

Politeness Has Its Limits: Avoiding Negation in Romanian Professional Context

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Abstract

To avoid saying ‘no’ in professional context is a communicative strategy which was socially and culturally imposed both in workplace encounters and in written texts. The present paper analyzes examples of written communication in Romanian institutions and commercial organizations from a pragmatic and discursive perspective. Despite the adverse effect that negation has on people’s ability to think positively, saying “no” is a powerful instrument for setting rules in military policies and procedures, though it can be gracefully avoided in less formal texts, such as the e-mails sent as part of the internal communication of many commercial organizations.

Keywords: *negation, workplace, written communication, communicative strategy*

Cultural Notes on Negation

Limits exist because the society imposes them. They govern our behaviour both at a linguistic level and at an extralinguistic one. A culture is shared by a society when the members of the society agree about the meanings of things and about the *why*. Societies are motivated by common views, and those views are a dynamic force in enabling them to achieve societal goals. People in a culture share symbols of that culture, the most obvious set of symbols being the language. According to Beamer and Varner, (2008, 5-12), culture has three main characteristics: it is coherent, learned and shared and it also ranks values, furnishes attitudes and dictates how to behave.

In interactions, cultural differences usually make themselves known first by behaviour (Beamer and Varner, 2008, 11). One of the most difficult tasks in workplace interaction is dealing with unwelcome messages, especially communicating about problems and saying “no”. In low-context cultures (see Hall, 1976 for the high-context vs. low-context culture dichotomy) like the American one, saying “no” is done with delay and indirectness. In most cases, especially in written communication, “say no slowly” is a rule dictated by a simple rationale: explain *why* first and since facts persuade readers, by the time the reader gets to the “no”, he or she has been persuaded to accept it. Using objective facts represents an embedded technique based on the idea that facts are neutral, instrumental, and impersonal and, usually, no pointing fingers-of-blame is done (in pragma-dialectical argumentation theory, this technique is part of the more complex concept of “evading the burden of proof” - see Van Eemeren et al., 2009, 203).

Asian cultures are renowned for saying “yes” when they really mean “no”. This is called “social affirmative” (Cohen, 1997, 144), it is “yes, I am listening” or “yes, you have a good point” or “yes, I see, but I don’t agree”. Saying “no” is highly problematic

in high-context cultures (Hall, 1976), such as the Japanese (see Fukushima, 2000) or the Chinese culture, because, when they communicate about problems, they would rather not actually have to put a refusal into words. In Chinese, a “no” may be rendered in words like “That may be difficult”.

According to Hall (1976), Romanian culture is a Latin-based one, being placed in the middle of the dichotomy low-context vs. high-context cultures. Ethnic Romanians “display a more indirect communication” approach, according to Riel (1997) being very careful not to offend the person(s) to whom they speak. When discussing the use of apology in ethnic Romanian culture as displayed at United States residents of Romanian origin, Trimbitas, Lin and Clark explain that:

Verbal messages shared among ethnic Romanians do not need to be very specific, instead focusing more on nonverbal communication behaviors, such as gestures, mimicry, and intonation of voice, rather than on words. These speculations suggest that ethnic Romanian culture may be considered more collectivistic and high-context culture than individualistic and low-context. (2007, 407)

Their observations match the general findings of Geert Hofstede’s study of cultural dimensions for Romania (Hofstede et al., 2010), but do not take into consideration the Romanian internal changes, caused by the UE integration and the continuous adaptation to and adoption of foreign, mostly Western, cultural patterns. Romanian professional context has encountered significant changes since the fall of the communist regime and recent research on professional communication (Măda, 2009, Săftoiu et al., 2010) indicate that, at the level of professional practices, certain features of low-context communication occur quite frequently: the communication is direct, explicit, rule-oriented, and task-centered. Thus, disagreement is depersonalized. One withdraws from conflict and gets on with the task, focusing on rational solutions, not personal ones (for a more detailed account, see Măda, 2009, 26-48).

Negation in Socio-professional Context

Disagreement and negation are two communicative instances which are difficult to negotiate in the professional environment. Taboos, workplace etiquette, organizational policies and common sense often dictate the necessity of avoiding a direct speech act. The present paper aims at analyzing from a pragmatic and discursive theoretical framework the situations in which this communicative behaviour aids the harmonization and preservation of workplace relationships.

The examples offered for analysis represent excerpts of real written communication collected from Romanian institutions and organizations. The data used in this paper were gathered during 2007 – 2010, as part of the research project entitled *Professional language in present-day Romanian. Discursive patterns and linguistic structures*. The data were published in two corpora, one of written examples – *Comunicarea la locul de muncă. Schiță de tipologie a textelor redactate în mediul profesional românesc* (Gheorghe et al., 2009a) and one of interactions – *Comunicarea la locul de muncă. Corpus de interacțiune verbală în mediul profesional* (Gheorghe et al., 2009b).

“No” is a word of denial or refusal, expressing a negation. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to the discursive realizations of negation (in the sense of expressing disagreement and refusal in general), irrespective of how they are rendered

grammatically (the use of negative adverbs e.g. “never”, “not”, “hardly”, “nowhere” and negative pronouns e.g. “no”, “no one”, “nobody”, “none”, “nothing”, “neither”, by means of negative prefixation e.g. dis-, ir-, il-, non-, etc., or even lacking any apparent negative particle) . A comprehensive review (classification and typology, syntax and semantics) and detailed studies on Romanian negation are included in Ionescu (2004).

Disagreement may be expressed directly in a formal manner (e.g. *I disagree entirely. That isn't the point. Well, I think I would take issue with that.*) or in a highly informal and ironic manner (*Come off it! Rubbish! Don't be silly! Do you really think so? You can't be serious!*). At the same time, an argument can be diplomatically dismissed as irrelevant or improbable, through doubt (*I wonder whether that's the case. I'm not sure I quite agree.*), by expressing a different opinion (*Yes, but... True, but... Well, you have a point there, but... Well, not really.*) or by appealing to logic: (*Not necessarily. That doesn't necessarily follow. That isn't strictly true.*)

When denying or contradicting what someone has stated, the speaker should consider politeness issues and try to soften the impact of his utterance by means of an apology or by adjusting to the interlocutor's point of view. People may perform face threatening acts (FTA) if they still address the face needs of the other person and “offer partial compensation for the face threat in the FTA by redressing some particular other wants” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 209) of the interlocutor. Positive politeness strategies dictate the necessity to avoid disagreement in order to preserve good relationships. The preference for agreement is common in many cultures and, if not possible, pseudo-agreement, the use of social white lies and hedging opinions represent convenient alternative strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 113-117). Linguistic research (Rees-Miller, 2000) has demonstrated the interlocutors' tendency to use softened disagreement (in more than 60% of the cases in Rees-Miller's study), more than forms of strengthened disagreement (in 30% of the cases) and aggravated disagreement (in less than 10% of the cases).

In professional environment, more than in other contexts, negation appears as a phenomenon which unbalances relationships, creates tension between interlocutors and induces negative thinking. Whenever people in command are imposing rules, criticizing or just offering feedback, negative sentences appear as an imposition. That is why effective communication in the workplace attempts to reduce negative expressions used both in writing and in the oral discourse.

Avoiding Negative Thinking and Ambiguities

Whenever someone says: “You shouldn't think of a cat.” – what is the thing that you think of? “Don't think at blue!” – what is the colour which you automatically visualize? If I tell a child: “Make sure that you don't spill the milk!” – what image would I create in his mind? If human actions are influenced by thought, than the thought of “spilling milk” is more likely to induce the action corresponding to that description, than to increase the chances for the action that you actually desire. Negation statements put in mind the very idea that the other person should put out of mind. And since action follows thought, the person may be more likely to do the thing they were asked not to do (see Lakoff, 2004, for an account of how political discourse may influence the way people think).

The corrective action or the skill which is suggested in such cases is to reformulate negated statements into their opposing, affirmative statements, to

reformulate negated statements and say the logically opposing alternative, as an affirmative statement.

Negation is somehow ambiguous when people use it to correct a negative behavior. In some cases, someone may try to make others see what he wants by telling them what he does not want. In other cases, telling others what someone thinks they should do appears as a sentence in which the person is telling them what he does not want them to do. When trying to make someone understand that a different perspective is right and a certain course of action is desirable, people sometimes use sentences which communicate just that the person's point of view is wrong and that he should not proceed with a certain course of action, opposed with the actual desire of the speaker.

This ambiguity could be explained by the lack of positive reference for both interlocutors. Saying "x is wrong" allows various interpretations of "what is right". Using "no" excessively may impede the communication process. Using positive sentences instead, in which the speaker's point of view and wishes regarding someone else's behavior are expressed seems a more effective approach.

Tannen (1994) exposes how cultural and gender styles impact on our ability to communicate with one another and why people should permanently consider others' needs, the social implications of a verbal encounter, and the interlocutor's possible reactions to what has been said. All these raise awareness of the effort and the communicative competence which are required in quality communication. In the workplace, a manager should be able to send messages which are correctly understood by the team. Apart from that, people need to successfully decode the messages received from others (clients, managers or team colleagues). Employing adequate communicative competences involves listening in an active manner (to your interlocutor's needs) and using positive rather than negative language.

Negation in Professional Written Communication

In what follows, I will analyze the role of negation in written professional communication. More than in other types of documents, the policies of an organization render sets of rules and recommendations which should be followed by all employees. When approaching a difficult negotiation or a seemingly conflicting situation, speakers should consider some common ground rules such as: preserving good relationships with all the parties, keeping people and problems separate, paying attention to the arguments that are being presented, listening first, then talking, setting out the 'facts' and exploring options together (i.e. being open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that together you can get to this idea). By following these rules, employees can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

- (1) (Gheorghe et al., 2009a, 135)
 Type of organization: Military
 Title of the document: *Procedure regarding negotiation and mediation techniques*
 Context: Rules and felicity conditions in negotiation instances
- [...] 1. Succesul oricărei negocieri va depinde de:
- a. problema(-ele) care sunt de negociat
 - b. participanții, în majoritate dacă nu toți, să fie deschiși la compromis
 - c. fiecare parte din negociere să aibă o măsură de încredere în celelalte părți și în implementarea rezultatului sesiunii(-lor).
 - d. gradul de pregătire al ofițerului ce negociază

2. prima regulă a negociatorului Bg. este: NICIODATĂ să nu distorsioneze adevărul, niciodată să nu mintă și să lucreze numai cu FAPTE. A doua regulă este: NICIODATĂ să nu ia partea, ori în nici un caz să nu se arate INFLUENȚAT [...]

- [...] 1. The success of any negotiation will depend on:
- a. The issue(s) to be negotiated
 - b. The majority (if not all) of the participants to be willing to find a compromise
 - c. Every party should trust the other parties to a certain extent to implement the result of their meeting(s)
 - d. The degree of expertise of the negotiator.
2. The first rule of a Brigade's negotiator is: NEVER distort the truth, never lie and work only with FACTS. The second rule is: NEVER take sides or admit being INFLUENCED in any case [...]

In this example, the text describes the rules for success in any negotiation and how the negotiator is expected to behave in the military field. In such situations, military officers need to know the specific procedure which regulates how the negotiations are prepared and conducted. In the second paragraph (marked with 2), the conduct is set out clearly in two general rules which are (later in the same document) detailed into 25 specific rules. We notice the frequent use and the capitalization of the negative adverb “never”, which is meant to emphasize each of the general rules. *NEVER distort the truth, never lie and work only with FACTS* represents the first rule. The first use of *never* and the word *fact* are capitalized in order to emphasize the main elements of this rule. The second rule, *NEVER take sides or admit being INFLUENCED in any case*, follows the same graphic principle of highlighting through capital letters the two words which sum up the rule. The fact that these rules are formulated in the negative is due to the strictly prohibitive character of military regulations, in general. The limits are established in an indisputable manner and are not subject to interpretation. The repetitive use of *never* and the synonymous constructions (*never distort the truth ~ never lie ~ work only with facts; never take sides ~ [never] admit being influenced*) aim at increasing the illocutionary force of the two rules, urging the readers to obey them.

In another section of the same procedure, the rules are detailed in twenty-five points. In example (2), several of these rules were excerpted.

(2) (Gheorghe et al., 2009a, 138-139)

Type of organization: Military

Title of the document: *Procedure regarding negotiation and mediation techniques*

Context: Rules and felicity conditions in negotiation instances.

- [...] - arată o neutralitate adevărată, obiectivitate și respect, nu-ți exprima niciodată părtinirea.
- nu renunța imediat la posibilele soluții.
 - fă pozitivă întâlnirea în care nu există înțelegere. Cazi de acord să vă întâlniți din nou, culege orice puncte pe care le urmezi cu perseverență.
 - dacă e posibil, lasă contra-partea să înceapă și ascult-o, nu întrerupe, fii răbdător. (...)
 - dacă se dau informații incorecte – indică cu evidență statutul actual al lucrurilor, dar nu te certa.
 - prezintă-ți punctul de vedere, menționează numai faptele.
 - dacă apare o controversă asupra punctului problemei, ia notițe despre contraparte și indică că ai alt punct de vedere și că, după investigarea problemei, vei reveni la subiect. (...)
 - fii consecvent. Stai ferm și corect bazat pe fapte, nu te contrazice pe tine sau pe negociatorii camarazi, privește pe fiecare în ochi. Nu vorbi interpretului. [...]
- [...] - display real neutrality, objectivity, and respect, never express any biased opinions.
- do not give up easily to possible solutions.

- transform the meeting without chances of agreement in a positive one. Agree to meet again, set the aims for a future meeting and follow them consistently.
- if possible, let the opposing party to start talking and listen carefully; do not interrupt, be patient. (...)
- if incorrect information is provided, show evidence for the actual state of affairs without arguing.
- Present your point of view, mentioning only the facts.
- If any controversy occurs about a sensitive issue, take notes on the other party's opinion, indicate that you have a different point of view and that you will discuss the problem only after thorough investigation. (...)
- Be consistent. Express your opinion firmly and accurately, based on facts. Do not contradict yourself or your colleagues from the negotiation team. Maintain eye-contact. Do not speak to the interpreter. [...]

Many of the communication rules included in the procedure contain negative elements (*never express, do not interrupt, incorrect information, without arguing, do not contradict yourself, do not speak to the interpreter*) which clearly specify interdiction. At a closer look one may notice the fact that interdictions are softened by means of positive suggestions which, in many cases, occur before the negation. This gives an overall positive tone to the whole text, despite the elements of negation.

The rules in example (2) represent a code of conduct for the arguers involved in the military negotiation. Interpreting such discourse from the theoretical perspective of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), a suitable analytical framework should be adopted, in order to get an overview of those aspects that are crucial for resolving a difference of opinion. Thus, one should determine the points at issue, and then recognize the position adopted by the parties and the explicit and implicit arguments that defend their standpoints. The analysis of the structure of the argumentation aids the identifying of argumentative moves in the argumentative practice.

An ideal military negotiation (such as the one presented in example (2)) seems to be a good opportunity to develop such an analysis. *Display real neutrality, objectivity, and respect, never express any biased opinions* correspond to the view of the outsider, the facilitator of a military negotiation, able to assess the standpoints of each party. *Do not give up easily to possible solutions* summarizes the *burden of proof rule* (for all the argumentation rules mentioned in this paragraph, see Van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans, 2002, 182-183) according to which, an advanced standpoint has to be defended if one is asked by the other party to do so. *Transform the meeting without chances of agreement in a positive one. Agree to meet again, set the aims for a future meeting and follow them consistently* are the communicative moves which allow the negotiator to save his face and the interlocutor's from a possibly conflicting resolution. *If possible, let the opposing party to start talking and listen carefully; do not interrupt, be patient* sum up politeness strategies and the *freedom rule* which states the unrestricted opportunity of either party to advance and defend their standpoints. The *standpoint rule*, the *relevance rule*, the *validity rule*, and the *usage rule* are implied in the statements *if incorrect information is provided, show evidence for the actual state of affairs without arguing* and *present your point of view, mentioning only the facts*.

The rule in example (2), *If any controversy occurs about a sensitive issue, take notes on the other party's opinion, indicate that you have a different point of view and that you will discuss the problem only after thorough investigation*, renders the succession of actions taken by the negotiator in order to avoid further misunderstanding on a sensitive issue. The last excerpt (*Be consistent. Express your opinion firmly and*

accurately, based on facts. Do not contradict yourself or your colleagues from the negotiation team. Maintain eye-contact. Do not speak to the interpreter) shows the rules of discursive and gestural conduct the negotiator should obey.

In texts consisting of institutional rules and regulations (such as policies and procedures), negation appears as a mandatory discursive strategy, marked as on-record imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 68-69), and followed by well-balanced argumentation. Thus, negation appears as a complex construct which needs to be understood from multiple theoretical and analytical perspectives.

In commercial organizations, written communication obeys the recommendations of communication trainers to a greater extent. Thus, grammatical negation is avoided, sometimes completely dismissed and replaced by softened and less direct speech acts (Măda, 2009, 67-71). In the following example, the manager of the department is sending an e-mail to her team. The message is entitled *Rules* and focuses on the necessity to eliminate the mistakes made by the subordinates in registering the costs in the accountancy program. Despite the fact that it contains no negative particles, the message is clear and the meaning intact. The expected behaviour is described and the rules established, without using negation and, implicitly, without creating negative thinking.

(3) (Gheorghe et al., 2009a, 188)

Type of organization: Commercial

Title of the document: *Rules*

Context: Message addressed to the entire team by the department manager.

Stimați colegi,

În urma atenționărilor repetate din partea dept. Controlling, mă văd nevoită să vă reamintesc că pentru orice încadrare a unei cheltuieli, mijloc fix, sau orice altă înregistrare care are legătură cu un centru de cost, trebuie consultată d-ra [NUMELE ȘI PRENUMELE].

Excepție vor face acele cheltuieli care sunt foarte strict și în mod explicit reglementate prin regulile întocmite și difuzate deja de către Controlling, cum ar fi energia electrică, convorbiri telefonice, etc. Această listă o aveți deja. Dacă aveți întrebări suplimentare, vă rog să o contactați pe d-ra [NUMELE].

Astfel de arondări greșite a unor înregistrări pe centre de cost trebuie eliminate.

Vă mulțumesc,

Mit freundlichen Grüßen / Best regards,

[FIRST NAME AND SURNAME]

Dear colleagues,

As a result of repeated warnings received from the Controlling Dept., I am in the position to remind you that you have to ask Ms. [SURNAME AND FIRST NAME] for the placement of a cost, an asset, or any other registration regarding a cost centre.

Exemption will make those costs which are very strictly and explicitly regulated by the already existing rules, established by Controlling, such as (those referring to) electricity, phone calls, etc. You already have this list. If you have any additional questions, please contact Ms [SURNAME].

Such wrongly assignments of registrations on cost centers need to be eliminated.

Thank you,

Mit freundlichen Grüßen / Best regards,

[First name and surname]

The department manager was trained to give orders in an effective manner. Instead of creating an even greater imposition by performing a direct FTA [1], she is softening its impact on the *face* [1] of her employees by referring to external factors –

the “*repeated warnings received from the Controlling Dept.*” – and by reminding her team of previously existing rules. The illocutionary force of such a message is intensified by the lack of negations, which creates positive thinking and determines the employees to adopt a constructive behaviour. The manager shows determination in assigning work duties both at a general scale – “*Such wrongly assignments of registrations on cost centers need to be eliminated.*”, and individually, by mentioning who carries the responsibility of each assignment.

The next example demonstrates how negation takes an active role in creating less constructive messages. There is an exchange of messages in which the first sender uses negation in an accusatory manner, instead of asking for clarifications.

(4) [4, p. 201]

Type of organization: Commercial

Title of the document: *Re: Target 2008*

Context: Exchanged messages between a member of the marketing department and a member of the financial department regarding an inconsistency which occurred in a report. (first message)

Mulțumesc pentru răspuns.

Am sesizat faptul ca totalul lunilor 2008 nu corespunde cu total cantități 2008.

[PRENUME]

Thank you for your answer.

I have noticed the fact that the monthly total in 2008 does not correspond to the quantities total in 2008.

[FIRST NAME]

(second message, in response to the first one)

Sunt încântat că ai observat acest lucru.

Cu siguranță în schimb ai observat că a fost aplicată o creștere de 7% pe an la valoare 2007 realizată, NU TARGHETATĂ

Cu respect / Best regards,

[PRENUME ȘI NUME]

[POZIȚIE]

[ADRESĂ]

I am delighted that you have noticed it.

In exchange, you have definitely noticed that a raise of 7% per year was applied to the realized value for 2007, NOT TO THE TARGETED one.

Respectfully yours / Best regards,

[FIRST NAME AND SURNAME]

[POSITION]

[ADDRESS]

The two colleagues share a tense working relationship. Despite the very polite opening formula, the first message does not create the opportunity for a good collaboration. The author of the first message realises that a possible error might have occurred in his colleague’s report. Instead of asking for clarifications, he has only emphasized the inadvertence, by means of a negative verbal structure – *does not correspond*. The general tone of the message remains a negative one.

It is especially important to consider tone when you are writing a negative message. In a negative message, such as a document that rejects a job offer or denies a request, be sure to assume a tone that is gracious and sincere. Thanking the reader for the input or involvement represents the background for expressing regret that you

cannot comply with his wishes. If necessary, such a response may be followed by an explanation. It is also advisable not to draw attention to the person performing the action that will likely displease the reader. Therefore, the use of active voice should be avoided when delivering negative messages. In the above example, the use of the active voice in the first message (*I have noticed*) followed by a negative structure has echoes in the second message, in which the sender states ironically – *I am delighted that you have noticed it* and *In exchange, you have definitely noticed that...* The explanation for the inadvertence follows the ironic comment and clarifies the professional issue. Unfortunately, this message only created more tension between the two colleagues.

Some negative messages may refer to the person's attitude or the activity. It is advisable to maintain a professional tone, to avoid attacking the person, and to refer strictly to facts (as in *the monthly total in 2008 does not correspond to the quantities total in 2008* or in *a raise of 7% per year was applied to the realized value [...]*). Without having a negative structure, the message should make clear the sender's position to the given situation.

In the message exchange from example (4), we notice a transition from informal to formal in the way the two senders structure their signatures. The interpersonal relationship seems to deteriorate since the first message is signed only with the first name of the sender, while the second appears with closing formula, full name and details regarding position and address. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the interlocutors tend to answer strategically to a FTA by an increase in the use of negative politeness devices, meant to maintain the distance between speakers. The use of marked deference is proportional with the degree of imposition caused by the FTA. In example (4), the second sender was obviously disturbed by the tone and the content of the received message and he chooses to answer excessively polite, but ironic (see above) to his colleague (also using the formal closing formulas *Respectfully yours/Best regards*). He activates these negative politeness markers in order to account for the imposition he felt at receiving the message.

Conclusion

When receiving emotionally negative messages individuals react according to the social and cultural norms they are accustomed with. In professional context, a negative message may have a considerable impact on interpersonal relationships, on reputation or on the whole career of a person. The professional communicative competence should allow individuals to respond appropriately and effectively to the emotional and social threats of negative messages, by using an adequate tone, by referring to the content and adjusting social balance and distance. The individual may choose to respond aggressively to a direct FTA, performing, most probably, another overt FTA. There is a real danger of creating a winding reaction of defense, in which both communicators became oppressors and victims in turns. By adopting an adequate communicative competence in professional context, the speakers will make use of evasive strategies such as avoid saying “no” in potentially conflicting situations. This will diminish the relational and transactional costs of a negative structure.

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Politețea are limite: evitarea negației în contextul profesional românesc

A evita folosirea lui „nu” în context profesional este o strategie comunicativă care a fost impusă de cadrul socio-cultural atât în interacțiunea profesională, cât și în textele scrise. Lucrarea de față analizează, dintr-o perspectivă pragmatică și discursivă, câteva exemple de comunicare profesională scrisă, culese din instituții și organizații comerciale din România. În ciuda efectului opus pe care negația îl are asupra capacității oamenilor de a gândi pozitiv, a spune „nu” reprezintă un instrument puternic pentru a impune reguli în documentele și procedurile specifice mediului militar. De asemenea, negația poate fi cu succes evitată în texte mai puțin formale, precum e-mail-urile trimise ca parte a comunicării interne din multe organizații comerciale.