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

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# SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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## 17 **Supporting Information**

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42 SECTION 0 – *About method*

43       The naturalistic approach we chose presents several difficulties, given that human  
44 communication cannot actually be observed “from outside”: it is part of us and we  
45 simultaneously belong to it; it is impossible to avoid interactions (i.e. “interference”)  
46 with the studied sample, even though limiting them to the data collection. However, for  
47 research purposes there is a solution: an external point of view can be 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). On this basis, we made three operative decisions: on the specific matter in  
53 which to involve the sample; on the materials to be employed for data collection; on the  
54 survey modalities.

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

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

72       Two last considerations. The first is that we define our approach as “naturalistic”  
73 in that it is aimed to explore the interpretation process in the “natural” conditions in  
74 which it is performed: human beings usually interpret full messages, not single words or  
75 isolated short phrases like in laboratory research. A message is not just a bunch of words,  
76 and studying interpretation this way could bring something new to our knowledge. The  
77 second consideration regards the kind of control that, through our approach, we exerted  
78 on the survey: beyond the rigorously standardized data collection procedure (see this  
79 Supporting Information, [Section 1](#) and [Section 3](#)), our control mainly lied on the  
80 reliability and the homogeneity of the relational system, rather than on the (impossible)  
81 attempt to cut off the relational aspects.

**82 PART I - Materials and Method**

83

84 SECTION 1 – *The research guide-lines*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

154 CHARACTERS:

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

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

168 The STORY:



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

191 SECTION 3 – *The research protocol*

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

197       **The protocol:**198       INTRODUCTION

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

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

216 The QUESTIONNAIRE and its MANAGEMENT

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

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

- 242 7. All the questions (or sub-questions, if present) have been divided into two  
243 parts: in the first one, the interpretation of the respondent about one specific  
244 subject is requested. In the second one, he/she is invited to "indicate the  
245 concrete elements (words, sentences, expressions etc...) on which your  
246 answer is based".
- 247 8. A special attention has been dedicated to the wording of the questions.  
248 Structural ambiguity of natural language implies the impossibility to  
249 formulate sentences with a univocal meaning, as the acknowledged Italian  
250 linguist De Mauro confirms<sup>2</sup>. Thus, any idea to pursue completely  
251 unambiguous formulations has been dropped. After the first careful  
252 formulation of the questions, two pilot-sessions will be set up for testing the  
253 questionnaire's suitability and gather indications about possible corrections. In

---

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

254 addition, ex-post specific controls will discard from quantitative analysis all  
255 the possibly remained ambiguous cases.

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

268 SURVEY and DATA COLLECTION:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

301 **NOTE:** Once the protocol defined, two successive pilot sessions have been set up  
302 (7 and 5 people respectively) and these experiences helped to progressively refine the  
303 form of the questions, until the definitive shape was reached. The texts of the messages  
304 remained always unaltered. The following [Section 4](#) presents the questions in their final  
305 form.

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

307

<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>

308

309

310 **Title page**

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

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

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

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

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

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



327

**328 Message #1 (description)**

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

335

**336 Message #2 (description)**

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

340

**341 Message #3 (description)**

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

347

**348 QUESTIONS #1 and #2, about Messages #1, #2, #3 (full text)**

349 **1 \* Please, read Messages #1 and #2 and answer to the following questions:**

350 a - What do you think is going on, between XX and YY?

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

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

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

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

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

359 **2 \* Please, read Message #3 and answer to the following questions:**

360 Do you think the attitude of XX towards YY has changed, in respect to Message #1?

361 [YES/NO]

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

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

365

366 **Message #4 / “H” version (*the spontaneous version by the architect, full text*)**367 Block #1368 From: YY (*Project Account for the heating plant works*)369 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)370 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)

371 Sent: ... [date] [hour]

372 **Subject:** R: heating plant

373

374 Dear Mrs. XX,

375 Block #2

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

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

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

389 Block #3

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

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

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

400 Block #4

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

404 Block #5

405 Yours sincerely  
 406 The Project Account  
 407 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

408 \_\_\_\_\_  
 409  
 410

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

412 Block #1

413 From: YY (*Project Account for heating plant works*)  
 414 To: XX (*Employee in one of the offices affected by the works*)  
 415 Cc: ZZ (*Office referent for the works*)  
 416 Sent: ... [date] [hour]  
 417 **Subject:** R: heating plant

418  
 419 Dear Mrs. XX,

420 Block #2

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

424 Block #3

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

432 Block #4

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

440 Block #5

441 Best regards  
 442 The Project Account  
 443 Arch. YY - [Corporation branch] .....

444 \_\_\_\_\_

445

446 **QUESTIONS #3 and #4, about Messages #4/H and #4/S (full text)**447 *Premise: YY prepares Message #4 as an answer to Message #3 (received from XX).*448 *Before he sends it, he consults one of his colleagues, who advises him against sending*449 *and suggests a different text (alternative Message #4).*450 **3 \* Please, read Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**451 In your opinion, what effect will this version produce on XX?

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

453 your answer is based?

454 **4 \* Please, read alternative Message #4 and answer to the following questions:**455 In your opinion, what effect will the alternative version produce on XX?

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

457 your answer is based?

458

459 -----

460

461

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

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

464 you and your answer was exhaustive.

465 Best regards

466 XX

467

468

469 **FINAL QUESTION**470 *Consider that Message #5 was the final reaction of XX and answer the following*471 *questions:*472 In your opinion, which version of Message #4 did XX receive?473 [*YY's draft / Alternative*]

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

475 your answer is based?

476

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

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

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

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

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

501         Now, if we analyse in deep [Msg #4/H](#)'s structure, we can detect in it five main  
502 content blocks (see this SI, [Section 4](#), where they are marked along with [Message #4/H](#)  
503 text). [Msg #4/S](#) maintains the same content while its written form is reviewed and its  
504 sequence modified. In practice, the “alternative message” [#4/S](#) presents the same content  
505 blocks of [Msg #4/H](#) (see this SI, [Section 4](#), where they are marked along with Message  
506 [#4/S](#) text) in a different order and under a new written form. We have synthesized a  
507 comparison of the two structures in [Table S2](#).

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

513

**514 PART II - The collected data**

515

516 SECTION 6 – *The sample*

517 Our work was aimed to explore the process of message interpretation, sharing the  
518 general assumption that the communication process is uniform all across humankind. We  
519 mean that human communication, although it appears extremely variable on its  
520 expressions, must however stem from a unique base of fundamental factors and  
521 processes. Something like a limb in a heterogeneous sample of humans: its aspect looks  
522 very different in function of sex, age, size, health and so on; nonetheless, it remains based  
523 on a unique anatomical and functional scheme. For this, the sample's representativeness  
524 with respect to the Italian people was not critical. Thus, we decided to increase, as much  
525 as possible, the amount of participants while easing the sampling process (see research  
526 protocol, in this Supporting Information, [Section 3](#), points 10, 12).

527 We recruited 102 participants in our sample, whose characteristics are displayed  
528 in Tables S3-S5. The total sample composition ([Table S3](#)) shows an exceeding rate of  
529 women vs. men and of Graduates/Post-graduates vs. High-school degree granted  
530 members (columns "Education", "Gr" bin vs. "Dg" bin; people granted with Elementary  
531 degree are inessential, only 4 out of 102). We also highlight the high rate of students and  
532 unemployed vs. employed members (columns "Employment", "E" and "F" bins vs.  
533 others). For these reasons, even if sample statistical analysis is less relevant in our work,  
534 we have drawn more balanced sub-samples from the total sample. The statistical  
535 distribution results, observed on the total sample, have been verified on sub-samples

536 every time it turned out necessary. The first sub-sample (“AGE”, [Table S4](#)) is  
537 exclusively composed by people over 29 years-old (age bins B, C and D, excluding A; in  
538 total, 60 members). The second one (“EMPLOYMENT”, [Table S5](#)) is exclusively  
539 composed by employed people (A to D bins, excluding E and F, that is for students and  
540 unemployed people; in total, 65 members). Our intention was to balance the weight of  
541 the younger part of the sample, over-crowded with female members (either graduates or  
542 students).



543 SECTION 7 – *The harvest*

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

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

- 554     ▪ Paper archive: each participant provided a 6 pages long document. Four pages  
555         contained the information materials (the title page and the transcriptions of the  
556         messages). In a few cases, on those pages, respondents had written very short  
557         notes and underlined some words. The other two pages contained the answers,  
558         which are the actual data source of our research. In conclusion, we collected  
559          $102 \times 2 = 204$  handwritten pages containing data to be processed.
- 560     ▪ Digital archives: they contain the transcriptions of opened answers (harmon-  
561         ized text), that returned totals of 16,094 words, corresponding to 89,685 char-  
562         acters (spaces excluded) or 104,200 characters (spaces included).
- 563     ▪ In order to let the readers estimate the amounts better, we calculated that using  
564         Times New Roman font in 12 size characters, space 1, with a “letter” page

565 format and 1'' for all margins, the opened answer texts should be occupying  
566 about 26.7 to 27.4 pages (range of 3,800-3,900 characters per page, spaces in-  
567 cluded, text only, no picture, table or main titles).

568 ▪ We also calculated the filling rate of the questionnaires (opened answers) in  
569 the following way: we excluded the two opened items of [Question #2](#) (an-  
570 swering the opened part of the question was under condition and it was per-  
571 formed by just 60% of the sample); then, we recorded 27 unanswered items on  
572 an expected total of 102 participants x 11 items = 1,122 (see SI, [Section 4](#),  
573 questionnaire [summarizing form](#)). The filling rate is:  $(1,122-27)/1,122 \times 100 =$   
574 97.6%.

575 ▪ This last information says which percentage of the opened questions received  
576 an answer but says nothing about the length of those answers. We can calcu-  
577 late an average length in two ways: the first is dividing the total words by the  
578 amount of participants and, then, by the amount of the opened items. The res-  
579 ult is  $16,094/102/13=12.1$  words per respondent per item (answers to [Question](#)  
580 [#2](#) are included in the calculation). In order to appreciate this value better we  
581 can follow the second way: one page, of the previously approximated 27, has  
582 typically 44 lines, which means an average of about 1 typed line per respond-  
583 ent per item ( $44 \times 27 / 13 / 102 = 0.90$  typed lines, answers to [Question #2](#) in-  
584 cluded). 1 typed line is up to 90 characters (spaces included) or about 10 to 15  
585 words; a satisfactory result, about the accomplishment of their commission by  
586 the sample members.

- 587       ▪ About the closed answers, only the [Final question](#) is relevant (for the closed  
588           part of [Question #2](#), see previous points), and 101 out of 102 answered to it.  
589       In the end: survey returned a good harvest, consistent with our expectations and  
590 with the research needs.

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

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

604 Another important point is that no one of the sample members uses any technical  
605 word or expression. About this, it is worth considering how participants reacted to the  
606 two points which, from a communication slant, can be rated as the most critical: the  
607 possible threat XX expressed in [Message #3](#); the squabbling and the personal attack by  
608 YY against XX in [Message #4/H](#) (see this SI [Section 5](#) and [Table S1](#)). Even if some

---

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

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

609 participants refer to these passages in their answers, none stresses them as particularly  
610 critical and almost none labels them as “threat” or “personal attack”. Finally, while  
611 examining the answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and to the [Final Question](#), we found that  
612 about one fourth of the sample (mean for the three questions 26.5%, range 16% - 36%)  
613 overtly stated, at least once, the impossibility to analytically answer to the second part of  
614 the questions (which requested to point out the “concrete elements” that induced the  
615 answer to the first part). These respondents described their answers to the first part of the  
616 questions as the result of “a general impression”, “a sensation/a perception”; in other  
617 cases they presented such answers as “an opinion drawn from the whole message” or  
618 something similar. These observations confirm the general naïve condition of the sample  
619 about human communication (another feature requested by the research plan).

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

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

631 Here, two examples of the second kind:

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

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

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

656 In order to check the existence of possible imbalances in the collected data, we  
657 explored the distribution of the answers' texts with respect, by one hand, to the  
658 questionnaire's questions/sub-questions and, by the other hand, to the respondents. We  
659 quantified these texts through the amount of words and characters contained in the filled  
660 questionnaires. We remind that each question/sub-question was divided into two items;  
661 when we refer to "totals", we mean that the presented data are the result of summing  
662 values related to the "strict" answer (first item, i.e. first part of the question) and values  
663 related to the indicated "concrete elements" (second item, i.e. second part of the  
664 question).

665 a – *Text amounts' distribution with respect to items*. The results of this first  
666 analysis are displayed in [Table S6](#) and [Fig. S1](#). [Table S6](#) shows totals and some statistical  
667 indexes with regards to the distribution of the answers' texts on questions/sub-questions.  
668 Data referred to all the answers (left part) are compared with those excluding [Question](#)  
669 [#2](#) (right part). The reason of such exclusion: answering was under condition and  
670 [Question #2](#) was answered by only a part of the sample. In order to investigate the  
671 distribution shape, we drew the histogram of [Fig. S1](#), which displays the percent  
672 distribution of the texts' amounts (in terms of words and characters, [Question #2](#)  
673 excluded) with respect to the questionnaire's items. It shows evident lower levels for  
674 [Questions #1-b](#) and [#1-c](#) (whose minimum, all the same, is around 7%); the rest of the  
675 values seesaws between 9% and 11% (the general percent mean, per item, is  
676 100:11=9.1%, see [Table S6](#), right part, "% Gen. means per item" row).



677 About this, we must consider that several respondents answered in short to [sub-](#)  
678 [questions #1-b](#) and [#1-c](#), just indicating some references to the previous sub-question  
679 ([#1-a](#), indeed having the highest values). Thus we prefer to use, for comparing different  
680 items, values referring to the percent mean of the three sub-questions of [Question #1](#), that  
681 is 8.3% both for words and for characters (SI = spaces included). On the whole, we have  
682 a range oscillating between 8.3% and 11.1% (for words) or 11.3% (for characters). No  
683 significant difference is recordable and the distribution of the answers' texts with respect  
684 to the questionnaire's items can be assessed as satisfactorily balanced. Actually, no  
685 question at all has been neglected by respondents.

686 b – *Sample distribution with respect to the text amounts*. The results of this  
687 analysis are displayed in [Table S7](#) and [Fig. S2](#) and [S3](#). [Table S7](#) shows totals and some  
688 statistical indexes referred to the amounts of text (in terms of words and characters,  
689 [Question #2](#) excluded) provided by respondents through their answers. Data are  
690 displayed separating values referred to the first item of the questions (“strict” answer)  
691 from those referred to the second one (“concrete elements”). In order to investigate the  
692 distribution shape, we drew two histograms, in which participants have been grouped in  
693 bins referred to words (30-words bins, [Fig. S2](#)) and characters (200-characters bins, [Fig.](#)  
694 [S3](#), SI=spaces included) amounts. The histograms' shape has features comparable to a  
695 bell-curve, even though its form is not perfect (see statistical details in the figures'  
696 captions). Data uphold the idea of differences mainly due to spontaneous random  
697 variations and lead to the conclusion that also such distribution can be considered  
698 satisfactorily regular (no participants seem to have neglected their commission).

**699 PART III - Added materials**

700

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

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

714       To build the block preference indicator we, at first, examined the answers to  
715 [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) and highlighted all the direct references to Message “H” and  
716 Message “S” texts (i.e. sentences in quotation marks or undoubtedly referring to clearly  
717 identifiable passages). Then, we associated them to the text blocks. Results from this part  
718 of the analysis are displayed in [Tables S8-S11](#)<sup>5</sup>; they contain clear indications about the

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81 <sup>5</sup> [Tables S8](#) and [S9](#) display data with regards to the amount of **references** to each block  
82 expressed by participants. In [Table S8](#), totals for each block and each evaluated message (as  
83 well as general totals) can be higher than the people amount, given that each person can express  
84 more than one references. [Tables S10](#) and [S11](#) display data with regards to the amount of  
85 **participants** that referred to each block. In [Table S10](#), totals for each block and each evaluated  
86 message must be inferior to the participants’ amount; however, the general totals can be higher,

719 message blocks which the attention of participants has fallen upon. We will base our  
 720 analysis on [Table S10](#) data; blocks are displayed along with the texts of [Message #4/H](#)  
 721 and [Message #4/S](#); a comparison among them is presented in [Table S2](#).

722       Regarding Message “H” blocks, both “H” and “S” choosers express the same  
 723 preference, as their attention is mainly attracted by [Block #2](#) (from both the versions of  
 724 Msg #4) in a similar proportion:  $(13+9)/(21+11)$ , about 70%, for “H” choosers;  $(10+43)/$   
 725  $(17+65)$ , about 65%, for “S” choosers. Conversely, with regard to Message “S”, “H” and  
 726 “S” choosers split. Indeed, “H” choosers focus on Blocks #2 and #3 (converted  
 727 numbers<sup>6</sup>) in a large majority:  $(6+10+7+3)/(18+14)$ , more than 80%. “S” choosers focus  
 728 on Blocks #3 and #4 in a minor but still strongly prevailing proportion:  $(34+3+35+0)/$   
 729  $(95+7)$ , a little more than 70%. The principal differences regarding [Block #2](#) and [Block](#)  
 730 [#4](#) are the following: [Block #2](#) is the paragraph through which YY refuses to engage  
 731 XX’s request and re-addresses XX to another account (ZZ) inside the organisation. Both  
 732 “H” and “S” choosers give [Block #2](#) a prevalent attention, when they read it in Message  
 733 “H”. However, when they read it in Message “S”, we see that “H” choosers maintain  
 734 their preference (with a little shift towards [Block #3](#), containing specific information)  
 735 while “S” choosers pay the minimum of attention to it ( $18+4=22$  references) moving  
 736 towards [Block #3](#) and [#4](#) ( $34+3=37$  and  $35+0=35$  references respectively).

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89       given that each person could refer to more than one block.

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

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

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

756 Conversely, "H" choosers clearly split: on one hand, eleven of them (out of 26,  
757 42%, see manuscript Table 11, left column, L and LM rows) express, on Message "H",  
758 the same negative rating of "S" choosers (XX-YY conflict escalation) and for the same

759 reasons (relation aspects), too. Nevertheless, they eventually choose that same Message  
 760 “H” providing various justifications for their choice. On the other hand, 15 of them (58%,  
 761 see manuscript Table 11, left column, MG and G rows) rate the impact of Message “H”  
 762 on XX-YY conflict as positive. Coherently, they choose that message but indicate final  
 763 effects of different nature: XX should be “calmed”, because of the great quantity of  
 764 information received. However, she could also be sorted out, just stopped despite her  
 765 dissatisfaction. These 15 people behave as if they were thinking that information is what  
 766 it matters and they pay little attention to relational aspects. Such situation reminds the  
 767 differences between “H” and “S” choosers’ behaviour highlighted by coherence indicator  
 768 analysis (specifically, the sample distribution with respect to coherence level).

769 We successively noted that a minority of “S” choosers, while evaluating Message  
 770 “H”, focused on [Block #4](#) (the relational acceptance passage) and rated it,  
 771 overwhelmingly, negative (4+15=19, see [Table S10](#), Block #4 row, column “S”  
 772 choosers/”H” evaluation). Some of them, for example, justify their evaluation  
 773 interpreting that YY overtly declares that he does not trust XX, given that he says he  
 774 reserves himself to check for the real existence of the problem, before intervening<sup>7</sup>. They  
 775 do not pay any importance to the formal relational acceptance that [Block #4](#) contains.  
 776 Moving to Message “S” evaluations, we face apparent divergent behaviours, as “H” and  
 777 “S” choosers focus on different blocks; nevertheless, this appearance covers an actual  
 778 continuity with what we observed about the evaluations on Message “H”. For example,

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

779 “S” choosers that focus on [Message “S”/Block #4](#) (we remind this is the “converted”  
780 number, corresponding to the original #2, see [Table S2](#)) express positive rates for  
781 relational reasons; quite homogeneously, they hold this block responsible for solving the  
782 conflict and they constantly describe the effects of [Message “S”](#) (and [Block #4](#) in  
783 particular) with words like “acceptance”, “XX satisfaction”, “reassuring”, “XX will feel  
784 listened to”, “acknowledgement”, “appreciation”. Conversely, “H” chooser behaviour,  
785 once again, is split: those who, regardless of their choice, rate “S” effects as positive  
786 (9+5=14, see manuscript Table 11, left column, L and MG rows), express their  
787 evaluations in terms which are very similar to those of “S” choosers: “satisfaction” of  
788 XX, “reassuring”, “calming”, “attention given” and so on. Twelve of them, who deem  
789 “S” as negative (2+10=12, see manuscript Table 11, left column, LM and G rows), give  
790 the maximum of importance to XX notifying the necessity to refer to a different person  
791 (Dr. ZZ). Only in 2 or 3 cases we found generic comments about the excessively  
792 “diplomatic” form of Message “S”.

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

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

810       One last aspect to be cleared: the second point contains, besides the specific  
811 divergence in focusing, a new example of the first case, i.e. the same focusing joined to  
812 attention paid to different characteristics. Actually, both “H and “S” choosers focus also  
813 on [Block #3](#) (converted number) of [Message “S”](#), that is labelled as “Information” in  
814 [Table S2](#). However, even though that block undoubtedly contains information, the two  
815 versions present it in different ways. Confronting the texts, we can easily verify that the  
816 “H” version bears just technical and formal contents while the “S” version pays attention  
817 to present the information as a “service” for the colleagues. Evidently, respondents  
818 jointly take such aspect into account but (as usual) they interpret it in different ways. As  
819 a matter of fact, “H” choosers mainly highlight the **information** that “the works are not  
820 yet concluded and final checks... are about to be carefully planned”; “S” choosers mainly

821 emphasize the **reassurance** (a purely relational aspect) that YY expressly gives to XX  
822 with his words “I assure you [that your indications] will not be ignored”.

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

833



834 **References**

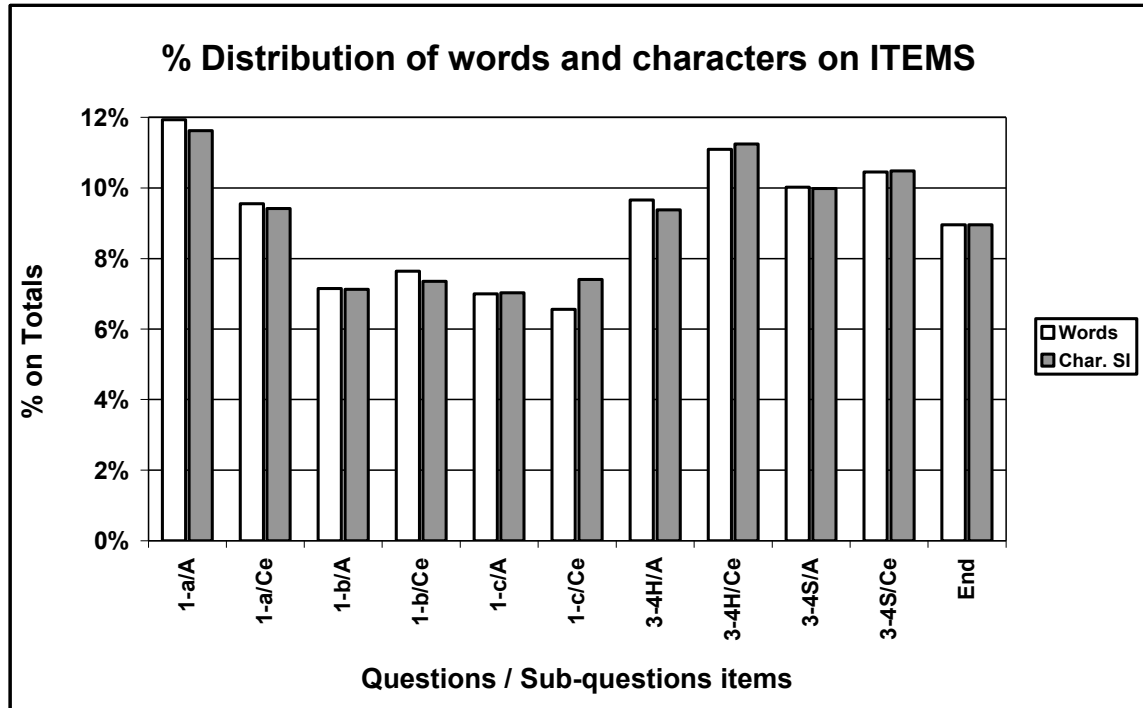
835 De Mauro T. 2003 (1980). *Guida all'uso delle parole*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

836

837

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION Figures

838



839

840

841 **Figure S1: Percent distribution of words and characters on question items ([Question](#)**  
 842 **[#2](#) excluded).**

843 [Legend: [1-a](#), [1-b](#), [1-c](#) = Answers to sub-questions of [Question #1](#); 3-4/H, 3-4/S =

844 Answers to [Questions #3](#) and [#4](#) referred to [Message “H”](#) or to [Message “S”](#); End =

845 [Final question](#). A = “Strict” answers; Ce = Concrete elements; Char.SI = Characters

846 (spaces included)]

847

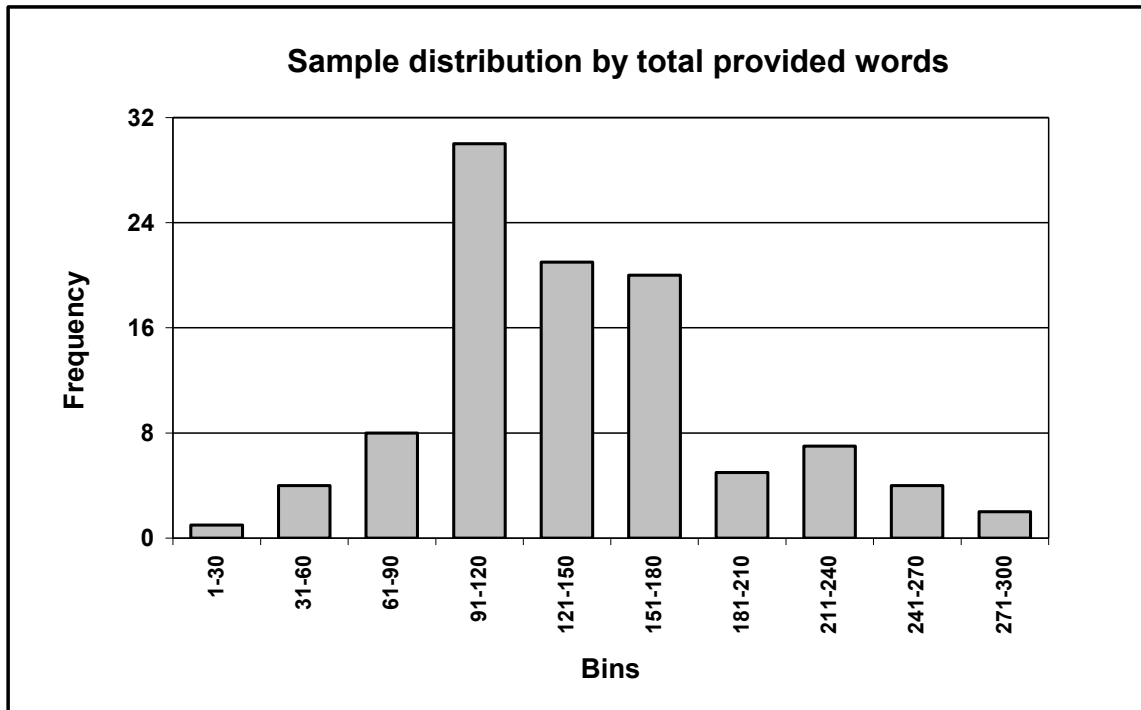
848 This histogram shows that the words’ and characters’ amounts resulting from the

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

850 7.0% to 11.6% (characters, spaces included). The range reduces to 8.3%-11.1% (words)

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

856



857

858

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

860

**excluded).**

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

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

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

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

865

of Variation):

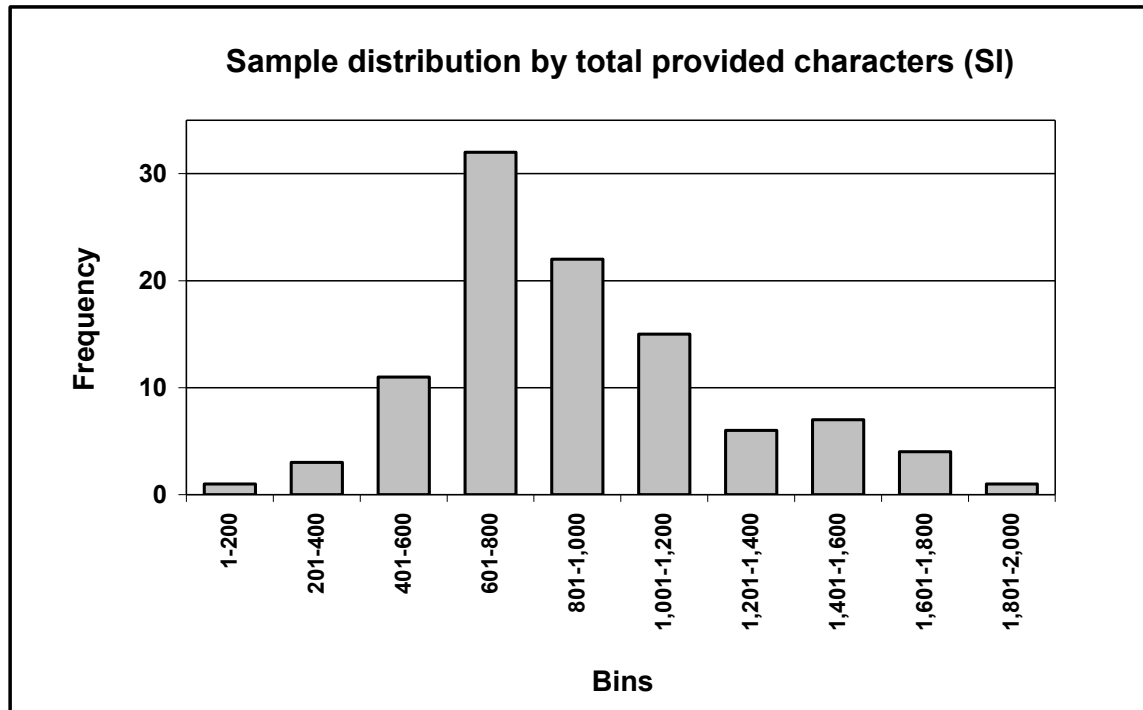
866

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

867

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

868



869

870

871 **Figure S3: Sample distribution with respect to total provided characters (spaces**872 **included, [Question #2](#) excluded).**

873 The histogram shows how the sample is distributed with respect to the amount of  
 874 characters (spaces included) provided by participants. The participants are grouped in

875 200-characters bins. Totals (“strict” answers + concrete elements indications) are

876 displayed. The main statistical indexes of the distribution are the following (SD =

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

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

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

880

881

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION Tables**

882

883

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

884

885

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

886

This scheme displays the interaction structure and the communication critical points

887

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

888

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

889

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

890

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

891

him/her to suggest the alternative.

892

893

894

<b>Blocks</b>	<b>“H” Structure</b>	<b>“S” Structure</b>	<b>Conversion</b>
#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>

895

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

897 The message presented as alternative to [Message #4/H](#) (i.e. the “S” version of Message  
898 #4, in short [Msg #4/S](#)) has the same text blocks of version “H” with the same information  
899 content. Only the position in the text and the written form were modified. Extreme right  
900 column shows the “conversion table” of the blocks numbers for the two versions, in order  
901 to simplify referencing while comparing them.

902

903

904

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>

905

906

**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

907

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

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

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

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

912



913

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>

914

915

**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

916

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

918 30 years, and over, old) with regards to age (left columns), education level (central

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

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

921

922

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>

923

924 **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

925

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

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

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

929 Legends for the used symbols. Data is shown as totals and split down by gender (*M* =

930 males; *F* = Females).

931

932

	<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

933

934 **Table S6: Descriptive analysis of the text amounts' distribution with respect to the**

935

**questionnaire's items.**

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

937

percent Coefficient of Variation]

938

939 The table shows totals and some statistical indexes (some means and percent coefficient  
940 of variation) referred to the words' and characters' amounts resulting from the texts of the

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

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

943 items, right part of the table, see text for the reasons of exclusion). Further information in

944

[Fig. S1.](#)

945

946

947

948

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

949

950 **Table S7: Descriptive analysis of the sample distribution with respect to the text**

951

**amounts they provided.**

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

953

percent Coefficient of Variation]

954

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

956 variation and minimum / maximum) referred to the words' and characters' amounts

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

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

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

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

961

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

962

963

964

965

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>

966 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to Message "H" is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
 967 message); the sequence belonging to Message "S" is *converted* (see SI, [Section 10](#) and [Note 7](#), for details).  
 968

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

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

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

972

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

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

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

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

977 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,

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

979

980

981

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

982

983

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

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

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

986 references per participant.

987

988

989

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>

990 <sup>(\*)</sup> The sequence of the blocks belonging to Message "H" is the original one (as it appears in the actual  
 991 message); the sequence belonging to Message "S" is *converted* (see SI, [Section 10](#) and [Note 7](#), for details).  
 992

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

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

997

998 The table displays the "preference" for different blocks, expressed through the amount of  
 999 participants that refer to each block. Data is disaggregated for H/S choice and for type of  
 1000 expressed predictions (+/-) on Message "H" and Message "S" effects. Respondents, while  
 1001 evaluating the "H" message, seem to be mainly focused on the same block (the [Block](#)  
 1002 [#2](#)), regardless of their H/S choice. On the opposite, while evaluating the "S" message,  
 1003 they mainly focus on different blocks, depending on the choice they expressed.

1004

1005

1006

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

1007

1008

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

1009 The table displays some additional information about data displayed in previous [Table](#)

1010 [S10](#). Additional data consists of total people expressing references and mean values about

1011 referred blocks per participant.

1012

1013

1014