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1 **Contributions to a neurophysiology of meaning: The interpretation of**  
2 **written messages could be an automatic stimulus-reaction mechanism**  
3 **before becoming conscious processing of information.**

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# SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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## Supporting Information

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45 SECTION 0 – *About method*

46       The naturalistic approach we chose presents several difficulties, given that human  
47 communication cannot actually be observed “from outside”: it is part of us and we  
48 simultaneously belong to it; it is impossible to avoid interactions (i.e. “interference”)  
49 with the studied sample. However, for research purposes, there is an at least partial  
50 solution: an external point of view can be simulated. We designed such simulation  
51 considering that a total exclusion of personal/relational factors is illusory, even with  
52 unknown persons, given that it is impossible to take under control their emotional  
53 involvement (their subjective reactions to the survey in itself and to survey conductors,  
54 independently of any specific content). On this basis, we made three operative decisions:  
55 on the specific subject in which to involve the sample; on the materials to be employed  
56 for data collection; on the survey modalities.

57       About the subject, we involved the sample in a real world-like communication  
58 case, neutral with respect to possible personal critical issues and totally external to the  
59 sample members' lives and to their possible relationships with the survey conductors.  
60 About the materials, we employed the complete sequence of the messages exchanged in  
61 the case, full-text versions, submitting them to the sample through a specifically  
62 designed questionnaire that alternated messages and questions in a precise sequence.  
63 About the survey modalities, we tried to transform the relational weak point in a strong  
64 one: we concluded that, in the end, the most effective condition could never be the  
65 illusory neutrality; rather, it could be the possibility to act in a stress-free condition, to  
66 read messages without time pressure, to let sensations and emotions emerge and to report

67 them without any fear. It is worth delving a little further in how we carried this last  
68 decision out: a friendly, familiar environment, with a known conductor (to reduce the  
69 structural initial difficulties in human relationships); a shared programming of the survey  
70 date and hour (to get the maximum possible of comfort and relax); the possibility to  
71 answer free from any constrictions (for this, we mainly used questions with opened  
72 answers); the certainty about anonymity and the non-evaluative purposes of the survey.  
73 At the same time, the consciousness of participating to a serious work and the guarantee  
74 (for the research's purposes) of mostly uniform survey modalities.

75       Two last considerations. The first is that we define our approach as “naturalistic”  
76 in that it is aimed to explore the interpretation process in the “natural” conditions in  
77 which it is performed: for example, in their communications, human beings usually deal  
78 with (and interpret) full messages; however, current laboratory approaches are forced to  
79 privilege the use of single words or isolated short phrases because of the difficulties  
80 associated to the study of free natural language interactions. We decided to check,  
81 through our “naturalistic” approach, the possibility to complement current studies and  
82 bring something new to scientific knowledge.

83       The second consideration regards the kind of control that, through our approach,  
84 we exerted on the survey: besides the rigorously standardized data collection procedure  
85 (see this Supporting Information, [Section 1](#) and [Section 3](#)), our control mainly lied on the  
86 reliability and the homogeneity of the relational system, rather than on the (impossible)  
87 attempt to cut off the relational aspects.

**88 PART I - Materials and Method**

89

90 SECTION 1 – *The research guide-lines*

91 Object to be investigated: human communication, the process through which a  
92 receiver attributes meaning to a message (i.e. the interpretation process, the way he/she  
93 “understands” the incoming message).

94 Methodological approach: given that research on human communication (H.c.  
95 from now on) has provided, about interpretation, abundance of theoretical hypotheses  
96 along with still indefinite answers, it seems a good solution to re-start from a basic  
97 exploration, which means from the **phenomenology** of specific events in a given  
98 environment (“naturalistic” approach).

99 Action plan: (1) Submitting a real world-like case to the sample and requesting  
100 the solution of a concrete problem related to it; (2) Observing respondents’ reactions  
101 through collecting their accounts; (3) Analysing the respondents' accounts. The case  
102 should be suitable to be fully documented for the sample and its investigation should  
103 require a reasonably short time.

104 On the basis of these premises, the GUIDE-LINES for our investigation are  
105 established as it follows:

- 106 • The research will be carried out through a qualitative and quantitative  
107 statistics-based research.
- 108 • The sample will be randomly composed by adult Italians, granted with High-  
109 school degree (or upper education levels) and regardless of their student or  
110 employed (any employment) condition.

- 111 • About education level, possible exceptions only for people whose literacy,  
112 joined with their life experience, allow them to understand without effort the  
113 case documentation<sup>1</sup>.
- 114 • The sample will be engaged in an appropriately documented H.c. case and  
115 individual reactions to it will be investigated through a questionnaire. The  
116 questionnaire will end posing a **concrete problem**, referred to the case, and  
117 requiring the respondent's solution.
- 118 • The case must be **quasi-real**, not a mere laboratory exercise. So, it will be  
119 based on real world cases, remaining as close as possible to reality, at the  
120 same time avoiding any reference or hint to the original real situations. It will  
121 be a written communication case (to allow for a better control on the stimuli  
122 submitted to the participants), short enough to be taken into account complete,  
123 unabridged and accomplished.
- 124 • The sample will collect about 100 individuals and the survey sessions must  
125 not exceed the 30 – 45 minute time range. The sessions may be attended  
126 individually or in groups, but the filling of the questionnaires will always be  
127 an individual act.
- 128 • All the survey sessions will take place under the control of a conductor, who  
129 will follow a standard procedure for presenting the texts about the case and  
130 the questions (in order to send homogeneous inputs to the sample).

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12 <sup>1</sup> Actually, only 4 participants, out of the 102 composing the sample, had qualifications inferior than a  
13 High-school degree.

132 SECTION 2 – *The case: description and research’s rationale*

133        Introduction and rationale of the research. We examined, for our research, a  
134 series of real-world cases of interaction some of the authors had dealt with in their  
135 professional experience. The chosen cases were short enough to be easily handled and, at  
136 the same time, they were fully representative of the real world’s complexity. The case to  
137 be created should have consisted of a realistic problem to challenge participants with;  
138 moreover, it should have been fully documented from start to end, consisting of written  
139 messages (e-mails) only and set inside an Italian corporation. We set up our case, we  
140 named it “The employee and the architect” (as a tribute to the protagonist characters) and  
141 we drew up the research protocol (see this Supporting Information, [Section 3](#)).

142        A complete description of the case can be found ahead in this present Section. In  
143 extreme synthesis, it goes on as an exchange of written messages (5 e-mails in total)  
144 between the employee and the architect; we have submitted these messages to the sample  
145 leading its members in a two-step work. In the first step, we have asked the participants  
146 to carefully read Messages #1, #2 and #3 in sequence; then, to interpret them and the  
147 situation they outline; finally, to report and display the “concrete elements” on which  
148 their interpretations were based. The rationale was: *in vivo* observation of the  
149 interpretation process, quali-quantitative analysis and formulation of a hypothesis.

150        In the second step, we have submitted to participants the last two messages asking  
151 them to read carefully the texts, to interpret them, then to solve a problem: the last two  
152 messages were two different versions of Message #4 and the problem was to indicate  
153 which of the two could have produced the final answer ([fifth message](#)). The rationale

154 was: exploring the relationship between interpretation and action and, through a  
155 quantitative analysis, obtaining a first check of our hypothesis.

156 Case details. What follows is a complete description of the case used for our  
157 research, from its start to its end.

158 TITLE: We named the case “The employee and the architect”, as a tribute to its  
159 protagonist characters.

160 CHARACTERS:

- 161 ▪ XX – The employee. Female, line worker in an office of an Italian  
162 corporation. Her office is undergoing works regarding the heating plant.
- 163 ▪ YY – The architect. Male, executive in charge of the works. He is a colleague  
164 of XX, being himself an employee of the corporation. He has superior  
165 position and duties, with respect to her, but he belongs to another branch and  
166 has no hierarchic power on her.
- 167 ▪ Dr. KK and Dr. ZZ – Employee’s (XX) colleagues, just mentioned by the  
168 architect in reference to the works in progress.
- 169 ▪ The Colleague – A shadow character in the interaction, as he never appears  
170 during the action. The architect (YY) requests his advice about the text of one  
171 message to be sent to XX.

172 NOTE: The employee and the architect do not know each other; this interaction is  
173 their first contact, started and ended through e-mails only.

174 The STORY:



175       **Notice** – The texts of the messages that will be mentioned here below can be  
176 found in this Supporting Information, [Section 4](#). The first three messages are presented  
177 under the form of a description in order to make the whole situation more  
178 comprehensible to the reader of this Supporting Information; however, they have been  
179 submitted to the sample as full-text documents.

180       **Prologue** – Work on the heating plant is coming to its end; XX (the employee)  
181 starts the interaction by writing to the architect ([Message #1](#)). She requests an inspection  
182 for quality control on the basis of generically claimed issues.

183       YY (the architect) replies immediately ([Message #2](#)) declaring, very briefly and  
184 generically as well, that the situation has already been checked and lies under control.

185       Several weeks later, XX writes again ([Msg #3](#)) insisting for an inspection and  
186 indicating some specific issues at the basis of her claim. The tone of her message appears  
187 to be hardened and one passage seems to contain a sort of threat.

188       **Action** – YY prepares a new reply (Msg #4, “Hard” version, in short [Msg #4/H](#))  
189 but requests his colleague an advice, before sending it. The colleague accepts YY’s  
190 request and suggests sending a different version (Msg #4, “Softer” version, in short [Msg](#)  
191 [#4/S](#)).

192       The architect accepts the advice, the “Softer” Msg #4/S is sent and the case ends  
193 with a last reply of XX ([Msg #5](#)) declaring her satisfaction.

194       **NOTES:** Because of a specific choice of YY’s colleague, [Msg #4/S](#) (the “Softer”  
195 version) bears the same content of [the "Hard" \(H\) version](#) but is written in different form

196 and its topics are put in a different sequence. Although XX expresses her satisfaction, no  
197 inspection has been carried out nor it has been requested any more.

198 SECTION 3 – *The research protocol*

199       **Notice** – The texts of the messages that will be mentioned here below can be  
200 found in this Supporting Information, [Section 4](#). The first three messages are presented  
201 under the form of a description in order to make the whole situation more  
202 comprehensible to the reader of this Supporting Information; however, they have been  
203 submitted to the sample as full-text documents.

204       **The protocol:**205       INTRODUCTION

- 206       1. A case managed completely via e-mail, between an employee and a  
207           professional (the “architect”), has been set up. It concerns an interaction,  
208           related to a problem, inside an Italian corporation; the interaction lasts one  
209           month and a half. The problem developed and was completely solved through  
210           5 transactions (5 messages were exchanged, chronologically labelled from #1  
211           to #5). The employee starts the first transaction ([Message #1](#)) and concludes  
212           the interaction with the fifth one ([Message #5](#)).
- 213       2. During the action, the architect requests the opinion of a colleague of his; such  
214           request refers to a draft of the answer to Msg #3 spontaneously prepared by  
215           the architect (such draft is the first version of Msg #4, [the “Hard”/H version](#)).  
216           The colleague studies the case and proposes an alternative Msg #4 ([the](#)  
217           [“Softer”/S version](#)); the advice is accepted by the architect, the “S” version is  
218           sent and produces the expected result, as the last reaction of the employee  
219           demonstrates ([Msg #5](#)).

- 220 3. The used case is based on real cases which some of the authors had dealt with;  
221 it remains as close as possible to reality at the same time avoiding any  
222 reference or hint to the original real situations.

223 The QUESTIONNAIRE and its MANAGEMENT

- 224 4. Anonymity of respondents will be fully guaranteed during either the survey  
225 (questionnaire collection) or the analysis (data elaboration). No personal data  
226 will be asked; information that is necessary for statistical purposes (age,  
227 gender, education level and employment) will be requested as aggregated  
228 through pre-defined bins only.
- 229 5. For a better representation in the questionnaire, the case has been divided into  
230 two parts. In the first part (corresponding to the “Prologue” of the case  
231 description, see this Supporting Information, [Section 2](#)), the first 3 messages  
232 are gathered, in the same order they have been sent. These messages have  
233 been printed in sequence, in a single A4 page. The aim of this first part is to  
234 collect data about the interpretation process in general through a first set of  
235 questions. Such questions have been printed in another single A4 page (two  
236 opened questions, [#1](#) and [#2](#), the first sub-divided into three sub-questions).
- 237 6. In the second part (corresponding to the “Action” of the case description, see  
238 this SI, [Section 2](#)), the two versions of Msg #4 (the "[Hard](#)" and the "[Softer](#)"  
239 one) are presented, in separate A4 pages. They are submitted to participants in  
240 sequence (not simultaneously) and the remaining questions are printed in a  
241 last A4 page. At first ([Questions #3](#) and [#4](#)) the participants’ opinions are

242 requested (separately) about the presumable effects of each version of Msg #4  
243 on XX. In the end, after the transcription of the very brief [Msg #5](#) (the  
244 employee's last reply), participants are requested ([Final Question](#)) to indicate  
245 which version (the "[Hard](#)" or the "[Softer](#)"), in their opinion, has produced the  
246 effect showed in [Message #5](#). The aim of this second part is to collect data  
247 about the relationship between the interpretations of the alternative messages  
248 and the action (the choice) performed by participants.

249 7. All the questions (or sub-questions, if present) have been divided into two  
250 parts: in the first one, the interpretation of the respondent about one specific  
251 aspect is requested. In the second one, he/she is invited to "indicate the  
252 concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which your  
253 answer is based".

254 8. A special attention has been dedicated to the wording of the questions.  
255 Structural ambiguity of natural language implies the impossibility to  
256 formulate sentences that can be univocally interpreted by everybody, as the  
257 acknowledged Italian linguist De Mauro confirms<sup>2</sup>. Thus, any idea to pursue  
258 completely unambiguous formulations has been dropped. After the first  
259 careful formulation of the questions, two pilot-sessions will be set up for  
260 testing the questionnaire's suitability and gather indications about possible

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28 <sup>2</sup> The author ([De Mauro, 1980](#)) says that natural language is "equivocal" in etymological sense, from  
29 Latin *aeque vocare* (to name in the same way). That is: a same word can be used to refer to different  
30 things; different words can be used to indicate the same thing.

261 corrections. In addition, ex-post specific controls will discard from  
262 quantitative analysis all the possibly remained ambiguous cases.

263 9. Same attention has been dedicated to possible statistical distortion effects. For  
264 example the YY's Colleague opinion on [Msg #4/H](#) (the original, "Hard"  
265 version) could influence respondents inducing some biases in their final  
266 choice; furthermore, there could be a possible precedence effect if the two  
267 versions of Msg #4 were submitted always in the same order. On these bases,  
268 the presentation of the two versions to the participants will be  
269 counterbalanced: all the participants will be informed that they are going to  
270 see, at first, the version spontaneously prepared by the "architect". The second  
271 (the "alternative" version) will be presented as suggested to him by one of his  
272 colleagues when asked for an advice. However, about one half of the sample  
273 will actually receive the two versions in that order (first [Msg #4/H](#), then [Msg](#)  
274 [#4/S](#)); the remainder will receive them in the reverse order.

275 SURVEY and DATA COLLECTION:

276 10. All the conductors of the survey sessions (12 persons, in total) are members of  
277 the research group or in contact with it. Non-members will follow a brief  
278 training, led by one of the authors. All the conductors are committed to avoid  
279 expressing any comment about the message texts and concentrate on survey  
280 process conformity. Conductors have also to assure that the process is clear for  
281 the participants and that they understand the structure of the case and the  
282 questions. In order to minimize the speech necessities for the conductors, a

283 title page has been prepared; it contains a presentation of the survey and the  
284 main context information (see this SI, [Section 4](#)). The conductors are due to  
285 invite participants to carefully read it. In the title page, the case will be  
286 presented as a real world case.

287 11. Informed consent will be requested verbally, after the reading of the title page.

288 Written consent will not be collected for two reasons: the first is that it would  
289 imply the creation and management of a general database, paradoxically  
290 increasing, by its mere existence, the risks of accidental data diffusion. The  
291 second reason is that our data collection procedure (see also following points)  
292 anyway fully guarantees anonymity of participants. At the end of data  
293 collection, it will be impossible for everyone either to trace back participants  
294 starting from the filled questionnaires or to reconstruct the participants' list.

295 12. The 12 conductors will operate in a completely independent way and the  
296 participants will be enlisted by using their personal relationship network,  
297 extended until the third degree of separation. Enlisting requirements: adult  
298 condition (age>18 years), High-school degree at least. Exceptions about  
299 education level are accepted just for people whose literacy and life experience  
300 allow them to understand the case documentation without effort (see [Note 1](#)).

301 13. The conductors will collect questionnaires bereft of every personal indications  
302 (or even hints) related to participants. They will individually deliver the  
303 collected anonymous questionnaires to the authors' team and those documents  
304 will be randomly numbered and stored in a dedicated collection box. The

305 research activities that will follow (data entry, in order to set up a digital data  
306 base, and qualitative and quantitative analysis) will be performed on such  
307 anonymous database.

308 **NOTE:** Once the protocol defined, two successive pilot sessions have been set up  
309 (7 and 5 people respectively) and these experiences helped to progressively refine the  
310 form of the questions, until the definitive shape was reached. The texts of the messages  
311 remained always unaltered. The following [Section 4](#) presents the questions in their final  
312 form.



313 SECTION 4 – *The questionnaire: message texts and questions (English translation)*

314

<b>Questionnaire summarizing form</b>			
<i>Part / Question #</i>	<i>n. of sub-quest.</i>	<i>n. of items</i>	<i>NOTES</i>
<b>Title page</b>	---	---	Presentation of the research and general instructions to participants
<b>Statistical information</b>	---	---	Gender, age range, education level, employment
<b>Question #1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2 x 3 = 6</b>	Opened answers
<b>Question #2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	Closed answer
		<b>2</b>	Opened answers
<b>Question #3</b>	---	<b>2</b>	Opened answers
<b>Question #4</b>	---	<b>2</b>	Opened answers
<b>Final Question</b>	---	<b>1</b>	Closed answer
		<b>1</b>	Opened answer
<i>Total of 5 questions</i>	<i>Total of 8 quest. / sub-questions</i>	<i>Total of 15 items</i>	<i>Total of 2 closed answers and 13 opened answers</i>

315

316

317 **Title page**

318 First of all, welcome and thank you for joining our research.

319 The e-mails on which this study is based will be submitted to you during the present  
 320 session. They have been exchanged in a real working environment and they refer to an  
 321 interaction that occurred in real life. They are presented in their original version; their  
 322 text has not been modified to be used for this research. Of course, all the elements that  
 323 specifically refer to persons, or to the real context, have been removed or appropriately  
 324 altered for privacy reasons.

325 Your task consists in reading the messages, respecting their submission sequence.  
 326 Please, read carefully and answer the questions intuitively, not analytically (although,  
 327 not excluding some personal reflections, if necessary). Underline the text, take notes or  
 328 look back at the message text, when deemed necessary, any time you need it.

329 All the questionnaires will be anonymous. We only ask you to give us general  
 330 information about yourself, here below, for merely statistical purposes (data  
 331 disaggregation).

332 [*Questions followed on gender, age range, education level and employment (answers*  
 333 *requested through pre-defined bins only).*]

334

335 **Message #1 (description)**

336 *A female line-worker (the “employee”, named “XX”) writes a 67 word e-mail to the*  
 337 *Project Account (the “architect”) about the installation of the heating plant in her office.*  
 338 *She requires an inspection, claiming about “flaws” in the present state of the works.*  
 339 *Flaws are no better detailed. In her request, she declares that she is also speaking in the*  
 340 *name of some colleagues and she uses the expression: “we would be pleased if, at least*  
 341 *once, someone of our Corporation would come here and control...”.*

342

343 **Message #2 (description)**

344 *The Project Account (a male professional, the “architect”, named “YY”) answers to XX.*  
 345 *In his brief message (48 words) he declares regularity in the Project progress, and ends*  
 346 *with: “at the moment, the progress substantially complies with the chronogram”.*

347

348 **Message #3 (description)**

349 *XX replies to YY’s answer declaring herself totally unsatisfied. Her message (136 words)*  
 350 *presents two main features: (i) some minor flaws are listed; (ii) she expresses what*  
 351 *resembles an actual threat against YY, in the case he would not take measures regarding*  
 352 *to the presented problem (she specifically refers to a hypothetic “waste of public*  
 353 *money”, given that the Project funding involved public sources).*

354

355 **QUESTIONS #1 and #2, about Messages #1, #2, #3 (full text)**356 **1 \* Please, read Messages #1 and #2 and answer to the following questions:**357 a - What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?

358 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on  
 359 which your answer is based?

360 b - In particular, how would you define XX’s position during the interaction?

361 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on  
 362 which your answer is based?

363 c – How would you define, then, YY’s position during the interaction?

364 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on  
 365 which your answer is based?

366 **2 \* Please, read Message #3 and answer to the following questions:**367 Do you think the attitude of XX towards YY has changed, in respect to Message #1?

368 [YES/NO]

369 If it has, how would you define the new XX’s position, in respect to YY?

370 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on  
 371 which your answer is based?

372

373 **Message #4 / “H” version (*the spontaneous “Hard” version by the architect,***  
 374 ***full text*)**

375 Block #1376 From: YY (*Project Account for the heating plant works*)377 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)378 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)

379 Sent: ... [date] [hour]

380 **Subject:** R: heating plant

381

382 Dear Mrs. XX,

383 Block #2

384 I want to premise that, for the sake of a wise management of the work process, intended to  
 385 optimize the utilization of our Corporation resources (exactly, in order to avoid wasting  
 386 public money):

- 387 - Before Project start, I asked the Director of your structure (B wing of the building), Dr.  
 388 KK, to put a specific person in charge of controlling the work's progress;
- 389 - As far as I am concerned, the indicated person is, and will remain, Dr. ZZ;
- 390 - Dr. ZZ carefully planned the project development steps with us;
- 391 - Each office, situated in the B wing of the building, has been already supplied with heat-  
 392 ing systems (hardware), fully complying with the timetable agreed with Mrs. ZZ;
- 393 - The heating plant is now working, even though in provisional mode.

394 I do recommend you to send any communication, concerning the mentioned Project, to the  
 395 specific person in charge of controlling, in order to avoid (as already happened) message  
 396 exchange with personnel that is not directly and formally involved within the process.

397 Block #3

398 However, I inform you that, at the moment, the works under discussion have been suspended,  
 399 in order to enable the provisioning of the plant-control software. It will manage automatically  
 400 the heating system in the offices, including yours, regulating the warm air diffusion (in order,  
 401 as said above, to reduce any waste of money).

402 As soon as the software will be installed by the contractor, the works will come to end. By  
 403 the way, in this phase they should not affect the rooms situated in the B wing of the building  
 404 at all, but only the thermo-station.

405 All quantitative and qualitative controls, requested by the CHK form [*formal inspection*  
 406 *document*], will be carried out after the end of the works and just before their compliance to  
 407 fixed quality standards will be attested, as prescribed by the current rules.

408 Block #4

409 This said, I have found your objections very interesting. For this reason, once the real  
 410 existence of the problems you have marked will be assessed, I will certainly solve them as a  
 411 part of my duty.

412 Block #5

413 Yours sincerely

414 The Project Account

415 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

416

417

418

419 **Message #4 / “S” version (the “Softer” version suggested by YY’s colleague,**  
 420 **full text)**

421 Block #1422 From: YY (*Project Account for heating plant works*)423 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)424 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)

425 Sent: ... [date] [hour]

426 **Subject:** R: heating plant

427

428 Dear Mrs. XX,

429 Block #2

430 I remember your last message, which I have already answered, and now I really thank you for  
 431 this new one. In fact, we do believe that the attention of our colleagues, on field operating  
 432 with structures and plants we provide, is fundamental to complete our tasks at best.

433 Block #3

434 In order to optimize our contribution, I have been since the beginning asking for a unique  
 435 person in charge of controlling the works, accounted for your office’s building. This person is  
 436 Doctor ZZ (I might have already mentioned her in my previous answer even though, at  
 437 present time, I am not certain about this). Her duty is to collect all the observations expressed  
 438 by the staff about the work in progress, then to send it directly to my office. I think you  
 439 already know her and she is going to receive a copy of the present message. I thought this  
 440 would make communication easier.

441 Block #4

442 Concerning your request, you can be certain that, so far, our Project has been developed by  
 443 following all the technical and formal standards prescribed by the current rules. In addition, I  
 444 inform you that the works are not yet concluded and final checks (along with possible  
 445 inspections) are about to be carefully planned. Please, inform your colleagues about the  
 446 existence of a person in charge of control and do not hesitate to contact her in the case of  
 447 further observations or possible problems. As I said, she will return your indications to us;  
 448 this way, I assure you they will not be ignored.

449 Block #5

450 Best regards

451 The Project Account

452 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

453

454 **QUESTIONS #3 and #4, about Messages #4/H and #4/S (full text)**455 *Premise: YY prepares Message #4 as an answer to Message #3 (received from XX).*456 *Before he sends it, he consults one of his colleagues, who advises him against sending*457 *and suggests a different text (alternative Message #4).*458 **3 \* Please, read Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**459 In your opinion, what effect will this version produce on XX?

460 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which

461 your answer is based?

462 **4 \* Please, read alternative Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**463 In your opinion, what effect will the alternative version produce on XX?

464 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which

465 your answer is based?

466

467 -----

468

469

470 **Message #5 (full text)**

471 Thank you very much for your interest and for the information. That was very kind of

472 you and your answer was exhaustive.

473 Best regards

474 XX

475

476

477 **FINAL QUESTION**478 *Consider that Message #5 was the final reaction of XX and answer the following*479 *questions:*480 In your opinion, which version of Message #4 did XX receive?481 [*YY's draft / Alternative*]

482 Could you indicate the concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which

483 your answer is based?

484

485 SECTION 5 – *Case structure and communication critical points*

486 Focusing on the communication aspects of our case, we can synthesize its  
487 structure as in [Table S1](#), which accounts also for the critical points of the interaction  
488 between the employee and the architect. Such scheme can be translated in plain language  
489 as it follows: apparently, the employee (working for the architect’s same corporation but  
490 belonging to a different branch, with no executive commission) was complaining,  
491 through [Message #1](#), about the quality of the heating plant installation. However, some  
492 lacks of matter (for example the claimed “flaws” were not specified) suggest to figure out  
493 possible different reasons.

494 The architect’s first answer ([Message #2](#)) can be interpreted as an attempt to  
495 quickly end the interaction; however, the reaction of the employee ([Message #3](#))  
496 demonstrates the failure of this tactic. It is particularly worth quoting a possible threat  
497 contained in that message, considering that XX literally writes: “if the work had regarded  
498 my home... there’s a matter of public money...”. She was hinting to the fact that the  
499 Project funding involved public sources. All this should arouse alarm and caution.

500 On the contrary, the architect’s spontaneous reaction (Message #4, “Hard”  
501 version, in short [Msg #4/H](#)) follows the escalation initiated by the employee: he  
502 squabbles, with a repeated retaliation, about the question of money; he expresses doubts  
503 about the fondness of the employee’s statements (“once the real existence of the  
504 problems you have marked will be assessed, I will certainly solve them...”); he  
505 substantially refuses to establish any relationship with the employee, putting just a hint of  
506 appreciation at the end of the message (“This said, I have found your objections very

507 interesting...”), at the same time counterbalancing it with his doubts. The most probable  
508 result should be an escalation of the conflict.

509       Now, if we analyse in deep [Msg #4/H](#) (the “Hard” version of Msg #4) structure,  
510 we can detect in it five main content blocks (they are marked through specific sub-  
511 headings along the message text). [Msg #4/S](#) (the “Softer” version, suggested to YY by  
512 one colleague of his) maintains the same content while its written form is reviewed and  
513 its sequence modified. In practice, the “alternative message” [#4/S](#) presents the same  
514 content blocks of [Msg #4/H](#) in a different order and under a new written form. We have  
515 synthesized a comparison of the two structures in [Table S2](#).

516       The substantial difference between the “Hard” and the “Softer” versions of  
517 Message #4 is founded on the diverse approach to the arising conflict: while the “Hard”  
518 spontaneous reaction of YY approached it through a direct confrontation, the alternative  
519 “Softer” version maintains the same information content but approaches the relation with  
520 XX in terms of welcome and acknowledgement.

521

**522 PART II - The collected data**

523

524 SECTION 6 – *About the sample*

525 Our work was aimed to explore the process of message interpretation, sharing the  
526 general assumption that the communication process is universally uniform. We mean that  
527 human communication, although its expressions appear extremely variable, must  
528 however stem from a unique base of fundamental factors and processes. Something like a  
529 limb in a heterogeneous sample of humans: its aspect looks very different in function of  
530 sex, age, size, health and so on; nonetheless, it is based on a unique anatomical and  
531 functional scheme. For this, the sample's representativeness with respect to the Italian  
532 people was not critical. Thus, we decided to increase, as much as possible, the amount of  
533 participants while easing the sampling process (see research protocol, in this Supporting  
534 Information, [Section 3](#), point 12).

535 We recruited 102 participants in our sample, whose characteristics are displayed  
536 in manuscript Tables 1-3. The total sample composition (manuscript Table 1) shows an  
537 exceeding rate of women vs. men and of Graduates/Post-graduates vs. High-school  
538 degree granted members (columns "Education", "Gr" bin vs. "Dg" bin; people granted  
539 with Elementary degree are inessential, only 4 out of 102). We also highlight the high  
540 rate of students and unemployed vs. employed members (columns "Employment", "E"  
541 and "F" bins vs. others). For these reasons, even if sample statistical analysis is less  
542 relevant in our work, we have drawn more balanced sub-samples from the total sample.  
543 The statistical distribution results, observed on the total sample, have been verified on



544 sub-samples every time it turned out necessary. The first sub-sample (“AGE”,  
545 manuscript Table 2) is exclusively composed by people over 29 years-old (age bins B, C  
546 and D, excluding A; in total, 60 members). The second one (“EMPLOYMENT”,  
547 manuscript Table 3) is exclusively composed by employed people (A to D bins,  
548 excluding E and F, i.e. students and unemployed people; in total, 65 members).

549 SECTION 7 – *The harvest*

550 In this section we present in detail an assessment about the amount of the  
551 collected materials (“how much” the respondents have written in their answers, the  
552 “physical amount” of the answers).

553 Starting data analysis, we firstly transcribed into a .xls file the filled  
554 questionnaires; such file turned into 1 tab containing 8 data-sheets, one for each main  
555 question or data source (information for disaggregating data, Questions [#1-a](#), [#1-b](#), [#1-c](#),  
556 [#2](#), [#3](#), [#4](#), [Final question](#)). Secondly, we reviewed transcriptions with regard to text  
557 correction (typos) and we harmonized data entries (different operators had produced little  
558 differences in managing spaces near punctuation marks and in using suspension points,  
559 abbreviations and similar details). At this point, it was possible to measure the collected  
560 data amount:

- 561     ▪ Paper archive: each participant provided a 6 pages long document. Four pages  
562         contained the information materials (the title page and the transcriptions of the  
563         messages). In a few cases, on those pages, respondents had written very short  
564         notes and underlined some words. The other two pages contained the answers,  
565         which are the actual data source of our research. In conclusion, we collected  
566          $102 \times 2 = 204$  handwritten pages containing data to be processed.
- 567     ▪ Digital archives: they contain the transcriptions of opened answers (harmon-  
568         ized text), that returned totals of 16,094 words, corresponding to 89,685 char-  
569         acters (spaces excluded) or 104,200 characters (spaces included).

- 570       ▪ In order to let the readers estimate the amounts better, we calculated that using  
571 Times New Roman font, 12 size characters, space 1, with a “letter” page  
572 format and 1” for all margins, the opened answer texts should be occupying  
573 about 26.7 to 27.4 pages (range of 3,800-3,900 characters per page, spaces in-  
574 cluded, text only, no picture, table or main titles).
- 575       ▪ We also calculated the filling rate of the questionnaires (opened answers) in  
576 the following way: we excluded the two opened items of [Question #2](#) (an-  
577 swering the opened part of the question was under condition and it was per-  
578 formed by just 60% of the sample); then, we recorded 27 unanswered items on  
579 an expected total of 102 participants x 11 items = 1,122 answers (see SI, Sec-  
580 tion 4, questionnaire [summarizing form](#)). The filling rate is:  $(1,122 -$   
581  $27) / 1,122 \times 100 = 97.6\%$ .
- 582       ▪ This last information says which percentage of the opened questions received  
583 an answer but says nothing about the length of those answers. We can calcu-  
584 late an average length in two ways: the first is dividing the total words by the  
585 amount of participants and, then, by the amount of the opened items. The res-  
586 ult is  $16,094 / 102 / 13 = 12.1$  words per respondent per item (answers to [Question](#)  
587 [#2](#) are included in this calculation). In order to appreciate this value better we  
588 can follow the second way: one page, of the previously approximated 27, has  
589 typically 44 lines, which means an average of about 1 typed line per respond-  
590 ent per item ( $44 \times 27 / 13 / 102 = 0.90$  typed lines, answers to [Question #2](#) in-  
591 cluded). 1 typed line is up to 90 characters (spaces included) or about 10 to 15

592 words; a satisfactory result, about the accomplishment of their commission by  
593 the sample members.

594 ▪ About the closed answers, only the [Final question](#) is relevant (for the closed  
595 part of [Question #2](#), see previous points), and 101 out of 102 answered to it.

596 In the end: survey returned a good harvest, consistent with our expectations and  
597 with the research needs.

598 SECTION 8 – *Data quality check: compliance with research requirements and*  
 599 *technical-theoretical questions related to answer interpretation*

600 a – Answer general features and compliance with research requirements. A first  
 601 noticeable aspect is that it is not possible, in any of the answers, to find overt doubts,  
 602 uncertainty statements, declarations of impossibility to answer, indications of equivalent  
 603 alternatives<sup>3</sup>. For each respondent, his/her own interpretation seems to be **the only**  
 604 **available option**. This happens in spite of the fact that about 28% of the total sample  
 605 describes the effects of the "[Hard](#)" and of the "[Softer](#)" versions of Msg #4 as similar: for  
 606 an 18% (18 people) they both will solve or ease the contrast; for a 10% (10 people) they  
 607 both will escalate the contrast (see this SI [Section 11](#) and [Table S5](#), “Total sample”  
 608 columns, H+/S+ and H-/S- cells). This observation confirms that the answers are  
 609 spontaneous and that our survey collected subjective perceptions, instead of elaborated  
 610 rational reflections. That is what we aimed to, while following the research guide-lines  
 611 and protocol (see this SI, [Sections 1](#) and [3](#))<sup>4</sup>.

612 Another important point is that no one of the sample members uses any technical  
 613 word or expression. About this, it is worth considering how participants reacted to the  
 614 two points which, from a communication slant, can be rated as the most critical: the  
 615 possible threat XX expressed in [Message #3](#); the squabbling and the personal attack by

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63 <sup>3</sup> Just 1 participant (out of 102) declares some uncertainties in his final choice, writing that the final  
 64 effect (as it appears in [Message #5](#)) could be obtained both with the “Hard” or the “Softer” version  
 65 of Message #4. Nevertheless, while answering to the other questions, his statements are in all similar  
 66 to the other participants’ ones.

67 <sup>4</sup> Exactly in order to facilitate such result, in the actual survey sessions (lasting range: 20 to 45  
 68 minutes) no discussion about the answers was allowed before the filled in questionnaires had been  
 69 collected by the conductor; in addition, no further contact with the questionnaires was permitted  
 70 after the sessions were over.

616 YY against XX in [Message #4/H](#) (see also this SI [Section 5](#) and [Table S1](#)). Even if some  
617 participants refer to these passages in their answers, none stresses them as particularly  
618 critical and almost none labels them as “threat” or “personal attack”. Finally, while  
619 examining the answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and to the [Final Question](#), we found that  
620 about one fourth of the sample (mean for the three questions 26.5%, range 16% - 36%)  
621 overtly stated, at least once, the impossibility to analytically answer to the second part of  
622 the questions (which requested to point out the “concrete elements” that induced the  
623 answer to the first part). These respondents describe their answers to the first part of the  
624 questions as the result of “a general impression”, “a sensation/a perception”; in other  
625 cases they present such answers as “an opinion drawn from the whole message” or  
626 something similar. These observations confirm the general naïve condition of the sample  
627 about human communication (another feature requested by our research plan).

628       b – *About the questionnaire interpretation*. Interpretation problems, related to the  
629 questionnaires, are essentially of two kinds: interpretation of the questionnaire questions  
630 by the sample; interpretation of the sample answers by the research team. Following here,  
631 two selected examples of the first kind:

- 632       1. [Question #1](#) (“What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?”) – It has  
633       been interpreted, in certain cases, in terms of interpersonal relationship, in  
634       other cases in terms of organizational position or professional profile.
- 635       2. [Questions #1](#) and [#2](#), first part (each containing indications for focusing on a  
636       specific message, out of the first three) – Actually, a large part of the sample

637 answered ignoring indications and simultaneously referring to all the three  
638 messages.

639 Here, two examples of the second kind:

- 640 3. [Question #1](#) (“What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?”) – In  
641 one of the answers, [Message #2](#) is defined as “bureaucratic”; however, it is  
642 impossible to understand if this adjective is used with a technical meaning  
643 (referring to a normal interaction inside an office) or with a relational one  
644 (defining a conflict, with YY using formality to resist to XX’s action). We  
645 found other similar cases.
- 646 4. [Question #2](#), first part (requesting if, after comparing [Message #3](#) with  
647 [Message #1](#), the respondent considers XX’s position as “changed”) – It is  
648 interesting to see that 41 people (40% of the sample) answered “NO – Not  
649 changed”, and 61 (60%) answered “YES – It has changed”. These answers are  
650 nonetheless unsuitable for deep quantitative analysis because of the different  
651 interpretation of the word “changed”. For example the answer “YES” (the  
652 position has changed) may correspond to the actual perception of an escalated  
653 interaction; however, it may also be simply connected with attention on  
654 isolated linguistic elements (like some technical terms, introduced in [Message](#)  
655 [#3](#) but absent in [#1](#)). The answer “NO” (no change detected) could mean that  
656 the respondent does not actually perceive any difference; it may also indicate  
657 that the differences, clearly detected relationship-wise, are nevertheless

658            considered scarcely effective on the respective organizational positions of XX  
659            and YY.

660            As stated in the research protocol (previous [Section 3](#), point 8.), given the  
661 impossibility of a completely unambiguous formulation of concepts in natural language,  
662 we ex-post discarded from quantitative analyses all the unsuitable data.



663 SECTION 9 – *Data quality check: analysis of the collected data distribution*

664 In order to check the existence of possible imbalances in the collected data, we  
665 explored the distribution of the answer texts with respect, by one hand, to the  
666 questionnaire questions/sub-questions and, by the other hand, to the respondents. We  
667 quantified these texts through the amount of words and characters contained in the filled  
668 questionnaires. We remind that each question/sub-question was divided into two items;  
669 when we refer to “totals”, we mean that the presented data are the result of summing  
670 values related to the “strict” answer (first item, i.e. first part of the question) and values  
671 related to the indicated “concrete elements” (second item, i.e. second part of the  
672 question).

673 a – *Text amount distribution with respect to items*. The results of this first analysis  
674 are displayed in [Table S3](#) and [Fig. S1](#). [Table S3](#) shows totals and some statistical indexes  
675 with regards to the distribution of the answer text amounts on questions/sub-questions.  
676 Data referred to all the answers (left part) are compared with those excluding [Question](#)  
677 [#2](#) (right part). The reason of such exclusion: answering was under condition and  
678 [Question #2](#) was answered by only a part of the sample. In order to investigate the  
679 distribution shape, we drew the histogram of [Fig. S1](#), which displays the percent  
680 distribution of text amounts (in terms of words and characters, [Question #2](#) excluded)  
681 with respect to the questionnaire items. It shows evident lower levels for [Questions #1-b](#)  
682 and [#1-c](#) (whose minimum, all the same, is around 7%); the rest of the values seesaws  
683 between 9% and 11% (the general percent mean, per item, is  $100:11=9.1\%$ , see [Table](#)  
684 [S3](#), right part, “% Gen. means per item” row).

685 About this, we must consider that several respondents answered in short to [sub-](#)  
686 [questions #1-b](#) and [#1-c](#), just indicating some references to the previous sub-question  
687 ([#1-a](#), indeed having the highest values). Thus we prefer to use, for comparing different  
688 items, values referring to the percent mean of the three sub-questions of [Question #1](#), that  
689 is 8.3% both for words and for characters (SI = spaces included). On the whole, we have  
690 a range oscillating between 8.3% and 11.1% (for words) or 11.3% (for characters). No  
691 meaningful difference is recordable; the distribution of the answer texts with respect to  
692 the questionnaire items has an almost rectangular shape and can be assessed as  
693 satisfactorily uniform. Actually, no question at all has been neglected by respondents.

694 b – *Sample distribution with respect to the text amounts*. The results of this  
695 analysis are displayed in [Table S4](#) and [Fig. S2](#) and [S3](#). [Table S4](#) shows totals and some  
696 statistical indexes referred to the amounts of text (in terms of words and characters,  
697 [Question #2](#) excluded) provided by respondents through their answers. Data are  
698 displayed separating values referred to the first item of the questions (“strict” answer)  
699 from those referred to the second one (“concrete elements”). In order to investigate the  
700 distribution shape, we drew two histograms, in which participants have been grouped in  
701 bins referred to words (30-word bins, [Fig. S2](#)) and characters (200-character bins, [Fig.](#)  
702 [S3](#), SI=spaces included) amounts. The histogram shapes have features comparable to a  
703 bell-curve, even though imperfect (see statistical details in the figure captions). Data  
704 uphold the idea of differences mainly due to spontaneous random variations and lead to  
705 the conclusion that also such distribution can be considered thoroughly acceptable (no  
706 participants seem to have neglected their commission).

**707 PART III - Added materials**

708

709 SECTION 10 – *Analysis of some indicated component distributions*

710 In this Section we detail the results of our check on the distribution of the  
711 components indicated by participants, searching for possible imbalances that could  
712 contradict our findings presented in the main text (about components, see manuscript,  
713 Section “Results/1”, Sub-section *Answers to the second input of the questions*).

714 Firstly, we have checked the percent distribution of components under two  
715 profiles: (i) With respect to questions/sub-questions of the questionnaire ([Fig. S4](#), which  
716 presents an almost rectangular shape, showing that no question has been privileged or  
717 neglected in the participants' indications) ; (ii) With respect to component types ([Fig. S5](#),  
718 types approximately ranked by physical dimension, histogram presenting an almost  
719 “bell-curve” shape, hinting to a spontaneous variability of the sample).

720 Secondly, we have checked the percent distribution of the sample under two  
721 profiles: with respect to the amount of component types employed ([Fig. S6](#)) and with  
722 respect to the amount of components indicated ([Fig. S7](#)). Both the histograms show “bell  
723 curve” shapes, which we assumed due to the spontaneous variability of the sample,  
724 without special imbalances to be considered.

725

726

727 SECTION 11 – *Complement materials on coherence investigation*

728 In this Section we present some complement data, and the related analysis,  
729 referred to the investigation of the coherence among participants' interpretations and  
730 choices.

731 a – *From the interpretation of Message #4 two versions to the coherence*  
732 *assessment*. In this sub-section we report some complement data regarding the passage  
733 from the interpretations of the two Msg #4 versions (the “Hard”/H and the “Softer”/S) to  
734 the conceiving and using of the “coherence” statistical indicator (coherence between the  
735 interpretations provided by participants and the final choice they expressed).

736 The interpretations of the “Hard” and “Softer” versions are expressed in terms of  
737 predictions about their effects on XX through the dummy variable “Expected effects”,  
738 which can take the values “+” (if the interpretation entails the prediction of solving or  
739 easing the conflict) or “-” (if the interpretation entails the prediction of a surge or  
740 escalation of the conflict). [Table S5](#) displays data in a dichotomous representation and  
741 shows that there is a clear convergence on the “H-/S+” combined prediction (further  
742 details in manuscript, Section “Results/2”, Sub-section *The coherence between*  
743 *interpretation and choice*).

744 [Table S6](#) displays the participants' combined predictions cross-checked with the  
745 final choice (i.e. the answer to the Final Question, asking which of the two versions could  
746 elicit the final XX's reaction, reported by Message #5). The most frequent combined  
747 prediction (H-/S+) appears to be strongly associated to the “Softer” message choice

748 (further details in manuscript, Section “Results/2”, *Sub-section The coherence between*  
749 *interpretation and choice*).

750 [Table S7](#) displays the scale of the coherence indicator, i.e. the levels through  
751 which the coherence between, on the one hand, the interpretations of the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and  
752 the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) versions of Message #4; and, on the other hand, the final choice, is rated  
753 (see manuscript for details about the definitions of the four levels of coherence set by the  
754 authors). The use of this scale allowed the study of the sample distribution with regards  
755 to the aforementioned coherence.

756 b – *Graphic representations complement materials*. In this sub-section some  
757 complement materials are presented regarding some graphic representations of sample  
758 distributions with respect to the coherence between the predictions about the effects of  
759 the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) version of Msg #4 and the final choice between  
760 them.

761 In [Fig. S8-S9-S10-S11](#) each histogram compares the percent distributions of “H”  
762 and “S” choosers with respect to the aforementioned coherence (expressed through the  
763 coherence indicator). Each histogram regards a specific sub-sample; the displayed sub-  
764 samples are: Male, Female, High-School degree granted, Graduated participants. All the  
765 histograms show a clear difference in the distribution shape of “H” with respect to “S”  
766 choosers (further details in manuscript, Section “Results/2”, *Sub-section The coherence*  
767 *between interpretation and choice*).

768 In addition, [Table S8](#) and [Table S9](#) contain the source data for the manuscript  
769 Fig.7 and Fig.8, which display, for the sub-samples “Age” and “Employment”, the same  
770 kind of histograms of [Fig. S8-S9-S10-S11](#).

771 SECTION 12 – *The “block preference” analysis*

772       The second indicator we have used (block preference indicator), was built starting  
 773 from the consideration (this SI, [Sections 4](#) and [5](#)) that the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and the [“Softer” \(S\)](#)  
 774 version of Message #4 contain the same content blocks (it was an overt decision of YY’s  
 775 “colleague”), differing for the order of presentation and for linguistic form. Each block is  
 776 identified as concerning a given content (see this SI, [Section 5](#) and [Table S2](#)). Then, we  
 777 investigated about possible differences regarding the attention paid by “H” and “S”  
 778 choosers to different blocks, while answering to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) (predictions of the  
 779 messages’ effects on XX). Our goal was to explore finer characteristics in the choice  
 780 process. Specifically, we intended to verify if the different choices (“H” or “S”) were  
 781 linked to differences in focusing on the blocks or in detecting diverse characteristics  
 782 inside same blocks. In the first case the different contents, ascribable to the different  
 783 blocks, would lead the process; in the second case, other factors would play a critical  
 784 role.

785       To build the block preference indicator we, at first, examined the answers to  
 786 [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and highlighted all the direct references to [Message “H”](#) and  
 787 [Message “S”](#) texts (i.e. sentences in quotation marks or undoubtedly referring to clearly  
 788 identifiable passages). Then, we associated them to the text blocks. Results from this part  
 789 of the analysis are displayed in [Tables S10-S13](#)<sup>5</sup>; they contain clear indications about the

---

91 <sup>5</sup> [Tables S10](#) and [S11](#) display data with regards to the amount of **references** to each block  
 92 expressed by participants. In [Table S10](#), totals for each block and each evaluated message (as  
 93 well as general totals) can be higher than the people amount, given that each person can express  
 94 more than one references. [Tables S12](#) and [S13](#) display data with regards to the amount of  
 95 **participants** that referred to each block. In [Table S12](#), totals for each block and each evaluated  
 96 message must be inferior to the participants’ amount; however, the general totals can be higher,  
 97 given that each person could refer to more than one block.

790 message blocks which the attention of participants has fallen upon. We will base our  
 791 analysis on [Table S12](#) data; blocks are displayed along with the texts of the [“Hard” \(H\)](#)  
 792 and the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) versions of Message #4; a comparison among them is presented in  
 793 [Table S2](#).

794       Regarding the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) message blocks, both “H” and “S” choosers express the  
 795 same preference, as their attention is mainly attracted by [Block #2](#) (from both the  
 796 versions of Msg #4) in a similar proportion:  $(13+9)/(21+11)$ , about 70%, for “H”  
 797 choosers;  $(10+43)/(17+65)$ , about 65%, for “S” choosers. Conversely, with regard to the  
 798 [“Softer” \(S\)](#) version, “H” and “S” choosers split. Indeed, “H” choosers focus on [Blocks](#)  
 799 [#2](#) and [#3](#) (converted numbers<sup>6</sup>) in a large majority:  $(6+10+7+3)/(18+14)$ , more than  
 800 80%. “S” choosers focus on [Blocks #3](#) and [#4](#) in a minor but still strongly prevailing  
 801 proportion:  $(34+3+35+0)/(95+7)$ , a little more than 70%. The principal differences  
 802 regarding [Block #2](#) and [Block #4](#) are the following: [Block #2](#) is the paragraph through  
 803 which YY refuses to engage XX’s request and re-addresses XX to another account (ZZ)  
 804 inside the organisation. Both “H” and “S” choosers give [Block #2](#) a prevalent attention,  
 805 when they read it in the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) message. However, when they read it in the [“Softer”](#)  
 806 [\(S\)](#) version, we see that “H” choosers maintain their preference (with a little shift towards  
 807 [Block #3](#), containing specific information) while “S” choosers pay the minimum of

---

100 <sup>6</sup> We remind that Message “S” maintained the same content of Message “H”, and that content  
 101 was divided into analogous text blocks, but varying their sequence (besides their written form).  
 102 For reliable comparing, it has been necessary to give each “S” block a “converted number”, that  
 103 is the same of the correspondent block in Message “H” (see this SI, [Section 5](#), and [Table S2](#),  
 104 extreme right column). From now on, until express notice, all the numeric references to “S”  
 105 blocks must be intended as converted numbers.



808 attention to it (18+4=22 references) moving towards [Block #3](#) and [#4](#) (34+3=37 and  
809 35+0=35 references respectively).

810 [Block #4](#) is the paragraph expressing YY's relational acceptance toward XX; in  
811 Message "H", it is placed at the end, immediately before the form of salute, and is  
812 scarcely considered by both sides (even if, as usual, in different proportions). Reading it  
813 in Message "S" (where it comes as second, immediately after the form of address), we  
814 see that "H" choosers confirm their neglecting while "S" choosers pay great attention to  
815 it. In other words, "H" choosers give constantly their preference to YY's refuting and, a  
816 little less, to information providing. "S" choosers vary their preferences according to the  
817 message and they seem to attribute importance to the relational block just in Message  
818 "S", even if it is present in Message "H", too.

819 What does this result mean? Data seemed to be insufficient for drawing reliable  
820 conclusions; for this reason, we returned to the answers' texts (answers to [Questions #3](#)  
821 and [#4](#), in particular the second item, "concrete elements") and discovered what it  
822 follows. First, the apparent convergence of "H" and "S" choosers behaviour, about their  
823 taking into account Message "H" (both choosers preferentially focused on [Block #2](#)), is  
824 not real: almost all "S" choosers rate the impact of [Block #2 from Message "H"](#) on XX-  
825 YY conflict as negative **for relational reasons**. It is notable that their answers are about  
826 an information that YY gives to XX (Dr. ZZ assuming a role of account) but they refer  
827 quite exclusively to the relational impact of the passage. In this way, choosers behave  
828 homogeneously and coherently select Message "S".

829           Conversely, “H” choosers clearly split: on the one hand, 12 of them (out of 24,  
830 50%, see manuscript Table 14, left column, L and LM rows) express, on the [“Hard” \(H\)](#)  
831 message, the same negative rating of “S” choosers (XX-YY conflict escalation) and for  
832 the same reasons (relation aspects), too. Nevertheless, they eventually choose that same  
833 Message “H” providing various justifications for their choice. On the other hand, 12 of  
834 them (50%, see manuscript Table 14, left column, MG and G rows) rate the impact of  
835 Message “H” on XX-YY conflict as positive. Coherently, they choose that message but  
836 indicate final effects of different nature: XX should be “calmed”, because of the great  
837 quantity of information received. However, she could also be sorted out, just stopped  
838 despite her dissatisfaction. These 12 people behave as if they were thinking that  
839 information is what it matters and they pay little attention to relational aspects. Such  
840 situation reminds the differences between “H” and “S” choosers’ behaviours highlighted  
841 by coherence indicator analysis (specifically, the sample distribution with respect to  
842 coherence level).

843           We successively noted that a minority of “S” choosers, while evaluating the  
844 [“Hard” \(H\)](#) message, focused on [Block #4](#) (the relational acceptance passage) and rated  
845 it, overwhelmingly, negative (4+15=19, see [Table S12](#), Block #4 row, column “S”  
846 choosers/”H” evaluation). Some of them, for example, justify their evaluation  
847 interpreting that YY overtly declares that he does not trust XX, given that he says he  
848 reserves himself to check for the real existence of the problem, before intervening<sup>7</sup>. They

---

110 <sup>7</sup> We observe that, as widely discussed in the manuscript (specially in the Discussion section),  
111 the question is not linked to the information *per se*, nor it regards YY’s right to control. The  
112 question is “the fact that” YY decided to overtly declare, in a certain point of his message and  
113 under a certain form, his doubt and his intentions.

849 do not pay any importance to the formal relational acceptance that [Block #4](#) contains.  
850 Moving to Message “S” evaluations, we face apparent divergent behaviours, as “H” and  
851 “S” choosers focus on different blocks; nevertheless, this appearance covers an actual  
852 continuity with what we observed about the evaluations on Message “H”. For example,  
853 “S” choosers that focus on [Message “S”/Block #4](#) (we remind this is the “converted”  
854 number, corresponding to the original #2, see [Table S2](#)) express positive rates for  
855 relational reasons; quite homogeneously, they hold this block responsible for solving the  
856 conflict and they constantly describe the effects of the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) message (and its  
857 [Block #4](#) in particular) with words like “acceptance”, “XX satisfaction”, “reassuring”,  
858 “XX will feel listened to”, “acknowledgement”, “appreciation”. Conversely, “H” chooser  
859 behaviour, once again, is split: those who, regardless of their choice, rate “S” effects as  
860 positive ( $10+5=15$ , see manuscript Table 14, left column, L and MG rows), express their  
861 evaluations in terms which are very similar to those of “S” choosers: “satisfaction” of  
862 XX, “reassuring”, “calming”, “attention given” and so on. Nine of them, who deem “S”  
863 as negative ( $2+7=9$ , see manuscript Table 14, left column, LM and G rows), give the  
864 maximum of importance to XX notifying the necessity to refer to a different person (Dr.  
865 ZZ). Only in 2 or 3 cases we found generic comments about the excessively “diplomatic”  
866 form of Message “S”.

867 All these observations summed up, our investigation through the second indicator  
868 helps us to answer the initial question: if the choice between Message “H” and Message  
869 “S” can be linked to differences in block focusing or to different characteristics detected  
870 inside same focused blocks. Indeed, even though our observations seem to be pointing to

871 the second option, we got the impression that such formulation could result weak and  
872 that the observed processes cannot be restrained to such dichotomy. Then, how can we  
873 explain our observations? The picture can be synthesized as it follows:

- 874       ▪ When predicting Message “H” effects, both “H” and “S” choosers mainly  
875       focus on the same block but they are attracted by different characteristics: “H”  
876       choosers by its information content; “S” choosers by its relational impact.
- 877       ▪ When predicting Message “S” effects, “H” and “S” choosers mainly focus on  
878       different blocks. However, their answers show that such behaviour is linked to  
879       the attraction they feel towards the same characteristics that stimulated them  
880       in the previous case: “H” choosers insist on privileging information content  
881       (and [Blocks #2](#) and [#3](#), that concentrate the information); “S” choosers shift  
882       towards new blocks that make evident the relational care of YY with regards  
883       to XX ([Blocks #3](#) and [#4](#), converted numbers, see [Note 6](#)).

884       One last aspect to be cleared: the second point contains, besides the specific  
885 divergence in focusing, a new example of the first case, i.e. the same focusing joined to  
886 attention paid to different characteristics. Actually, both “H and “S” choosers focus also  
887 on [Block #3](#) (converted number) of the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) message, that is labelled as  
888 “Information” in [Table S2](#). However, even though that block undoubtedly contains  
889 information, the two versions present it in different ways. Confronting the texts, we can  
890 easily verify that the “H” version bears just technical and formal contents while the “S”  
891 version pays attention to present the information as a “service” for the colleagues.  
892 Evidently, respondents jointly take such aspect into account but (as usual) they interpret

893 it in different ways. As a matter of fact, “H” choosers mainly highlight the **information**  
894 that “the works are not yet concluded and final checks... are about to be carefully  
895 planned”; “S” choosers mainly emphasize the **reassurance** (a purely relational aspect)  
896 that YY expressly gives to XX with his words “I assure you [that your indications] will  
897 not be ignored”.

898         In synthesis, what we found is that, about focusing on blocks, the differences, as  
899 well as the convergence, are apparent and the attention of participants seems to be  
900 attracted by those blocks that can “resound” something they are possibly looking for,  
901 something pre-existent. What drives the focusing is not the mere information content of  
902 the blocks. Once more, we have observed nothing else than a “disassembling” operation  
903 (see manuscript for details). In doing so, we have collected two examples of what kind of  
904 “pre-existing blueprints” (in some way present in the actors’ central nervous system) can  
905 orient focusing and explain the different approaches employed by “H” or “S” choosers:  
906 the first mainly focus on content or context aspects; the second ones mainly focus on  
907 relational aspects.

908

909 **References**

910 De Mauro T. 2003 (1980). *Guida all'uso delle parole*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

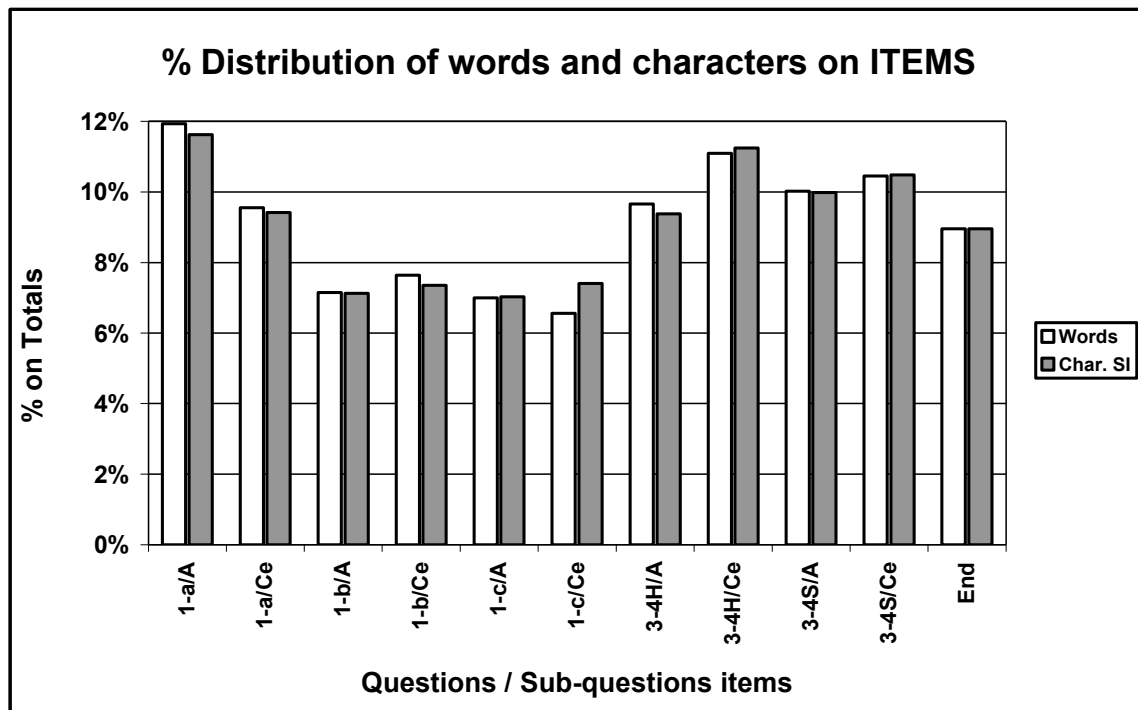
911

912

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION Figures

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917 **Figure S1: Percent distribution of words and characters on question items ([Question](#)**

918

**[#2](#) excluded).**919 [Legend: [1-a](#), [1-b](#), [1-c](#) = Answers to sub-questions of [Question #1](#); 3-4/H, 3-4/S =920 Answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) referred to [Message "H"](#) (the "Hard" version of Msg #4)921 or to [Message "S"](#) (the "Softer version"); End = [Final question](#); A = "Strict" answers; Ce

922 = Concrete elements; Char.SI = Characters (spaces included)]

923

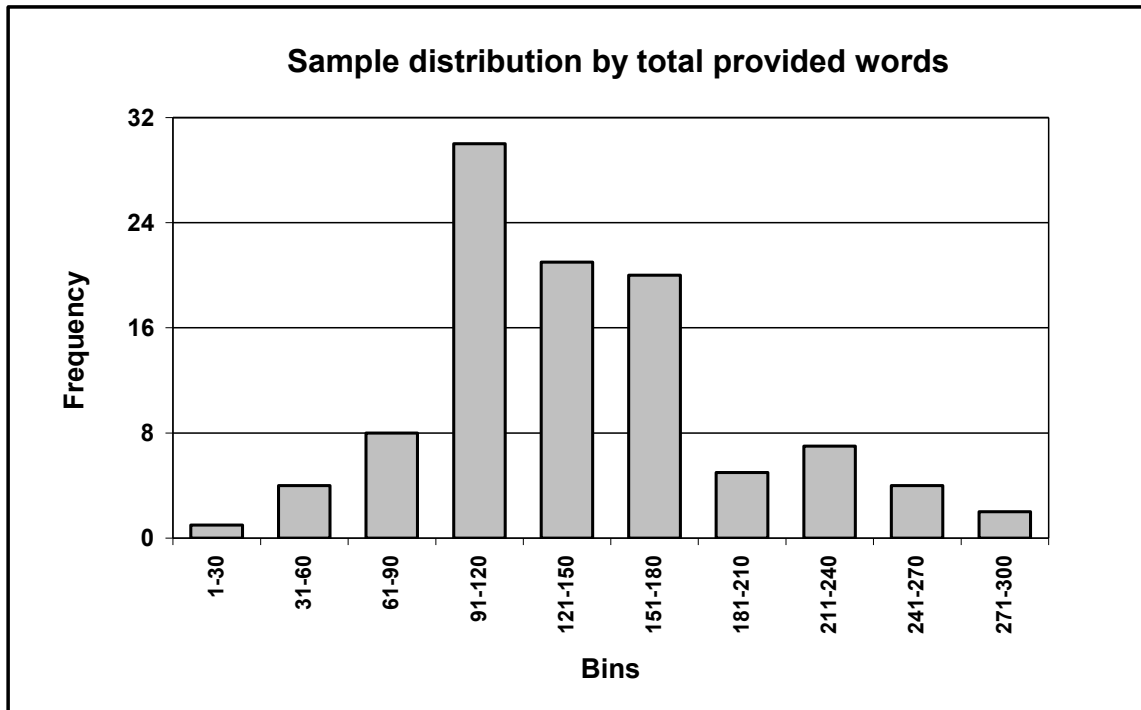
924 This histogram shows that the word and character percent amounts resulting from the

925 respondents' answers vary, with respect to items, from 6.6% to 11.9% (words) and from

926 7.0% to 11.6% (characters, spaces included). The range reduces to 8.3%-11.1% (words)  
927 and 8.3%-11.3% (characters SI) if the three sub-questions of [Question #1](#) are grouped  
928 together and their mean is considered (see text for details). The amounts appear to be  
929 distributed in an almost rectangular distribution (i.e. in a satisfactorily uniform shape)  
930 across the questions of the questionnaire. On the whole, no item seems to be definitely  
931 privileged, or neglected, by participants.



932



933

934

935 **Figure S2: Sample distribution with respect to total provided words ([Question #2](#)**

936

**excluded).**

937 The histogram shows how the sample is distributed with respect to the amount of words

938 provided by participants. The participants are grouped in 30-word bins. Totals (“strict”

939 answers + concrete elements indications) are displayed. The main statistical indexes of

940 the distribution are the following (SD = Standard deviation; CV(%) = percent Coefficient

941

of Variation):

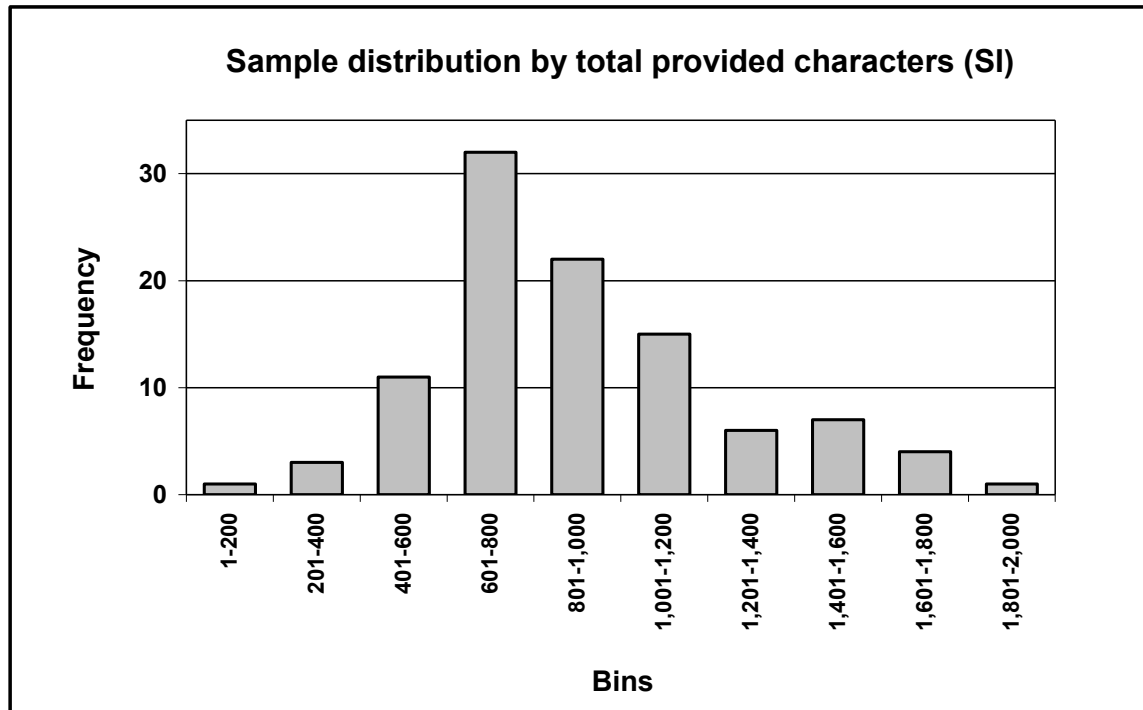
942

**Mean = 138.5; Median = 131; Mode = 142; SD = 53.7; CV(%) = 38.75%.**

943

**Skewness = 1.15; Kurtosis = 0.09.**

944



945

946

947 **Figure S3: Sample distribution with respect to total provided characters (spaces**  
 948 **included, [Question #2](#) excluded).**

949

950 The histogram shows how the sample is distributed with respect to the amount of  
 951 characters (spaces included) provided by participants. The participants are grouped in  
 952 200-character bins. Totals (“strict” answers + concrete elements indications) are  
 953 displayed. The main statistical indexes of the distribution are the following (SD =

954 Standard deviation; CV(%) = percent Coefficient of Variation):

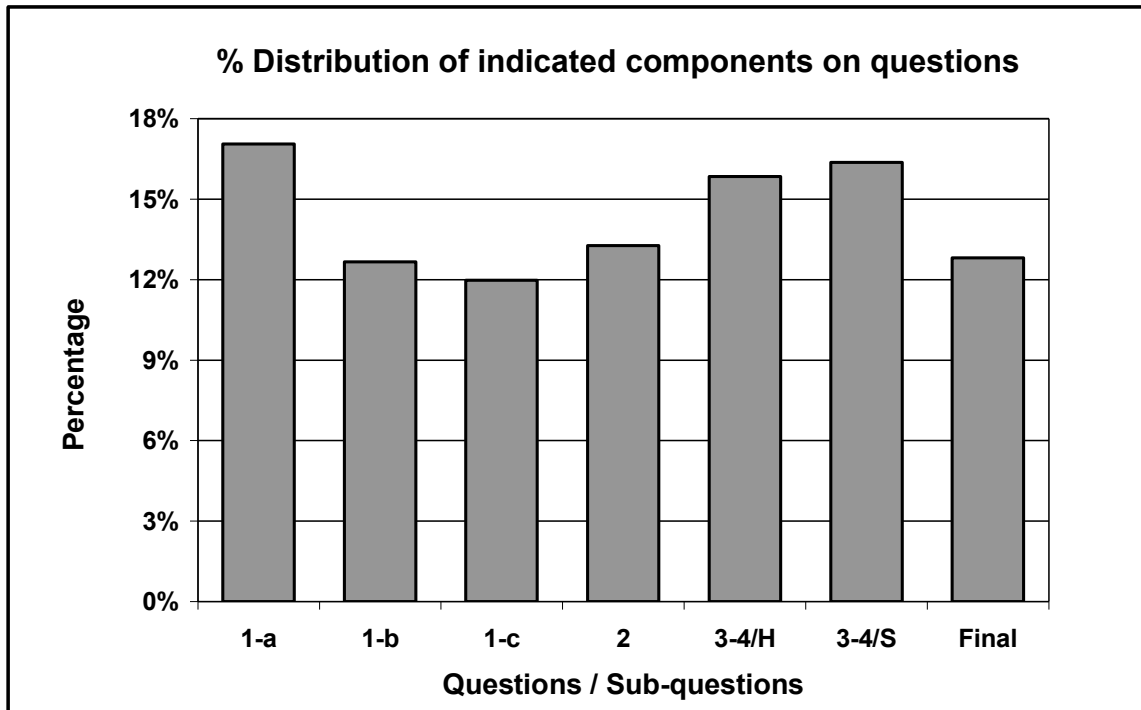
955 **Mean = 900.4; Median = 813; Mode = 1,040; SD = 341.6; CV(%) = 37.94%**

956 **Skewness = 1.31; Kurtosis = 1.12.**

957

958

959



961

962

**Figure S4: Percent distribution of indicated components with respect to**

963

**questions/sub-questions.**

964

With respect to questions, the respondents' indications about the focused components

965

(see text for definition) present a rectangular-like percent distribution (differences in a

966

range around 5%, from 12% to 17% about, source data from Table 8, “%” column). The

967

range reduces to around 3.6% (from 12.8% to 16.4% about) if we group together the

968

three sub-questions of Question #1 and consider their mean (the reason is that the

969

answers to Questions #1-b and #1-c are often given in short, indicating reference to the

970

already provided answer to Question #1-a). The indications are distributed without any

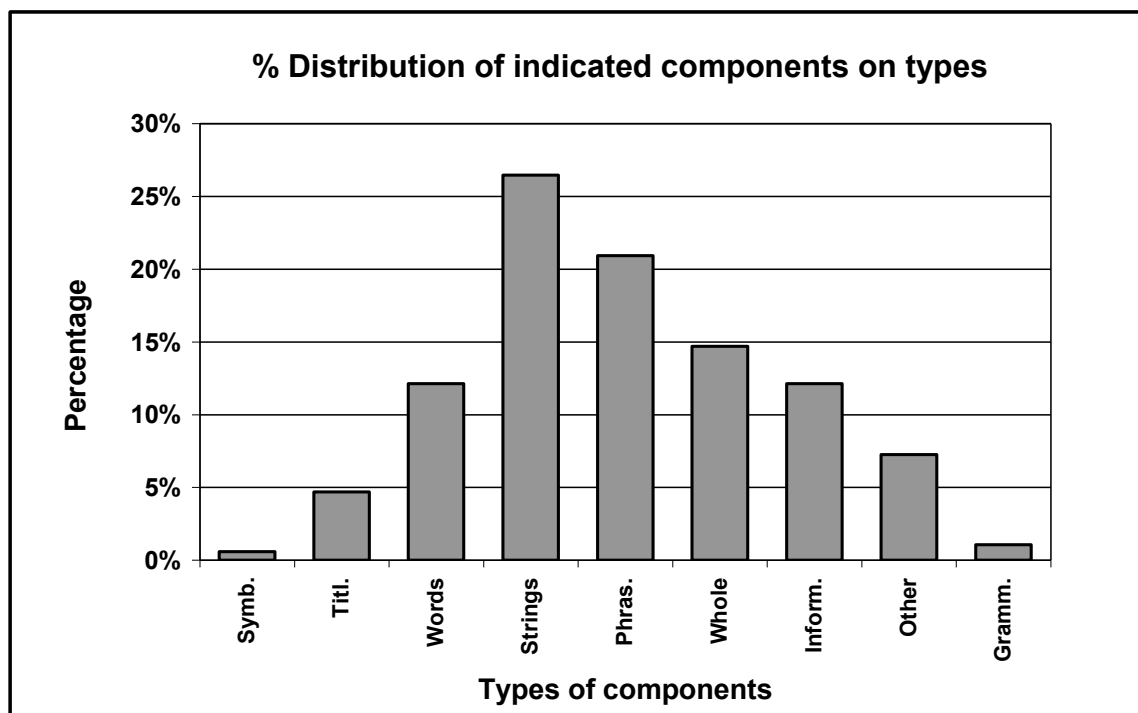
971

significant imbalance among the different questions of the questionnaire. The approach

972

through subjective selective focusing does not definitely privilege any question or item.

973



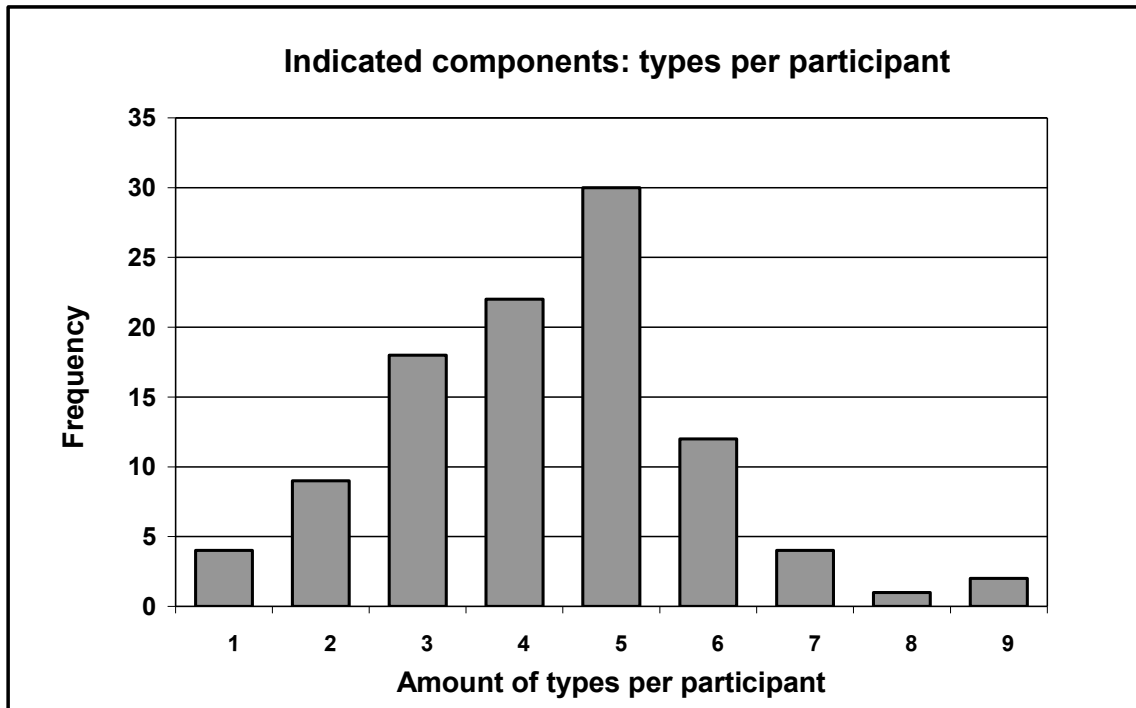
975 **LEGEND:** Symb. = Punctuation marks; Titl. = Title/salutes (opening and closing expressions);  
 976 Phras. = Complete phrases/periods; Whole = References to the message as a whole; In-  
 977 form. = Information content; Gramm. = Grammar notations (verb tense etc.)

978

979 **Figure S5: Percent distribution of indicated components with respect to component**  
 980 **types.**

981 The respondents' indications have been grouped in bins by type. The presented percent  
 982 distribution (source data from manuscript Table 8, "%" row) has been built through  
 983 ranking the first six types (from "Symbols" to "Whole") by their increasing size. The  
 984 remaining three types (Information content, Other components and Grammar notations)  
 985 have been added ranking them by decreasing percent values. The highest frequencies  
 986 correspond to middle-sized "chunks" of the messages.

987



988

989

990 **Figure S6: Sample distribution with respect to the amount of component types used**  
 991 **by participants.**

992

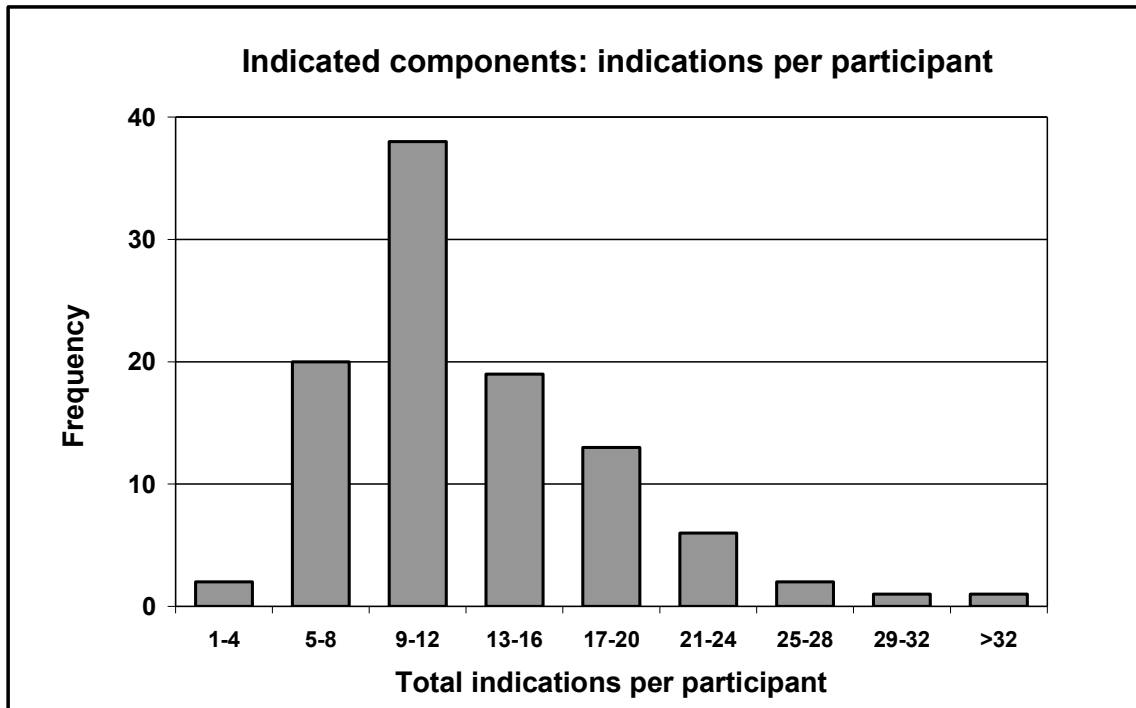
993 Respondents have been grouped in bins by the amount of component types (see text for  
 994 definition) they used. The histogram shows the sample's distribution; it presents the  
 995 highest frequencies on the 3-4-5 types-per-participant bins and has an almost "bell curve"

996 shape. The main statistical indexes of the distribution are the following:

997 **Mean = 4.3; SD = 1.6; Skewness = 0.25; Kurtosis = 0,49.**

998

999



1000

1001

1002 **Figure S7: Sample distribution with respect to the amount of components indicated**  
 1003 **by participants.**

1004

1005 Respondents have been grouped in bins by the amount of components (see text for  
 1006 definition) they indicated. The histogram shows the sample distribution; it presents the  
 1007 highest frequencies on the second, third and fourth bins and has an almost “bell curve”  
 1008 shape (even though it is clearly skewed towards the left side). The main statistical indexes

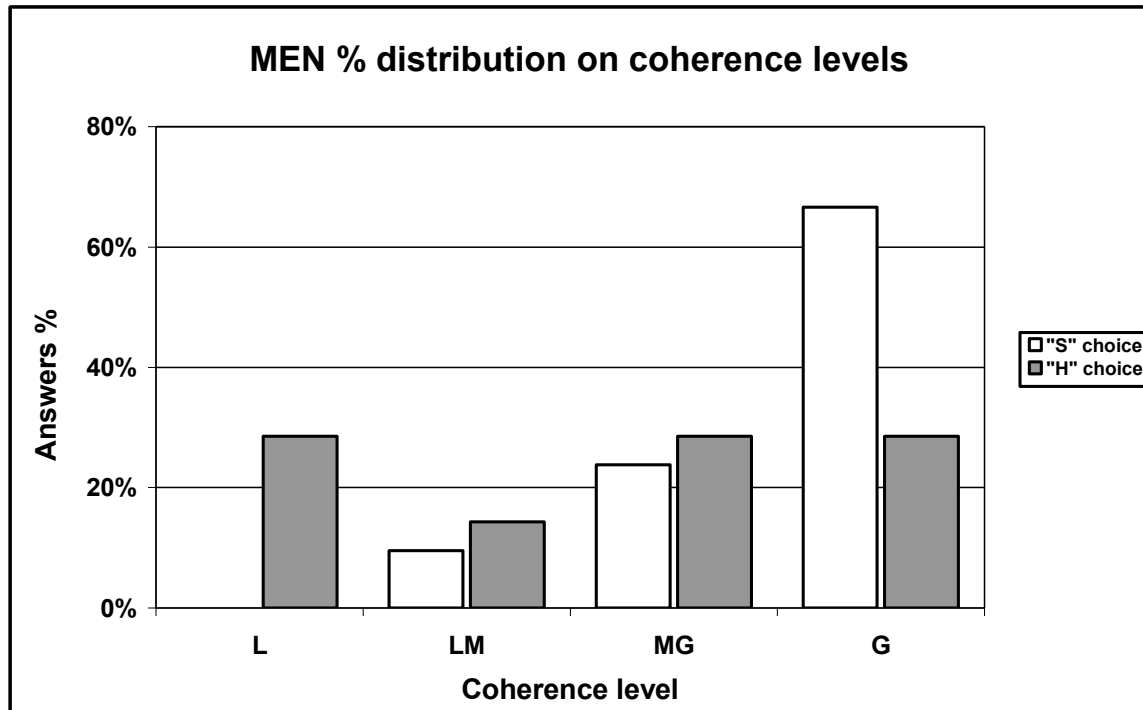
1009 of the distribution are the following:

1010 **Mean = 12.9; SD = 6.2; Skewness = 1.93; Kurtosis = 7.18.**

1011 ..

1012

1013



1015 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-Medium; MG = Medium-Great; G = Great level of coherence.

1016

1017 **Figure S8: Sample percent distribution with respect to coherence levels / Comparing**

1018 **"Hard" and "Softer" Msg #4 version choosers / Sub-sample MEN**

1019 This histogram shows the percent distributions of MALE respondents according to the

1020 coherence (expressed through the coherence indicator) between, on the one hand, their

1021 interpretations of the "Hard" (H) and the "Softer" (S) version of Msg #4; on the other

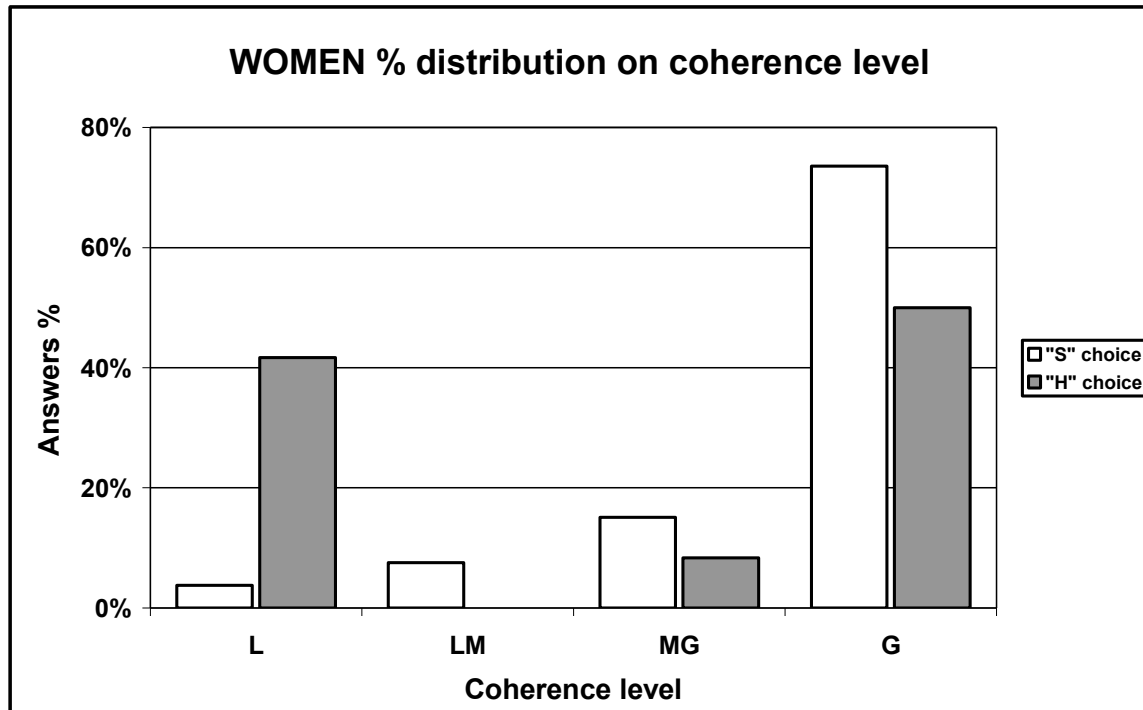
1022 hand, their final choice between the two versions. Data is shown separately for "H" and

1023 "S" choosers. Chi-squared test unsuitable for the presence of a zero value; Fisher's Exact

1024

test:  $p=0.003$ .

1025



1027 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-Medium; MG = Medium-Great; G = Great level of coherence.

1028

1029 **Figure S9: Sample percent distribution with respect to coherence levels / Comparing**

1030 **“Hard” and “Softer” Msg #4 version choosers / Sub-sample WOMEN**

1031 This histogram shows the percent distributions of FEMALE respondents according to the

1032 coherence (expressed through the coherence indicator) between, on the one hand, their

1033 interpretations of the “Hard” (H) and the “Softer” (S) version of Msg #4; on the other

1034 hand, their final choice between the two versions. Data is shown separately for “H” and

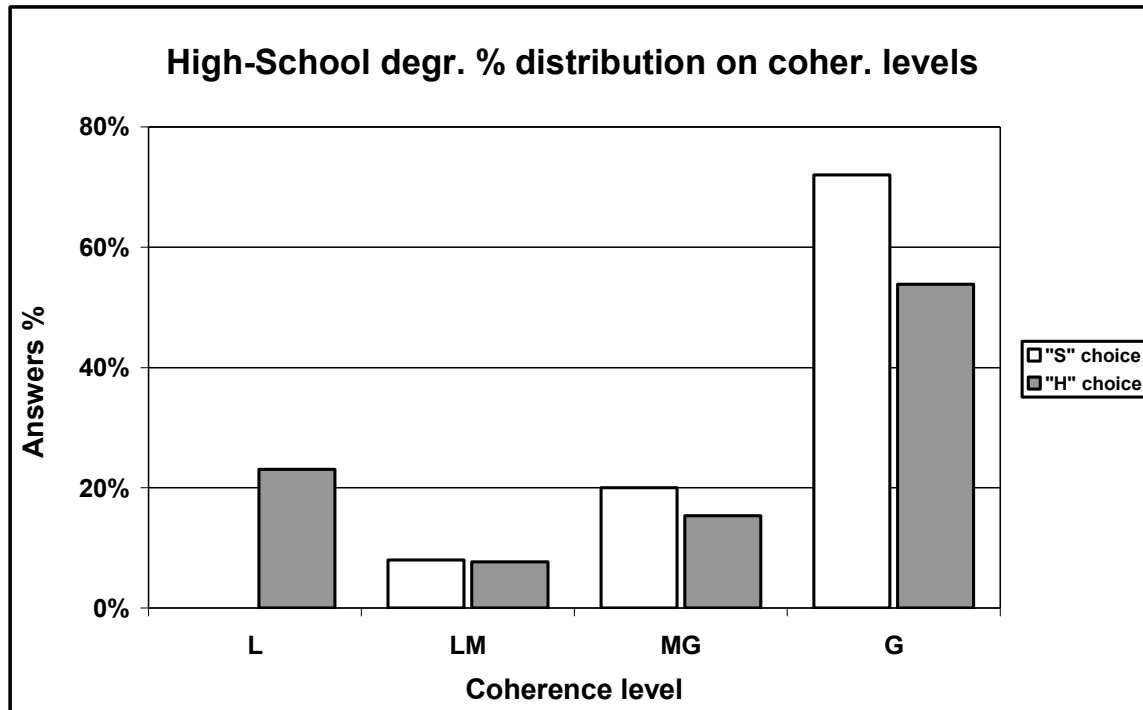
1035 “S” choosers. Chi-squared test unsuitable for the presence of a zero value; Fisher's Exact

1036

test:  $p=0.004$ .



1037



1039 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-Medium; MG = Medium-Great; G = Great level of coherence.

1040

1041 **Figure S10: Sample percent distribution with respect to coherence levels /**

1042 **Comparing “Hard” and “Softer” Msg #4 version choosers / Sub-sample High School**

1043 This histogram shows the percent distributions of HIGH-SCHOOL degree granted

1044 respondents according to the coherence (expressed through the coherence indicator)

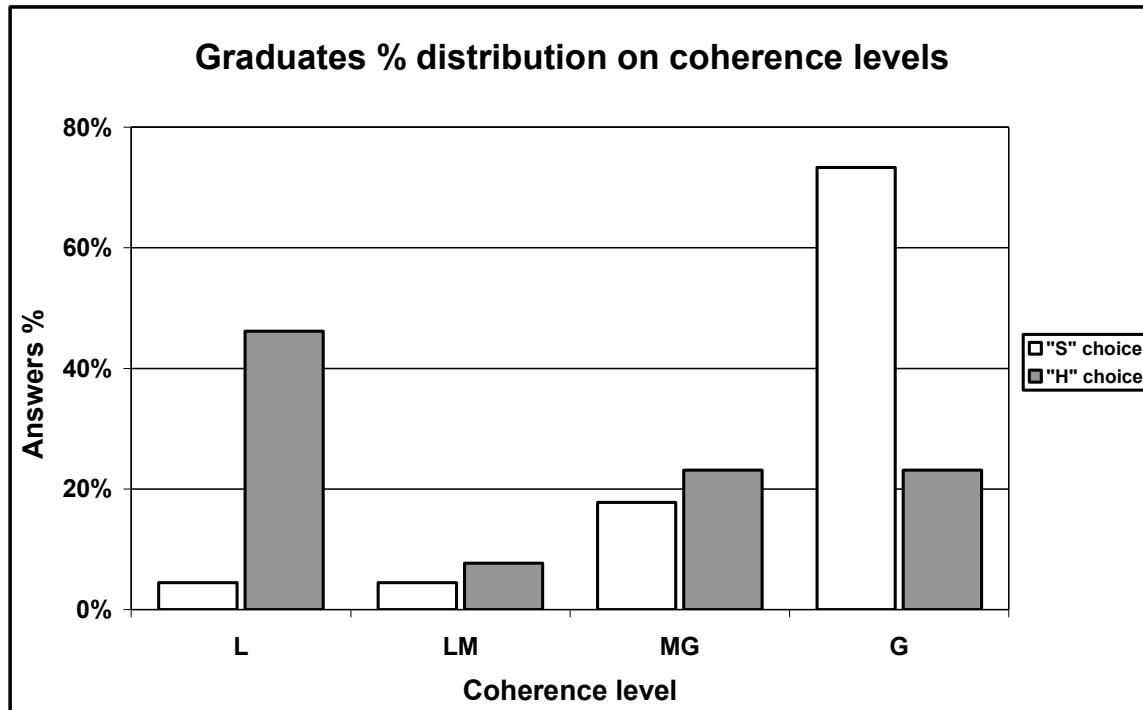
1045 between, on the one hand, their interpretations of the “Hard” (H) and the “Softer” (S)

1046 version of Msg #4; on the other hand, their final choice between the two versions. Data is

1047 shown separately for “H” and “S” choosers. Chi-squared test unsuitable for the presence

1048 of a zero value; Fisher's Exact test:  $p=0.001$ .

1049



1051 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-Medium; MG = Medium-Great; G = Great level of coherence.

1052

1053 **Figure S11: Sample percent distribution with respect to coherence levels /**

1054 **Comparing "Hard" and "Softer" Msg #4 version choosers / Sub-sample Graduates**

1055 This histogram shows the percent distribution of GRADUATED respondents according

1056 to the coherence (expressed through the coherence indicator) between, on the one hand,

1057 their interpretations of the "Hard" (H) and the "Softer" (S) version of Msg #4; on the

1058 other hand, their final choice between the two versions. Data is shown separately for "H"

1059 and "S" choosers. Distributions result significantly different (Chi-squared test and

1060

Fisher's Exact test:  $p=0.001$ ).

1061

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION Tables**

1062

1063

Message	Author	Character	Critical points	Notes
<a href="#">#1</a>	XX	The employee, woman, line position	Lack of matter: no specific claim, no evident goal (consequent suspect of relational problems).	Start message
<a href="#">#2</a>	YY	The professional, man, executive in charge of the Project	Evasive action, bureaucratic answer.	First feedback
<a href="#">#3</a>	XX	The employee	Hardened position, presence of a possible threat ( <i>ALARM!!</i> ).	Reaction / Reinforce
<a href="#">#4 “H”</a>	YY	The professional	Squabble + Refusing relational level + Personal attack to XX ( <i>ALARM!!</i> ).	Second feedback

1064

1065

**Table S1: The case structure and the communication critical points.**

1066

This scheme displays the interaction structure and the communication critical points

1067

related to the first part of the case. It considers the exchanged messages ([Messages #1](#) to

1068

[#3](#)) and provides comments on the [“Hard” version of Message #4](#) (spontaneously

1069

prepared by the “architect”, i.e. YY). While creating our case, we figured that exactly this

1070

could be the analysis of YY’s colleague (or some external communication expert) that

1071

drove him/her to suggest the alternative.

1072

1073

1074

Blocks	“H” Structure	“S” Structure	Conversion
#1	<a href="#">Form of address</a>	<a href="#">Form of address</a>	<a href="#">S “1”</a> → S “1” <i>converted</i>
#2	<a href="#">Re-addressing XX</a>	<a href="#">Relational acceptance</a>	<a href="#">S “2”</a> → S “4” <i>converted</i>
#3	<a href="#">Information</a>	<a href="#">Re-addressing XX</a>	<a href="#">S “3”</a> → S “2” <i>converted</i>
#4	<a href="#">Relational acceptance</a>	<a href="#">Information</a>	<a href="#">S “4”</a> → S “3” <i>converted</i>
#5	<a href="#">Form of saluting</a>	<a href="#">Form of saluting</a>	<a href="#">S “5”</a> → S “5” <i>converted</i>

1075

1076 **Table S2: Comparing text blocks in the two versions (the “[Hard](#)” and the “[Softer](#)”**

1077

**one) of Message #4.**1078 The message presented as alternative to [Message #4/H](#) (i.e. the “Softer” version of1079 Message #4, in short [Msg #4/S](#)) has the same text blocks of the “Hard” version with the

1080 same information content. Only the position in the text and the written form were

1081 modified. Extreme right column shows the “conversion table” of the blocks numbers for

1082 the two versions, in order to simplify referencing while comparing them.

1083

1084

1085

	<i>All the Questions (13 items)</i>			<i>Quest. #2 excluded (11 items)</i>		
	Words	Char.(SE)	Char.(SI)	Words	Char.(SE)	Char.(SI)
TOTALS	16,094	89,685	104,200	14,128	79,097	91,843
General means per item	1,238	6,899	8,015	1,284	7,191	8,349
% Gen. means per item	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%	9.1%	9.1%	9.1%
CV(%)	21.0%	20.3%	20.5%	18.78%	17.19%	17.56%
General means per person	158	879	1,022	139	776	900
Gen. means per person-item	12.1	68	79	12.6	71	82

1086

1087 **Table S3: Descriptive analysis of the text amount distribution with respect to the**

1088

**questionnaire items.**

1089 [Legend: Char.(SE) / (SI) = Character amounts, (Spaces Excluded) / (Spaces Included); CV(%) =

1090

percent Coefficient of Variation]

1091

1092 The table shows totals and some statistical indexes (some means and percent coefficient

1093 of variation) referred to the word and character amounts resulting from the texts of the

1094 respondents' answers. Indexes are calculated on question items, in two ways: on all the

1095 opened items (13 items, left part of the table); on all the items excluding [Question #2](#) (11

1096 items, right part of the table, see text for the reasons of such exclusion). Further

1097

information in [Fig. S1](#).

1098

1099

1100

1101

	<i>“Strict” answers</i>			<i>Concrete elements</i>			<i>Totals</i>		
	<b>Words</b>	<b>Ch.(SE)</b>	<b>Ch.(SI)</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Ch.(SE)</b>	<b>Ch.(SI)</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Ch.(SE)</b>	<b>Ch.(SI)</b>
TOTALS	6,463	35,484	41,461	7,665	43,613	50,382	14,128	79,097	91,843
% on General total	45.7%	44.9%	45.1%	54.3%	55.1%	54.9%	100 %	100 %	100 %
Gen. means p. person	63.4	348	407	75.1	428	494	138,5	775	900
CV(%)	48.58%	43.63%	44.80%	45.56%	45.46%	45.75%	47.77%	46.13%	46.61%
Minimum	8	73	76	4	25	28	4	25	28
Maximum	175	905	1,075	185	1,030	1,180	185	1,030	1,180

1102

1103 **Table S4: Descriptive analysis of the sample distribution with respect to the**

1104

**provided text amounts.**

1105 [Legend: Ch.(SE) / (SI) = Character amounts, (Spaces Excluded) / (Spaces Included); CV(%) =

1106

percent Coefficient of Variation]

1107

1108 The table shows totals and some statistical indexes (some means, percent coefficient of

1109 variation and minimum/maximum) referred to the word and character amounts provided

1110 by the respondents through their answers. Answers to [Question #2](#) have been excluded

1111 (see text for the reasons of such exclusion). In the left part, data from the answers to the

1112 first item of the questions (“strict” answer); in the central part, to the second item

1113 (concrete elements). Total values are displayed in the right part of the table. Further

1114

information in [Fig. S2](#), [S3](#).

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1116

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1119

	Total sample						Sub-sample "AGE"						Sub-sample "EMPLOYMENT"					
	S+		S-		Totals		S+		S-		Totals		S+		S-		Totals	
<b>H+</b>	18	22.5%	9	47.4%	27	27.3%	8	17.4%	4	36.4%	12	21.1%	9	18.4%	6	46.2%	15	24.2%
<b>H-</b>	62	77.5%	10	52.6%	72	72.7%	38	82.6%	7	63.6%	45	78.9%	40	81.6%	7	53.8%	47	75.8%
<b>Tot.</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Gen. Total</b>	<b>99</b>						<b>57</b>						<b>62</b>					

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1122 **Table S5: Distribution of predictions about the effects of the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and the**

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**[“Softer” \(S\)](#) version of Message #4 on the receiver.**1124 Predictions about the effects that the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) or the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) version of Message

1125 #4 could have on the receiver (the “employee” XX) are independently expressed, by each

1126 member of the sample, through answering to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#). Answers are classified

1127 through the dummy variable “Expected effects” (possible values “+”, if respondents point

1128 out that the message will solve the XX-YY conflict, or “-“ in the opposite case). The

1129 table shows, for the total sample and the two control sub-samples, that all the possible

1130 combinations of predictions are present. Distribution is clearly imbalanced (definite

1131 preference on “H-/S+” combination). Significance is checked through Chi-squared test

1132 ( $p=0.029$ , total sample;  $p=0.166$ , sub-sample “AGE”;  $p=0.038$ , sub-sample1133 “EMPLOYMENT”) and Fisher's Exact test ( $p=0.043$ , total sample;  $p=0.219$ , sub-sample1134 “AGE”;  $p=0.064$ , sub-sample “EMPLOYMENT”).

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	Total sample						Sub-sample "AGE"						Sub-sample "EMPLOYMENT"					
	"H" Choice		"S" Choice		Totals		"H" Choice		"S" Choice		Totals		"H" Choice		"S" Choice		Totals	
<b>H+/S+</b>	5	20.8%	13	17.6%	18	18.4%	4	26.7%	4	9.8%	8	14.3%	4	22.2%	5	11.6%	9	14.8%
<b>H+/S-</b>	7	29.2%	2	2.7%	9	9.2%	3	20.0%	1	2.4%	4	7.1%	5	27.8%	1	2.3%	6	9.8%
<b>H-/S+</b>	10	41.7%	52	70.3%	62	63.3%	7	46.7%	31	75.6%	38	67.9%	8	44.4%	32	74.5%	40	65.6%
<b>H-/S-</b>	2	8.3%	7	9.4%	9	9.2%	1	6.7%	5	12.2%	6	10.7%	1	5.6%	5	11.6%	6	9.8%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Gen. Total</b>	<b>98</b>						<b>56</b>						<b>61</b>					

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1139 **Table S6: Combined predictions cross-checked with the final choice between the**1140 **“Hard” (H) and the “Softer” (S) version of Message #4.**1141 In this table the combined predictions (see [Table S5](#)) about the effects that the “Hard” (H)1142 or the “Softer” (S) version of Message #4 could have on the receiver (the “employee”

1143 XX) are crossed with the final choices of the respondents (all the variables are

1144 independent). Data shows the association (for the total sample and the two control sub-

1145 samples) between the “H-/S+” combination and the S-version (the “Softer” one) as final

1146 choice. In addition, some correlations between the two variables is underlined by Chi-

1147 squared test ( $p=0.001$ , total sample;  $p=0.035$ , sub-sample “AGE”;  $p=0.009$ , sub-sample1148 “EMPLOYMENT”) and Fisher's Exact test ( $p=0.002$ , total sample;  $p=0.027$ , sub-sample1149 “AGE”;  $p=0.008$ , sub-sample “EMPLOYMENT”).

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	<b>L</b> ( <i>low coherence</i> )	<b>LM</b> ( <i>low-medium c.</i> )	<b>MG</b> ( <i>med.-great c.</i> )	<b>G</b> ( <i>great coherence</i> )
<b>“H” choice</b>	<b>H-</b> / <b>S+</b>	<b>H-</b> / <b>S-</b>	<b>H+</b> / <b>S+</b>	<b>H+</b> / <b>S-</b>
<b>“S” choice</b>	<b>H+</b> / <b>S-</b>	<b>H-</b> / <b>S-</b>	<b>H+</b> / <b>S+</b>	<b>H-</b> / <b>S+</b>

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**Table S7: Plot of the coherence level scale.**

1159 The table shows the scale of the coherence levels expressed through the coherence  
1160 indicator; four levels of coherence are defined and ranked. The indicator rates the degree  
1161 of coherence between two independent kinds of answers each respondent provided in  
1162 his/her own questionnaire. On the one hand, the answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#),  
1163 reporting the respondent's predictions about the effects that the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) or the  
1164 [“Softer” \(S\)](#) version of Message #4 could have on the receiver, the “employee” XX (the  
1165 predictions are represented through the dummy variable “Expected effects” and labelled  
1166 “+” if they indicate that the message will ease or solve the contrast between XX and YY,  
1167 “-“ in the opposite case). On the other hand, the answer to the [Final question](#), reporting  
1168 the final choice the respondent made indicating which, between the [“Hard”](#) and the  
1169 [“Softer”](#) version of Message #4, was suitable to solve the case ending the XX-YY  
1170 conflict.

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<b>“H” Choosers</b>			<b>“S” Choosers</b>			<b>Total</b>	
<i>Coherence level</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Coherence level</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>L</b> (H-/S+)	7	46.7	<b>L</b> (H+/S-)	1	2.4	8	14.3
<b>LM</b> (H-/S-)	1	6.7	<b>LM</b> (H-/S-)	5	12.2	6	10.7
<b>MG</b> (H+/S+)	4	26.7	<b>MG</b> (H+/S+)	4	9.8	8	14.3
<b>G</b> (H+/S-)	3	20.0	<b>G</b> (H-/S+)	31	75.6	34	60.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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1177 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-medium, MG = Medium-great, G = Great level of coherence

1178 between predictions and choice; H/S = Versions of Message #4; +/- = type of predicted

1179 effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of the messages on XX.

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1181 **Table S8: Sample distribution with respect to coherence levels and expressed choice**

1182 **(Sub-sample “Age”).**

1183 The table displays (for the sub-sample “Age”, >29yy-old people only) the distribution of

1184 participants with respect to the coherence between, on the one hand, the predictions about

1185 the effects on XX of the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and the [“Softer” \(S\)](#) version of Msg #4; on the other

1186 hand, the final “H-or-S” choice. Data is displayed separately for “H” and “S” choosers

1187 and highlights a clear correlation between the two variables coherence and choice; Chi-

1188 squared test and Fisher's Exact test return high significance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

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“H” Choosers			“S” Choosers			Total	
<i>Coherence level</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Coherence level</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>L</b> (H-/S+)	8	44.4	<b>L</b> (H+/S-)	1	2.3	9	14.8
<b>LM</b> (H-/S-)	1	5.6	<b>LM</b> (H-/S-)	5	11.6	6	9.8
<b>MG</b> (H+/S+)	4	22.2	<b>MG</b> (H+/S+)	5	11.6	9	14.8
<b>G</b> (H+/S-)	5	27.8	<b>G</b> (H-/S+)	32	74.4	37	60.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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1196 **LEGEND:** L = Low; LM = Low-medium, MG = Medium-great, G = Great level of coherence

1197 between predictions and choice; H/S = Versions of Message #4; +/- = type of predicted

1198 effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of the messages on XX.

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1200 **Table S9: Sample distribution with respect to coherence levels and expressed choice**

1201 **(Sub-sample “Employment”).**

1202 The table displays (for the sub-sample “Employment”, people with a regular employment

1203 only) the distribution of participants with respect to the coherence between, on the one

1204 hand, the predictions about the effects on XX of the [“Hard” \(H\)](#) and the [“Softer” \(S\)](#)

1205 version of Msg #4; on the other hand, the final “H-or-S” choice. Data is displayed

1206 separately for “H” and “S” choosers and highlights a clear correlation between the two

1207 variables coherence and choice; Chi-squared test and Fisher's Exact test return high

1208 significance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

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Blocks	"H" Choosers				"S" Choosers			
	"H" Evaluation		"S" Evaluation <sup>(*)</sup>		"H" Evaluation		"S" Evaluation <sup>(*)</sup>	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
2	16	13	6	10	13	75	23	4
3	6	1	7	5	5	6	50	4
4	3	1	7	1	4	16	52	0
5	0	0	1	0	0	1	7	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>8</b>

1213 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to [Message "H"](#) is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
1214 message); the sequence belonging to [Message "S"](#) is *converted* (see SI, [Section 12](#) and [Note 6](#), for details).

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1216 **Table S10: Block preference analysis (I) – Amount of expressed REFERENCES.**

1217 [Legend: +/- = type of predicted effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of the

1218 ["Hard" \(H\)](#) and the ["Softer" \(S\)](#) version of Msg #4 on XX.]

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1220 The table displays the "preference" for different blocks, expressed through the amount of

1221 references to each block. Data is disaggregated for H/S choice and for type of expressed

1222 predictions (+/-) on Message "H" and Message "S" effects. Respondents, while

1223 evaluating the "H" message, seem to be mainly focused on the same block (the [Block](#)1224 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,

1225 they mainly focus on different blocks, depending on the choice they expressed.

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<b>General Totals</b>		<b>Means</b>
<i>Total references to Msg “H” blocks</i>	<b>161</b>	<i>1,59</i> references/participant
<i>Total references to Msg “S” blocks</i>	<b>178</b>	<i>1,76</i> references/participant
<i>Total references expressed by “H” choosers</i>	<b>77</b>	<i>2,96</i> references/participant
<i>Total references expressed by “S” choosers</i>	<b>262</b>	<i>3,49</i> references/participant
<i>General total</i>	<b>339</b>	<i>3,36</i> references/participant

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**Table S11: Block preference analysis (I) – Additional data.**

1231 The table displays some additional information about data displayed in previous [Table](#)

1232 [S10](#). Additional data consists of total expressed references and mean values about

1233 references per participant.

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Blocks	"H" Choosers				"S" Choosers			
	"H" Evaluation		"S" Evaluation <sup>(*)</sup>		"H" Evaluation		"S" Evaluation <sup>(*)</sup>	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
2	13	9	6	10	10	43	18	4
3	5	1	7	3	3	5	34	3
4	3	1	4	1	4	15	35	0
5	0	0	1	0	0	1	7	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>7</b>

1237 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to [Message "H"](#) is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
1238 message); the sequence belonging to [Message "S"](#) is *converted* (see SI, [Section 12](#) and [Note 6](#), for details).

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1240 **Table S12: Block preference analysis (II) – Amount of PARTICIPANTS expressing**

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**references.**

1242 [Legend: +/- = type of predicted effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of the

1243 ["Hard" \(H\)](#) and the ["Softer" \(S\)](#) version of Msg #4 on XX.]

1244

1245 The table displays the "preference" for different blocks, expressed through the amount of

1246 participants that refer to each block. Data is disaggregated for H/S choice and for type of

1247 expressed predictions (+/-) on Message "H" and Message "S" effects. Respondents, while

1248 evaluating the "H" message, seem to be mainly focused on the same block (the [Block](#)

1249 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,

1250 they mainly focus on different blocks, depending on the choice they expressed.

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<b>General Totals</b>		<b>Means</b>
<i>Total people referring to msg “H” blocks</i>	<b>114</b>	<i>1,13</i> referred blocks/participant
<i>Total people referring to msg “S” blocks</i>	<b>134</b>	<i>1,33</i> referred blocks/participant
<i>Total “H” choosers’ block evaluations</i>	<b>64</b>	<i>2,46</i> referred blocks/participant
<i>Total “S” choosers’ block evaluations</i>	<b>184</b>	<i>2,45</i> referred blocks/participant
<i>General total</i>	<b>248</b>	<i>2,46</i> referred blocks/participant

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**Table S13: Block preference analysis (II) – Additional data.**

1256 The table displays some additional information about data displayed in previous [Table](#)

1257 [S12](#). Additional data consists of total people expressing references and mean values about

1258 referred blocks per participant.

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