

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

4

5 Roberto Maffei<sup>\*1</sup>, Livia Selene Convertini<sup>1</sup>, Sabrina Quatraro<sup>1</sup>, Stefania Ressa<sup>1</sup>,

6

Annalisa Velasco<sup>1</sup>

7

8 <sup>1</sup> A.L.B.E.R.T. (ARPA-Firenze Landmarks on human Behaviour Experimental Research

9

Team), Florence – Italy.

10

11 \* E-mail: [roberto@robertomaffei.it](mailto:roberto@robertomaffei.it) ; [albert@arpafirenze.it](mailto:albert@arpafirenze.it)

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# SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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## 17 **Supporting Information**

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41 SECTION 0 – *About method*

42       The naturalistic approach we chose presents several difficulties, given that human  
43 communication cannot actually be observed “from outside”: it is part of us and we  
44 simultaneously belong to it; it is impossible to avoid interactions (as much as to say  
45 “interference”) with the studied sample, even though limiting them to the data collection.  
46 There is a solution, though, for research purposes: an external point of view can be  
47 simulated.

48       We designed such simulation starting from the consideration that a total exclusion  
49 of personal/relational factors is illusory, even with unknown persons, given that it is  
50 impossible to take under control their emotional involvement (their subjective reactions  
51 to the survey in itself and to the survey conductors, independently of any specific  
52 content). In such perspective, two problems had to be solved: the first was related to the  
53 specific matter about which the sample would be committed; the second was related to  
54 the survey modalities. To solve the first one, we have involved our sample members in a  
55 real world-like communication case, totally external to their relationship with the survey  
56 conductors. Following a precise sequence, through a specifically designed questionnaire,  
57 we have submitted to participants the exchanged messages and the questions about their  
58 interpretation.

59       About the second problem, we decided to try transforming the relational weak  
60 point in a strong one. We concluded that, in the end, the most effective condition could  
61 never be the illusory neutrality; rather, it could be the possibility to act far from any  
62 stressor, to read messages without time pressure, to let sensations and emotions emerge

63 and to report them without any fear. In other words: a friendly, familiar environment,  
64 with a known conductor (to de-potentiate the structural initial difficulties in human  
65 relationships); a shared programming of the survey date and hour (to get the maximum  
66 possible of comfort and relax); the possibility to answer free from any constrictions (for  
67 this we mainly used questions with opened answers); the certainty about anonymity and  
68 the non-evaluative purposes of the survey. At the same time, the consciousness of  
69 participating to a serious work and the guarantee (for the research's purposes) of mostly  
70 uniform survey modalities. As much as to say that our control on the survey mainly lied  
71 on the reliability and the homogeneity of the relational system, rather than on the  
72 (impossible) attempt to cut off the relational aspects from the survey.

## 73 **PART I - Materials and Method**

74

### 75 SECTION 1 – *The research guide-lines*

76 Object to be investigated: human communication, the process through which a  
77 receiver attributes meaning to a message (the interpretation process, the way he/she  
78 “understands” the incoming message).

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

84 Action plan: (1) Submitting a real world-like case to the sample and requesting  
85 the solution for a concrete problem related to it; (2) Observing respondents’ reactions  
86 through collecting their accounts; (3) Analyzing them. The case should be suitable to be  
87 fully documented for the sample and its investigation should require a satisfyingly short  
88 time.

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

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

- 96 • About education level, possible exceptions only for people whose literacy,  
97 joined with their life experience, allow them to understand without effort the  
98 case documentation [1].
- 99 • The sample will be challenged with an appropriately documented H.c. case  
100 and the individual reactions to it will be investigated through a questionnaire.  
101 The questionnaire will end posing a **concrete problem**, referred to the case,  
102 and requiring the respondent's solution.
- 103 • The case must be **quasi-real**, not a mere laboratory exercise. So, it will be  
104 based on real world cases, remaining as close as possible to reality at the same  
105 time avoiding any reference or hint to the original real situations. It will be a  
106 written communication case (to allow for a better control on the stimuli  
107 submitted to the participants), limited enough to be taken into account  
108 complete, unabridged and accomplished.
- 109 • The sample will collect about 100 individuals and the survey sessions must  
110 not exceed the 30 – 45 minute time range. The sessions may be attended  
111 individually or in groups, but the filling of the questionnaires will always be  
112 an individual act.
- 113 • All the survey sessions will take place under the control of a conductor, who  
114 will follow a standard procedure for presenting the texts about the case and  
115 the questions (in order to send homogeneous inputs to the sample).

116

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

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

127 A complete description of the case can be found ahead in this present Section. In  
128 extreme synthesis, we could say that it goes on as an exchange of written messages (5 e-  
129 mails in total) between the employee and the architect; we have submitted these  
130 messages to the sample leading its members in a two-step work. In the first step, we have  
131 asked the participants to carefully read the first three messages in sequence, then to  
132 interpret them and the situation they outline; finally, to report and display the “concrete  
133 elements” on which the interpretations were based. The rationale was: interpretation  
134 process *in vivo* observation, quali-quantitative analysis and formulation of a hypothesis.

135 In the second step, we have submitted to participants the last two messages asking  
136 them to read carefully the texts and then to solve a problem: the fourth message had been  
137 submitted in two versions and the problem to solve was to indicate which of the two  
138 could have produced the final answer ([fifth message](#)). The rationale was: exploring the

139 relationship between interpretation and following action and, through a quantitative  
140 analysis, obtaining a first check of our hypothesis.

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

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

145 CHARACTERS:

- 146 ▪ XX – The employee. Female, line worker in an office of an Italian  
147 corporation. Her office is undergoing works regarding the heating plant.
- 148 ▪ YY – The architect. Male, executive in charge of the works. He is a colleague  
149 of XX, being himself an employee of the corporation. He has superior  
150 position and duties, in respect to her, but he belongs to another branch and has  
151 no hierarchic power on her.
- 152 ▪ Dr. KK and Dr. ZZ – Employee’s (XX) colleagues, just mentioned by the  
153 architect in reference to the works in progress.
- 154 ▪ The Colleague – A shadow character in the interaction, as he never appears  
155 during the action. The architect (YY) requests his advice about the text of one  
156 message to be sent to XX.

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

159 The STORY:



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

165       **Prologue** – Works on the heating plant are coming to their end; XX (the  
166 employee) starts the interaction by writing to the architect ([Message #1](#)). She requests an  
167 inspection for quality control on the basis of generically claimed issues.

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

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

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

176       The architect accepts the advice; Msg #4/S is sent and the case ends with a last  
177 reply of XX ([Msg #5](#)) declaring her satisfaction.

178       **NOTES:** Because of a specific choice of YY’s colleague, [Msg #4/S](#) bears the  
179 same content of [version “H”](#) but is written in different form and its topics are put in a  
180 different sequence. Although XX expresses her satisfaction, no inspection has been  
181 carried out nor it has been requested any more.

182 SECTION 3 – *The research protocol*

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

188       **The protocol:**189       INTRODUCTION

- 190       1. A case managed completely via e-mail, between an employee and a  
191       professional (the “architect”), has been set up. It concerns a problem inside an  
192       Italian corporation, lasting for one month and a half. The problem developed  
193       and was completely solved through 5 transactions (5 messages were  
194       exchanged, chronologically labelled from #1 to #5). The employee starts the  
195       first transaction ([Message #1](#)) and concludes the interaction with the fifth  
196       ([Message #5](#)).
- 197       2. During the action, the architect requests the opinion of a colleague of his; such  
198       request refers to a draft of the answer to Msg #3 spontaneously prepared by  
199       the architect (such draft is the first version of Msg #4, [the “H” version](#)). The  
200       colleague studies the case and proposes an alternative Msg #4 ([the “S”](#)  
201       [version](#)); the advice is accepted by the architect, the “S” version is sent and it  
202       produces the expected result, as the last reaction of the employee  
203       demonstrates ([Msg #5](#)).

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

#### 207 The QUESTIONNAIRE and its MANAGEMENT

208 4. Anonymity of respondents will be fully guaranteed during either the survey  
209 (questionnaire collection) or the analysis (data elaboration). No personal data  
210 will be asked; information that is necessary for statistical purposes (age,  
211 gender, education level and employment) will be requested as aggregated  
212 through pre-defined bins only.

213 5. For a better representation in the questionnaire, the case has been divided into  
214 two parts. In the first part (corresponding to the “Prologue” of the case  
215 description, see this Supporting Information, [Section 2](#)), the first 3 messages  
216 are gathered, in the same order they result issued. The messages have been  
217 printed in sequence, in a single page (A4 dimension). The aim of this first part  
218 is to collect data about the interpretation process in general through a first set  
219 of questions. Such questions have been printed in another single A4 page (two  
220 opened questions, [#1](#) and [#2](#), the first sub-divided into three sub-questions).

221 6. In the second part (corresponding to the “Action” of the case description, see  
222 this SI, [Section 2](#)), the two versions of Msg #4 ([version “H”](#) and [version “S”](#))  
223 are presented, in separate A4 pages. They are submitted to participants in  
224 sequence (not simultaneously) and the remaining questions are printed in a  
225 last A4 page. At first ([Questions #3](#) and [#4](#)) the participants’ opinions are

226 requested (separately) about the presumable effects of each version of Msg #4  
227 on XX. In the end, after transcription of the very brief [Msg #5](#) (the  
228 employee's last reply), participants are requested ([Final Question](#)) to indicate  
229 which version ("[H](#)" or "[S](#)"), in their opinion, has produced the effect showed  
230 in [Message #5](#). The aim of this second part is to collect data about the  
231 relationship between the interpretations of the alternative messages and the  
232 action (the choice) that follows.

- 233 7. All the questions (or sub-questions, if present) have been divided into two  
234 parts: in the first one, the interpretation of the respondent about one specific  
235 subject is requested. In the second one, he/she is invited to "indicate the  
236 concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which your  
237 answer is based".
- 238 8. A special attention has been dedicated to the wording of the questions.  
239 Structural ambiguity of natural language implies the impossibility to  
240 formulate sentences with a univocal meaning, as the acknowledged Italian  
241 linguist De Mauro confirms [[2,3](#)]. Thus, any idea to pursue completely  
242 unambiguous formulations has been dropped. After the first careful  
243 formulation of the questions, two pilot-sessions will be set up for testing the  
244 questionnaire's suitability and gather indications about possible corrections. In  
245 addition, ex-post specific controls will discard from quantitative analysis all  
246 the possibly remained ambiguous cases.

247 9. Same attention has been dedicated to possible statistical distortion effects. For  
248 example the YY's Colleague opinion on [Msg #4/H](#) could influence  
249 respondents inducing some biases in their final choice; furthermore, there  
250 could be a possible precedence effect if the two versions of Msg #4 were  
251 submitted always in the same order. On these bases, the presentation of the  
252 two versions to the participants will be counterbalanced: all the participants  
253 will be informed that they are going to see, as first, the version spontaneously  
254 prepared by the "architect". The second (the "alternative" version) will be  
255 presented as suggested to him by one of his colleagues when asked for an  
256 advice. However, about one half of the sample will actually receive the two  
257 versions in that order (first [Msg #4/H](#), then [Msg #4/S](#)); the remainder will  
258 receive them in the reverse order.

259 SURVEY and DATA COLLECTION:

260 10. All the conductors of the survey sessions (12 persons, in total) are members of  
261 the research group or in contact with it. Non-members will follow a brief  
262 training, led by one of the authors. All the conductors are committed to avoid  
263 expressing any comment about the message texts and concentrate on survey  
264 process conformity. They also have to assure that the process is clear for the  
265 participants and that they understand the structure of the case and the  
266 questions. In order to minimize the speech necessities for the conductors, a  
267 title page has been prepared; it contains a presentation of the survey and the  
268 main context information (see this SI, [Section 4](#)). The conductors are due to

269 invite participants to carefully read it. In the title page, the case will be  
270 presented as a real world case.

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

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

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

285 13. The conductors will collect questionnaires bereft of every personal indications  
286 (or even hints) related to participants. They will individually deliver the  
287 collected anonymous questionnaires to the authors' team and those documents  
288 will be randomly numbered and stored in a dedicated collection box. The  
289 research activities that will follow (data entry, in order to set up a digital data

290 base, and qualitative and quantitative analysis) will be performed on such  
291 anonymous database.

292 **NOTE:** Once the protocol defined, two successive pilot sessions have been set up  
293 (7 and 5 people respectively) and these experiences helped to progressively refine the  
294 form of the questions, until the definitive shape was reached. The texts of the messages  
295 remained always unaltered. The following [Section 4](#) presents the questions in their final  
296 form.

297 SECTION 4 – *The questionnaire: message texts and questions (english translation)*  
 298

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

299

300

301 **Title page**

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

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

309 Your task consists in reading the messages, respecting their submission sequence.

310 Please, read carefully and answer the questions intuitively, not analytically (although,  
 311 not excluding some personal reflections, if necessary). Underline the text, take notes or  
 312 look back at the message text, when deemed necessary, any time you need it.

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

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



318

319 **Message #1 (description)**

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

326

327 **Message #2 (description)**

328 *The Project Account (a male professional, the “architect”, named “YY”) answers to XX.*  
 329 *In his message (which is brief, 48 words) he declares regularity in the Project progress,*  
 330 *ending with: “at the moment, the progress substantially complies with the chronogram”.*

331

332 **Message #3 (description)**

333 *XX replies to YY’s answer, declaring herself totally unsatisfied. Her message (136*  
 334 *words) sports two main features: (i) some minor flaws are listed; (ii) she expresses what*  
 335 *it looks like an actual threat against YY, in the case he would not take measures*  
 336 *regarding to the presented problem (she makes a specific reference to a hypothetic*  
 337 *“waste of public money”, as the Project funding involved some public sources).*

338

339 **QUESTIONS #1 and #2, about Messages #1, #2, #3 (full text)**340 **1 \* Please, read Messages #1 and #2 and answer to the following questions:**341 a - What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?

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

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

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

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

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

350 **2 \* Please, read Message #3 and answer to the following questions:**351 Do you think the attitude of XX towards YY has changed, in respect to Message #1?

352 [YES/NO]

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

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

356

357 **Message #4 / “H” version (*the spontaneous version by the architect, full text*)**358 Block #1359 From: YY (*Project Account for the heating plant works*)360 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)361 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)

362 Sent: ... [date] [hour]

363 **Subject:** R: heating plant

364

365 Dear Mrs. XX,

366 Block #2

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

370 - Before Project start, I asked the Director of your structure (B wing of the building), Dr.  
371 KK, to put a specific person in charge of controlling the work's progress;

372 - As far as I am concerned, the indicated person is, and will remain, Dr. ZZ;

373 - Dr. ZZ carefully planned the project development steps with us;

374 - Each office, situated in the B wing of the building, has been already supplied with heat-  
375 ing systems (hardware), fully complying with the timetable agreed with Mrs. ZZ;

376 - The heating plant is now working, even though in provisional mode.

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

380 Block #3

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

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

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

391 Block #4

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

395 Block #5

396 Yours sincerely  
 397 The Project Account  
 398 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

399 \_\_\_\_\_  
 400  
 401

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

403 Block #1

404 From: YY (*Project Account for heating plant works*)  
 405 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)  
 406 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)  
 407 Sent: ... [date] [hour]  
 408 **Subject:** R: heating plant

409  
 410 Dear Mrs. XX,

411 Block #2

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

415 Block #3

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

423 Block #4

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

431 Block #5

432 Best regards  
 433 The Project Account  
 434 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

435 \_\_\_\_\_

436

437 **QUESTIONS #3 and #4, about Messages #4/H and #4/S (full text)**438 *Premise: YY prepares Message #4 as an answer to Message #3 (received from XX).*439 *Before he sends it, he consults one of his colleagues, who advises him against sending*440 *and suggests a different text (alternative Message #4).*441 **3 \* Please, read Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**442 In your opinion, what effect will this version produce on XX?

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

444 your answer is based?

445 **4 \* Please, read alternative Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**446 In your opinion, what effect will the alternative version produce on XX?

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

448 your answer is based?

449

450 -----

451

452

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

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

455 you and your answer was exhaustive.

456 Best regards

457 XX

458

459

460 **FINAL QUESTION**461 *Consider that Message #5 was the final reaction of XX and answer the following*462 *questions:*463 In your opinion, which version of Message #4 did XX receive?464 [*YY's draft / Alternative*]

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

466 your answer is based?

467

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

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

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

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

490 counterbalancing it with his doubts. The most probable result should be an escalation of  
491 the conflict.

492         Now, if we analyse in deep [Msg #4/H](#)'s structure, we can detect in it five main  
493 content blocks (see this SI, [Section 4](#), where they are marked along with [Message #4/H](#)  
494 text). [Msg #4/S](#) maintains the same content while its written form is reviewed and its  
495 sequence modified. In practice, the “alternative message” [#4/S](#) presents the same content  
496 blocks of [Msg #4/H](#) (see this SI, [Section 4](#), where they are marked along with Message  
497 [#4/S](#) text) in a different order and under a new written form. We have synthesized a  
498 comparison of the two structures in [Table S2](#).

499         The substantial difference between version “H” and version “S” of Message #4 is  
500 founded on the diverse approach to the arising conflict: while the spontaneous reaction of  
501 YY approached it through a direct confrontation, the alternative version maintains the  
502 same information content but approaches the relation with XX in terms of welcome and  
503 acknowledgement.

504

**505 PART II - The collected data**

506

507 SECTION 6 – *The sample*

508 Our work was aimed to explore the process of message interpretation, sharing the  
509 general assumption that the communication process is uniform all across humankind. We  
510 mean that human communication, although it appears extremely variable on its  
511 expressions, must however stem from a unique base of fundamental factors and  
512 processes. Something like a limb in a heterogeneous sample of humans: its aspect looks  
513 very different in function of sex, age, size, health and so on; nonetheless, it remains based  
514 on a unique anatomical and functional scheme. For this, the sample's representativeness  
515 with respect to the Italian people was not critical. Thus, we decided to increase, as much  
516 as possible, the amount of participants while easing the sampling process (see research  
517 protocol, in this Supporting Information, [Section 3](#), points j,l).

518 We recruited 102 participants in our sample, whose characteristics are displayed  
519 in Tables S3-S5. The total sample composition ([Table S3](#)) shows an exceeding rate of  
520 women vs. men and of Graduates/Post-graduates vs. High-school degree granted  
521 members (columns "Education", "Gr" bin vs. "Dg" bin; people granted with Elementary  
522 degree are inessential [[1](#)]). We also highlight the high rate of students and unemployed  
523 vs. employed members (columns "Employment", "E" and "F" bins vs. others). For these  
524 reasons, even if sample statistical analysis is less relevant in our work, we have drawn  
525 more balanced sub-samples from the total sample. The statistical distribution results,  
526 observed on the total sample, have been verified on sub-samples every time it turned out

527 necessary. The first sub-sample (“AGE”, [Table S4](#)) is exclusively composed by people  
528 over 29 years-old (age bins B, C and D, excluding A; in total, 60 members). The second  
529 one (“EMPLOYMENT”, [Table S5](#)) is exclusively composed by employed people (A to  
530 D bins, excluding E and F, that is for students and unemployed people; in total, 65  
531 members). Our intention was to balance the weight of the younger part of the sample,  
532 over-crowded with female members (either graduates or students).



533 SECTION 7 – *The harvest*

534 *The collected materials*: In this section we present in detail, at first, an assessment  
535 about the amount of the collected materials (“how much” the respondents have written in  
536 their answers, the answers’ “physical amount”). As second we give some information  
537 about the quantitative aspects involved in the analysis, in terms of data processing and  
538 storing.

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

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

- 555       ▪ In order to let the readers estimate the amounts better, we calculated that using  
556 Times New Roman font in 12 size characters, space 1, with a “letter” page  
557 format and 1” for all margins, the opened answer texts should be occupying  
558 about 26.7 to 27.4 pages (range of 3,800-3,900 characters per page, spaces in-  
559 cluded, text only, no picture, table or main titles).
- 560       ▪ We also calculated the filling rate of the questionnaires (opened answers) in  
561 the following way: we excluded the two opened items of [Question #2](#) (an-  
562 swering the opened part of the question was under condition and it was per-  
563 formed by just 60% of the sample); then, we recorded 27 unanswered items on  
564 an expected total of 102 participants x 11 items = 1,122 (see SI, [Section 4](#),  
565 questionnaire [summarizing form](#)). The filling rate is:  $(1,122-27)/1,122 \times 100 =$   
566 97.6%.
- 567       ▪ This last information says which percentage of the opened questions received  
568 an answer but says nothing about the length of those answers. We can calcu-  
569 late an average length in two ways: the first is dividing the total words by the  
570 amount of participants and, then, by the amount of the opened items. The res-  
571 ult is  $16,094/102/13=12.1$  words per respondent per item (answers to [Question](#)  
572 [#2](#) are included in the calculation). In order to appreciate this value better we  
573 can follow the second way: one page, of the previously approximated 27, has  
574 typically 44 lines, which means an average of about 1 typed line per respond-  
575 ent per item ( $44 \times 27/13=91.4$ , answers to [Question #2](#) included). That is up to

576 90 characters (spaces included) or about 10 to 15 words; a satisfactory result,  
577 about the accomplishment of their commission by the sample members.

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

580 In the end: survey returned a good harvest, equal to our expectations. The next  
581 step of the processing was to store data into a system of files, made up as it follows:

582 ▪ Ten .doc files, divided into two groups. The first group has 8 files; each one of  
583 the first seven files contains the transcription of a different answer (from  
584 Question [#1-a](#) to [Final question](#), harmonized texts) in a shape that make such  
585 content suitable for operations more difficultly available on electronic data  
586 sheets (for example certain investigations about the texts); the eighth file con-  
587 tains a collection of particularly interesting examples. The second group con-  
588 tains two service files. Total used memory: 1.22 Mb.

589 ▪ Twenty-one .xls files: one of them is the formerly mentioned archive of tran-  
590 scriptions (1 file, 8 data-sheets); the remaining are 20 files containing the data  
591 processing documentation and results (included those explorative analyses  
592 that have been later abandoned). Inside these files, there is a total of 142 dif-  
593 ferent data-sheets; total used memory: 4.50 Mbytes.

594 ▪ Intermediate processing and support materials (including some publications  
595 available online). Total used memory (including the previously mentioned  
596 files): 388 Mbytes (683 files, organized into 61 folders).

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

599 a – *Answers’ general features and compliance with research requirements*. A first  
600 noticeable aspect is that it is not possible, in any of the answers, to find overt doubts,  
601 uncertainty statements, declarations of impossibility to answer, indications of equivalent  
602 alternatives [4]. For each respondent, his/her own interpretation seems to be **the only**  
603 **available option**. This happens in spite of the fact that about 27% of the total sample  
604 describes the effects of [Messages #4/H](#) and [#4/S](#) as similar: for an 18% (18 people) they  
605 both will solve or ease the contrast; for a 9% (9 people) they both will escalate the  
606 contrast (see [manuscript Table 8](#), “Total sample” columns, H+/S+ and H-/S- cells). This  
607 observation confirms that the answers are spontaneous and that our survey collected  
608 subjective perceptions, instead of elaborated rational reflections. That is what we aimed  
609 to, while following the research guide-lines and protocol (see this SI, [Sections 1](#) and [3](#))  
610 [5].

611 Another important point is that no one of the sample members uses any technical  
612 word or expression. About this, it is worth considering how participants reacted to the  
613 two points which, from a communication slant, can be rated as the most critical: the  
614 possible threat XX expressed in [Message #3](#); the squabbling and the personal attack by  
615 YY against XX in [Message #4/H](#) (see this SI [Section 5](#) and [Table S1](#)). Even if some  
616 participants refer to these passages in their answers, none stresses them as particularly  
617 critical and almost none labels them as “threat” or “personal attack”. Finally, while  
618 examining the answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and to the [Final Question](#), we found that

619 about one fourth of the sample (average for the three questions 26.5%, range 16% - 36%)  
620 overtly stated, at least once, the impossibility to analytically answer to the second part of  
621 the questions (which requested to point out the “concrete elements” that induced the  
622 answer to the first part). These respondents described their answers to the first part of the  
623 questions as the result of “a general impression”, “a sensation/a perception”; in other  
624 cases they presented such answers as “an opinion drawn from the whole message” or  
625 something similar. These observations confirm the general naïve condition of the sample  
626 about human communication (another feature requested by the research plan).

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

- 631       1. [Question #1](#) (“What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?”) – It has  
632       been interpreted, in certain cases, in terms of interpersonal relationship, in  
633       other cases in terms of organizational position or professional profile.
- 634       2. [Questions #1](#) and [#2](#), first part (each containing indications for focusing on a  
635       specific message, out of the first three) – Actually, a large part of the sample  
636       did not make any distinction and answered discarding indications and  
637       simultaneously referring to all the three messages.

638 Here, two examples of the second kind:

- 639       3. [Question #1](#) (“What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?”) – In  
640       one of the answers, [Message #2](#) is defined as “bureaucratic”; although, it is

641 impossible to understand if this adjective is used with a technical meaning  
642 (referring to a normal interaction inside an office) or with a relational one  
643 (defining a conflict, with YY using formality to resist to XX's action). We  
644 found other similar cases.

645 4. [Question #2](#), first part (requesting if, after comparing [Message #3](#) with  
646 [Message #1](#), the respondent considers XX's position as "changed") – It is  
647 interesting to know that 41 people (40% of the sample) answered "NO – Not  
648 changed", and 61 (60%) answered "YES – It has changed". These answers are  
649 nonetheless unsuitable for deep quantitative analysis because of the different  
650 interpretation of the word "changed". For example the answer "YES" (the  
651 position has changed) may correspond to the actual perception of an escalated  
652 interaction; however, it may also be simply connected with attention on  
653 isolated linguistic elements (like some technical terms, introduced in [Message](#)  
654 [#3](#) but absent in [#1](#)). The answer "NO" (no change detected) could mean that  
655 the respondent does not actually perceive any difference; it may also indicate  
656 that the differences, clearly detected relationship-wise, are nevertheless  
657 considered scarcely effective on the respective organizational positions of XX  
658 and YY.

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

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

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

671 a – *Text amounts' distribution with respect to items*. The results of this first  
672 analysis are displayed in [Table S6](#) and [Fig. S1](#). [Table S6](#) shows totals and some statistical  
673 indexes with regards to the distribution of the answers' texts on questions/sub-questions.  
674 Data referred to all the answers (left part) are compared with those excluding [Question](#)  
675 [#2](#) (right part). The reason of such exclusion: answering was under condition and  
676 [Question #2](#) was answered by only a part of the sample. Besides that, we observe that the  
677 calculated means of the table provide an incomplete information (no hint about the  
678 variation shape); for this reason, we displayed, through the histogram of [Fig. S1](#), the  
679 percent distribution of the texts' amounts (in terms of words and characters, [Question #2](#)  
680 excluded) with respect to the items. It shows evident lower levels for [Questions #1-b](#) and  
681 [#1-c](#) (whose minimum, all the same, is around 7%); the rest of the values seesaws  
682 between 9% and 11% (the general percent mean, per item, is  $100:11=9.1\%$ , see [Table S6](#),  
683 right part, "% Gen. means per item" row).

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

693 b – *Text amounts' distribution with respect to participants*. The results of this  
694 analysis are displayed in [Table S7](#) and [Fig. S2](#) and [S3](#). [Table S7](#) shows totals and some  
695 statistical indexes referred to the provided amounts of text (in terms of words and  
696 characters, [Question #2](#) excluded); indexes are calculated on participants. Data are  
697 displayed separating values referred to the first item of the questions (“strict” answer)  
698 from those referred to the second one (“concrete elements”). In this case also, the indexes  
699 of the table provide a limited information (no hint about the variation shape); for this  
700 reason, we drew the histograms that show the distribution. Participants have been  
701 grouped in bins referred to words (30-words bins, [Fig. S2](#)) and characters (200-characters  
702 bins, [Fig. S3](#), SI=spaces included) amounts. The histograms' shape has features  
703 comparable to a bell-curve, even though its form is not perfect (see statistical details in  
704 the figures' captions). Data uphold the idea of differences mainly due to spontaneous



705 random variations and lead to the conclusion that also such distribution can be considered  
706 satisfactorily regular (no participants seem to have neglected their commission).

**707 PART III - Added materials**

708

709 SECTION 10 – *The “block preference” analysis*

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

722 To build the block preference indicator we, at first, examined the answers to  
723 [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and highlighted all the direct references to Message “H” and  
724 Message “S” texts (i.e. sentences in quotation marks or undoubtedly referring to clearly  
725 identifiable passages). Then we associated them to the text blocks. Results from this part  
726 of the analysis are displayed in [Tables S8-S11](#) [6]; they contain clear indications about  
727 the message blocks which the attention of participants has fallen upon. We will base our  
728 analysis on [Table S10](#) data; blocks are displayed along with the texts of [Message #4/H](#)  
729 and [Message #4/S](#); a comparison among them is presented in [Table S2](#).

730           Regarding Message “H” blocks, both “H” and “S” choosers express the same  
731 preference, as their attention is mainly attracted by [Block #2](#) (from both the versions of  
732 Msg #4) in a similar proportion:  $(13+9)/(21+11)$ , about 70%, for “H” choosers;  $(10+43)/$   
733  $(17+65)$ , about 65%, for “S” choosers. Conversely, with regard to Message “S”, “H” and  
734 “S” choosers split. Indeed, “H” choosers focus on Blocks #2 and #3 (converted numbers  
735 [\[7\]](#)) in a large majority:  $(6+10+7+3)/(18+14)$ , more than 80%. “S” choosers focus on  
736 Blocks #3 and #4 in a minor but still strongly prevailing proportion:  $(34+3+35+0)/$   
737  $(95+7)$ , a little more than 70%. The principal differences regarding [Block #2](#) and [Block](#)  
738 [#4](#) are the following: [Block #2](#) is the paragraph through which YY refuses to engage  
739 XX’s request and re-addresses XX to another account (ZZ) inside the organisation. Both  
740 “H” and “S” choosers give [Block #2](#) a prevalent attention, when they read it in Message  
741 “H”. However, when they read it in Message “S”, we see that “H” choosers maintain  
742 their preference (with a little shift towards [Block #3](#), containing specific information)  
743 while “S” choosers pay the minimum of attention to it ( $18+4=22$  references) moving  
744 towards [Block #3](#) and [#4](#) ( $34+3=37$  and  $35+0=35$  references respectively).

745           [Block #4](#) is the paragraph expressing YY’s relational acceptance toward XX; in  
746 Message “H”, it is placed at the end, immediately before the form of salute, and is  
747 scarcely considered by both sides (even if, as usual, in different proportions). Reading it  
748 in Message “S” (where it comes as second, immediately after the form of address), we  
749 see that “H” choosers confirm their neglecting while “S” choosers pay great attention to  
750 it. In other words, “H” choosers give constantly their preference to YY’s refuting and, a  
751 little less, to information providing. “S” choosers vary their preferences according to the

752 message and they seem to attribute importance to the relational block just in Message  
753 “S”, even if it is present in Message “H”, too.

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

764       Conversely, “H” choosers clearly split: on one hand, eleven of them (out of 26,  
765 42%, see [manuscript Table 11](#), left column, L and LM rows) express, on Message “H”,  
766 the same negative rating of “S” choosers (XX-YY conflict escalation) and for the same  
767 reasons (relation aspects), too. Nevertheless, they eventually choose that same Message  
768 “H” providing various justifications for their choice. On the other hand, 15 of them (58%,  
769 see [manuscript Table 11](#), left column, MG and G rows) rate the impact of Message “H”  
770 on XX-YY conflict as positive. Coherently, they choose that message but indicate final  
771 effects of different nature: XX should be “calmed”, because of the great quantity of  
772 information received. However, she could also be sorted out, just stopped despite her  
773 dissatisfaction. These 15 people behave as if they were thinking that information is what

774 it matters and they pay little attention to relational aspects. Such situation reminds the  
775 differences between “H” and “S” choosers’ behaviour highlighted by coherence indicator  
776 analysis (specifically, the sample distribution with respect to coherence level).

777 We successively noted that a minority of “S” choosers, while evaluating Message  
778 “H”, focused on [Block #4](#) (the relational acceptance passage) and rated it,  
779 overwhelmingly, negative (4+15=19, see [Table S10](#), Block #4 row, column “S”  
780 choosers/”H” evaluation). Some of them, for example, justify their evaluation  
781 interpreting that YY overtly declares that he does not trust XX, given that he says he  
782 reserves himself to check for the real existence of the problem, before intervening [[8](#)].  
783 They do not pay any importance to the formal relational acceptance that [Block #4](#)  
784 contains. Moving to Message “S” evaluations, we face apparent divergent behaviours, as  
785 “H” and “S” choosers focus on different blocks; nevertheless, this appearance covers an  
786 actual continuity with what we observed about the evaluations on Message “H”. For  
787 example, “S” choosers that focus on [Message “S”/Block #4](#) (we remind this is the  
788 “converted” number, corresponding to the original #2, see [Table S2](#)) express positive  
789 rates for relational reasons; quite homogeneously, they hold this block responsible for  
790 solving the conflict and they constantly describe the effects of [Message “S”](#) (and [Block](#)  
791 [#4](#) in particular) with words like “acceptance”, “XX satisfaction”, “reassuring”, “XX will  
792 feel listened to”, “acknowledgement”, “appreciation”. Conversely, “H” chooser  
793 behaviour, once again, is split: those who, regardless of their choice, rate “S” effects as  
794 positive (9+5=14, see [manuscript Table 11](#), left column, L and MG rows), express their  
795 evaluations in terms which are very similar to those of “S” choosers: “satisfaction” of

796 XX, “reassuring”, “calming”, “attention given” and so on. Twelve of them, who deem  
797 “S” as negative (2+10=12, see [manuscript Table 11](#), left column, LM and G rows), give  
798 the maximum of importance to XX notifying the necessity to refer to a different person  
799 (Dr. ZZ). Only in 2 or 3 cases we found generic comments about the excessively  
800 “diplomatic” form of Message “S”.

801 All these observations summed up, our investigation through the second indicator  
802 helps us to answer the initial question: if the choice between Message “H” and Message  
803 “S” can be linked to differences in block focusing or to different characteristics detected  
804 inside same focused blocks. Indeed, even though our observations seem to be pointing to  
805 the second option, we got the impression that such formulation could result weak and  
806 that the observed processes cannot be restrained to such dichotomy. Then, how can we  
807 explain our observations? The picture can be synthesized as it follows:

- 808     ▪ When predicting Message “H” effects, both “H” and “S” choosers mainly  
809       focus on the same block but they are attracted by different characteristics: “H”  
810       choosers by its information content; “S” choosers by its relational impact.
- 811     ▪ When predicting Message “S” effects, “H” and “S” choosers mainly focus on  
812       different blocks. However, their answers show that such behaviour is linked to  
813       the attraction they feel towards the same characteristics that stimulated them  
814       in the previous case: “H” choosers insist on privileging information content  
815       (and Blocks #2 and #3, that concentrate the information); “S” choosers shift  
816       towards new blocks that make evident the relational care of YY with regards  
817       to XX (Blocks #3 and #4).

818 One last aspect to be cleared: the second point contains, besides the specific  
819 divergence in focusing, a new example of the first case, i.e. the same focusing joined to  
820 attention paid to different characteristics. Actually, both “H and “S” choosers focus also  
821 on [Block #3](#) (converted number) of [Message “S”](#), that is labelled as “Information” in  
822 [Table S2](#). However, even though that block undoubtedly contains information, the two  
823 versions present it in different ways. Confronting the texts, we can easily verify that the  
824 “H” version bears just technical and formal contents while the “S” version pays attention  
825 to present the information as a “service” for the colleagues. Evidently, respondents  
826 jointly take such aspect into account but (as usual) they interpret it in different ways. As  
827 a matter of fact, “H” choosers mainly highlight the **information** that “the works are not  
828 yet concluded and final checks... are about to be carefully planned”; “S” choosers mainly  
829 emphasize the **reassurance** (a purely relational aspect) that YY expressly gives to XX  
830 with his words “I assure you [that your indications] will not be ignored”.

831 In synthesis, what we found is that, about focusing on blocks, the differences, as  
832 well as the convergence, are apparent and the attention of participants seems to be  
833 attracted by those blocks that can “resound” something they are possibly looking for,  
834 something pre-existent. What drives the focusing is not the mere information content of  
835 the blocks. Once more, we have observed nothing else than a “disassembling” operation  
836 (see manuscript for details). In doing so, we have collected two examples of what kind of  
837 “pre-existing blueprints” (in some way present in the actors’ central nervous system) can  
838 orient focusing and explain the different approaches employed by “H” or “S” choosers:

839 the first mainly focus on content or context aspects; the second ones mainly focus on  
840 relational aspects.

841



842 **References**

- 843 1. Actually only 4 participants, out of the 102 composing the sample, had  
844 qualifications inferior than a High-school degree.
- 845 2. De Mauro says [3] that natural language is “equivocal” in etymological sense, from  
846 Latin *aeque vocare* (to name in the same way). That is: a same word can be used to  
847 refer to different things; different words can be used to indicate the same thing.
- 848 3. De Mauro T. 2003 (1980). *Guida all’uso delle parole*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.
- 849 4. Just 1 participant (out of 102) declares some uncertainties in his final choice,  
850 writing that the final effect (as it appears in [Message #5](#)) could be obtained both  
851 with Message “H” and Message “S”. Nevertheless, while answering to the other  
852 questions, his statements are in all similar to the other participants’ ones.
- 853 5. Exactly in order to facilitate such result, in the actual survey sessions (lasting range:  
854 20 to 45 minutes) no discussion about the answers was allowed before the filled in  
855 questionnaires had been collected by the conductor; in addition, no further contact  
856 with the questionnaires was permitted after the sessions were over.
- 857 6. [Tables S8](#) and [S9](#) display data with regards to the amount of **references** to each  
858 block expressed by participants. In [Table S8](#), totals for each block and each  
859 evaluated message (as well as general totals) can be higher than the people amount,  
860 given that each person can express more than one references. [Tables S10](#) and [S11](#)  
861 display data with regards to the amount of **participants** that referred to each block.  
862 In [Table S10](#), totals for each block and each evaluated message must be inferior to

863 the participants' amount; however, the general totals can be superior, given that  
864 each person could refer to more than one block.

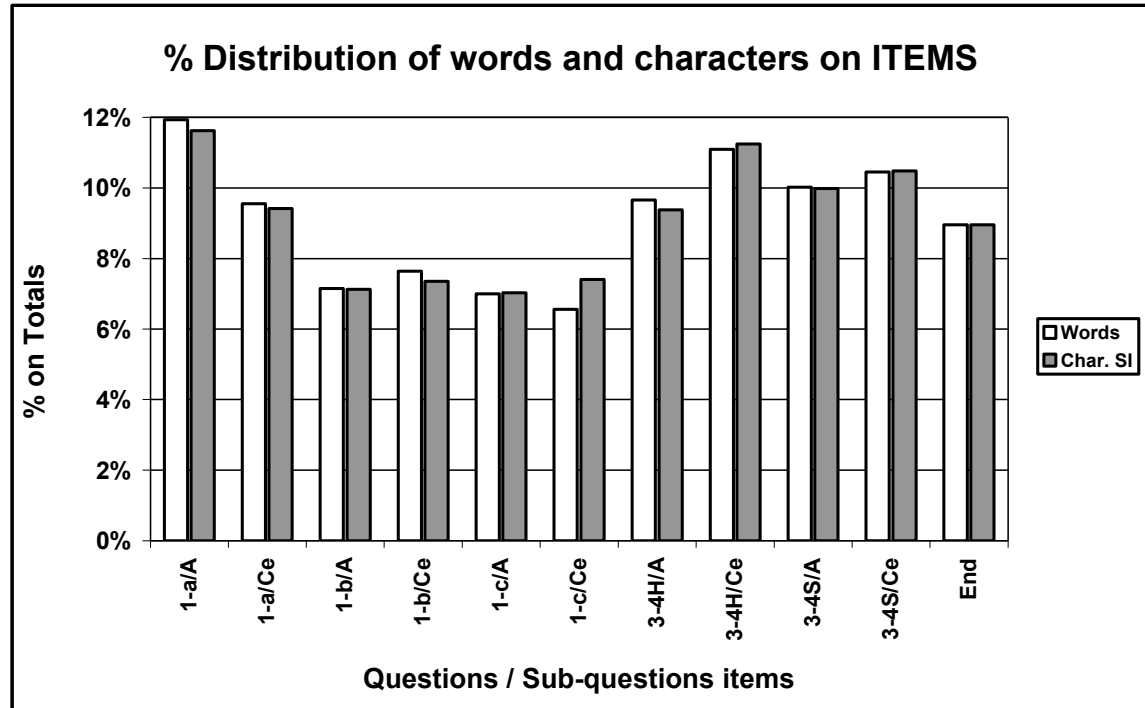
865 7. We remind that Message "S" maintained the same content of Message "H", and  
866 that content was divided into analogous text blocks, but varying their sequence  
867 (besides their written form). For reliable comparing, it has been necessary to give  
868 each "S" block a "converted number", that is the same of the correspondent block  
869 in Message "H" (see this SI, [Section 5](#), and [Table S2](#), extreme right column). From  
870 now on, until express notice, all the numeric references to "S" blocks must be  
871 intended as converted numbers.

872 8. We observe that, as widely discussed in the manuscript (specially in the Discussion  
873 section), the question is not linked to the information *per se*, nor it regards YY's  
874 right to control. The question is "the fact that" YY decided to overtly declare, in a  
875 certain point of his message and under a certain form, his doubt and his intentions.  
876

877

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION Figures

878



879

880

881 **Figure S1: Percent distribution of words and characters on question items ([Question](#)**  
 882 **[#2](#) excluded).**

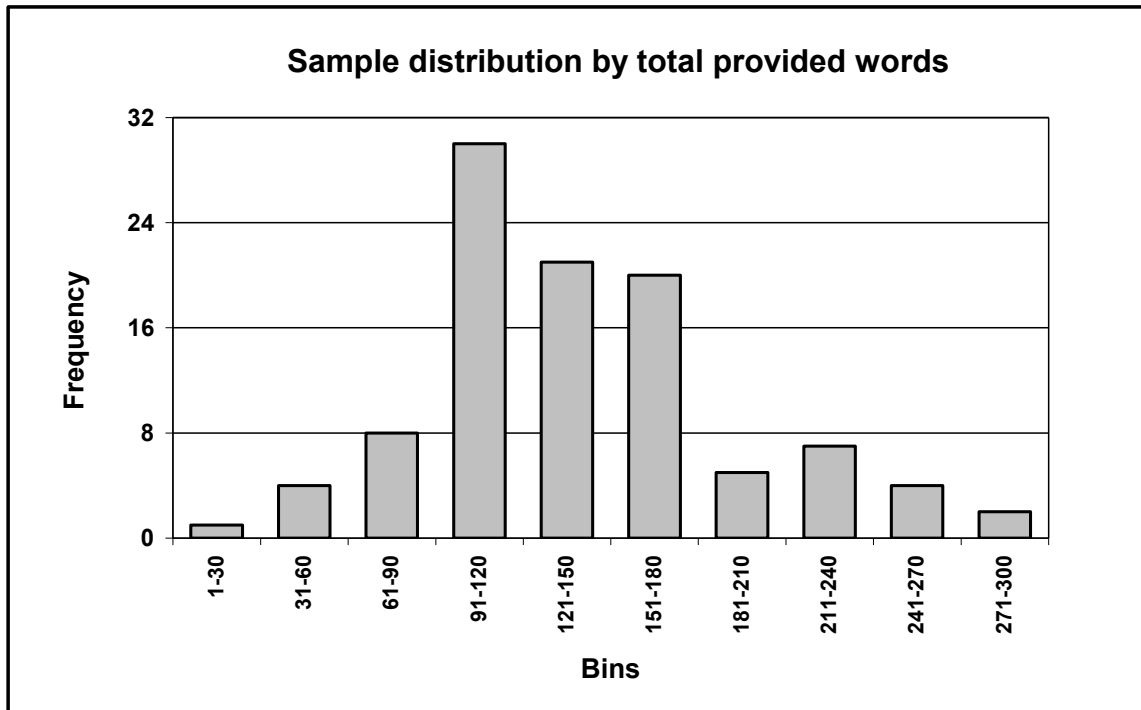
883 [Legend: [1-a](#), [1-b](#), [1-c](#) = Answers to sub-questions of [Question #1](#); 3-4/H, 3-4/S =  
 884 Answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) referred to [Message “H”](#) or to [Message “S”](#); End =  
 885 [Final question](#). A = “Strict” answers; Ce = Concrete elements; Char.SI = Characters  
 886 (spaces included)]

887

888 This histogram shows that the words’ and characters’ amounts resulting from the  
 889 respondents’ answers vary, with respect to items, from 6.6% to 11.9% (words) and from  
 890 7.0% to 11.6% (characters, spaces included). The range reduces to 8.3%-11.1% (words)

891 and 8.3%-11.3% (characters SI) if the three sub-questions of [Question #1](#) are grouped  
892 together and their mean is considered (see text for details). The amounts appear to be  
893 distributed in a satisfactorily balanced shape, across the questions of the questionnaire (no  
894 statistical significance recorded). On the whole, no item seems to be definitely privileged,  
895 or neglected, by the participants.

896



897

898

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

900

**excluded).**

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

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

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

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

905

of Variation):

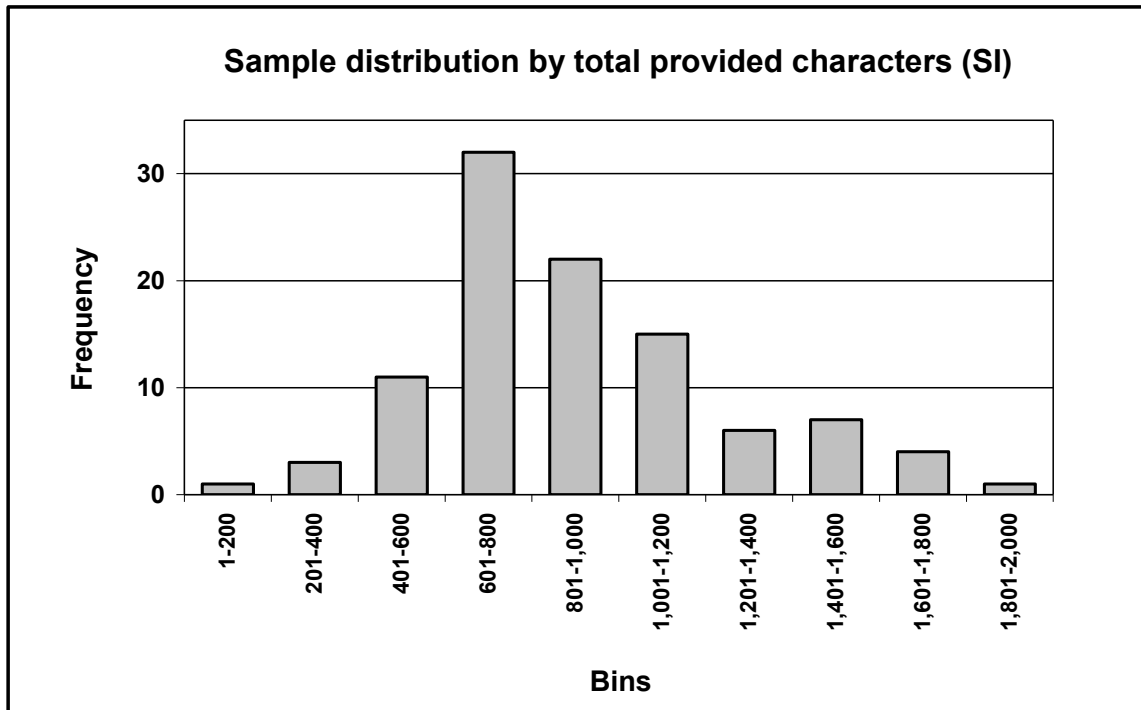
906

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

907

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

908



909

910

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

913 The histogram shows how the sample is distributed with respect to the amount of  
 914 characters (spaces included) provided by participants. The participants are grouped in  
 915 200-characters bins. Totals (“strict” answers + concrete elements indications) are  
 916 displayed. The main statistical indexes of the distribution are the following (SD =  
 917 Standard deviation; CV(%) = percent Coefficient of Variation):

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

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

920

921

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION Tables**

922

923

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

924

925

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

926

This scheme displays the interaction structure and the communication critical points

927

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

928

[#3](#)) and provides comments on the ["H" version of Message #4](#) (spontaneously prepared

929

by the "architect", i.e. YY). While creating our case, we figured that exactly this could be

930

the analysis of YY's colleague (or some external communication expert) that drove him

931

to suggest the alternative.

932

933

934

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

935

936 **Table S2: Comparing text blocks in the two versions (“H” and “S”) of Message #4.**

937 The message presented as alternative to [Message #4/H](#) (i.e. the “S” version of Message  
938 #4, in short [Msg #4/S](#)) has the same text blocks of version “H” with the same information  
939 content. Only the position in the text and the written form were modified. Extreme right  
940 column shows the “conversion table” of the blocks numbers for the two versions, in order  
941 to simplify referencing while comparing them.

942



943

944

Age					Education					Employment							
Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot
	Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%			
A	10	23.8	32	76.2	42	El	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	A	16	47.1	18	52.9	34
B	11	36.7	19	63.3	30	Dg	18	46.2	21	53.8	39	B	6	85.7	1	14.3	7
C	7	46.7	8	53.3	15	Gr	18	30.5	41	69.5	59	C	6	31.6	13	68.4	19
D	9	60.0	6	40.0	15	--	--	--	--	--	--	D	1	20.0	4	80.0	5
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	E	5	17.2	24	82.8	29
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	F	3	37.5	5	62.5	8
<b>Tot</b>	<b>37</b>		<b>65</b>		<b>102</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>37</b>		<b>65</b>		<b>102</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>37</b>		<b>65</b>		<b>102</b>

945

946

**Table S3: Main features of the sample (total sample)**

Legend ( <i>age</i> )	Legend ( <i>education</i> )	Legend ( <i>employment</i> )
A = 18-29 yy	El = Elementary level	A = Line workers
B = 30-39 yy	Dg = High School degree	B = Managers
C = 40-49 yy	Gr = Graduates / Post-graduates	C = Graduated technicians / Professionals
D = 50 yy and over		D = Artisans / Entrepreneurs
		E = Students
		F = Unemployed / Others

947

948 The table provides a quantitative description of the total sample with regards to age (left

949 columns), education level (central columns) and employment (right columns) of the

950 participants; see Legends for the used symbols. Data is shown as totals and split down by

951 gender (*M* = males; *F* = Females).

952

953

Age						Education						Employment					
Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot
	Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%	Val.	%	
A	/	/	/	/	/	El	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	A	14	46.7	16	53.3	30
B	11	36.7	19	63.3	30	Dg	12	52.2	11	47.8	23	B	6	85.7	1	14.3	7
C	7	46.7	8	53.3	15	Gr	14	42.4	19	57.6	33	C	6	37.5	10	62.5	16
D	9	60.0	6	40.0	15	--	--	--	--	--	--	D	1	25.0	3	75.0	4
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	E	0	0.0	2	100	2
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	F	0	0.0	1	100	1
<b>Tot</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>33</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>33</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>33</b>		<b>60</b>

954

955 **Table S4: Main features of the sample (sub-sample “Age”, >29yy)**

Legend ( <i>age</i> )	Legend ( <i>education</i> )	Legend ( <i>employment</i> )
A = 18-29 yy	El = Elementary level	A = Line workers
B = 30-39 yy	Dg = High School degree	B = Managers
C = 40-49 yy	Gr = Graduates / Post-graduates	C = Graduated technicians / Professionals
D = 50 yy and over		D = Artisans / Entrepreneurs
		E = Students
		F = Unemployed / Others

956

957 The table provides a quantitative description of the sub-sample “Age” (only participants

958 30 years, and over, old) with regards to age (left columns), education level (central

959 columns) and employment (right columns) of the participants; see Legends for the used

960 symbols. Data is shown as totals and split down by gender (*M* = males; *F* = Females).

961

962

Age					Education						Employment						
Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot	Bin	M		F		Tot
	Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%	Val.	%			Val.	%			
A	2	25.0	6	75.0	8	El	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	A	16	47.1	18	52.9	34
B	11	40.7	16	59.3	27	Dg	13	52.0	12	48.0	25	B	6	85.7	1	14.3	7
C	7	46.7	8	53.3	15	Gr	15	41.7	21	58.3	36	C	6	31.6	13	68.4	19
D	9	60.0	6	40.0	15	--	--	--	--	--	--	D	1	20.0	4	80.0	5
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	E	/	/	/	/	/
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	F	/	/	/	/	/
<b>Tot</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>36</b>		<b>65</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>36</b>		<b>65</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>36</b>		<b>65</b>

963

964 **Table S5: Main features of the sample (sub-sample “Employment”, job owners)**

Legend ( <i>age</i> )	Legend ( <i>education</i> )	Legend ( <i>employment</i> )
A = 18-29 yy	El = Elementary level	A = Line workers
B = 30-39 yy	Dg = High School degree	B = Managers
C = 40-49 yy	Gr = Graduates / Post-graduates	C = Graduated technicians / Professionals
D = 50 yy and over		D = Artisans / Entrepreneurs
		E = Students
		F = Unemployed / Others

965

966 The table provides a quantitative description of the sub-sample “Employment”

967 (participants with a regular employment only) with regards to age (left columns),

968 education level (central columns) and employment (right columns) of the participants; see

969 Legends for the used symbols. Data is shown as totals and split down by gender (*M* =970 males; *F* = Females).

971

972

	<i>All the Questions (13 items)</i>			<i>Quest. #2 excluded (11 items)</i>		
	Words	Char.(SE)	Char.(SI)	Words	Char.(SE)	Char.(SI)
TOTALS	16,094	89,685	104,200	14,128	79,097	91,843
General means per item	1,238	6,899	8,015	1,284	7,191	8,349
% Gen. means per item	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%	9,1%	9,1%	9,1%
CV(%)	21.0%	20.3%	20.5%	18.78%	17.19%	17.56%
General means per person	158	879	1,022	139	776	900
Gen. means per person-item	12.1	68	79	12.6	71	82

973

974

**Table S6: Analysis of the text amounts' distribution with respect to the**

975

**questionnaire's items.**

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

977

percent Coefficient of Variation]

978

979 The table shows totals and some statistical indexes (some means and percent coefficient  
 980 of variation) referred to the words' and characters' amounts resulting from the texts of the  
 981 respondents' answers. Indexes are calculated on questions' items, in two ways: on all the  
 982 opened items (13 items, left part of the table); on all the items excluding [Question #2](#) (11  
 983 items, right part of the table, see text for the reasons of exclusion). Further information in

984

[Fig. S1.](#)

985

986

987

988

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

989

990 **Table S7: Analysis of the text amounts’ distribution with respect to the participants.**

991 [Legend: Ch.(SE) / (SI) = Character amounts, (Spaces Excluded) / (Spaces Included); CV(%) =  
 992 percent Coefficient of Variation]

993

994 The table shows totals and some statistical indexes (some means, percent coefficient of  
 995 variation and minimum / maximum) referred to the words’ and characters’ amounts  
 996 resulting from the texts of the respondents’ answers. Indexes are calculated on  
 997 participants; answers to [Question #2](#) have been excluded (see text for the reasons of  
 998 exclusion). In the left part, data from the answers to the first item of the questions  
 999 (“strict” answer); in the central part, to the second item (concrete elements). Total values  
 1000 are displayed in the right part of the table. Further information in [Fig. S2](#), [S3](#).

1001

1002

1003

1004

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

1005 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to Message "H" is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
 1006 message); the sequence belonging to Message "S" is *converted* (see SI, [Section 10](#) and [Note 7](#), for details).

1007

1008 **Table S8: Block preference analysis (I) – Amount of expressed REFERENCES.**

1009 [Legend: +/- = type of predicted effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of

1010 Message "H" and Message "S" on XX.]

1011

1012 The table displays the "preference" for different blocks, expressed through the amount of

1013 references to each block. Data is disaggregated for H/S choice and for type of expressed

1014 predictions (+/-) on Message "H" and Message "S" effects. Respondents, while

1015 evaluating the "H" message, seem to be mainly focused on the same block (the [Block](#)

1016 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,

1017 they mainly focus on different blocks, depending on the choice they expressed.

1018

1019

1020

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

1021

1022

**Table S9: Block preference analysis (I) – Additional data.**

1023 The table displays some additional information about data displayed in previous [Table](#)

1024 [S8](#). Additional data consists of total expressed references and mean values about

1025

references per participant.

1026

1027  
1028

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

1029 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to Message "H" is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
1030 message); the sequence belonging to Message "S" is *converted* (see SI, [Section 10](#) and [Note 7](#), for details).  
1031

1032 **Table S10: Block preference analysis (II) – Amount of PARTICIPANTS expressing**  
1033 **references.**

1034 [Legend: +/- = type of predicted effect (resolution or escalation of the conflict) of  
1035 Message "H" and Message "S" on XX.]

1036

1037 The table displays the "preference" for different blocks, expressed through the amount of  
1038 participants that refer to each block. Data is disaggregated for H/S choice and for type of  
1039 expressed predictions (+/-) on Message "H" and Message "S" effects. Respondents, while  
1040 evaluating the "H" message, seem to be mainly focused on the same block (the [Block](#)  
1041 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,  
1042 they mainly focus on different blocks, depending on the choice they expressed.

1043



1044

1045

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

1046

1047

**Table S11: Block preference analysis (II) – Additional data.**1048 The table displays some additional information about data displayed in previous [Table](#)1049 [S10](#). Additional data consists of total people expressing references and mean values about

1050

referred blocks per participant.

1051

1052

1053