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A cross-linguistic study of metacommunication in online hotel reviews

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Abstract: In this study, we focus on a specific form of metacommunication found in an emerging digital genre: Hotel reviews posted on TripAdvisor. In particular, we investigate how tourists represent their service encounter interactions. The main goal of the present study is to identify what these digital metacommunicative practices reveal about communicative norms and expectations among groups of reviewers writing in three different languages. We analyzed a multilingual dataset of 1800 reviews written in English, Dutch, and Italian. The results reveal that reviewers commented upon a broad range of aspects when evaluating service encounters interactions, for instance, describing the quality of the interaction (e.g. polite, correct), or a lack of communication when a specific type of communication is expected (e.g. absence of greetings, or apologies after a service failure). Further, we found similar cross-linguistic patterns, such as appreciation for being able to communicate in one's mother tongue during the hotel-guest encounter. At the same time, a few differences across languages emerged, such as the preference for precise and correct information within British reviews. Since service interactions are of fundamental importance for customer satisfaction, our findings contribute not only to the current research on metacommunication in digital contexts, but may also be significant for service providers in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: metacommunication, cross-linguistic analysis, TripAdvisor, online hotel reviews, service interactions

1 Introduction: Metacommunication online

Modern societies are characterized not only by an increasing amount of communication, but also an increasing emphasis on the importance of communication

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(Cameron 2000). As a result, a closely related trend is the growing amount of explicit communication *about* communication (i.e., metacommunication). This is especially the case in the digital era, as social media give rise to a great deal of textual activity, rendering different forms of communication even more visible, enduring and searchable. Yet as pervasive as online metacommunicative practices are, only a few studies have focused specifically on this topic (e.g., Barton and Lee 2013; Jones et al. 2011; Manning 2008; Wikström 2016, as discussed in Section 1.2). These studies indicate that metacommunication online is highly variable and context-specific, serving different functions in different platforms. In order to add to this body of research on digital metacommunication, our study focuses on one popular – and highly consequential – digital genre: online consumer reviews. Because of the impact of online consumer reviews on consumer decision-making, this digital genre has attracted the interest of a growing number of discourse scholars (e.g. Bridges and Vásquez 2016; Cenni and Goethals 2017; Ren 2018; Vásquez 2011, 2012, 2014; Virtanen 2017).

In this study, we examine how reviewers describe their service encounter interactions, as they reflect upon the communicative practices experienced during their hotel visits. Our aim is to determine what these metacommunicative practices reveal about communicative norms and expectations among tourists, and, moreover, whether these norms and expectations vary cross-linguistically. Besides contributing insights to scholarship on metacommunication in digital contexts, because service is a major factor in consumers' assessment of their hospitality experiences, we also hope to shed light on issues that may be of interest to the fields of business communication and tourism studies.

1.1 Defining metacommunication

As we will use it in this study, the term “metacommunication” has a specific meaning, which can be understood as the most explicit realization of Bateson's (1951, 1972) concept of metacommunication namely “communication which refers to communication.” Since the term *metacommunication* could be understood as overlapping with other terms, including *metalanguage* (Jaworski et al. 2012), *metatalk* (Schiffrin 1980), *discourse reflexivity* (Mauranen 2010), *metadiscourse* (Hyland 2017) and *metapragmatics* (Bublitz and Hubler 2007; Liu and You 2019), it is important to point out that although some points of convergence exist among these various labels, they are not coterminous (for a more elaborate terminological review, see Qin and Uccelli 2019).

For instance, *metadiscourse* is commonly explained as the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing. This conceptualization of

metadiscourse highlights how language can be used in order to help readers or hearers process and comprehend what is being said, for instance through the use of specific linguistic elements, such as enumeration of points or discourse markers (Hyland 2017). In contrast, *metapragmatics* is often defined as the reflexive assessment of the circumstances and consequences of speech and linguistic forms (Lucy 1993) and tends to be mostly concerned with speakers' judgments of appropriateness of communicative behavior, both their own and that of others, thus promoting reflections on the specific social context in which these metapragmatic utterances are performed (Bridges 2017).

It is worth pointing out that a handful of studies (e.g., Incelli 2017; Malenkina and Ivanov 2018; Mapelli 2016; Suau-Jiménez 2019) have addressed the meta-discursive aspects of tourism discourse by focusing on those linguistic features (such as boosters, hedges, discourse markers etc.) that are used by writers to organize and structure their texts for their readers – in other words, applying Hyland's notion of metadiscourse. However, in the current study, we use the term *metacommunication* to refer to verbal comments about a past communicative episode that are reported in a specific context. In particular, we focus on meta-communicative comments appearing in online hotel reviews, produced by reviewers who comment on staff–guest communication that took place during their stay.

1.2 Metacommunication in digital contexts

In digital contexts, metacommunication may serve very different goals and, depending on the medium, it may reflect context- and user group-sensitive differences. For example, in their study of adolescent practices on Facebook, Jones et al. (2011) identified metacommunication as a recurrent discourse strategy adopted in this specific setting, mostly consisting of social media users commenting upon the communication practices of their Facebook friends: for instance, pointing out when others were being too public in their communication (“I think you should stop with that whole shower thing”).

In a different study, Wikström (2016) examined users' metacommunicative practices on Twitter. His findings suggest that metacommunicative practices in this context may function as explicit reflections on communication norms in digital media, highlighting possible differences between digital and face-to-face conversation. Addressing a different online context (i.e., the photo-sharing site, Flickr) Barton and Lee (2013) described how the metacommunicative practices of some users on that platform may reveal a “self-deprecating” tendency as, for instance, when they downplay their linguistic abilities, specifically in their negative self-

judgments about English proficiency (e.g., “my English is so poor”). What all of these studies have in common are users’ commentaries about communication during, or in the midst of, their ongoing communication. However, in addition to these forms of metacommunication, language users, of course, can also communicate about communication that took place at some point in the past.

Similar to our own focus on retrospective reports of interactions that took place during service encounters, Manning (2008) explored conversations reported by coffee shop workers on a specialized barista website, about “stupid customers” they served and interacted with in Starbucks coffee shops. The author pointed out that this type of “talk about talk” about specific service transactions has the potential to bring to surface the communicative rules and conventions that operate in very specific service contexts. By investigating these metacommunicative “rants,” Manning elaborated on the complex and hybrid nature of the represented interactions. Indeed, he highlighted how barista–customer interactions are characterized by both technical necessities, such as getting the job done (getting the customer their coffee), and at the same time social/interactional goals, involving issues of politeness specific to the customer-server relationship.

In a study focusing on narrative features of hotel reviews, Vásquez (2011, 2012) noted that it was not unusual to find reviewers reporting on their interactions with hotel staff members, often by means of metadiscursive commentary as well as through representations of dialogic interactions, conveying “not just what was said during an interaction with a hotel staff member, but also how it was said” (114). More recently, metacommunication within the context of service encounters has also been the focus of the work that addressed language-related reports in online tourism reviews. In particular, examining the extent to which German-, French- and Spanish-speaking tourists referred to experiences involving specific languages in their online hotel reviews, Goethals (2016) found that language is indeed an issue mentioned in hotel reviews, but to varying degrees according to the language group of the tourists. French and Spanish-speaking tourists referred far more frequently to their language experiences, and in particular to the use of their mother tongue, than did German-speaking tourists. Moreover, Spanish and French tourists complained about the fact that they had to speak English “too often.” These results suggested that French and Spanish tourists assigned a privileged role to their mother tongue, especially for realizing interpersonal goals during international service encounters. Analogous results highlighting tourists’ preference in using their mother tongue when interacting with service providers also emerged in a study of Mariani et al. (2019), which examined a corpus of Booking.com reviews focusing on evaluations of Italian and Russian hotels by tourists from over 100 different countries.

Finally, another aspect related to metacommunicative instances within online travel reviews is how tourism professionals are represented in these digital texts. Although this issue has been discussed only peripherally in prior research, a few studies (e.g., Keymeulen and Goethals 2018; Vásquez 2011, 2012, 2014) have pointed out that service providers can be described in various ways, for instance by using their name or referring to their professional role. Because the varying ways in which participants in a service encounter are represented contributes to the overall conceptualization of the communicative event described, our study also addresses this specific aspect of metacommunication (Section 3.3.3).

Thus, widening the main scope of inquiry from code choice and preference, our goals are first, to examine reports concerning *all* aspects of staff/customer communication in online reviews of hotels. Online reviews represent a valuable source of information concerning service interactions, since they yield metacommunicative data. Indeed, in online hotel reviews, tourists not only comment on and evaluate the physical accommodations, but they also describe their personal perceptions and evaluations of their interactions with the hotel staff. By studying these metacommunicative comments, we aim to shed light on tacit rules, norms and expectations related to hotel service encounters and perhaps highlight some main areas of concern for service providers. From there, we also build on the aforementioned studies that have adopted a cross-linguistic approach, by comparing metacommunication in reviews written in three different languages. Indeed, we believe that in increasingly multilingual digital spaces (Lee 2016), the investigation of multiple languages represents a valuable and needed contribution to any research focusing on digital communication. Finally, we also take up the issue of what linguistic resources are used to refer to, or describe, the service workers represented in these metacommunicative accounts of interaction.

1.3 Online travel reviews: A cross-linguistic perspective

As we have noted, writing and reading online reviews has become a widespread practice for tourists everywhere. Reviews represent a powerful tool to express opinions and recommendations on touristic attractions, accommodations and services (De Ascaniis and Gretzel 2013), and to access pre-purchase information (Mariani et al. 2019). Online travel reviews are also extremely relevant for service providers in the hospitality industry, since they offer insights on customers' preferences and their levels of (dis)satisfaction (Sparks and Browning 2010). Moreover, the ubiquity of online reviews on the Internet has not passed unnoticed among academic researchers, especially marketing scholars and discourse linguists. Discourse-oriented studies have explored, for instance, the pragmatic

aspects of review discourse (Ren 2018), the use of specific vocabulary (De Ascaniis and Gretzel 2013), or the narrative and genre characteristics (Vásquez 2012, 2014).

As we have argued elsewhere (Cenni and Goethals 2017), there is a growing demand in CMC research for analyses that deal with a multiplicity of languages and not only with English-language data (Feng and Ren 2019; Lee 2016). Applied to tourism, this cross-linguistic perspective is particularly relevant, as international tourism has by itself an important inter- and cross-linguistic dimension – and tourism communication platforms greatly foster contacts between review writers and readers from different backgrounds as well. Global platforms, such as TripAdvisor, provide a communication environment where discourse is generated by individuals from a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds, and, although automatic translations are provided, language still remains one of the main filters for selecting a specific review display order, since users can select a particular language and only read reviews originally written in this language. As mentioned, in the present study we address the cross-linguistic issue by analyzing a multilingual dataset comprising English, Italian and Dutch reviews.

1.4 Research questions and structure of the article

Our main research questions are:

- (1) How common are metacommunicative comments in positive and negative online hotel reviews?
- (2) On which aspects of the host–guest interaction do these metacommunicative comments focus? (For instance, are reviewers commenting on the quality of the communication with staff? The lack of communication? The language abilities of the staff?)
- (3) To what extent do metacommunicative comments point to any cross-linguistic differences (or cross-cultural expectations) related to service interactions?

The paper is organized as follows. In the methodology section (2), we describe the corpus compilation and annotation procedures, including our annotation taxonomy. In the results section (3), we begin by presenting the frequency patterns of the main types of metacommunicative comments (3.1), in order to find out whether there are systematic differences or similarities linked to different languages or to different review polarity. Next, in Section 3.2, we present a more detailed taxonomy of metacommunicative comments within online hotel reviews. Then, in Section 3.3, we offer a more in-depth analysis of those topics that point to possible cross-linguistic differences or cross-cultural issues. At the end of Section 3.3, we explore the different ways in which interlocutors are referred to in metacommunicative

comments, in terms of varying degrees of personalization. In Section 4, we provide a discussion of our results. Finally, in Section 5, we present our conclusions.

2 Methodology

2.1 Data

Our corpus consists of 1800 reviews, originally downloaded from Tripadvisor.com in October 2017. The reviews were downloaded with randomizing scraping techniques using the programming language Python. After selecting three countries' capitals as our target cities (London, Rome and Amsterdam), we scraped a list of hotels located in these cities. The script accessed the hotels following a random order and selected, for each target city, reviews that fulfilled the desired criteria, namely:

- Reviews with ratings of 1 or 2 bullets out of 5 ('terrible' or 'poor')
- Reviews with ratings of 4 or 5 bullets ('very good' or 'excellent')
- Reviews written in English, Italian, and Dutch by users who marked their location respectively in the U.K., Italy, and The Netherlands
- Reviews posted after 2015

After this initial corpus compilation was completed, we selected the first 600 reviews for each city: 200 reviews written in English (100 negative + 100 positive), 200 reviews written in Dutch (100 negative + 100 positive) and 200 reviews written in Italian (100 negative + 100 positive).

Following this method, we were able to compile a corpus balanced for polarity, language and destination. In terms of polarity, 50% of the reviews in the corpus are negative, with ratings of 1 or 2 bullets out of 5 ('terrible' or 'poor'), and 50% of the reviews are positive, with ratings of 4 or 5 bullets ('very good' or 'excellent'). In terms of languages represented, the corpus includes 600 reviews written in three different languages: English, Italian and Dutch. In terms of destination, the hotels reviewed are situated in three cities: London, Rome and Amsterdam. Table 1 provides a visual representation of our sampling design, and the resulting corpus.

Throughout the sampling, we also dedicated special attention to randomization: no more than 10 reviews per individual hotel were included, and all reviews were written by different reviewers.

The corpus was designed to include three languages (U.K. English, Dutch and Italian) in order to observe any discourse differences between closely related (i.e., European) cultural and linguistic environments. The researchers are proficient in these three languages.

Table 1: Schematic structure of the corpus.

Negative reviews (n900)		Destinations		
		London	Rome	Amsterdam
Language /Origin	English–UK	100	100	100
	Italian–Italy	100	100	100
	Dutch–Netherlands	100	100	100
Positive reviews (n900)		Destinations		
		London	Rome	Amsterdam
Language /Origin	English–UK	100	100	100
	Italian–Italy	100	100	100
	Dutch–Netherlands	100	100	100

2.2 Coding procedure

Metacommunicative comments were identified with a semi-automatic text search using keywords in the data analysis tool, NVivo 12. The lists of keywords included words related to interaction and communication (e.g., *speak, tell, say, complain, shout, English, Italian*), along with words referring to the participant roles in interaction (e.g., *customer, client, receptionist, waiter, manager*). The lists of keywords were established in successive steps. For each language, a preliminary set of keywords was extracted from the manually annotated corpus. We used these lists as combined keywords in the NVivo text search function to retrieve all reviews containing metacommunicative comments. Subsequently, a manual control check was carried out with 40% of the corpus and the list of keywords was progressively refined in order to ensure the retrieval of all metacommunicative comments present in our corpus and to avoid false negatives. As a final step, all candidate excerpts were manually checked in order to reject false positives.

2.3 Macro-categories of metacommunicative comments

In order to determine overall tendencies in our multilingual corpus, we distinguished between three main categories of metacommunicative comments: 1) comments on verbal communication, 2) comments on lack of verbal communication/non-verbal communication and 3) comments on language competence. The category “comments on verbal communication” comprises all comments that included communication verbs (e.g., *tell, answer*) or a related nominalization (e.g., *conversation, response*) and all instances commenting on the

quality of the communication (e.g., *the receptionist shouted at me!; this information was incorrect*). The category “comments on lack of verbal communication/non-verbal communication” covers all comments describing an absence of communication (when communication is expected), and all instances describing non-verbal communication (e.g., *the man at the desk rolled his eyes; the manager just got up and walked away*). Finally, the category “language competence” includes any reference to the language skills of the interlocutors involved in the service encounter (e.g., *their English was very basic*). These main categories were used to identify and code metacommunicative comments in the corpus of 1800 reviews.

3 Results

3.1 Frequency patterns of metacommunicative comments in online hotel reviews

Our analysis reveals that metacommunicative comments can be considered a recurrent topic of online hotel reviews, especially in negative reviews (27%) and, to a lesser extent, in positive reviews (15%) (see Table 2). These results corroborate previous research findings that communication represents an important factor in tourists’ evaluations of their hotel experiences (Wang et al. 2015). Indeed, this aspect seems to become more salient when a client is dissatisfied, since these types of comments appear more frequently in negative reviews. This finding suggests a relationship between the polarity (negative/positive) of the review and the number of metacommunicative comments. In other words, when the hotel-guest communication is positive and the guest is satisfied about the interaction s/he had with the staff, there seems to be less needed to comment on this aspect of the hospitality experience in a post-trip review. This finding aligns with previous research that found that when the quality of a service matches the expectations of the tourist there is no mention of this in the review, while when an expectation is not met, a negative comment is more likely to be included in the review (Goethals 2016; Keymeulen and Goethals 2018).

Taking a closer look at cross-linguistic differences, the frequency distributions reveal some interesting tendencies. In general terms, metacommunicative comments are most frequent in British reviews in both negative and positive reviews. Pair-wise chi-square tests demonstrate that, from a total of 24 pair-wise comparisons, there are 12 significant differences¹ (Table 3). Remarkably, the significant differences concern almost exclusively comparisons with the English subset: 10

¹ For each test, the critical p value was set at the 0.05 level of confidence.

Table 2: Overall frequencies of metacommunicative comments in negative and positive reviews.

Frequencies ^a	Negative reviews (n900)			Positive reviews (n900)		
	EN n300	NL n300	IT n300	EN n300	NL n300	IT n300
Metacommunicative comments TOT per language group						
	118 ^b	70	57	66	29	39
	245 (27%)			134 (15%)		
Comments on:						
Communication	102	27	36	59	20	22
Lack of communication/ Non-verbal communication	45	38	21	7	1	6
Language competence	14	22	11	8	9	15

^a The total frequencies (n) refer to the number of reviews in which a certain category occurs at least once.

^b In a review where metacommunicative comments are detected, it is possible that more than one type of metacommunication might be coded. For this reason, adding up the frequencies of the three main metacommunicative themes may result in a higher number than the total number of reviews per language in which at least one metacommunicative instance has been identified.

Table 3: Overview of the statistically significant differences, comparison between language groups.

Statistical significant differences		Negative reviews (n900)			Positive reviews (n900)		
		EN-IT	EN-NL	NL-IT	EN-IT	EN-NL	NL-IT
Metacommunicative comments TOT		X	X	-	X	X	-
Comments on:	Communication	X	X	-	X	X	-
	Lack of communication/ Non-verbal communication	X	-	X	-	X	-
	Language competence	-	-	X	-	-	-

out of 12 significant differences signal a higher number of metacommunicative comments in the English subset. These results suggest a preference among British tourists to discuss communication issues with the staff in their reviews. However, this does not hold for the category of comments on language competence. For this category, Dutch reviewers tend to comment on this issue more frequently in negative reviews, and Italian reviewers tend to do so in positive reviews (We discuss this issue in more detail in Section 3.3.2).

3.2 A taxonomy of metacommunication in online hotel reviews

In further analyzing the various types of metacommunicative comments found in our corpus, we developed a more detailed taxonomy that includes all recurrent metacommunicative themes found in our corpus of 1800 online hotel reviews. Table 4 illustrates all of the subcategories we identified. More specifically, within the category of “comments on verbal communication” we noted that reviewers formulate metacommunicative comments in a number of different ways: by including direct reported speech, by describing the way something was communicated (e.g., *the receptionist shouted; he answered in a rude way*), or by indicating that communication was unclear or that information provided was incorrect. Similarly, in the category of “lack of verbal communication/non-verbal communication” we observed that reviewers typically referred to the absence of specific speech acts, such as the lack of greeting, the lack of an apology after a service failure, or a missing response to a question or email. In negative reviews, consumers also referred to various instances of non-verbal communication (e.g. staff members rolling their eyes, shrugging, or staring).

The analysis of metacommunicative comments in positive reviews showed much less thematic variation (Table 5). Indeed, within the broader category “comments on verbal communication,” we identified only two subthemes: 1) giving advice to guests and 2) answering questions. Furthermore, we observed that the few metacommunicative instances in the positive reviews within the category of “lack of verbal communication/non-verbal communication” were limited to comments concerning the positive non-verbal communication of the staff and referred exclusively to staff members smiling.

Table 4: Taxonomy of metacommunicative comments in negative hotel reviews.

Negative reviews		
Comments on Communication	Communication general comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>We were as met by responses such as ‘we have no control over road works, it’s not our fault’</i> – <i>The receptionist asked us to use her computer to enter our details ourselves</i>
	Negative acts of communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I was met with a brusque response</i> – <i>I was quite rudely told that my room had “already been upgraded”</i> – <i>The receptionist started shouting in anger</i>
	Incorrect info, unclear info, lies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>He had lied to us about availability clearly.</i> – <i>We were told we had booked a twin room, which was not correct</i>
Comments on Lack of communication/ Non-verbal communication	Lack of communication general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>He didn’t even tell us where breakfast was being held.</i> – <i>What they don’t tell you!</i>
	No apology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Again no apology for having forgotten to bring it up earlier.</i>
	No greeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>They don’t even say good morning</i>
	Not answering the phone or emails	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>They acknowledged receipt of my email, but have not had the interest to reply.</i>
Comments on Language Competence	Non-verbal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>He just shrugged</i> – <i>Just one of them managed to smile</i>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>He responded, once again in very poor English</i>

Table 5: Taxonomy of metacommunicative comments in positive hotel reviews.

Positive reviews		
Comments on Communication	Giving advice to customers	– <i>The staff was happy to <u>give you tips</u> on where to go and the best ways to get around.</i>
	Answering tourists' questions	– <i>They <u>answered all of our questions</u> at any time of the day/night.</i>
Comments on Lack of communication/Non-verbal communication	Non-verbal communication	– <i>Staff <u>never stop smiling</u></i>
Comments on Language Competence		– <i>The staff can <u>speak super English</u></i>

3.3 Cross-linguistic differences

3.3.1 Getting necessary information

The quantitative findings for the corpus as a whole presented in Section 3.1 and the more-detailed taxonomy of metacommunicative themes presented in Section 3.2 enabled us to identify specific areas of communication that potentially point to cross-linguistic, or intercultural, issues. In this section, we turn to a closer examination of two main cross-linguistic topics: (a) comments about getting necessary, correct, clear, or truthful information and (b) comments on the language competence of the staff.

Lack of communication constitutes a recurrent issue mentioned in British and Dutch negative reviews, which display a significantly higher number of occurrences when compared to Italian (EN n45; NL n38; IT n21). In particular, British reviewers often indicate that the hotel staff failed to communicate what, in their opinion, should be basic and important information, as in (1).

(1) *Why didn't they tell us at 12pm when we first checked in that our room wasn't available? Why didn't the hotel inform us before we arrived that renovation work was being carried out and that our room wouldn't be available? Why couldn't the hotel ask for a deposit so that the room can be secured? These simple things could have prevented a lot of stress and anger.* (UK tourist; Amsterdam)

Not receiving relevant information is discussed by British reviewers as a key disappointing factor, even causing them “stress and anger” (as in the example above) and thus it appears to be an influential factor in writing a negative

evaluation of their stay. In Example 1, the list of questions emphasizes the reviewer's disappointment and frustration. In the final sentence, the reviewer indicates that providing this type of information is a "simple thing," thus revealing an underlying normative view on staff–tourist communication.

Similarly, an emphasis on information received being correct, precise and truthful, appears again to be particularly important for British tourists (EN n37), while in Italian and Dutch reviews, there are far fewer references to this issue (IT n7; NL n7). The following examples illustrate this category (2–4)

- (2) I was told that check out had been completed and the bill paid, both incorrect. (UK tourist; Amsterdam)
- (3) *Eventually found a room that they told me was the same price and same quality, but both bits of that were a lie.* (UK tourist; Amsterdam)
- (4) *When we asked what time we needed to be ready for our transfer back to the airport (which was previously confirmed in email and on the phone) we were shocked to be told that no transfer had been booked at all.* UK tourist; Rome)

These examples (2–4) show that reviewers trust the staff to provide correct and honest information and to fulfil commitments made in previous conversations. These comments are not very surprising; yet what is surprising is that they are far more frequent in the English reviews. This is a rather puzzling observation, since the higher frequency of these types of comments in British reviews might be related to the notion that British English is a so-called "low context" culture (Hall 1976) with a preference for highly explicit information. This could explain the difference in frequency when compared to the Italian reviews. At the same time however, this explanation fails to elucidate the significant difference between British and Dutch occurrences in requiring precise and correct information, since both groups are traditionally classified as "low context" cultures.

3.3.2 Language competence

Although the issue of language competence is not among the most frequent topics (Table 2), and the cross-linguistic differences in frequency patterns are less marked when compared to other categories, as we took a closer look at the examples in this category, some suggestive findings emerged.

First, in our subset of negative reviews, Dutch reviewers commented more frequently on the issue of language competence (NL n22) when compared to the other two languages (EN n14; IT n11). In these instances, Dutch reviewers frequently pointed out the lack of language skills of the staff, as in (5), remarking on the low level of English of the staff, especially when staying in Rome. In some cases, these criticisms go a step further as, for instance, when they mock the local

staff and imitate their English pronunciation as can be seen in this case of direct reported speech (6). These comments are highly denigrating, especially when posted on a public platform that can be accessed not only by other tourists but by the hotels' staff as well.

- (5) *Mensen aan de receptie spreken slecht Engels.* [People at the reception speak bad English] (NL tourist; Rome)
- (6) *Bij de receptie: "ze mecanic does not wurk in ze wiekend!"* [At the reception "ze mecanic does not wurk in ze wiekend!"] (NL tourist; Rome)

At the same time, several Dutch tourists also expressed the wish to be able to interact in Dutch when staying in a hotel located in the Netherlands and were irritated when this was not possible (7–8). In this type of domestic context, such a comment about competence in the local language may also be a form of veiled discrimination, or xenophobia, since it implies the presence of foreigners as staff members in the reviewer's own country.

- (7) *Personeel spraak ook geen of weinig Nederlands!!* [Staff spoke little or no Dutch!!] (NL tourist; Amsterdam)
- (8) *Al blijf ik het vreemd vinden dat ik in een Nederlands hotel in het Engels te woord word gestaan bij de receptie* [Even if I still find it strange that in a Dutch hotel I am addressed in English] (NL tourist; Amsterdam)

In a similar fashion, some British reviewers also commented on the issue of language competence complaining about not being able to interact in English, when staying in a local hotel, as in (9).

- (9) *Guess what? They don't speak English!* (UK tourist; London)

In some cases, reviewers even warned future hotel guests ("please be careful"), pointing out how a low level of staff's English may lead to misunderstandings and to potential service failures (10).

- (10) *So please be careful and confirm what they mean because they do not speak proper English* (UK tourist; Rome)

In a few other cases, British reviewers complained that Italian staff spoke their mother tongue when communicating amongst themselves, in front of guests (11). In spite of the fact that the staff were using the local language, their use of a language other than English in front of British guests was linked to a perception of rudeness.

- (11) *Staff could speak English, but when discussing issues that we had brought to their attention, they would speak Italian to each other in front of us which we found to be very rude.* (UK tourist; Rome).

In a different vein, negative comments on language competence made by Italian reviewers highlight a rather different type of discourse: one which challenges the status of English as the only and undisputed *lingua franca* and points to the possibility of using languages other than English to communicate with the staff (12–13). Similar kinds of remarks from Spanish and French reviewers, challenging the linguistic hegemony of English, have already been attested in previous research (e.g. Goethals 2016).

- (12) *Il personale parla solo inglese, nè una lingua di più!* [The staff only speaks English, not one language more] (IT tourist; Amsterdam)
- (13) *Parlano solo inglese, un ragazzo capisce un po' d'italiano, nessuno parla francese.* [They speak only English, a guy understands a little bit Italian, nobody speaks French] (IT tourist; London)

In the following example (14) an Italian reviewer discusses in even more detail a language competence issue she encountered in a hotel located in London. In this extract she discusses her own language skills and indirectly reflects on the established role of English as *lingua franca*. The reviewer begins by identifying herself as multilingual, emphasizing that she speaks many Romance languages (Spanish, French and Portuguese, in addition to Italian, which she uses to write her review), adding that she happens to be less proficient in English. She then describes how her initial interaction with the hotel receptionist turned unpleasant when she did not immediately understand what was being said in English – noting the receptionist's *annoyed tone* and *raised voice*, and using direct reported speech to illustrate the two unmitigated face-threatening questions posed to her by the receptionist. At the end of this excerpt, the reviewer expresses her gratitude to a second hotel employee, who observed the interaction and intervened by switching the communication to one of the languages known to the reviewer.

- (14) *Premetto che parlo 3 lingue fluentemente per lavoro, spagnolo, francese e portoghese. Purtroppo il mio inglese è scarso... diciamo scolastico. Alla reception la ragazza, stressatissima, mi chiese qualcosa in inglese che non compresi (capii dopo che si trattava di una caparra) e, prima di poterle chiedere se parlasse una delle mie lingue, incominciò con tono scocciato e ad alta voce a ripetere "Do you understand me?". Alla fine una collega brasiliana più intelligente e attenta, avendo capito la situazione, ha preso a parlarmi in portoghese e da lì in avanti non ho avuto più problemi.*

[I start by saying that I speak 3 languages fluently for work, Spanish, French and Portuguese. Unfortunately my English is poor ... let's say school English. At the reception the girl, extremely stressed, asked me in English something I didn't understand (I understood later that she was referring to a down payment) and

before I could ask her whether she spoke one of my languages, she started in an annoyed tone and with a raised voice to repeat "Do you understand me?". At the end a Brazilian colleague more clever and attentive, understanding the situation, started to speak to me in Portuguese and from then on I didn't have any more problems.] (Italian tourist; London)

When comments on language competence occur in positive reviews, they comprise a single theme across the three languages: reviewers' expressions of gratitude for having found staff members who can communicate in the guests' mother tongue, as in 15–16.

- (15) *Daarnaast werden we ook nog in onze eigen taal aangesproken! Hierdoor voel je je echt welkom. Complimenten voor het management. Een echte aanrader.* [Beyond that we were even addressed in our own language! This makes you feel really welcome! Congratulations to the management. Really recommended] (Dutch tourist; Rome)
- (16) *Ringrazio la receptionist Graziella che ci ha seguiti capendo la nostra poca praticità con la lingua inglese* [I thank the receptionist Graziella who helped us understanding our uneasiness with English] (Italian tourist; London)

In (16) we noted that the ability to use one's mother tongue to communicate with a staff member made such a positive impression that it even prompted the reviewer to make a personalized comment, and to use the name of the individual staff member with whom the guest interacted within her expression of gratitude. In the following section (3.3.3), we provide a closer examination of this topic of how interlocutors are represented in instances of metacommunicative discourse.

Considering the examples discussed in this section, it emerges that language/s used can play an important role in service interactions. In particular, the issue of being able to speak one's own mother tongue seems to be a recurrent and relevant theme, and one that might even influence the overall appreciation of the hotel stay. This finding is in line with previous research, such as for instance, a study of a multilingual corpus of reviews on TripAdvisor (Keymeulen and Goethals 2018), and in a study focusing on Italian and Russian hotel reviews on Booking.com (Mariani et al. 2019). Similar instances and patterns found in our dataset seem to corroborate and further develop the argument that having the possibility to interact in one's native language/(s) may contribute to a satisfying communication experience between service providers and customers (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012).

3.3.3 Referring to the interlocutor in metacommunicative comments

Taking a closer look at the actual examples of metacommunication in our corpus, we also noted considerable variation in how the staff is referred to. More specifically, we observed various degrees of personalization in how the interlocutor is represented in instances of metacommunicative discourse. As illustrated in Table 6, we identified the following categories used to refer to interlocutors: 1) impersonal/underspecified forms of reference (often formulated as agentless passive constructions), 2) collective forms of reference (e.g. *they* or *staff*), 3) references to a specific individual, occurring either as a third-person singular pronoun (e.g., *he*, *she*), a generic noun (e.g., *the woman*, *the guy*, *the man*, *the lady*) or an institutional role or position (e.g., *the receptionist*, *the driver*). Finally, the highest degree of personalization is represented by 4) the use of the name of the interlocutor – as seen earlier in the previous (16) *Graziella* example. While theoretically, the reviewer could also speak directly to the staff member(s) by using the second person pronoun *you*, this never occurred in our dataset. Instead, reviewers always speak *about* the staff and never *to* the staff.

Table 6: Degrees of personalization in referencing staff members.

Impersonal/ underspecified		<i>This comment <u>was met by responses</u> such as ‘We have other customers that side of the hotel that haven’t complained’.</i> <i>My questions <u>have gone unanswered</u>.</i> <i><u>I was told</u> it ‘depended on the individual’ and that my feedback was ‘important’.</i>
Plural/collective reference	They	<i>I pre-booked a room, yet <u>they</u> still told me <u>they</u> had no room for me.</i>
Singular reference/ reference to a specific individual	Staff	<i>The <u>staff</u> said it happens all the time.</i>
	He/She	<i><u>He</u> then refused to give his name (no name tag on).</i>
	Man/Woman/etc.	<i><u>The guy</u> didn’t seem to understand what I meant.</i>
	Position	<i>At this point <u>the receptionist</u> came into the lift shouting.</i> <i>I was told by <u>a young receptionist</u> “it was because the previous guests had the room on Do not disturb”</i>
Name		<i>I must make a special mention about <u>Wilma</u> who checked us in and she offered so much information even though check in was busy.</i>

In comparing the forms of representation in negative and positive reviews, we observed several statistically significant differences (see Table 7). First, it appears that impersonal/underspecified forms are used more frequently in negative reviews, whereas positive reviews showed a tendency toward more personal forms of representation of the interlocutor. Indeed, in positive comments, we noticed a significant lower use of pronouns (both plural and singular) – and when generic nouns or the employee title/position are used to identify the interlocutor, half of these occurrences (n 21/40) are accompanied by a positive-oriented adjective, enhancing the personalization, such as in (17). Of course, the most personal way to identify the interlocutor in the service interaction is to mention the name of the staff member. This strategy also displays a significant difference between negative and positive reviews, occurring more frequently in positive metacommunicative comments. Remarkably, the great majority of the instances mentioning the name of the interlocutor (n 12/14) are combined with the act of thanking this person for having contributed to an enjoyable holiday, for instance by giving good tips on where to eat or what to visit (18), or solving language barrier issues as in (19).

Table 7: Different forms of personalization in referencing staff members: frequencies and statistical significant differences between negative and positive reviews (*).

Degree of personalization	References to the interlocutor in metacommunicative comments in Negative R	References to the interlocutor in metacommunicative comments in Positive R
	n 337	n 150
Impersonal/underspecified (*p < 0.05)	n 90 (27%)	n 12 (8%)
Plural/collective ref.(tot) (*p < 0.05)	n 119 (35%)	n 81 (54%)
They (*p < 0.05)	n 55 (16%)	n 8 (5%)
Staff (*p < 0.05)	n 64 (19%)	n 73 (49%)
Singular ref./ref. to a specific individual (tot) (not sign.)	n 122 (36%)	n 43 (29%)
He/She (*p < 0.05)	n 41 (12%)	n 3 (2%)
Man/Woman (not sign.)	n 26 (8%)	n 13 (9%)
Position (not sign.)	n 55 (16%)	n 27 (18%)
Name (*p < 0.05)	n 6 (2%)	n 14 (9%)

- (17) *Upon arrival the lovely man on reception explained me the facilities of the room.*
(UK tourist; Amsterdam)
- (18) *Ben especially on arrival, giving us top tips on where to visit* (UK tourist; Amsterdam)
- (19) *Ci accoglie colui che si è dimostrato sempre pronto a rispondere alle nostre domande e richieste: Odyssea grande Odyssea!!! La sua professionalità è data anche dal fatto che di fronte al nostro inglese... parecchio "italiese" ...è riuscito ugualmente a capire e farsi capire.* (IT tourist; London)

[We are welcomed by he who showed us to be always ready to answer our questions and requests Odyssea great Odyssea!!! His professionalism is given also by the fact that given our English ... quite "Itanglish" ... he managed to understand and make himself understandable.]

4 Discussion

As language and communication are crucial in the tourism sector (De Carlos et al. 2019; Holmqvist et al. 2017), a positive touristic experience seems inseparable from an efficient and pleasant interaction between guests and service providers. Indeed, effective communication between consumers and service providers represents a core issue in hospitality encounters (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012; Wang et al. 2015). One way of exploring this issue from a discourse analytic perspective is to examine what tourists themselves report about staff–guest interactions.

Our study found that these type of metacommunicative comments constitute a recurrent feature of online hotel reviews – and especially of negative ones – occurring in nearly one third of the negative reviews. In contrast, their frequency is significantly lower in positive reviews. Indeed, when a service interaction unfolds in an unsatisfactory way, the reviewer seems to be more compelled to explicitly discuss this aspect in his/her review (Keymeulen and Goethals 2018).

We also found that negative comments about communication covered a relatively wide range of topics. We observed that reviewers not only commented on the communication itself (e.g. describing the manner something was communicated) but also, and with considerable frequency, they often discussed a *lack* of communication. A close reading of these instances revealed that there are specific communicative exchanges that are expected in a service interaction, such as being greeted by the staff, receiving an apology after a service failure, and receiving correct and punctual information. In these detailed reflections on communication, or the lack thereof, tourists point out what they believe to be appropriate

communicative behavior in the context of service interactions (Chan and Chandra-Sagaran 2019; Kang and Hyun 2012; Jung and Yoon 2011).

Furthermore, we also detected a relevant variation in how the staff is referred to in online reviews. Different degrees of personalization were observed, ranging from impersonal/underspecified forms of reference (e.g., passive constructions) to highly personalized ones, such as referring to the interlocutor by mentioning his/her first name. Several statistically significant differences were found when comparing these forms of address in reviews of different polarity. Negative comments revealed a statistically significant preference for underspecified forms of reference and the use of third-person pronouns (such as *they* or *he*/*she*), while positive comments showed an inclination towards more specified forms of address (e.g. name), often occurring with positively oriented adjectives describing the staff member (e.g. *charming receptionist/friendly owner*).

This tendency toward more personalized ways of representing the interlocutor in positive metacommunicative comments is linked to an appreciation of the communication experienced during the service encounter. Furthermore, using an individual's name in the context of giving praise related to their professional communication is clearly a face-enhancing strategy. In contrast, when the service interaction was unpleasant and disappointing, the use of underspecified constructions and pronouns seems to be preferred. Reviewers may be aware that some employers use online reviews to evaluate employees' performance, and it could be the case that even the most unhappy of reviewers may not want the individual in question to face negative employment consequences for their poor service performance, so they do not refer to them by name.

Finally, by exploiting the multilingual design of our corpus, we were able to further explore similarities and differences among the different groups of review writers. We found that, overall, the texts written by British reviews contained more metacommunicative comments compared to those written by Italian or Dutch reviewers. By taking a closer look at the actual examples in each category, we found that British reviewers placed more emphasis on getting complete, correct and timely information than the other two groups of reviewers. The higher occurrence of such instances in British reviews may be seen as a characteristic of a "low-context" culture (Hall 1976), whose members show a preference for highly explicit information. We also found that Dutch reviews included a higher frequency of negative comments related to language competence, and often included complaints about the low level of knowledge of foreign languages by the hotel staff, in particular criticizing the English proficiency of the hotel staff in Rome, but also complaining about the low level of Dutch, the local language, among hotel staff in Amsterdam.

A common cross-linguistic concern, however, is represented by the wish and appreciation of the reviewers to be able to speak their mother tongue in a service interaction. In particular, in the case of Italian and Dutch, service interactions in their mother tongue in hotels abroad were received as a welcome and unexpected surprise. This result corroborates previous research (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012; Mariani et al. 2019) indicating that the option to use one's mother tongue in a service interaction represents a positive factor in the tourist experience and increases the level of guest satisfaction.

5 Conclusions

In this study, we investigated how tourists represent their service encounter interactions in a corpus of 1800 hotel reviews posted on TripAdvisor. One of the main goals of the study was to identify what these digital metacommunicative practices reveal about communicative norms and expectations among groups of reviewers writing in three different languages.

As a general conclusion, the data represents a powerful reminder to service providers that whatever is *said* or *done* during a face-to-face service interaction can be easily reported online. Most metacommunicative reports occur in negative contexts, and may thus contribute to a negative reputation of the hotel, although it is also true that they occur in one out of six positive reviews. Therefore further training in ways that staff might improve service interactions skills is recommended for businesses who wish to improve the service quality provided to their guests, avoid negative word-of-mouth and/or favor positive recommendations.

Moreover, the increasingly globalized character of the tourism industry creates new challenges, with increasing interactions between guests and staff members from diverse linguistic backgrounds and with varying sets of values, business practices, and communication styles (Zakaria 2017). Thus, hotels may need to rethink their organizational values, practices and procedures, especially when addressing service encounters, in order to successfully accommodate their guests in this respect. To the extent possible, our findings call for hotels to hire staff members who are multilingual and who will be able to accommodate guests in their linguistic preferences, including services in the local language for domestic clients.

In addition, this study contributes to scholarship on metacommunication in several ways. First, it extends the study of metacommunicative practices in one important digital genre: online travel reviews. Like previous research on metacommunication in digital contexts, we have identified metacommunicative practices that are specific to the goals of this genre, which center on evaluation and

assessment of a service experience. Building on previous studies that have touched on different forms of metadiscourse in hotel reviews (Keymeulen and Goethals 2018; Goethals 2016; Vásquez 2012, 2014), we have focused more specifically on metacommunication related to guest-staff interactions, and we have developed a taxonomy that may be useful for researchers interested in pursuing this topic in the future. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this research represents one of the first studies analyzing metacommunication from a cross-linguistic perspective. Shedding light on some possible differences in communicative norms and expectations among reviewers writing in three different European languages, our findings suggest that tourists from different linguacultural backgrounds may place different emphasis on different kinds of communicative behavior. Third, our results provide a deeper understanding of the importance of communication in service encounters. We believe that the results of this study could represent a useful source of information for the hospitality industry, with potential to help improve hotel service encounters and consequently contribute to higher levels of tourists' satisfaction.

Our study offers an in-depth exploration of tourists' expectations, perceptions and evaluations of service encounter interactions. Future research could test how these customers' reflections on communication might affect their future purchase behavior (e.g. propensity to return to the hotel) (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012). Further, webcare research represents another area which could benefit from a more thorough consideration of these types of metacommunicative comments. Considering that tourists might interpret unpleasant, inefficient or unsatisfactory hotel-guest interactions as a service failure (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist 2014), future research might examine how service providers can recover such failures and efficiently address these complaints both in their online responses (Holmqvist et al. 2017) and in their actual work practice.

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