, which may be a valuable source of information for export companies that wish to introduce their products abroad by means of their business websites.

Keywords: intercultural communication; cultural dimension; digital genres; interactional metadiscourse strategies

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# Los valores culturales y su correlación con las estrategias del metadiscurso interaccional en las páginas web de negocios españolas y estadounidenses

En este estudio se explora en qué medida la dimensión cultural del individualismo se refleja en el discurso interaccional de páginas web de negocios españolas y estadounidenses. Esta dimensión se relaciona con el modo en que los miembros de una cultura conciben su identidad y su relación social con otras personas. Según el índice de valores culturales con que España y los Estados Unidos de América responden a la dimensión cultural del individualismo, en este estudio intento alcanzar dos objetivos: (a) analizar el tipo de estrategias metadiscursivas interaccionales que se emplean en la página de presentación de la empresa en páginas web de negocios españolas y estadounidenses y (b) examinar si el índice de valores culturales individualistas de España y de los Estados Unidos de América se muestra en estrategias metadiscursivas diferentes en el momento de establecer una relación social y persuadir a un posible cliente a comprar los productos de la empresa. Los resultados obtenidos confirman diferencias en el discurso interaccional de este género digital, que pueden ser útiles para empresas exportadoras que desean introducir sus productos en países extranjeros a través de sus webs de negocios.

Palabras clave: comunicación intercultural; dimensión cultural; géneros digitales; estrategias del metadiscurso interaccional

## 1. Introduction

From an anthropological perspective the concept of culture has attracted the attention of many scholars for over a century. The first definition of this term correlated with "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society" (Tylor 1975, 21). Culture has also been defined as "a shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviour" (Gibson 2000, 7) or "the software of the mind or collective mental programming" (Hofstede 1991, 4). Although various definitions have been provided throughout the decades, it is commonly accepted that the theme of *shared values* is central to any definition of culture (Hofstede 1991; Singh and Pereira 2005; Guillén 2009). In other words, culture refers to the way in which, in a particular group, people are trained from a very early age to internalise the behaviour and attitudes of the group.

Researchers interested in the field of intercultural communication have proposed different theoretical paradigms to identify the basic social problems that affect all societies—*cultural dimensions*—but for which members of different societies may have different answers—*cultural values*. One of the most noteworthy models developed within the framework of cultural dimensions theory is the Dutch anthropologist and social psychologist Geert Hofstede's (1991) five value dimension paradigm (*individualism, power distance, masculinity*, *uncertainty avoidance* and *long-term orientation*).

In this study, I intend to focus on the cultural dimension of individualism, i.e., concern for yourself as an individual as opposed to concern for the group to which you belong (Hofstede 1991; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993; Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003; Loukianenko 2008). Within a society, cultural groups can be seen to favour a preferred strategic orientation along a *continuum* between the two extremes, which are often referred to as *individualistic* and *collectivist* cultural orientations.

In his ground-breaking work *Cultures and Organizations*: *Software of the Mind* (1991), Hofstede states that individualism pertains to societies in which "ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family." At the other extreme, meanwhile, collectivism is characterised by societies in which "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (1991, 51).

Hofstede analysed a large database of information collected from IBM between 1967 and 1973, covering more than 70 countries, related to the values of their employees. He used the data to measure the degree of individualism or collectivism of people from different countries using a 0 to 100 scale (0 corresponding to the most collectivist society and 100 to the most individualistic society). The empirically verified results gave Spain a score of 51 points, while the US scored 91 points, confirming a strong cultural difference between the two countries.

Even though Hofstede's research has latterly attracted a lot of criticism for being old-fashioned and liable to promote cultural overgeneralisation as well as lead to stereotyping

(Loukianenko 2008), other scholars (Clark 1990; Simon 1999, Guillén 2009) are of the opinion that Hofstede has provided the most comprehensive and influential study to date of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture at a collective level.

Advances in social anthropology and social psychology in the final decades of the twentieth century paralleled the reaction against the alleged universalism of certain linguistic theories formulated by Anglo-Saxon academics (e.g., Grice 1975; Brown and Levinson 1987). In the 1970s this resulted in the emergence of the new discipline of *intercultural pragmatics* focusing on the descriptive and contrastive analysis of the culture-specific pragmalinguistic conventions ruling speech acts, social interaction, and discourse strategies across languages (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Wierzbicka 1985, 1991; Trosborg 1995; Márquez 2000; Díaz 2003; Hickey and Stewart 2005; Nuyts 2006; House 2009).

However, in my view the studies cited above which analyse the intercultural use of language lack an underlying theory to explain why the principles of interaction that speakers from different societies hold are motivated by the cultural values by means of which speakers from different countries solve many of the cultural dimensions shared by all human beings, particularly the cultural dimension of individualism. In fact, since the 1990s, there has been increasing academic interest in this research question (Kaplan 1966; Clyne 1994; Scollon and Scollon 1995; Loukianenko 2008; Guillén 2009; Ivorra 2009, 2012).

Based on the view of writing as a social and communicative engagement between writer and reader, the concept of *metadiscourse* deals with "the ways writers project themselves into their discourse to signal their attitude towards both the content and the audience of the text" (Hyland and Tse 2004, 156). It can be defined as "the linguistic resources used to organize a discourse or the writer's stance towards either its content or the reader" (Hyland 2000, 109). Two principal strategies are involved which are either (a) *interactive* or (b) *interactional*. Whereas the former helps to organize the discourse by indicating topic shifts, signalling sequences, cross-referencing, connecting ideas and previewing material, the latter modifies and highlights aspects of the text and gives the writer's attitude to it through the use of hedging, boosters, attitude, engagement or self-reference markers (Hyland and Tse 2004).

Here I will concentrate on the second function of metadiscourse, that is, those interactional strategies that alert readers to the author's perspective towards both propositional information and the readers themselves. This clearly relates to the *tenor* of the discourse (Hyland 1998), concerned with controlling the level of personality in the text. The starting point of my study is the interactional metadiscourse strategies model developed by Hyland and Tse (2004), depicted in Table 1 (next page).

This model has been employed in numerous intercultural studies which analyse the interactional metadiscourse strategies used in different countries focusing on various fields such as business, tourism or journalism (Valero 1996; Dafouz 2006, 2008; Shokouki and Talati 2009; Mur 2010, Suau 2010). However, in my opinion, a deeper evaluation is needed which may shed light on the influence of cultural values on the divergent interactional metadiscourse strategies preferred by different countries and cultures.

Table 1. Interactional metadiscourse strategies model (Hyland and Tse 2004)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Hedges | withhold writer's full commitment to proposition | e.g., may/might/perhaps/possible/ about |
| Boosters | emphasise force or writer's certainty in proposition | e.g., in fact/definitely/it is clear that |
| Attitude markers | express writer's attitude to proposition | e.g., unfortunately/I agree/ surprisingly |
| Engagement markers | explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader | e.g., consider/note that/ you can see that |
| Self-mention markers | explicit reference to author (s) | e.g., I/we/my/our |

As a result, I deem it necessary to go beyond the interactional model of Hyland and Tse (2004) to include other types of interactional strategies, not contemplated in their model. For instance, as regards engagement markers and self-mention markers it is useful to quantitatively analyse not only their frequency, but also how often they may be avoided in different ways, such as employing depersonalisation strategies and references to a third person in discourse.

## 2. Objectives and Hypotheses

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of the individualism cultural dimension on the interactional metadiscourse strategies used on the presentation page of Spanish and US business websites by means of which social interaction with a prospective customer is established.

In line with the different scores of Spain and the US on the world dimension of individualism (Hofstede 1991), it is hypothesized that the different values held by the two societies will foster different professional cultures on business websites. As such, Spanish companies will identify themselves as more collectivist entities than their US counterparts and consequently use interactional metadiscourse strategies that enhance more collectivist cultural values while the US companies will take a more individualistic approach.

## 3. Methodology and Corpus

This research is empirically based on a corpus of 100 business websites (50 from Spain and 50 from the US) belonging to toy companies. Data were collected during December 2013, making use of different Internet directories such as www.aefj.es, www.uschamber.co.uk, or www.kompass.es. One reason for choosing the toy sector was the fact that it is currently one of the leading industrial export sectors.

As far as the analysis is concerned, on the one hand, a qualitative analysis is carried out in which I examine both corpora of business websites, paying attention to the type

of interactional metadiscourse markers found on the firm's presentation page. While on the other, a quantitative analysis is conducted using the computer program Textworks 1.0 which enables the absolute frequency of occurrence of each interactional metadiscourse marker to be determined. In addition, I have calculated the relative frequency, i.e., the absolute frequency divided by the total amount of words contained in each corpus of websites. However, as the two corpora are, inevitably, of unequal size (Spanish corpus: 9,353 words and US corpus: 12,247 words), the absolute frequency of each interactional marker analysed is also computed per 1,000 words, a conventional way of standardising results of corpora of different sizes.

These results are then submitted to statistical analysis using the Chi-square test of homogeneity in a contingency table using the computer program SPSS Statistics 18 Software.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Hedges

According to linguist Alcaraz Varó, the concept of *hedging* consists "in graduating the message content, reducing the degree of uncertainty of the things uttered by the speaker or lowering the level of imposition that the utterance may have, either explicitly or implicitly" (2000, 170). Hedges are also used to help speakers and writers indicate more precisely how Gricean's conversational maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance are observed in assessments. Following Wang (2010), these interactional strategies can also be used to express fuzzy meanings. For the purpose of my research, I find it interesting to understand the term *hedging* as a communicative strategy used to convey linguistic politeness (Lewin 1998) for the reasons explained in the next paragraph.

The obvious aim of a company's presentation page on its business website is to provide information on the firm's foundation, history, international reputation, daily work, description of the company's products and, most importantly, to persuade a potential customer to purchase what is offered on-line. In this latter issue, it is worth considering the degree of linguistic politeness employed in attempting to establish this interpersonal relationship between the company and the potential consumer. If we conceive of *hedges* as linguistic politeness strategies, they may be used to reduce the level of imposition perceived by the consumer in the company's efforts to persuade him/her to buy the product and its effect on the consumer's *face*. According to Goffman (1967, 61), the term *face* makes reference to "the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for him or herself."

In terms of a digital genre such as a business website, this persuasion can be achieved by means of different speech acts (Searle 1975): (a) assertive (e.g., companies inform the consumer about their entities and they also describe the products they make); (b) directive (e.g., companies request, advise or suggest that the consumer buy the product); (c) commissive (e.g., companies commit themselves to take a particular action by means of

promises); or (d) expressive (e.g., companies express their attitudes or emotions towards the information they are transmitting). It must be pointed out that directive speech acts (Blum-Kulka, et al. 1989; Trosborg 1995) are considered the most paradigmatic case of a speech act in which there is clear intrusion in the personal territory of the consumer (Márquez 2000).

For the current study the following categories of hedges were selected: (a) *modal verbs* (e.g., *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *should*, *ought to/puede*, *podría*, *puede que*, *podría que*, *debería*, *etc.*); (b) *probability adverbs* (e.g., *probably*, *likely*, *improbably*, *perhaps*, *maybe*, *possibly/quizás*, *tal vez*, *probablemente*, *posiblemente etc.*); (c) *epistemic expressions* (e.g., *it is likely/es probable*, *etc.*); and (d) *de-emphasisers* (e.g., *in no way*, *it is not true/de ninguna manera*, *no es cierto*, *etc.*) (Hyland and Tse 2004, 169). Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of each category on Spanish and US business websites studied:

Table 2. Frequency of *hedges* in the business websites studied
(*p=.05; **p<.05; ***p<.01)

| Interactional Meta-discourse Strategies | Spanish business websites | | US business websites | | Chi-square test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hedge Category | Absolute frequency n= 9,353 | Relative frequency (per 1000 words) % | Absolute frequency n= 12,247 | Relative frequency (per 1000 words) % | Spanish business websites-US business websites |
| Modal verbs | 9 | 0.9% | 22 | 1.8% | 5.537 (.019)** |
| Probability adverbs | 2 | 0.2% | 0 | 0% | 2.002 (.157) |
| Epistemic expressions | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.1% | 1.001 (.317) |
| De-emphasizers | 2 | 0.2% | 0 | 0% | 2.002 (.157) |

The frequency of *probability adverbs*, *epistemic expressions* and *de-emphasizers*, in both corpora is very limited, or even nil in some cases. However, the frequency of *modal verbs* in the US corpus (22/1.8%) is significantly higher than on the Spanish websites (9/0.9%) ($x^2$=5.537, p<.019).

On the US toy websites, companies try to convince and persuade the customer to buy the products offered using modal verbs to tone down the imposition that direct speech acts, like requests, suggestions or advice, might have on customers. As stated previously, in this type of speech act there is always an intrusion into the personal space of the receiver of the action. The modal verbs therefore might act as linguistic politeness strategies which

offer consumers the necessary freedom of action to decide for themselves to acquire the toys provided on-line.

Despite the low occurrence of modal verbs in the Spanish corpus, directive speech acts are indeed used to persuade customers to purchase their toys. However, rather than minimizing the imposition that these acts may have on the customer through the use of modal verbs, the Spanish websites prefer to include performative verbs. In this sense, the illocutionary purpose of the directive speech act is made explicit. Some examples from the websites selected will be considered to illustrate this point:

On this US toy website (Example 1),[1] modal verbs like *can* or *would* were present, as well as probability adverbs like *maybe* acted as mitigating devices to convince consumers about the value of the company's toys and persuade them to make a purchase. In using these linguistic markers, the company is offering the consumer the possibility of choosing or rejecting the products it provides, that is, the consumer has freedom of action to decide for him or herself.

Example 1 (www.thehappykidcompany.com):

*Maybe* you'*d raid* the linen closet and take all your Mom's best tablecloths outside for an impromptu canopy, under which you*'d spend* the afternoon daydreaming . . . . Now kids *can build* any fort anywhere ... They *can traipse* outside with their Fortamajigs without worrying about . . . . With Fortamajig, kids *can build* and play to their heart's content and parents *can feel* great knowing that their children are exploring the worlds.

The use of modal verbs and adverbs of probability can also be observed in Example 2, also from the US. As in Example 1, this company also resorts to hedges to reduce the obligation on customers to purchase its goods.

Example 2 (www.mybabycantalk.com/content/company/aboutus.aspx):

How *would you feel* if you were unable to communicate that need to that person? Do you think that *you might be reduced* to tears and screams if you were unable to have this basic need fulfilled? . . . How *would you order* a meal or find a hotel? Your self-esteem and confidence *would be challenged* at every turn and you *would likely become* more and more frustrated.

Different linguistic strategies are found in Example 3, below, from a Spanish website in which the company tries to convince the customer by means of performative verbs, that is, verbs that explicitly state the illocutionary purpose of the speech act (Scollon and Scollon 1995, Vázquez 1995, Márquez 2000). In sharp contrast to the US corpus, the use

[1] The visualization of the business websites and references made to individuals has been omitted for reasons of data protection rights.

of these performative verbs acknowledges the firm's invasion of the customer's personal territory.

Example 3 (http://www.essentialminds.com/quienes%20somos.php):

Desde X *te animamos* a experimentar con tu bebé, *mirar* el mundo con sus ojos, y *llevarle* al viaje de los cinco sentidos. [2]

English translation:[3] From X *we encourage you* to experiment with your baby, *look* at the world through his/her eyes, and *take him/her* on the trip of the five senses.

### 4.2. Boosters

Whereas hedges mark the writer's reluctance to present propositional information categorically, *boosters* "imply certainty and emphasize the force of propositions" (Hyland and Tse 2004, 168). In this study the following categories of boosters have been selected: (a) *emphasizers* (e.g., *in fact*, *it is clear that/de hecho*, *está claro que*, *etc.*); (b) *amplifying adverbs* (e.g., *certainly/seguramente*, *etc.*); (c) *superlatives* (e.g., *the most beautiful*, *the greatest*, *the best/el más bonito*, *el mejor*, *etc.*); and (d) *hyperboles* (e.g., *splendid*, *magnificent*, *universal/espléndido*, *magnífico*, *universal*, *etc.*). The frequency of occurrence of boosters in both corpora is given in Table 3:

Table 3. Frequency of *boosters* in the business websites studied
(*p=.05; **p<.05; ***p<.01)

| Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies | Spanish business websites | | US business websites | | Chi-square test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boosters: Categories | Absolute frequency<br>n = 9,353 | Relative frequency<br>(per 1000 words)<br>% | Absolute frequency<br>n = 12,247 | Relative frequency<br>(per 1000 words)<br>% | Spanish business websites-US business website |
| Emphasizers | 5 | 0.5% | 2 | 0.1% | 1.290<br>(.256) |
| Amplifying adverbs | 7 | 0.7% | 1 | 0.1% | 4.518<br>(.034) |
| Superlatives | 53 | 5.6% | 81 | 6.6% | 6.271<br>(.012)** |
| Hyperboles | 10 | 1.0% | 18 | 1.4% | 2.318<br>(.128) |

2 The letter X has been used to avoid mentioning the name of the company.

3 English version taken from The Spanish website.

As far as boosters are concerned, we can note that the absolute and relative frequencies of *emphasizers* and *amplifying adverbs* are very low, although the frequency in the Spanish corpus is slightly higher than in the US corpus. In relation to *superlatives* and *hyperboles*, frequencies increase, especially the former, and both linguistic markers are more frequent in US than Spanish websites, although only difference between the frequency of the superlative forms are statistically significant ($x^2$=6.271, p<.012).

Example 4 is a representative example of a US toy website on which superlatives are repeated constantly:

Example 4 (http://www.jojollc.com/page.php?pg=aboutus.php):

X has been manufacturing and distributing *high* quality toys . . . . We have established ourselves as a *premier* supplier of *leading* plush toys . . . . It is our pleasure to now offer our *world-class* quality products . . . which are made of *the finest* quality fabrics available.

Superlatives are also found in the next Spanish toy website:

Example 5 (http://www.limitsport.com/main_skip.html):

X es el fabricante de disfraces de calidad y diseño *más experimentado* de España . . . más de 40 modelos a los *mejores precios* . . . todo el año en las *mejores jugueterías* . . . The use of a hyperbole is also included, e.g., . . . crear un *universo* visible de magia y celebración.

English translation:[4] X is *the most experienced* manufacturer of high quality fancy dress costumes in Spain . . . more than 40 outfits at *the best prices* . . . all year long in *the best toy stores* . . . create a visible *universe* of magic and celebration.

### 4.3. Attitude markers

Attitude markers, also called "expressive markers" (Dafouz 2006, 71), represent a personal and subjective appraisal of the content of the text, that is, the writer of a particular text uses them to provide his or her opinion about what he or she is stating. According to Biber et al. , attitude markers can be defined as expressing "personal feelings, attitudes, value judgements, or assessments" (1999, 966).

Six categories of attitude markers were selected for this analysis: (a) *comparatives* (e.g., *better than*, *as good as/mejor que*, *tan bueno que*, *etc.*); (b) *attitude adjectives* (e.g., *it is absurd*, *it is surprising/es absurdo*, *sorprendente*, etc.); (c) *phrasal adverbs* (e.g., *fortunately*, *unfortunately/afortunadamente*, *desafortunadamente*, *etc.*); (d) *exclamations* (e.g., *incredible!*, *best prices!/¡increíble!*, *¡a los mejores precios!*); (e) *deontic verbs* (e.g., *have to*, *must*, *needs to/hay que*, *deben*, *hace falta*); and (f) *cognitive verbs* (e.g., *I think*, *I*

[4] English version taken from the Spanish website.

*believe*, *I feel/creo*, *pienso*, *estimo*, *etc*.). Table 4 shows the results for the use of attitude markers:

Table 4. Frequency of *attitude markers* on the business websites studied (*p=.05; **p<.05; ***p<.01)

| Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies | Spanish business websites | | US business websites | | Chi-square test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitude markers: Categories | Absolute Frequency n = 3,953 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) % | Absolute Frequency n =12,247 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) % | Spanish business websites-US business websites |
| Comparatives | 7 | 0.7% | 29 | 2.3% | 13.691 (.000)*** |
| Attitude adjectives | 95 | 10.1% | 187 | 15.2% | 34.941 (.000)*** |
| Phrasal adverbs | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.1% | 1,001 (.317) |
| Exclamations | 4 | 0.4% | 16 | 1.3% | 7.273 (.007)*** |
| Deontic verbs | 7 | 0.7% | 4 | 0.3% | ,823 (.364) |
| Cognitive verbs | 1 | 0.1% | 13 | 1.06% | 10.358 (.001)*** |

Except for the use of *deontic verbs*, the frequency of occurrence all the attitude markers analysed is significantly higher on the US business websites. The results, in descending order of frequency, are as follows; *attitude adjectives* ($x^2$=34.941, p<.000), *comparatives* ($x^2$=13.691, p<.000), *cognitive verbs* ($x^2$=10.358, p<.000) and *exclamations* ($x^2$=7.273, p<.000).

The US website in Example 6 is a good example in that it uses exclamations and cognitive verbs as well as comparative forms. All these attitude markers serve for the company to express its view on the information being transmitted:

Example 6 (http://www.sanrio.com/about-sanrio):

Small gift, big smile! . . . It's *more than* just a catchy phrase . . . . At X we *believe* that a gift is *more than* just a gift

Similar attitude markers can also be observed in the following example drawn from the US corpus (Example 7). In this particular case, it is interesting to see the predominance of comparative forms:

Example 7 (http://4kidslikeme.com/About-Us.html):

> Our relationship with toy manufacturers means *better* prices, *better* availability, and exclusive promotions . . . . That means we have *better* control over our inventory, resulting in *fewer* backorders.

### 4.4. Engagement markers

*Engagement markers* have an important interpersonal function since "they build an explicit relationship with readers" (Hyland and Tse 2004, 169). For this analysis four different categories of engagement markers were chosen: (a) *second-person pronouns* (e.g., *you/usted/ustedes*); (b) *rhetorical questions* (e.g., *Is this the game that you were looking for? /¿Este es el juego que buscabas?*); (c) *imperatives* (e.g., *contact us*, *see our catalogue/contáctenos*, *vea nuestro catálogo*); and (d) *references to a third person in discourse* (e.g., *products to delight children*, *toys to be used by parents and children/productos para deleitar a los niños*, *juguetes para que jueguen padres y niños*). In this respect I must clarify that, in the case of the Spanish corpus, not only second-person pronouns are counted but also second-person references in the verb ending are included since Spanish is a pro-drop language. Table 5 shows the frequency of occurrence of these categories of engagement markers on the business websites selected.

Table 5. Frequency of *engagement markers* in the business websites studied (*p=.05; **p<.05; ***p<.01)

| Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies | Spanish business websites | | US business websites | | Chi-square test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Engagement markers: Categories | Absolute Frequency n= 9,353 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) % | Absolute Frequency n=12,247 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) % | Spanish business websites-US business websites |
| Second-person pronouns and second-person references in the verb ending | 51 | 5.4% | 169 | 13.8% | 71.113 (.000)*** |
| Rhetorical questions | 3 | 0.3% | 12 | 0.9% | 5.441 (.020)** |
| Imperatives | 2 | 0.2% | 45 | 3.6% | 40.287 (.000)*** |
| Reference to a third person in discourse | 111 | 11.8% | 166 | 13.5% | 12.676 (.000)*** |

The results show that US toy websites have higher frequencies of all four categories than their Spanish counterparts, all of which are statistically significant.

The overall frequencies for the use of *rhetorical questions* and *imperatives* are lower than for *second-person pronouns*; however, once more, their frequency is higher on the US business websites: rhetorical questions: US 12/09%-Spain 3/03% ($x^2$=5.441, p<.020); imperatives: US 45/3.6%-Spain 2/0.2% ($x^2$=40.287, p<.000). Likewise, the difference is statistically significant in the case of rhetorical questions and highly significant in relation to imperatives. These categories of engagement marker seem to be used by US companies to address the consumer in an explicit and direct way.

Although Spanish toy websites also resort to the types of engagement markers mentioned above, the results indicate that they use, in a greater degree, references to a third person in discourse (111/11.8%) in order to avoid the explicit reference to the consumer. Nevertheless, it is clearly observable that US websites also include a third person (166/13.5%), even more than their Spanish counterparts. As far as this last strategy is concerned, we could say that in the US toy websites the inclusion of a third person in discourse so as not to address the consumer in a direct way is used in combination with explicit references through the use of second-person pronouns. In contrast, in the case of the Spanish corpus, the use of a third person in discourse is much more recurrent than second-person references. This last issue leads me to establish differences between both corpora.

The following US website (Example 8) is useful to see how the company addresses consumers directly, establishes a link with them, and involves them in the discourse and the message through the use of *second-person pronouns*:

Example 8 (http://www.carrom.com/index.php/Site-Content/about-us):

> At X we strive to make available to *you*, our customer, this most popular . . . . To maintain the satisfaction of our relationship with *you*, our current customers . . . . Our commitment will always remain with the emphasis on *you*.

The use of *imperative constructions* is shown on the following US website (Example 9) where, apart from making use of the second-person pronoun, the imperative is used to address the consumer in a straightforward manner:

Example 9 (http://www.funexpress.com/h3-aboutus.fltr):

> *Contact* one of our representatives to place your order . . . . *Make* an impression. *Utilize* our award-winning artists and designers . . . . *Take* advantage of our one-stop shop . . . . *Visit* with our market-specific trained representatives

By contrast, on the Spanish website below (Example 10) a third person is included in the discourse to avoid addressing the consumer explicitly:

Example 10 (http://www.saicatoys.com/app/empresa/empresa.asp?idioma=es):

hemos ido actualizando nuestro catálogo pensando *en los más pequeños* . . . disponemos de una amplia gama de productos para *los más pequeños* que no sólo son atractivas para *los niños*, sino que también cumplen las expectativas *de sus padres* con artículos que potencian el desarrollo socio-cultural *del niño*:

English translation:[5] we have been updating our catalogue thinking especially of *the children* . . . we have a wide range of products *for children* that are not only to appeal to *children*, but also to meet the expectations *of their parents* with various aspects; among others we can mention the socio-cultural development *of the children*.

4.5. Self-mention markers

*Self-mention markers* are those interactional metadiscourse strategies "used to refer to the writer of a text in an explicit way" (Hyland and Tse 2004, 169). In this analysis three main linguistic categories were selected: (a) *first-person singular pronouns* (e.g., *I, my, mine, me/ yo, mío, mi, etc.*); (b) *first-person plural pronouns* (e.g., *we, our, us/nosotros, nuestro, etc.*) and (c) *depersonalisation strategies*. In relation to the latter, two important strategies seem to recur in the corpus of my study: the use of personifications (for instance, the name of the company or the word "company" is often attributed human qualities) and, exclusively in the Spanish corpus, *verb*–se passive constructions. In addition, I have also taken into account first-person singular and plural references in the verb ending when analysing the Spanish corpus. Table 6 summarises the main results found in relation to self-mention markers in both corpora.

The frequency in the use of *first-person singular references* is low compared with the use of plural forms and the US websites make greater use of these linguistic devices (28/2.2%) than do the Spanish (5/0.5%) ($x^2$=16.299, p<.000).

The *first-person plural references* are very interesting, being high in each corpus, although slightly higher on the Spanish than the US websites (Spain: 362/38.7% and US: 430/35.1 %) ($x^2$=9.666, p<.002). Nonetheless, I believe that whereas the Spanish websites could be making use of this marker to refer to the members of the company as a collective group of individuals, in the case of the US websites there may be just one person, generally the manager of the firm, who is actually speaking on behalf of the company. I offer the following reasons to support my thesis:

In many of the presentation pages of the Spanish toy company websites there is a hyperlink, which often takes the form of a noun phrase like "empresa" (company) or "nuestra empresa" (our company). In addition, there is sometimes a photo of the premises of the firm, its employees, or capital letters and different colours are used to highlight the name of the company and make it stand out from the rest of the text. These aspects

[5] English version taken from the Spanish website.

Table 6. Frequency of *self-mention markers* in the business websites selected for the Analysis (*p=.05; **p<.05; ***p<.01)

| Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies | Spanish business websites | | US business websites | | Chi-square test Spanish-US business websites |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-mention markers | Absolute Frequency n = 9,353 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) | Absolute Frequency n =12,247 | Relative Frequency (per 1000 words) | |
| First-person singular pronoun and first-person reference in the verb ending | 5 | 0.5% | 28 | 2.2% | 16.299 (.000)*** |
| First-person plural pronoun and first-person reference in the verb ending | 362 | 38.7% | 430 | 35.1% | 9.666 (.002)*** |
| Depersonalisations: Personifications (e.g., the company is attributed human qualities) | 157 | 16.8% | 159 | 12.9% | .344 (.558) |
| Depersonalisations: (-se passive constructions) | 18 | 1.9% | 0 | 0% | 18.163 (.000)*** |

suggest that first-person plural references may be used to make reference to the staff of the company, including the manager, as a collective entity that works together.

On the other hand, the US websites use this plural pronoun together with other communicative strategies that would seem to suggest that there is only one person who is speaking about the company. For instance, a photograph of the manager of the toy company is often included, quotation marks are used to reproduce direct speech or the name of the manager and his/her signature appears at the bottom of the page. On the basis of this, I would assert that the identity of the US company websites could be rendered as individualist, whereas that of the Spanish websites could be interpreted as collective. Let us consider some examples from the corpus to illustrate these aspects.

In Example 11 we observe a toy website taken from the US corpus where the identity of the company is perceived from an individualistic perspective. Linguistically speaking, this individualistic identity is mainly conveyed by the use of first-person singular pronouns which are combined with a photographic image of the manager and his name at the end of the message:

Example 11 (http://www.princessplayhomes.com/who-we-are.htm):

This is one of the reasons why *I* insist that . . . *I* began to work at X . . . *I* enjoy seeing the happiness each house brings to every child.

Different linguistic strategies are found on the Spanish website in Example12, where first-person plural references seem to make allusion to the group of people that work for the company. Furthermore, the photographic image of the staff of the company that appears at the bottom of the site reinforces the collectivist identity of the firm:

Example 12 (http://www.falca.es/Paginas/quienes_somos-I60.html):

*somos* expertos en la fabricación de muñecas . . . . *Nos* encanta que regales una muñeca . . . porque *nosotros* también *tenemos* familia, y *nuestros* hijos también lo han vivido . . . X ha contado con el apoyo incondicional de todos sus empleados, personas que han compartido con *nosotros* alegrías y penas . . . el cual *agradecemos* sinceramente . . . no *habríamos* podido llevar a cabo *nuestra* labor, porque al final, todos *formamos* un *equipo* . . . . *Tenemos* la voluntad de seguir aquí al menos otros 50 años, e intentar *adaptarnos* a las necesidades de las nuevas generaciones . . . . *Queremos* darte las gracias por continuar con *nosotros*

English translation:[6] *we* are experts in the manufacture of dolls . . . . *We* love that gift a doll . . . because *we* too have families, and *our* children have lived it too . . . X has had the unconditional support of all employees who have shared joys and sorrows . . . they have given *us* their trust, without their support, which *we* thank sincerely, *we* would not have carried out *our* own, because, in the end, *we* are a very big *team* . . . . *We* have the willingness to stay here at least another 50 years, and try to adapt to needs of new generations . . . . *We* want to thank you for continuing with *us*

Finally, in relation to the use of *depersonalisation* strategies, both corpora use personifications, with no statistical difference between countries (Spain: 157/16.8% and US: 159/12.7%; $x^2$=.344, p<.558). These are mainly used to attribute human qualities to the name of the company or the word "company." The lack of statistically significant differences in the use of this marker may be due to the fact that this strategy could be commonly accepted in a digital genre like a business website in general and/or in toy selling websites particularly. However, while the use of personification is more or less the same in the websites from the US and Spain, if other factors are considered simultaneously a different picture emerges: the Spanish websites tend to use personifications but without resorting to first-person singular references, whereas the US websites tend to use personifications along with first-person plural and first-person singular pronouns.

[6] English version taken from the Spanish website.

The results also reveal that the Spanish websites also include *–se passive constructions* as another type of depersonalisation strategy, even though the frequency of occurrence is not very high (18/1.9%). This is best illustrated with a couple of examples from the websites studied.

Example 13 shows the use of personification, human qualities being assigned to the company to avoid using self-mention markers explicitly. We can also see the presence of *–se passive* constructions, used to depersonalise the discourse, as well the use of first-person plural references:

Example 13 (http://www.colomaypastor.com/coloma-y-pastor):

*X es una empresa familiar dedicada* a la producción de juguetes desde su fundación . . . . Desde entonces *la empresa ha mantenido* un crecimiento constante . . . el diseño de todos *nuestros* productos *nos* ha permitido aumentar *nuestra* productividad . . . . Todo esto *ha permitido a X tener* un reconocido prestigio . . . faceta que no ha decaído desde que *se inició* . . . *X inició* su andadura produciendo triciclos . . . . A principio de los 90 *incorporamos* . . .

English translation:[7] [X *is a family run company that has specialized* in the manufacture of toys since its foundation ... Since that time, *the company has enjoyed* constant growth ... the design of all *our* products has enabled *us* to increase *our* productivity levels ... All this *has enabled X to achieve* a prestigious reputation ... an aspect that has grown steadily since *it began* ... *X initially began* by producing tricycles ... At the beginning of the nineties, *we* incorporated . . .

In the US website in Example 14 we can perceive how both first-person singular and plural pronouns are used together with personifications, and where the company is also assigned human qualities:

Example 14 (http://www.buffalogames.com/President-s-Message/presidents-message.html):

Today *X is one of the leading* party games . . . . *We* pride *ourselves* on creating games that are fun to play . . . *I'm* often asked "What's the key to your success?" *My* answer is always the same –*our* people . . . . Since 1986 *we* have experienced many changes . . . but *we* have always held true to *our* core purpose . . . . *I* hope you've had as much fun as *we* have.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results described in the previous section, I believe that the higher occurrence of hedges, boosters, attitude, engagement and self-reference markers observed on the presentation page of the US toy websites studied may be related to the high individualism

[7] English version taken from the Spanish website.

index score of North-Americans (91), whereas the scarce presence of these interactional metadiscourse strategies on the pages of the Spanish companies considered may be due to the moderate score (51) of Spaniards on this cultural dimension (Hofstede, 1991, 53).

It would appear that politeness considerations concerning the use of "positive" or "negative" aspects of linguistic devices seem to influence the way the Spanish and US toy selling websites examined here use more or less direct or indirect speech acts to socially interact with prospective customers, something which appears to be particularly relevant is the case of hedges. The different results for the two nationalities of websites studied may be linked to the two types of social self-image that the linguists Scollon and Scollon (1995) established in their study of linguistic politeness from an intercultural perspective: (a) *involvement* and (b) *independence*. The former is related to the speaker's right and need to be a cooperative member in any communicative act. In other words, the interlocutors of communication need to share their opinions and wishes, and cooperate with each other (*positive image*). The latter, on the contrary, highlights the speaker's right to be free from the imposition of others and keep his or her own space (*negative image*) (Brown and Levinson 1987; Scollon and Scollon 1995).

On the US toy websites examined hedges such as *modal verbs* are used to "minimize the illocutionary purpose of the speech act" (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 25-27), which consists in encouraging customers to make a purchase. By means of this type of interactional markers, companies try to not impose themselves on consumers, thereby safeguarding the latter's negative image, and offer freedom of action in the customer's decision. Similar results have been found in other studies focusing on the use of hedges as mitigating devices in different genres such as academic discourse (Hyland 1998, 2004; Moreno 1998) and doctoral research papers (Myers 1989; Salager-Meyer 1994). However, it would be interesting to consider, in future research, which types of hedges are more or less frequent compared to other genres (e.g., use of can, may, might, likely, probably, etc.).

In relation to the Spanish toy selling websites analysed, the persuasion is linguistically achieved in a different way. In the Spanish corpus, performative verbs or verbs that explicitly state the illocutionary purpose of the speech act are more frequently used. The use of these verbs points to a culture in which directive speech acts are interpreted as positive linguistic politeness strategies. In other words, in societies more oriented to collectivist cultural values, like Spain, it is normally assumed that the receiver will carry out the act asked by the sender of the message (Vázquez 1995; Márquez 2000; Díaz 2003). In this way, the positive image of the consumer is emphasised more than in the US corpus.

However, in relation to the hypothesis presented at the beginning of this paper, one must be cautious since individualism and collectivism are considered learnt values, whereas interactional markers of the types examined are not only influenced by these dimensions, but also by others which are based on communication and not values. I am particularly referring to "high versus low context communication" (Hall 1976). These cultural orientations examine how people express and convey meaning. In this way, Spaniards have been found to operate highly on context. As fairly high-context communicators, Spanish

people rely on nonverbal, symbolic, and situational cues more than on spoken or written communication. This is the reason why they seem to favour implicit communication. In contrast, as low context communicators, North Americans tend to believe that written messages and detailed communication have more importance than information that is transmitted orally or personally (Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003, 223).

The high score of individualistic cultural values of the US and its low-context cultural orientation are reflected in the US websites studied in the predominance of attitude markers, boosters, engagement and self-reference markers. The use of *exclamations*, *attitude adjectives*, *comparisons*, *cognitive verbs*, *superlatives*, *second person pronouns* and *imperatives* together with *first-person singular pronouns* might imply that the company is transmitting its own opinions to the person visiting the website.

The predominance of these interactional metadiscourse strategies in the US corpus can be related to one fundamental point: the explicit communicative style that speakers from individualistic societies make use of to communicate (Caillat and Mueller 1996; De Mooij 2000; Usunier and Lee 2005). In individualistic cultures saying what you really think about what someone feels is considered to be a virtue, that is, the free expression of one's own thoughts is a sign of sincerity and honesty (Hofstede 1991; Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003).

The lower frequency of occurrence of these interactional metadiscourse strategies on the Spanish websites may be due to the implicit communicative style used by collectivist speakers to communicate. In societies like Spain, which hold low or moderate individualist cultural values people are more likely to take into consideration "nonverbal, symbolic, and situational cues than spoken or written communication" (Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003, 223).

Although the Spanish corpus also resorts to the interactional metadiscourse strategies proposed in the model of Hyland and Tse (2004), the frequency of this is lower than in the US corpus. As such, the results reveal that on the Spanish pages an implicit communicative style is preferred, where engagement and self-mention markers seem to be avoided in various ways such as the inclusion of a third person in discourse or depersonalisation strategies such as the personification of the company and *–se passive* constructions.

In the same vein, I have also noticed that the US websites also include references to a third person in discourse as well as personification strategies at high frequencies. This may lead us to think that the use of these strategies might form part of the constraints imposed by the conventions of this particular digital genre (Moreno 1997; Garcés-Conejos et al. 2010) and not the peculiarities of Spanish or US written cultures. Nevertheless, from an intercultural perspective, the results indicate that the Spanish corpus shows, for instance, a very low frequency of use in first-person singular references.

As far as *first-person plural references* are concerned, their frequency of occurrence is high in both corpora, albeit significantly higher in the Spanish corpus. As mentioned previously, this could be interpreted as meaning that whereas the Spanish websites make use of these first-person plural references to refer to the company as a group of individuals

that work together (De Mooij 2000; Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003; Marcus and Baumgartner 2004; Loukianenko 2008), the US websites may use this same marker from the manager or founder of the firm, who speaks on behalf of the company; however, I feel that more empirical evidence is required from future research for this interpretation to be supported.

## 6. Conclusions

The results obtained in this study point to the different individualism index scores of Spain and the US being reflected in the different types of interactional metadiscourse strategies found on the presentation page of the websites of the US and Spanish toy companies studied. However, other cultural values, like the low or high-context dependence of each society, need to be addressed in this analysis.

The Spanish websites analysed have been found to make little or no use of hedges, boosters, attitude, engagement or self-mention markers, which are the metadiscursive strategies most frequently used on the US websites studied. In fact, these linguistic strategies confirm the particular view that the English language has about the interpersonal function since, by means of these interactional strategies a social relationship is established between the company and the consumer in order for the former to persuade the latter.

These results are supported, on the one hand, by the fact that in individualistic cultures, like the US, more value is placed on the liberty of the individual and his or her freedom of action. For this reason, its speakers try to communicate information by means of an explicit style, and the use of these interactional metadiscourse strategies makes it possible for the company to convey its own ideas to the consumer.

In contrast to what happens on the US websites, the communicative style used on the Spanish websites is more implicit since, in less individualistic cultures like Spain, more value is placed on the context surrounding the message. This leads to depersonalisations and third person references being used more often in discourse than, for example, first-person singular references.

The explicit and implicit communicative styles found in the US and Spanish corpus respectively might seem contradictory when addressing issues of "positive" and "negative" linguistic politeness strategies. The results suggest that Spanish toy websites make use of performative verbs that explicitly state the illocutionary purpose of the direct speech act. As I stated in the discussion, the more collective cultural orientation of Spaniards could support the idea that Spanish companies treat consumers like friends or colleagues. In this way, Spanish firms could expect that potential customers will accede to the former's wishes, showing, in this case, "positive politeness." However, this does not necessarily imply that the customer will finally agree to purchase the product.

In contrast, the highly individualistic cultural values of the US may explain why US companies consider it important to respect the personal space of customers in social interactions. For this reason, the US toy websites analysed mitigate the intrinsic imposition

that direct speech acts may have on the consumer's face by means of hedges like modal verbs or probability adverbs. In this sense, they tend to be more in favour of "negative politeness."

All in all, the results derived from my analysis seem to indicate that the two cultures studied use metadiscourse differently although this does not invalidate the model proposed by Hyland and Tse (2004). For the purposes of this study it could be said that Hyland and Tse's model needs to be extended in order to see in what ways the interactional metadiscourse strategies they propose are shared by other countries or, on the contrary, avoided. And if they are avoided, what types of interactional strategies are used instead.

I am fully aware that this study has only focused on examining the cultural dimension of individualism and business websites belonging to the toy sector. It would therefore be interesting to conduct further research on the possible influence that other cultural dimensions (e.g., Hall's context cultural orientations 1976) may have on the interactional discourse of business websites from other industrial sectors such as food, cleaning, beauty products, etc. to check genre differences or similarities. In addition, I suggest that personal interviews with company managers from different countries are carried out in order to shed light on the impression they have when reading and interpreting the interactional discourse shown on business websites from different countries. This last issue would lead to a much more sociolinguistic study.

Finally, I would like to mention that the interdisciplinary nature of pragmatics has been one fundamental reason for carrying out this research. I hope that this study may help Spanish and US toy manufacturers to understand the professional culture of their websites, mainly with respect to the translation and linguistic adaptations that are often carried out in the internationalisation phase of the company. As we have noticed in the examples illustrated above, the Spanish websites often provide a literal translation from Spanish into English in the English version without considering the appropriate interactional metadiscourse makers that make up the particular cultural framework of the US.

Firstly, this study could help Spanish and US toy manufacturers to become aware that there are linguistic and stylistic differences in the interactional discourse of their websites. Secondly, it could enable them to identify which aspects are different and how cultural values contribute to these differences. Lastly, manufacturers could apply this knowledge to communicate efficiently and appropriately in their international business transactions and acquire intercultural communicative competence.

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