

# *Netiquette Rules, OK! ... OK?: Speculating on Rhetorical Cleansing and English Linguistic and Cultural Imperialism through Email Netiquette Style Guides*

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## **1. Introduction**

Although the idea of the hegemony of English as such on the internet is gradually being eroded, at least by statistics<sup>1</sup> and in the linguistics literature (cf. Nunberg 1999; Graddol 1997, 2006; Wallraff 2000, Crystal 2004, and more recently Lovink in press), if not in the popular imagination, reference to the far more subtle influence of the underlying ideology inherent in the adoption of a 'foreign' rhetorical system (that enshrined in netiquette and/or English) by users of another language when engaged in computer mediated communication (CMC), has received as yet very little attention.

The general question of differences in discourse styles or rhetorical patterning in different languages/cultures and in non-native and nativized varieties of English are

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1 See at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> for the Top Ten Languages on the net, and at <http://web.archive.org/web/20041011043725/http://www.greach.com/globstats/index.php3>, and [http://www.worldlingo.com/en/resources/language\\_statistics.html](http://www.worldlingo.com/en/resources/language_statistics.html); even given the difficulty of estimating/distinguishing use by native speakers and that by non-native speakers, it is clear that English is no longer used by *most* internet users (on websites, forums, etc.), and even when its spread is individually compared to other single languages it is fast being caught up by several other languages, especially Chinese and Spanish. National webs are fast developing that do not use English at all (as can be seen in the blogosphere even more clearly – see Lovink in press). See also Gerrand 2007 on estimating linguistic diversity on the net.

familiar in the contrastive rhetoric, applied linguistics and English linguistics fields since at least Kaplan (1966), Hartmann (1980), Clyne (1981), Gumperz *et al.* (1979), Gumperz (1982), the work of Braj and Yamuna Kachru (see e.g. B. Kachru 1981, 1986; Y. Kachru 1996; Kachru, Kachru and Nelson 2006); Smith (1983, 1987), Connor and Kaplan eds. (1987), Connor (1996), Bhatia (1997). More recently, especially in the EFL field, but also in that of contrastive rhetoric itself some critical ‘discourses’ concerning the spread or global imposition of Anglo rhetorical norms (especially in academic discourse) are beginning to emerge explicitly (see e.g., Eggington 2003, Kubota and Lehner 2004). However, this aspect (that of rhetorical influence or, indeed, imposition) is not salient (if at all present) in the more general critical ‘discourses’ specifically on English linguistic and/or cultural imperialism, such as found, for example, in Philippon (1992) or in Pennycook (1998), nor indeed in Ashcroft *et al.* (1989), or Said (1993).

Other authors although explicitly contemplating cultural imperialism through the web (see e.g. in Ess and Sudweeks’ 2005 collection) think more of its (Western or North American) cultural contents and its potentially globalizing/levelling effects damaging to local cultures, comparing it to that through other traditional mass media (the web’s influence on local cultures will depend on whether they have limited/unlimited, filtered/unfiltered access to it).

In the Ess and Sudweeks edited issue of *EJC*, Davis (2002), for example, also examines questions of cultural domination, but again not addressing rhetorical colonialism, but rather that of a more general socio-psychological behavioural style (e.g. the extrovert, pro-active, time-pressed – N. American – cultural ethos). Other studies (Ess and Sudweeks 2005), looking at webpage designs, report differences in local architecture – e.g., adaptation to *local* High Context or Low Context cultures (Hall 1976), Individualist or Collectivist cultures (Triandis 1995), and to other cultural dimensions, e.g. as extrapolated by Hofstede (2001). Web design, in many non-Anglo countries, according to these studies, still seems to some degree to be culturally, locally influenced (see also Segev *et al.* 2007). Whether or not it will eventually become standardised world-wide remains to be seen.

There is, as we shall see, indeed, very little (except for a few hints) concerning the possibility of influence of ‘foreign’ rhetorical, discourse style features through CMC afforded by the medium of the internet.<sup>2</sup>

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2 As far as I have been able to see, there is also little, if anything of academic interest, on the micro-composition or style of writing of the texts on the actual web pages; but see Duke university students’ 2002 essays on the question: “Does the internet entail an end to the cultural and historical diversity of style in composition?” (e.g. Chris Dibble at <http://www.duke.edu/~cfd3/essays/style.htm>, concludes that diversity will thrive when everyone (not just the current elite in other-than N. American cultures) has equal access to the web. However, with C-B-S characteristics also clearly recognizable (even more strongly) in style guides for writing for the web (with its “culture of impatience”, as Kilian 2007,

Charles Ess, tantalizingly seems to address the question of the dangers and possibility of communicative style homogenization on the net, in several of his postgraduate courses, where he invites searching for ways:

to develop guidelines for ‘best practices’ in design and implementation of ICTs. ... [which] respect autonomy and cultural identity (specifically, by designing in ‘culturally aware’ ways that shape ICTs to fit with users’ cultural values and communicative preferences, rather than expect users to fit their values and preferences to those otherwise embedded in ICTs if designed ‘unaware’ of cultural values and communicative preferences).<sup>3</sup>

Or, even more, when, in another course outline, he asks:

How far may CMC technologies *foster* and/or *hinder* cross-cultural communication – especially those forms of cross-cultural communication that intend to *preserve* and foster the cultural values and communicative preferences that define individual cultures (in a *cultural pluralism*), rather than either simply overriding all such values and preferences for the sake of a single defining set (*homogenization* – “*McWorld*”) or collapsing into mere fragmentation and opposition (*balkanization*)? .... As our societies move more and more into online environments – what is our global future as citizens in a “un/wired world,” i.e., a world in which much of communication will take place via CMC technologies? Specifically, between the oppositions of *utopian* and *dystopian* possibilities – are *middle grounds* possible that will avoid both *homogenization* and mere *fragmentation*?<sup>4</sup>

However, his attention, as in his (co-)edited volumes, is less to interpersonal intercultural communication, than to ‘cross-cultural’ mass communication through website design.

While some focus specifically on Anglo discourse norms (controversially) becoming dominant or hegemonic can be found in discussions of international academic discourse and in the EAP teaching literature (see e.g. Turner 2003, Casenave 2004, Kubota and Lehner 2004), the stylistic hegemony would be perhaps relatively limited to this (relatively elite) domain; the global (more democratic) reach of the internet and its hosting (and generation – see e.g. Posteguillo 2002a, 2003:31) of a greater range of discourse genres than those involved in formal academic writing, increases the possible range and depth of influence of Anglo rhetorical norms. CMC, in particular, involves (perhaps mostly

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suggests) – see <http://www.benefit-from-it.com/index.php?fa=wdu101writingForWeb.writingStyle;> and <http://webstyleguide.com/style/online-style.html> – there is justifiable room for doubt, or, at least, for watchfulness and for investigation.

3 From his 2005 course outline on *Bridging Cultures: Computer Ethics, Culture, and ICT*, at <http://www.anvendtetikk.ntnu.no/main.php?id=redirected&page=pres/bridgingcultures>.

4 From his *FutureWorld/s?: Cultural Homogeneity/Hybridity/Diversity* Online course at <http://www.itu.dk/~chess/IRCulture/CourseStructure.html>

informal) interpersonal interaction within and across cultures, thus the possibility of the levelling influence of netiquette norms on more informal, interpersonal interaction styles around the world is not to be ignored.

Despite the swathe of studies on CMC in recent years – following on Herring’s seminal studies, see e.g. (Herring 1996), and in the specialist journal *JCMC*<sup>5</sup> edited by Herring and founded in 1995 –, and on the joint effect of English and the Internet on other languages (see e.g. Posteguillo 2002a, b, 2003, and in Perez Sabater 2007 for a bibliography, where studies usually focus on lexical aspects), except in the brief remarks by Carchidi (1997)<sup>6</sup> and the more extended ones by Atifi (2003),<sup>7</sup> as we shall see later, the connection to possible rhetorical imperialism through netiquette has not been made elsewhere, to my knowledge.

I would like here, then, to speculate on the question of whether or not netiquette norms, as promoted/imposed in (arguably prescriptive) CMC writing style guides, under the guise of commonsensical, rational, universally valid, neutral, style and behaviour advice for use in CMC might be seen as an (unwitting?) attempt at rhetorical imperialism, i.e. of cross-cultural rhetorical cleansing (to extend Cameron’s 1995 felicitous “verbal hygiene” image).

In connection with this, I will first be suggesting how the advice, or imperatives, in English language writing style guides (among them those for CMC) can be seen as manifestations of the Utilitarian Discourse System (UDS) (characterized as C-B-S – clarity, brevity, sincerity – by Lanham (1983); see Scollon and Scollon 1995) inherent in the Anglo-Protestant ethos since the Enlightenment (as traced also in Cameron 1995). Cameron did not discuss netiquette in her 1995 book when tracing prescriptivism and purist attitudes to language usage within the English-speaking editing profession and its published writing style guides (nor was her focus cross-cultural).<sup>8</sup> If she had been writing her ‘verbal hygiene’ book a few years later than 1995 she would not have hesitated, I feel, to discuss netiquette guides among them. The parallels seem too obvious, and I am here

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5 *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, currently available online at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/>

6 As Carchidi puts it: “The Internet imposes its own languages and codes on all who use it. The resultant hegemonic voice is one that has been developed without interest in or consultation with the many cultures of the west, much less with their kindred across the globe: «There is fear that English is becoming the international de facto electronic lingua franca, and people who do not speak English will be at a disadvantage;» users of the Internet further the flood of «cultural inundation» (Horton 1995: 23). *To endorse Internet use is to accept the need to use such computer languages, complete with their codes of «netiquette». The fly’s voice is swallowed by the electronic spider.*” (Carchidi 1997). (Italics added)

7 Atifi himself dismisses the thesis, stressing the cultural relativity of norms adopted, and cites a few researchers (‘surtout en France’) who do, however, suggest that the internet contributes to the diffusion of North-American cultural practices.

8 In her more recent work (Cameron 2002) where she discusses the globalization of ‘communication skills’ she is focussing on *oral* interaction.

merely, as it were, adding in a section by drawing netiquette explicitly into the picture.<sup>9</sup>

I shall then be referring to some of the slowly accumulating cross-cultural observations of CMC in different *intra*-cultural settings and to some of the few on *inter*-cultural settings available, as well as reporting informally on my own observations of Southern Italian students' emailing/forum practices.

My conclusions will briefly explore some of the implications, suggesting the need for further investigation and for non a-priori ideological stances.

## 2. Ideological and linguistic characteristics of UDS, CBS discourse style

Nunberg (1983), Cameron (1995), Scollon and Scollon (1995) stress how style choice, prescriptivism and attitudes to language style are ideological and morally evaluated:

Linguistic manners are like any others. People have always found it worthwhile to reflect on how best to behave, for the sake of at least individual enlightenment and improvement. Since the eighteenth century, most of our great moralists have at one time or another turned their attention to the language, from Addison, Swift, and Johnson to Arnold, James, Shaw, Mencken, and Orwell. In their essays and in the great grammars and dictionaries, we find the most direct secular continuation of the homiletic tradition, reflecting the conviction that the mastery of polite prose is a moral accomplishment, to which we will be moved by appeals to our highest instincts. [...] The linguists are at least forthright in their rejection of linguistic morality. Their opponents, the defenders of traditional values, are more deceptive. They talk a great deal about morality, but in millenarian tones, as if the rules of grammar were matters of revealed truth rather than the tentative conclusions of thoughtful argument [...] (Nunberg 1983)

[...] stylistic values are symbolic of moral, social, ideological and political values. (Cameron 1995: 77)

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9 A discourse on prescriptivism through netiquette *is* to be found in Hohenhaus (2005) when he discusses the “reverse purism” which according to him has emerged within the new media, e.g. in the form of netiquette guidelines and general comments about matters of style in CMC. However, Hohenhaus remarks more on its differences with respect to traditional “anti-change” purism in that it (e.g. in Hale and Scanlon’s 1999 *Wired Style* recommendations) “positively encourages some non-standard and/or new features, while at the same time still being purist in the sense that various value-judgements are involved which typically do not stand up to objective questioning either” (cit. from an online 2003 conference abstract). Although he stresses the (contextual) variability of netspeak appropriateness – as do Baron (2000: 247ff.) and Crystal (2001: 94ff.) to whom he refers – , he agrees that “pragmatic rules of net conduct”, i.e. netiquette norms, are (relatively) widely accepted (Hohenhaus 2005: 214).

For Scollon and Scollon, discourse systems<sup>10</sup> (become *ideological* systems, moreover, when they are conceived as superior to others:

the concept of ideology arises when a discourse system, such as the Utilitarian one, comes to assert itself as a complete communicative system. That is, it become ideological when it denies or devalues other forms of discourse, or communication. (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 119)

Scollon and Scollon's (1995: 98ff.) account of what they dub the Utilitarian Discourse System (UDS) shows that it assumes *clarity, brevity, sincerity* (C-B-S)<sup>11</sup> as the best way of communicating in its preferred forms of discourse. They also trace the history of C-B-S to (most likely) the XVII century and the Royal Society as the preferred style taken on "quite self-consciously" for scientific deliberations (1995: 99). The ethos, is indeed, expressed in Wilkins (1668: B1 recto, in his pursuit of the *Real Character and a Philosophical Language*; see also Eco 1993), and is that which is to some extent, essentially behind the Plain English movement (Gowers 1954). Cameron (1995) also traces these similarities historically and among modern authors (chief among them George Orwell 1949) and in publishers' house-style guides and professional editorial practice.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 186ff., and 1999: 118ff.) and Lakoff (1987: 294ff.), make similar points regarding value judgements, when they critique, for example, the objectivist 'myth'<sup>12</sup> as pernicious or 'insidious', since it presupposes its own absolute superiority and thus, for example, that speaking directly is better than indirectly, that somehow there is something wrong with people who use words which do not directly and literally reflect 'reality' or their thoughts.

Cultural or linguistic domination by a particular source language/culture may be seen thus as insidious not simply because of the threat to other languages/cultures (on any

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10 For how Scollon and Scollon conceive a 'discourse system' as constituted by four elements (forms of discourse, socialization, ideology, and face systems), each mutually influencing the others, (see 1995: 96-97).

11 They define the six main characteristics of the forms of discourse as preferred within the UDS, briefly, as *anti-rhetorical, positivist-empirical, deductive, individualistic, egalitarian* (only for members of the UDS see p. 117), and *public*. "These forms have become the preferred ones for the expression of the ideology of the [UDS] system [...]. Naturally, not all of the characteristics [...] will be found to the same extent in each of the forms one might analyze. These are the ideals for discourse by which the system conveys its ideology, and they will be found to a greater or lesser extent in most instances of Utilitarian discourse." (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 107). It may be worth pointing out, for the sake of precision, that the C-B-S style is not a "system of discourse" in their terms; "we would say that it represents the style of the preferred forms of discourse within a larger system which we will call the Utilitarian discourse system." (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 99).

12 They also argue that epistemological, linguistic, sociological theories, etc. may be seen as so many different competing local folk theories, ideologies, or 'myths' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 118ff.).

of the levels mentioned) but also because of the implicit value judgement of superiority, of *linguicism*, that it also brings. It is all the more insidious since a discourse system is usually out-of-awareness (or as Kramsch and Thorne say of genre, «invisible»), considered natural, the only way to do things, typically by monolinguals.

There seems to be little doubt, considering the arguably ‘imperative’ nature of the style guides (netiquette or otherwise), and their ubiquity in the English speaking world that the C-B-S or Utilitarian discourse system does value above others its own discourse style.

As, Cameron (1995) comments:

The idea that style norms have a strong moral element is developed by the philosopher Berel Lang in a thought-provoking collection of essays, *Writing and the Moral Self* (Lang 1991). In an essay called “Strunk, White and grammar as morality”[...], Lang detects a ‘structural analogy’ between discourse about good writing and discourse on moral conduct. One striking similarity can be found in the canonical syntax of stylistic prescriptions, which tend to the bald imperative (e.g. Strunk and White’s famous ‘omit needless words’) and the axiomatic statement (e.g. “brevity is always a virtue”). Like moral precepts expressed in similar form (“thou shalt not kill”[...]), these prescriptions discourage the question ‘why?’. (Cameron 1995: 67)

This is also more than apposite, moreover, to the question of netiquette, since netiquette ‘rules’ are not simply a style guide but also one on ‘proper’ behaviour, and let us also remember that the very etymology of ‘netiquette’ (net etiquette) tells us that etiquette is an (albeit minor) form of ethics.<sup>13</sup> We shall be returning shortly to the behavioural advice (or imperatives) of netiquette when briefly discussing the politeness norms implicit in the advice (also characteristic of the UDS Face system in many ways).

Cameron (1995) continues:

The core of the analogy for Lang, however, is the strong connection we make between the stylistic qualities of writing and the moral qualities of the writer. Consider for example the commonplace argument that even the most trivial spelling mistakes are to be deplored because they show that the writer is ‘careless’ and ‘sloppy’.<sup>[14]</sup> They are, in other words,

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13 This is, of course, more transparent in Italian (or French whence it comes) where *eticchetta* is immediately recognizable as the diminutive of *etica*. On ethics and the internet see Ess and Thorseth (2006); Rooksby (2002) and Rooksby and Piggott (1997): in the co-operative Convocational Noetic Hyper Entity that is the internet – a cooperative dynamic entity (Rooksby and Piggott 1997: 139) –, “the existent form of netiquette is the best model for appropriate behaviour” (1997: 133), since, for them, it is contractual and negotiable (1997: 138); they assume that there is universally a sense of responsibility to the net itself and to cooperation, and that it is wrong to see the net as Utilitarian and constituted by individual nodes with individual rights governed by self-interest (1997: 133).

14 See, indeed, Timothy Campbell’s *Internet Writing Style Guide* in his comment on Spelling “if you spell

outward signs of a deeper flaw in character. In handbooks such as the *Elements of Style*, readers are shown how to construct an acceptable moral self by conforming to certain stylistic norms: “to summarise the ideals of written style for Strunk and White [15] ... is to compose a model of human character: honest, plain, forthright, patient, simple” (Lang 1991: 17). As Lang points out, this is not the only conceivable model either for good writing or good character. (Cameron 1995: 67-68)

Although Cameron (mainly) criticizes the fact that typically no reasons are given of why people should communicate according to the prescribed rules, it is, however, possible to discern reasons in the guides<sup>16</sup> which typically appeal to certain principles of efficiency, when promoting brevity and clarity, together with showing concern for others, and these furthermore, seem consonant with the Utilitarian or even Kantian ethos, and, what is more, with the Writer Responsibility (rather than Reader Responsibility) ethos (Hinds 1987).

Even those guides Cameron mainly discusses are more circumstantial than she or Lang credits them with, however (though not thus less UDS or C-B-S; they simply confirm the commonsensical, natural, efficient, and therefore ‘universalistic’ ideology).

While discussing the reasons that (professional copy) editors give for insisting on correct and consistent usage, for example, «that it makes the writer’s meaning more directly accessible to the reader, without distracting attention from the content to the form», Cameron (1995: 64) comments that:

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badly, people will take your words less seriously [...] you want to look your best? [...] people on the net [...] can only see what you type. So take the time to make sure that what you write makes you look good”.

15 The original 1918 author was simply William Strunk. It was revised and expanded by E.B. White (Strunk’s student) in 1959, and eds. of *The Elements of Style* have been known as Strunk & White since (latest 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. 2008, Longman).

16 For example, in the *American Heritage Style Guide* (though not examined by Cameron to my knowledge), we find: “In a world in which *efficiency* has become a prime value, most people view *economy* in wording as a *sign of intelligence*. Its opposite, therefore, is often considered a sign of stupidity. Most of us are *busy and impatient* people. We hate to wait. Using too many words is like asking people to stand in line until you get around to the point. *It is irritating, which hardly helps when you are trying to win someone’s goodwill or show that you know what you’re talking about.* What is worse, using too many words often makes it *difficult to understand what is being said*. It forces a reader to work hard to figure out what is going on, and in many cases the *reader may simply decide it is not worth the effort*. Another *side effect of verbosity* is the *tendency to sound overblown, pompous, and evasive*. What better way to *turn off* a reader?” (italics mine). This is an important and revealing point, that of how not to turn off a reader – ego-centred in the end, albeit reader-centred first. Not turning off reader (by *wordiness*, – against brevity – and pomposity – a typical anti-rhetorical pet hate) is the means to the end of looking good/being taken seriously/getting goodwill/being read: in other words, communicative effectiveness (a theme we can discern again in the netiquette guidelines reported further on).

Uniformity may be a necessary condition for transparency, but it is not a sufficient one. In addition to rules about the minutiae of grammar, spelling and punctuation, good writing requires a set of global stylistic maxims, too general to be formulated as specific rules of usage: injunctions to be clear, precise, definite, simple and brief, while avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, vagueness, abstraction, complication, prolixity, jargon and cliché. And whereas authorities acknowledge, however reluctantly, the natural mutability of grammar and vocabulary, they typically present clarity *et al.* as if they belonged to some pure and typically timeless realm of self-evidently desirable qualities. In fact these norms are neither universal nor neutral. They have a history and a politics. (1995: 64)

She too then (Cameron 1995: 64) traces the origins of what she calls “transparency” (Orwell’s “image of writing as a pane of glass” or Rhees-Mogg (*The Times* editor’s) “plain style, plain language”) through five hundred years of debates; from the XVI/XVII century Inkhorn Controversy (where the «supporters of Latin “eloquence” won»), «but then the Enlightenment brought renewed emphasis on plainness, and a correspondingly strong distrust of rhetoric – criticized by Locke as “that powerful instrument of error and deceit”».

We must soon look (if only briefly) at some examples of netiquette rules, as familiar as they may be to readers, in order to let the discernible parallels with C-B-S and with the style guide characteristics mentioned by Cameron ‘leap to the eye’. Before we do this, however, let me mention that C-B-S style advice is also found in a manual by Leech *et al.* (1982) called *English Grammar for Today (EGFT)* for English high school students (though I have used it often with my Italian EFL students). Despite being declaredly descriptivist, as against prescriptivist (as all good linguists), in their section on “Grammar and Composition”, the authors present four “maxims of good writing”, and these are (you guessed): «1. *Make your language easy to follow*; 2. *Be clear*; 3. *Be economical*; 4. *Be effective*» (1982: 184-195). The interest lies, not only in the lack of any comment that there may be other ways of good writing,<sup>17</sup> but also in their reference to Dan Slobin’s (1977) work on the «principles in language generally». Slobin’s work is also referred to in Leech’s *Principles of Pragmatics* (Leech 1983) of the same period, as support for the naturalness, universality of rational principles in language. Slobin’s work refers to language change and development – «but a theory of language change cannot be separated from a theory of language structure» (Slobin 1977: 186). It is worth reporting his work since after some quiescence, it has been referred to again by Leech in his recent work on politeness (Leech 2005); at any rate, it is extremely pertinent to our present purposes here, of trying to get at what lies behind (purported universal or ideological, commonsensical, rational, or arbitrary) characteristics of (good) style norms.

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17 Indeed, they say they are “in a way, precepts of good behaviour in the use of language” (applying to speech and writing) [...]. People understandably tend to be more critical of style in writing than in speech” (Leech *et al.* 1982: 184).

Slobin (1977) characterizes «the cognitive and communicative determinants of the nature of human language» thus:

The speaker of a language wants to express himself clearly, efficiently, effectively, and reasonably quickly; the listener wants to quickly and efficiently retrieve a clear and informative message. These needs and constraints of speaker and hearer determine the structure of language. I conceive of four basic ground rules. (Slobin 1977: 186)

He presents his principles/maxims, as ‘imperatives’ to «the semi-mythical being [...] *Language* [...]». «The four charges to Language are 1) *Be clear*; 2) *Be humanly processible in ongoing time*; 3) *Be quick and easy*. 4) *Be expressive*», (Slobin 1977: 186).<sup>18</sup> It is worth repeating the point from the note below that: «To be fully expressive [...] increases the complexity both of communicative intentions and of surface structure, thus putting strains on the charges to be clear and to be processible». And he continues: «L is always under competing pressure to conform to all four of these charges. Because the pressures are inherently competitory, languages are constantly changing [...]» (Slobin 1977: 188). This is the loophole, I think, through which we could, by analogy, see how different solutions of discourse style (of compromise between the pressures based on cultural value preferences) can be ‘chosen’ by different languages/cultures, or by people in different contexts or communicative situations, and where, among other things, politeness would come in.

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18 (1) refers to semantic transparency: “underlying semantic relations should be marked overtly and clearly [...] there is a tendency for Language to strive to maintain a one-to-one mapping between underlying semantic structures and surface forms”; (2) means L “must conform to strategies of speech perception and production”; (3) “allows for human weakness and perversity [...]” [tendency to blur smudge phonology, delete or contract surface forms] “Perhaps the old arguments of least effort play some role here. At any rate, there are communicative needs to get a lot of information in before the listener gets bored or takes over the conversation; and there are short term memory constraints to get a message across before the speaker or listener loses track [...]”. And so, contrary to the *charges to be clear and processible, there is a charge to cut corners*” [i.e. clarity and brevity are in conflict, as is continually pointed out elsewhere too]; (4) has two important aspects: “be semantic” [expression of propositional and referential content (basic conceptual categories, and more complex ones)], “be rhetorical” [L is “used for more than conveying logical propositions and referential meaning”; L. must have alternate ways of expressing notions, “provide means for compacting semantic content on the surface, in order to communicate *well* – that is to communicate effectively, engagingly, appropriately, and so forth. The speaker must be able to direct the listener’s attention, to take account of his knowledge and expectations”; he “must have means for surprising, impressing, playing up to, or putting down [...]” and “linguistic means of expressing relations of status and affiliation between himself and his conversational partner. To be fully expressive [...] increases the complexity both of communicative intentions and of surface structure, thus putting strains on the charges to be clear and to be processible”. (see Slobin 1977: 186-187)

One cannot give a full overview of the complex issues here, and so let me simply very briefly put it that for R. Lakoff (1973), *Be Clear* and *Be Polite* were to be seen together as components of the Rules of Pragmatic Competence, as they were for Leech in his *Interpersonal Rhetoric* in 1983 (where the CP and its maxims and the PP were part of the *Interpersonal Rhetoric*; the *Textual Rhetoric* dealt with other details of Manner). Leech (2005) is a recent interesting update and discussion of politeness theory, significantly, in cross-cultural perspective.

Similar reasoning is to be found in that for netiquette (and in less systematic style guides than Leech *et al.*'s *EGFT*, not written by linguists). Among them the need to be quick, brief, clear, are, moreover, in my opinion, also strongly connected to the need to not bother the other. In other words, politeness is connected, for the UDS, to clarity and brevity themselves (not necessarily to expressiveness), though these too, are in 'competition'. And, readers will, of course, have recognized some familiar politeness principles in this – whether Brown and Levinson's negative politeness, or Leech's own PP, or, indeed, Hind's Writer Responsibility (Hinds 1987); and see also Cardarelli (2007) who, significantly, traces politeness from Grice to netiquette.

It all seems to argue for the *best-ness* of C-B-S (since it is seen as rational, i.e. universally *right*). If this were the only good and natural way for communication, though, why have the vast majority of the world's cultures' discourse styles (if not languages in their structural characteristics) not adopted it? Perhaps not all speakers/hearers are primarily interested in quick transfer of information.

The principles seen by Slobin (1977) are for language *structure*, (change and development) and not for discourse style; however, another point which will also not have escaped the reader, is their similarity to the Gricean CP and its maxims for communicative logic<sup>19</sup> (as taken up by Leech in 1983, to some degree, though, tempered by the PP).

### 3. Some netiquette writing rules,<sup>20</sup> maxims, norms

It would perhaps be tedious to enumerate all the rules of netiquette, all the echoes from the Orwellian and Gower-ian *Plain language* tradition, and found in the other Anglo style guides (on the latter, please see Cameron 1995), or to remind us systematically of

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19 It may not be a coincidence that both Slobin and Grice were at Berkeley in the same period (or at least Grice's manuscripts were circulating pre-publication in cyclostyle in the early seventies in Berkeley – personal experience). The echoes of Grice seem resonant.

20 I use the term 'rule' (rather than 'principle') since it is often used in the lay literature, as testimony to a trace of the general feeling that they are not merely advice, or maxims for 'best practice', but rather, essentially, prescriptive 'imperatives' – though not all authors would agree: e.g. Rooksby 2002, Rooksby and Piggot 1997, who speak rather of negotiable conventions and contracts.

the Gricean maxims, as well as the UDS. So I shall simply report briefly here from two online guides (Shea 1994, Campbell) for people new to the net (which complement each other to some degree) with some brief tabulated comments, and from an EFL textbook specifically dedicated to *email English* (Emmerson 2004).

Virginia Shea's (1994) well-known netiquette guide (in the abridged *Core Rules of Netiquette* version available online), lists the following decalogue of rules (in this order):

<b>Shea's Core Rules of Netiquette</b>	<b>Brief comments</b>
Rule 1: Remember the Human	<i>as she comments, it's the «golden rule»: «Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you».</i>
Rule 2: Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life	<i>seems flexible/relative/adaptable to culture and context</i>
Rule 3: Know where you are in cyberspace	<i>Refers to different community and contextual appropriateness, of topics, and language</i>
Rule 4: Respect other people's time and bandwidth	<i>by not wasting people's time e.g. by 'copying' them unnecessarily in to messages; also refers to length and 'weight' of messages and attachments. «You are not the center of cyberspace». Don't expect instant responses.</i>
Rule 5: Make yourself look good online	<i>through correctness and care with both your language form («spelling and grammar do count») and content («:make sure you make sense»). Because «You will be judged by the quality of your writing». Rule 5 also includes: «Don't post flame-bait», «Be pleasant and polite» (basically, a mixed bag of advice)</i>
Rule 6: Share expert knowledge	<i>«Sharing your knowledge is fun. It's a long-time net tradition. And it makes the world a better place».</i>
Rule 7: Help keep flame wars under control	<i>because these are disruptive, embarrassing to others and if prolonged, wasteful of bandwidth.</i>
Rule 8: Respect other people's privacy	<i>Don't forward another's mail without permission.</i>
Rule 9: Don't abuse your power	<i>«Those in authority, such as system administrators, should not abuse their power by taking advantage of it (say, by reading someone's e-mail)» [as reported in Wood and Smith 2004: 135]</i>
Rule 10: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes	<i>«Everyone's a newbie sometime, so if you feel that you must point out an error to someone, do so politely». [see Wood and Smith 2004: 135]</i>

These seem mainly to be simply norms of behaviour of reciprocity (general, but applied to the medium and to CMC), and for promoting knowledge-sharing, respect for other's time and effort and feelings, except for rule 5 which has more 'egoistic' justification behind it (how to manage, through carefulness of language and pleasantness, the other's impression of you – so as to be taken seriously, so as to be effective). They are, however, quite strikingly unsystematic and mixed.

Noteworthy, before we leave Shea, is her «golden rule», perhaps the overarching ethical guide since Confucius through Jesus and Kant, who has as his categorical imperative:

act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. (AK:<sup>21</sup> 4.421)

From which (the golden rule, and/or Kant's CI) would descend all specific ethical actions and moral decisions.

Timothy Campbell's (Internet writing guide)<sup>22</sup> points are generally more explicitly linguistic, stylistic (and have some overlap with the above).

He starts with general advice:

- Be properly understood
- Get your points across effectively
- Avoid getting anybody annoyed
- Avoid looking like a "beginner" on the net

Campbell then organizes his guide as follows under the headings of Format, Brevity, Clarity, and then moves onto Quoting, Spelling and Manners, but then also becomes less systematic:

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21 AK refers to the German Academy's approved edition of Kant's works (except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*), and is the approved way of referring to his work. The edition consulted here of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is by M. Gregor (see Kant, 1997: 32).

22 Inexplicably, frustratingly and intriguingly now (October 2008) no longer online: the link for Campbell (from <http://eleaston.com/writing.html#Guides>) now says "For philosophical reasons, I have discontinued this web site. I have no advice to give".

Campbell's main points	Reasons given and some brief comments
<p>FORMAT «Don't write EVERYTHING IN UPPERCASE!»</p> <p>«When typing in a message, break it up into paragraphs»</p>	<p><i>More relaxing (for other)</i> <i>Only for marked emphasis (Gricean Relation; Manner)</i> <i>you'd look like a newbie (thus also to avoid loss of personal face)</i></p> <p>«makes it easier to read» (<i>thus more likely to be read – effective communication + consequence for self</i>) <i>Mainly suggests reason of consideration of the other – though also thinking of backlash effect on self.</i></p>
<p>BREVITY «Keep it short» «Don't just make it up as you go along. Plan ahead.»</p> <p><i>Use short paragraphs (put blank lines in between)</i></p>	<p>«There is a lot of information on the net, and when people read what you've written, they want you to get to the point. They're busy, and they simply don't have the time to read a message in which you are thinking out loud»</p> <p>«It's a good idea to use short paragraphs. This forces you to express yourself with a minimum of words. [...] it is harder to read text on a computer screen than in a book. Small paragraphs give the reader's eyes some relief.»</p> <p><i>(Reminiscent of Gricean Manner and Relation: Avoid unnecessary prolixity – Be relevant)</i> <i>In the advice for carefulness with both content and form, we can see again an appeal to consideration for others, thinking also of consequences for self.</i></p>
<p>CLARITY «When you write something, make sure that people will understand you.»</p> <p>«Avoid using acronyms»</p> <p>«Above all, avoid time-saving contractions»</p>	<p>«After you type in a message – and before you send it – try reading it out loud. Sometimes sentences that seem to be okay when you're typing don't really work when you read them back.» <i>(also touches difference between written and spoken language)</i></p> <p>«While some of these (such as BTW [...]) are well known, you can't be sure that all of your readers know what they mean. Net acronyms (BTW, [...] ROFL [...] etc.) may seem "hip", but if they confuse the reader, you may not get your point across.»</p> <p>«such as "ur" for "your", or "cya" for "see you later". When you use these, you're telling everybody that you can't type well enough to use complete words. Take a typing course if you have to – it will pay off very well in the years to come!» «Note: contractions may be appropriate in "char" rooms, where fast typing is important. Still, do they save you that much time?»</p>

<p>QUOTING</p> <p>«Avoid Me-Tooing»</p> <p>«Avoid Step-Laddering»</p> <p>«Alternate Between Quotes and Your Comments»</p>	<p>«This is the longest section in the guide, but it is one of the most important.» <i>(be more informative) – show thoughtfulness.</i></p> <p><i>i.e.</i> «messages that contain “quotes in quotes in quotes”» <i>(against clarity; wastes reader’s time).</i></p> <p>«To make your replies more meaningful» <i>(and directly relevant)</i></p> <p>«Why bother? ... careful quoting will make your replies more organized, and your thoughts will come across more clearly. When you use your valuable time to reply to a message, you want people to read and understand what you say. Don’t let bad quoting habits make your messages unclear. »</p> <p><i>In Synthesis: only quote short relevant bits – more likely to be read – (avoid annoying others – respect other’s time).</i></p>
<p>SPELLING</p> <p>«[...] if you spell badly, people will take your words less seriously.»</p>	<p>«That may not be fair but that’s the way it is on the net.» <i>(this advice is mainly relevant only to professional writing; in chatrooms and between good friends it is often waived).</i></p> <p>«When you go to a reception or to a party, you take the time to make sure that you look your best. Well people on the net [...] only see what you type [...]. So take the time to make sure that what you write makes you look good.»</p> <p><i>He also cautions on not trusting spell checkers, because of homophones in English, such as ‘write’/‘right’</i></p>
<p>MANNERS</p> <p>«There are many ways to get people on the net annoyed at you, even if you are usually a polite person. The worst problem is ‘keyboard bravery’.»</p> <p>[see <i>Shea’s flaming</i>]</p>	<p>«If you frequently get into nasty debates, you should visit a search engine and look for the word ‘netiquette’. Much has been written about the importance of behaving diplomatically while online.»</p> <p>«You should always read what you have written before you send your message. Not only will this help you spot errors in spelling, phrasing and grammar, but you may also notice that you don’t sound as friendly as you would like.»</p>

For Campbell, then, «netiquette» as such is simply a question of politeness, «behaving diplomatically», online, and would not necessarily include his more specific style guidelines. For many others it does. As we can see, his hints as to how to write are, indeed, subsumable under Shea's «Make yourself look good on line».

Paul Emmerson (2004), next, in his specific EFL textbook on *Email English*, also reiterates these points, listing first of all, however, where neither Shea nor Campbell mention it at all, the importance of writing good subject lines:

that summarise briefly and clearly the content of the message. Your email may be one of hundreds on the recipient's computer, and you want them to read it when it arrives and then find it again easily in their files'. (Emmerson 2004: 5)

This reminds people to put themselves in the other's shoes; to not assume that they are the centre of the other's world, to not assume they are their only correspondent, and to make life easier for them; to respect their time and effort. As Dennis Jerz, in another guide on the <http://eleaston.com/writing.html#Guides> page, who also lists good subject line writing first in his tips for email writing, puts it:

E-mail etiquette asks you to put your reader's needs first, especially when you want the other person to do something [...] for you.

From yet another link on the same site, in an interesting general guide on *Writing Plain Language* (*plain* being a key word in the ethos), we find a very recognizably (indeed explicit) Writer Responsibility dictum, and one appealing to efficiency and effectiveness:

Plain language is an approach to communication that begins with the needs of the reader. When you use plain language:

- What you write is determined by your purpose for writing
- How you write is determined by your audience's reasons for reading and their reading skills.

Plain language matches the needs of the reader with your needs as a writer, resulting in effective and efficient communication. It is effective because the reader can understand the message. It is efficient because the reader can read and understand the message the first time. Unless you write clearly and directly, with the needs of your audience in mind, your readers may be left with more questions than answers.

Emmerson (2004), also promotes using «short, simple sentences», because «long sentences are often difficult to read and understand» (again, a writer-responsibility for clarity appeal, thinking of saving the other's effort). He then continues, interestingly for us, since it seems to imply that other languages are less clear:

The most common mistake for learners of English is to translate directly from their own language. Usually the result is a complicated, confusing sentence. (Emmerson 2004)

Another, additional, connected «tip» of Emmerson's «for writing good emails» not made in the other guides mentioned above, is to have:

only one subject per email. The other person can reply to an email about one thing, delete it, and leave another email in their 'Inbox' that needs more time. (Emmerson 2004)

Emmerson then – after also recommending revising/editing one's text before sending it; using bullet or numbered points for clarity; avoiding jokes, irony, personal comments, etc. (because «humour rarely translates well from one culture to another»); of waiting 24 hours before replying angrily (in case one regrets it later- «only write what you would be comfortable saying to the person's face»); not ignoring capital letters, punctuation, spelling «it might be okay when you are writing to a close friend, but to everyone else it's an important part of the image that you create. A careless, disorganised email shows the outside world a careless, disorganised mind» – makes a point (a good, strong point too of his manual throughout) of stressing the importance of adapting style appropriately to the occasion and interlocutor.

Marcoccia (1998, 2000, as reported in Atifi 2003: 12-13) provides a useful synthesis of various principles extrapolated from three style guides (including Shea's classic), and also offers some useful (though not fully explicated) matching with Gricean principles/maxims. As Atifi reports, for Marcoccia, netiquette, «un code de savoir communiquer», elaborated by internet pioneers in order to regulate CMC (among people, by definition, unknown to each other), has:

the aim is to raise a common attitude to avoid both the clogging up of the network and to raise the quality of the exchanges. It is thus based above all on 'good practice' to raise consensus and cooperation rather than conflict [Atifi says, more mildly: 'débat ou discussion animée'].<sup>23</sup> This preference for consensus is explained by the original ethos of the net which was for cooperation and information sharing, and justifies, thus the central place that cooperative principles [he is presumably alluding to the Gricean CP, here] have in the norms for writing in CMC. For Marcoccia (1998) netiquette rules (règles) determine norms for CMC as an ideal rather than a description of what actually occurs.<sup>24</sup>

According to Marcoccia who provides an analysis of three of the most commonly cited

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23 Nick Carbone (no date), however, would heartily disagree that discussions should only be tame; flaming, for example, is part of the free speech ethos on the net.

24 As Atifi comments, however, they do seem to be 'respected' in American forums (and he cites a study by McClaughlin, Osborne, Smith 1995).

netiquette guides [see the list in Atifi 2003: 62, note 12], netiquette is a normative and *axiologised* system. She extrapolates six categories of rules, each meant to resolve specific problems which can arise in CMC:

- Politeness (in the strict sense) (face management as in Goffman)
  - manage your interlocutor's (positive) face
  - do not encumber/invade another's space
  - do not encumber/invade another's temporal space
  - measure your words (be careful with emotions and humour)
  - Basic manners: adapt your behaviour to the local rules.
- Cooperation in/for the production of messages (in Gricean terms)
  - maxim of Relation (be relevant)
  - maxim of Manner (be brief and clear)
- Message contents:
  - no commercial messages
  - no messages of too personal a nature
  - no racist or sexist messages
- Identification/ Non-anonymity of writers and addressees
  - do not hide your identity
- Respect of 'real-life' laws:
  - respect copyright
- Adaptation to the constraints of the medium:
  - respect the coding and decoding norms.

*(my translation/paraphrase)*

Nabti (2006) neatly summarizes further saying that the set of netiquette 'conventions', require of CMC interlocutors «la clarté, la pertinence, la brièveté», and adds the insight that its role is *preventive*; it functions to prevent possible misunderstandings or conflicts, compensating for the limits of CMC (loss of paralinguistic and non-verbal clues/anonymity of interlocutors/difficulty of face management when face is imperceptible).

As I am arguing, explanations found among style guides are resonant of the Utilitarian and Kantian ethic; clarity, brevity are promulgated not only since they are determined by or are most efficient in the medium (e.g., to compensate for the 'dangers'/poverty of clues in the medium, and thus avert conflict), but also out of showing respect for others – not only in those circumstances, but in general (since they are not unique to CMC, and are found in all the style guides).

The golden rule of netiquette, «*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*», as does Kant's CI, appeals, indeed, to an ethic of reciprocity, of mirroring, one of using your own preferences for respect, to imagine those of others (in order to act on this, *if* you want to be good or 'ethical'). It is a Utilitarian stance, where it is for the good of all, but also one to some degree with a touch of Egoism: show concern, through carefulness,

clarity, brevity, openness with information, respect for the other's Autonomy;<sup>25</sup> show cooperation, politeness, respect for the other's (mirrored preferences), because in the end it's in your own good. An Individualist (whether of Triandis' vertical or horizontal type) ethic of concern for other individuals, is, indeed, a reciprocal Rights, and Autonomy type of ethics.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Across languages and cultures

What about the threat of cultural imperialism or rhetorical cleansing through the globalisation of netiquette?

Atifi (2003: 12-13), takes the tack (after his reporting of Marcoccia's schema above) that netiquette defines «Anglo-Saxon» rules for global communication; transcultural and universal rules meant to be valid for all the «internauts du village planétaire»:

Many aspects testify to this globalising assumption. On the one hand, the rules themselves are seen as advice, or rather injunctions which must be followed in cyberspace. On the other, this [particular] netiquette, which is essentially, American, is the most imported, assimilated and reproduced, as is, by different website administrations world wide. Now, this is the most important point: *these global rules define an ideal communicative style determined in part by specifically 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural traits. Thus, netiquette seems to us to be actually a reflection of the North American communicative style, i.e., of the way in which an individual from that culture presents himself and behaves in interaction* (Blum-Kulka, House, Kasper 1989). Concretely, this universalist conversational ideal rests to some degree on the [positive] value [judgment] ("valorisation") of four behaviours which are comparatively central to the *North American communicative ethos: the search for consensus* (as opposed to acceptance of conflict tolerated by other cultures), the *control of emotions* (as opposed to Mediterranean more expressiveness); *conciseness of messages* (as opposed to Mediterranean volubility) and a *preference for indirectness* [sic] as opposed to directness [sic] tolerated in Arabic cultures. [*my translation, and italics*]

We find here in a nutshell many points I am trying to speculate on. Atifi, however, then goes on to deny any stylistic colonisation in his Moroccan forums where local cultural ethos is, instead, strongly alive and well.

This brings us conveniently to considering the cross-cultural aspect: how do interactants from different cultures behave *intra*-culturally in CMC (and then, as a consequence presumably, perhaps, *inter*-culturally)? And, are there signs of rhetorical colonisation?

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25 On the Kantian respect for Autonomy- right to information, as consideration for others, etc. – see discussion in Vincent Marrelli (2004: 345)

26 See, e.g., Vazquez *et al.* (2001) on types of morality systems; and Scollon and Scollon (1995) for the connection between Individualism and Utilitarianism; but see Rooksby and Piggott (1997), Rooksby (2001), who argue for a non-Individualistic, non-Utilitarian view of the net.

It is, indeed, necessary to examine practices in two different macro domains which need to be kept methodologically separate:

- *INTRA-cultural* CMC situations
  - in single other-than-English-speaking communities,
  - and, relatedly, through *CROSS-cultural* or contrastive studies of *INTRAcultural* CMC (in cross-cultural studies one tends to more readily ‘notice’ the cultural differences and similarities, and thus the culture-specific features).
- *INTER-cultural* CMC situations, to be distinguished between
  - NS-NNS and
  - NNS-NNS interaction settings.

Investigations of *INTRA-CULTURAL* CMC/emailing practices, usually in group forum settings (see Herring 2007, for a systematic classification of types of CMC), are beginning to suggest that perhaps fear of colonisation on this level is misplaced (as Atifi, insists, at least in the case of the Moroccan forums he has observed),<sup>27</sup> since the local flavour seems strong in local forums. Atifi’s subjects seem to show, indeed, no sign of using anything resembling the netiquette norms or the general interactional outlines above (except in some technology-oriented forums): he observes with some relish, for example, the strong arguments that occur.<sup>28</sup> He also mentions, the presence of long (and sometimes very long) messages – as is reported also by Liao (2000) for Taiwanese EFL students, in an *intercultural* forum setting –. A further point in common, reported both by Atifi for his Moroccan subjects and by Liao for her Taiwanese students, seems to be the presence of violations of Relevance in that topics may be introduced willy nilly, answers to questions not given, etc. Atifi also observes plurilingual (English-French-Moroccan Arabic) code-switching (contravening the ‘only use the official forum language’ rule – since it is an international forum focussing on Morocco, not all participants speak Arabic – e.g. the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of immigrants abroad). There are also

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27 He also refers us to Atifi H. and Marcoccia M. “Communication médiatisée par ordinateur et variation culturelle: analyse contrastive de forums de discussion français et marocains.” *Les carnets du Cediscor*, 2006, vol. 9, pp. 59-73; and see Atifi (2003: 59) for reference to a few other empirical studies of intra-cultural CMC in different cultures which also show that usage is “largely determined by particularism and cultural differences”.

28 This could be, it is suggested, due to the lack of free speech on important delicate issues in the main traditional media: “les Marocains n’utilisent pas le réseau dans une logique utilitaire et coopérative de partage d’informations (rendre service); ils profitent du dispositif pour (ré)introduire dans l’espace public de nombreux sujets marginalisés par la parole officielle. Le réseau est même détourné, parfois, à des fins de militantisme politique” p.67

many private messages made in public, emotional tones and outbursts, and flaming, alongside courteous exchanges and formulas, these last, however, not so much caused by netiquette adoption, according to Atifi, as based rather on Moroccan norms of politeness and 'sacred values'; they coincide with netiquette only since, or as far as, they are 'en phase' with Moroccan values. He also mentions the use of Traditional Arabic openings and closings, numerous and very warm greetings; *tutoiment* showing conviviality and proximity; showing Religious identity and solidarity ethos (part of the «ouma» – a collectivistic not individualistic ethos). Atifi also points strongly to the emergence of a community spirit (bringing in the 'expats' far from home):

Le dispositif permet à chacun de s'impliquer dans sa communauté d'appartenance et de vivre pleinement sa 'marocanité' en se connectant à un forum de discussion pour y chercher des réponses à toutes les questions (sérieuses ou futiles) qui l'intéressent. (Atifi 2003: 72)

He also explains thus the off-topic (off *official* topic), i.e. irrelevance, of many posts: since the forum is seen as a space for free speech or as a listening space for evoking purely local, national or community issues (Atifi 2003: 72).

Finally, he also observes "neutralization", with pure netiquette adoption, but only in technical forums, and adds:

C'est le degré zero de l'appropriation individuelle nationale et culturelle qui semble correspondre le mieux à l'idéale communicationnel du net! (Atifi 2003: 79)

However, since there is often simple translation of netiquette rules on many foreign sites, as Atifi himself also mentions (2003: 12) as we saw above, the possibility cannot be ignored of rhetorical influence from this, or from peer pressure in interaction (Wallace 1999: 66-68), on local norms in other local languages/cultures other than English where the local discourse style is not essentially C-B-S.

Kramersch and Thorne (2002), who invoke Scollon and Scollon (1995: 98-99) for some of their framework, observe French and American subjects in *INTER*cultural email, and see their miscommunication problems in terms of genre (the "invisible fabric of our speech"); they also, thus, see different local norms in action but, since they are looking at intercultural interaction, see this (the resulting "genre wars") as a problem:

It should not be surprising [...], that at the end of our analysis we find genre to be the major source of misunderstanding in global communicative practice, because we tend to take genre norms for natural and universal (Fairclough 1992), we don't realize the local flavour they bring to the global medium.

Of course, genre wars also occur in face-to-face interactions. But there, the multiplicity of semiotic channels serves to diffuse the conflict and to disambiguate the nature of the

genre. In the rarefied context of cyberspace, the problem is exacerbated. The partners in the exchange [...] were not aware that the seemingly transparent medium of the internet might itself be the source of their frustrations. Each group mapped the communicative genres they were familiar with onto their FL communicative practices in cyberspace [...] (Kramersch and Thorne 2002)

Furthermore, they contemplate, significantly for us here, the strong possibility of imposition by some, and the consequent loss by others, of local forms of discourse :

But genres are part of the material, economic fabric of societies. There is a fear that those who own personal computers and email accounts may unwittingly impose their genres globally onto others and thus enforce deinstitutionalized forms of discourse [...] The danger is that those whose lives are less centred around the computer may not so much lose their language, as they risk losing the very genres that are the hallmark of their membership in their local social and cultural communities. (Kramersch and Thorne 2002: 99)

We have come thus to considering *INTER*-cultural settings. Observation of misunderstandings, and negotiations of understandings in such settings would, indeed, shed light on separate cultural community practices or styles, or on the gradual, or otherwise, convergence of one to the other (usually, of course, to the dominant participant in an asymmetrical situation, as suggested by Kramersch and Thorne above, or, in a NS-NNS interaction usually to the native speaker) or, might eventually, perhaps, reveal the emergence of a third, specifically, *intercultural* set of 'neutral' norms.

There are, of course, however, two very different types of intercultural setting. That between native speaker/s and non-native speaker/s (NS-NNS), and that between non-native speakers (NNS-NNS) using English as a lingua franca. Not only would different dynamics be expected, but we might also begin to ask what should/might be done/hoped for in terms of EFL, or EIL and/or intercultural interaction education with English to be used as a lingua franca, ELF (not to mention the interest of studying intercultural CMC situations with a language other-than-English being used, with and without 'Anglo' participants).

To continue with a brief overview of some of the few cross-cultural and intercultural studies to be found so far, one must also mention Murphy and Levy (2006) who investigated CMC between Australians and Korean academics (a NS-NNS setting again). They focused through questionnaires on perceptions of politeness and impoliteness,<sup>29</sup> eliciting also some indications of why/how these perceptions (of, one should say, perlocutions of others' style choices) with respect to politeness effects, were formed:

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29 But see Xie (2007) on the dangers and limits of using questionnaires in politeness research.

Results show aspects such as formality in language and use of correct titles are important politeness considerations in intercultural email communication. These politeness considerations however, vary according to culture and results show many discrepancies on these and other aspects between the Australian and Korean data. (Murphy and Levy 2006: 1)

One might also mention that much of what little there is on observing intercultural emailing is mostly being carried out by teachers of language as FL (and often of EFL), just as much of the cross-cultural and intercultural observations and comments on differences in politeness also come from people engaged in foreign language education. Differently from the general linguists, applied TFL linguists also ask themselves what can/should be done through teaching to help tackle the situation. Issues of cultural imperialism are also increasingly, though timidly, being addressed. But what is more important? political in/correctness, or intercultural pragmatic success/failure?

From the EFL perspective, then: Ford (2003) looks at “The Use of Pragmatics in E-mail Requests made by Second Language Learners of English” (at the university of Hawaii), and the perlocutionary effects (of politeness or otherwise) on native speakers of non-native speakers’ requests as did Murphy and Levy (2006) with different methods – referring also to a “handful” of similar works by others:

The line of research most directly relevant to my study are the handful of reports that investigate the pragmatics of e-mail requests in the ESL environment. Of particular interest to my study is the report by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), who analyzed for perlocutionary effect e-mail requests sent by NS and NNS graduate students to professors. They concluded that, in general, NNS e-mails did not adequately address imposition, which negatively affected perlocution (i.e., the effect that an utterance has on its recipient). In addition, NNS messages contained fewer downgraders and other mitigating supportive moves such as grounders and apologies, which negatively affected the impact of the requests. Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas (2000) analyzed variation between graduate NSs and NNSs of English in their e-mail requests to faculty. These researchers also found that NNSs employed pragmatic strategies that negatively affected the perlocution of their English e-mail requests. Chen (2001) analyzed and compared e-mail requests sent by Taiwanese and U.S. graduate students to their professors. She concluded that the Taiwanese students used different request strategies than the U.S. students due to culturally different perceptions of power relations, familiarity, and imposition. This study illuminates the possibility of divergent culture-specific pragmatic strategies employed by even advanced-level ESL students when making e-mail requests in the academic setting. (Ford: 146)

Though not centrally relevant to CMC style and netiquette as such, this is a useful overview of research on learning/teaching politeness pragmatics and of raising pragmatic awareness (especially of requests) in (mostly) Asian area students. I mention it here since one might well doubt that emailing was merely a neutral medium, politeness effects

not being divorced also from openings, closings, the appropriate use of titles, the pull of informality, brevity, etc. called for by netiquette, or simply email-style – as Murphy and Levy (2006) say: “aspects such as formality in language and use of correct titles are important politeness considerations in intercultural email communication”; and, anyway, CMC, as all communication, also has its pragmatics. At any rate, the consensus seems to be that explicit instruction of pragmatics works, though it can produce over-politeness and therefore still negative perlocutions. Many EFL oriented authors thus assume we must teach the pragmatics (of English). One can certainly agree, but, surely only for EFL, i.e., for interacting with English native speakers (NSs). Awareness must be achieved perhaps differently of intercultural equality when the situation is a lingua franca NNS-NNS one; but *whose* pragmatics are to be taught then? This is where the insights from the intercultural interaction literature should come in, aiming for the development of general intercultural communicative competence (see, e.g., Byram 1997).

And the usefulness of teaching CMC pragmatics, in general? There are several plausible reasons for doing so:

- It could be exploited to stress the variability of contexts – in other words, of sociolinguistic and pragmatic variability and appropriateness also in CMC (see Crystal 2001; the American Heritage section on email writing, and Emmerson 2004 as mentioned above) – it could also simply be a way of teaching general sociolinguistic appropriateness (given the probable current higher attraction (to young adults) of the net rather than that of other media or types of writing activities), i.e. of raising awareness of sociolinguistic variation and of linguistic and socio-pragmatics in general, as well as in specific target cultures.

- It could, of course, be a good opportunity for teaching awareness precisely of American (or ‘Anglo’ or Utilitarian cultural practices/pragmatics), to EFL students (it is, after all, in their interests when engaging in NS-NNS interactions in English).

- It may also, as said above, be of general use in raising cross-cultural and even intercultural awareness and competence (with accompanying discourses on the ‘imperialism’ aspect perhaps).

In all cases, it would further the development of CMC competence itself (see Spitzburg 2006), in any situation, probably, and of communicative competence and/or awareness, in general.

Despite some scholars’/teachers’ assumption, as said earlier, that pragmatic competence can successfully be taught explicitly and in CMC in particular, I have been witnessing non-adherence to netiquette norms among many students in my own (English language and linguistics) class forums with Southern Italian students over the past six years, as well as in the individual emails they (and Italian colleagues) send me. (The particular CMC situations I can report on are, thus, individual emails (to prof.) and posts to group forums, where a prof. or profs. + hundreds of classmates are also ‘present’).

Before outlining my students' typical 'violations' of netiquette, let me just mention that they may, perhaps, be put down to the still prevalent pull of the myth of informality of CMC (Crystal 2001; Emerson 2004: 4), or to dis-attention and carelessness, or they may, perhaps, be due to underlying cultural scripts which are not naturally of the UDS or C-B-S, or, indeed, perhaps to some sort of (intentional or unintentional) 'resistance'; however, this last option would be surprising in the EFL learning context of a class forum (where, incidentally, participation is encouraged but not obligatory, given that not all students have permanent easy access to the internet).

At any rate, there are several types of 'violations' they tend to make over and over again (despite introductory class sessions on netiquette and repeated private and public-forum and class-reminders), and several things that do not seem to be a 'problem'. I have, however, made no fully systematic investigation of behaviour before and after instruction, so can only make tentative points.

Briefly, my Neapolitan (or generally mainly Campanian) students 'perform' many instances of:

1. not putting a subject line (leaving it blank) or, even worse perhaps, putting a very vague or non-useful, even irrelevant subject line (such as 'help', 'please help me'; 'information'; 'a request'; etc.) or using the reply function to a previous thread to start a totally different topic;
2. not leaving a closing signature, not identifying themselves, despite having often non-transparent creative nicknames, 'profiles' and/or email addresses;
3. not worrying, even in what is an EFL context with their profs, to be careful about spelling, grammar, etc. – insisting on using lower-case for everything ('i', 'english' – even though I or my colleagues have pointed out that, this way, we do not know whether they are masking an error in standard English practice);
4. there are often (presumably unwanted) skewed perlocutionary effects of their opening, ending and greeting gambits – producing either over-politeness, or under-politeness; probably caused by errors of transference ('Dear teacher', 'Dear Mrs'; 'Hi teacher');
5. and in requests (although this would need a proper study), perceived perlocutionary, impoliteness or inappropriateness; let me just mention the unfortunately typical 'I expect your reply soon';
6. sometimes they are openly confrontational with a professor in ways that they might not be face-to-face; on the other hand, sometimes over complimentary,

and other times they tend to forget that the Prof is there at all,<sup>30</sup> and they engage in exchanges with their peers, on topics (usually to do with other courses, or administration problems, but also personal ones) anyway divorced from the explicit forum rules, including also not using the forum language (i.e. using Italian rather than English);

7. on these occasions the style is even more informal, resembling to some degree MSN use (or Chat-speak) and with many contractions, re-spellings, typical of SMS texting ('x' for 'per', 'k' for 'che', etc.) as well as 'errors'/?/typos;
8. many posts even to me (their Prof of English) in English also show surprising signs of hurry or simply carelessness (typos, grammar lapses, etc.);
9. they mostly do not read the archives, and thus often ask questions to which answers are already available, as well as also ask questions on information available elsewhere on the (admittedly not very user-friendly (non-Utilitarian)) general university website;
10. many of these 'characteristics' above are present also in *individual mails* to me – which, in themselves are 'violations' of a general norm since they are invited not to send us/me personal mails unless in an emergency or on a totally individual topic of no interest to others;
11. they also 'invade' weekends and vacation time with their emails, but that is another question (where E.T. Hall's 1984, distinction between polychronism and monochronism is at issue), and anyway since the forum is a-synchronous, need not be felt as pressurizing (though see Busher and Nalita 2007, on this);
12. in their peer-to-peer interactions, although there are (rare) cases of flaming, the groups function cooperatively, usually helping each other out with where to find information of various sorts (not always to do with our course);
13. there are, however, very few instances of long messages (these come mainly from me...). Perhaps this is explainable by time restraints, and the assumption that CMC is itself for quick, short, sharp messages, rather than for pondered, careful exchanges (also perhaps determining the lack of carefulness with linguistic form/correctness);
14. the messages, even to me, often seem unedited for contents too, written as they think, without worrying too much about clarity;

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30 Thus also confirming Warschauer's (1995) insight that the imputed controlling 'Panopticon' effect of the net is not strongly felt in some forums.

15. increasingly these days very few students, however, only very new 'newbies', use Capitals/Upper-case letters all the time, inadvertently shouting.

There seem to be some parallels between findings made by other researchers, and hints suggesting different assumptions concerning the appropriate register to be used in CMC (when not interacting with peers), and that for 'efficient' communication (e.g. by the use of subject lines for clarity/relevance and to follow deductive UDS format; lack of writer responsibility,<sup>31</sup> etc). Whether these are signs of entrenched local cultural style, or signs of resistance or just carelessness, bloody-mindedness, or whatever, cannot be asserted, however, on this basis.

I am not sure whether what they are engaging in can be called intercultural interaction either (although some of them are from abroad, and I at least am a 'foreigner'). What seems clear is that either explicit alongside implicit instruction does not work, or they are not getting either intensively enough for it to make a difference. I am also aware, that, in my English classes, as with essay writing, and contrastive rhetorical issues, I am teaching them (or trying to) – and they are made aware of this – an Anglo norm, rather than a non-controversially, universally valid one in all situations.

Whether or not our South Italian students (or other CMC users in other cultures, such as those described by Atifi (2003), Liao (2000), Murphy and Levy (2006), Ford (2003), Kramsch and Thorne (2002), or by Ware 2005, or Bensoussan *et al.* (2006) to mention two studies in the TEFL literature) are culturally influenced in their *not* following globally recommended "netiquette" norms, the issue remains that netiquette/guides are patently, as I see it, Utilitarian, C-B-S, and that some authors are beginning to question their possible influence on local norms, though not necessarily to question the correctness of teaching it for use in NS-NNS situations, nor ask themselves whether it is universally valid or right.

## 5. Concluding speculations

Let me conclude by speculating now on the rightness of teaching or promoting netiquette norms as appropriate for the neutral ground of lingua franca talk in *INTER*-cultural interaction between NNS and NNS, i.e. when using English as an international (EIL) or global (EGL) language (Jarvis 2006).

Political correctness would have us question why it should be the North American, C-B-S, UDS norm based netiquette. Nonetheless, considerations of another sort may suggest that it could be appropriate after all.

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31 Vergaro (2005) sees differences between FYI letters (though not emailed) between English and Italian, and remarks on the writer vs reader responsibility types emerging.

In lingua franca talk, especially between people who know each other very little or not at all, and who meet only on the Net, a *Low Context* (Hall 1976) type of communication, one where things are made explicit to avoid loss of information, may indeed be recommendable (see Vincent Marrelli 1990). Even politeness can be made explicit (and will thus be appreciated, rather than causing negative perlocutionary effects, even when still ‘weird’ to a NS’s eyes).

For wider communication, between people who do not know each other well or at all, (the *intercultural lingua franca CMC* situation, almost by definition), would a common set of norms/rules not be desirable? (also because of the impoverished medium for interaction with respect to face-to-face interaction). Should/would it be fair for it to be such as is emerging in the netiquette style guides? It would also be interesting to consider the characteristics that ‘netiquette’ imperatives or rules share with advice for Intercultural Interaction (see e.g. in Gudykunst 1991, Byram 1997, Alptekin 2002), but this cannot be done here.

Intercultural email communicators are usually fairly well-educated and know they are operating in conditions of uncertainty (at least the plurilinguals do), and so will also expect to have to make adjustments from their norms or cultural script to some other, *if* they want to co-operate. Furthermore, when you know nothing or very little about your possible interlocutors or audience – from other cultures, and when these are from a variety of different cultures – which set do you converge to? Is there ever any neutral ground? Perhaps netiquette norms can be this neutral ground, after all, as can any imposed law or contract if accepted by interactants, who will be relieved to have some common ground to stand on.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, an interesting study by Shachaf (2005) suggests that the use of email (a ‘lean’ media channel) in intercultural (work) situations, actually reduces the possibility of intercultural miscommunication (differently from Kramsch and Thorne’s view), *thanks to* the ‘universal’, direct, low context, clarity, brevity features of «email-style»:

This reduction is first due to the use of ‘e-mail style’, which is formal, technical, and

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32 Or a ‘Leviathan’ to whom to willingly defer; see Wallace (1999: 69-71), referring to MacKinnon’s (1995) elaboration on Hobbes’ concept: “Conforming to social conventions and adhering to laws that restrict our freedoms are, from a philosophical perspective, things we do to preserve our existence. We give up certain freedoms to earthly authorities in order to live in a predictable and safe world, interacting peaceably and fairly with our fellow humans [...] MacKinnon insightfully argued that there is indeed a leviathan on the Internet, one to which most people willingly give up freedoms in order to preserve the value and energy of the medium itself [...] we want the Internet to flourish, and sense it will not unless we build a framework of trust and establish means to ensure compliance with, at the very least, netiquette.” According to Wallace (1999: 62-68), furthermore, behavioural norms on the internet are enforced either by ‘signs on the door’ (written norms) or by ‘the arched brow’ (peer reactions and reproaches).

structured, with short and precise sentences. Each message contains only one idea and includes the relevant context [...]. A participant in Israel reported that GVT [global virtual team] members *learned* to use 'e-mail style': «One learns to use very simple language and short sentences. For example in an e-mail you will not include more than one idea. If you have three different things to say you will do it in three separate messages. I highly appreciate those who write on one subject, that appears in the subject line, with no additional subjects. Since I observed it with the Indian, the Japanese, everyone *learns slowly to behave in a universal way.*» (Shachaf 2005: 9-10)

In conclusion, I suggest that different positions or attitudes, and educational practices, would be appropriately adopted in different communicative contexts. Whether or not emailers and forum participants in non-Anglo cultures around the world are learning, adopting or adapting, ignoring or resisting the 'global' netiquette norms in their *intra-cultural* interactions (and this would indeed, justifiably, involve the wider issues of rhetorical cleansing, levelling, colonisation and globalization), it is still the case that in *inter-cultural* interaction (where most observers, and participants do, nonetheless, report on occurrences of miscommunication and conflict) the issue of rhetorical influence/imposition, and of whether the consequences are or would be 'good for' intercultural interaction, is not to be taken lightly either, and deserves to be investigated, and done so, moreover, I suggest, without a priori ideological prejudice either way.

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