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## CHAPTER 11

### **Interpersonal work in service encounters on Mercado Libre Argentina: A comparison between buyer and vendor patterns across two market domains**

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This paper looks at interpersonal work in vendor-buyer interactions on *Mercado Libre Argentina*, an online marketplace. It examines how users address (or not) interpersonal aspects of the service encounter across two distinct market domains: pets and toys. Based on a corpus of 145 interactions (290 individual posts), selected at random from these two domains, it focuses on the realization of two core elements of the transaction: openings and closings. In addition, it looks at how both vendors and buyers employ forms of address as a resource for interpersonal communication. Overall, there were more similarities than differences in the behavior patterns of users across the two domains. For example, all users overwhelmingly favored informal address. However, some clear distinctions between buyers and vendors could be discerned, particularly, how each user group structured their posts: buyers were far less restricted by formal convention than vendors, often omitting greetings and/or leave-takings. Some data, nonetheless, display that users are unsure of how to approach their online interactions as they use a mixture of politeness strategies.

#### **1. Introduction**

Interpersonal work, characterized here as work aimed at defining or changing the dynamics of *rapport* between interactants, has been extensively studied in face-to-face commercial service encounters (SEs) with respect to English and other languages, albeit not necessarily

under this guise (cf. Bailey, 1997; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006; Kong, 1998; Ryoo, 2007; Traverso, 2001). In relation to Spanish, initial studies can be traced back to the 1990s (cf. Placencia, 1998) and early 2000s (see, e.g. Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2004; Placencia, 2001, 2004; Rigatuso, 2000) (see Félix-Brasdefer, 2015, for an overview). Currently, as reflected in the present volume, there is a growing body of work dealing with different situational contexts and varieties of Spanish. Also, in the past few years, work in this area has been extended to virtual environments (see, e.g. Placencia, 2015, 2016; 2019; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Merino Hernández and Placencia & García, this volume).

The current study aims to contribute to this growing body of research through examination of service encounter interactions on an e-commerce context—*Mercado Libre Argentina* (MLA)—which, as far as we know, has not received any attention to date.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we explore how both vendors and buyers on MLA address (or not) interpersonal aspects of the service encounter, and thus, whether they appear to pay greater or lesser attention to the person rather than the task. The focus is on openings and closings and the use of address forms as a resource for interpersonal communication. By examining SE interactions relating to two market domains—pets and toys—, the study also looks at possible variation in interpersonal work according to domain.

*Mercado Libre* (ML) is at present the largest online marketplace in Latin America (cf. IHA, 2017), with bases in 19 countries. The site facilitates both direct purchases and online auctions. Buyers and vendors communicate via anonymous, online message boards before carrying out a purchase: buyers post questions about the product they are interested in which vendors can then respond to. Users are not allowed to exchange personal information. The ML environment shares some characteristics with real world environments, for instance, like an open-air marketplace, it is “without walls”: buyers can see the wares of many vendors simultaneously. However, there are key features that make it unlike any physical context: the

lack of co-presence, and related to this, the lack of physical cues. This means that buyers and sellers on ML have few or no clues as to their interlocutors' identity and cannot gauge one another's body language. These factors, together with features of the situational context, have been shown to influence both the organizational structure of encounters (cf. Lamoreaux, 1989; Ventola, 1987) and content (cf. Kong, 1998; Mc Carthy, 2000). The special qualities of ML as an anonymous, virtual marketplace, thus make it an interesting new context of study.

In what follows, we provide some background to the study of SEs and the theoretical framework employed, including a consideration of the distinction between transactional and interactional talk and interpersonal work, how the examination of interactional talk is approached as well as a review of the relevant literature (Section 2). We then present the data collection methodology (Section 3), followed by our data analysis and findings (Section 4). We conclude the chapter with a summary and discussion (Section 5).

## **2. Background**

### 2.1 Transactional versus interactional talk

In general, most talk within the context of a SEs is focused upon the transaction under negotiation—so called transactional or task-focused talk such as buyer requests and the negotiation of payment (cf. Hasan, 1985; Lamoreaux, 1989; Ventola, 1987). Alongside transactional talk, participants will also often indulge in more socially oriented, interactional or person-focused talk (cf. Aston, 1988). These two types of talk are often interlinked: transactional talk can contain interactional elements while interactional talk can often be used to attain transactional goals (cf. Holmes, 2000). Recognizing the false dichotomy between transactional and interactional talk, our term, *interpersonal work*<sup>2</sup>, refers to any element of the SE aimed at changing the dynamic or *rapport* between participants, for better or worse.

Interactional talk in SE's has been studied, under many guises, by numerous authors and there are several important observations from this body of work that need to be mentioned here. For instance, the majority of interactional talk in SE's uses a small repertoire of standard phrases restricted mainly to greeting and leave-taking sequences (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006; Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2004; Placencia, 2005). In addition the amount of interactional talk deemed necessary or appropriate is found to be highly dependant on several social and situational factors including the type of establishment and the level of acquaintance between participants: a hair-dresser's salon (cf. Mc Carthy, 2000; Placencia, 2007) provides more opportunity for non-transactional talk than a supermarket checkout (Kuiper & Flindall, 2000) while strong community ties between participants allow for talk to become more creative, for example, involving wordplay and other banter (as in Placencia's, 2004, *tiendas de barrio* 'corner shops'). Cultural preferences also determine appropriateness: thanking is expected in France but would be considered rude in Vietnam (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006). Moreover, the evolution of a particular SE can present new opportunities for small talk: to smooth over potential misunderstandings arising from issues such as transaction failures (Aston, 1988) or language barriers (Solon, 2013), or to mitigate a face-threatening act such as a refusal (see Kaiser, this volume).

The extent to which interactional talk in SEs extends to virtual environments is something that has received very little attention to date (cf. Placencia, 2015, 2016). It is this that we explore in this chapter in the context of MLA, as previously indicated.

## 2.2 Analyzing interpersonal work

Given the definition of interpersonal work adopted in the present study as any element of the SE aimed at changing the dynamic or rapport between participants (Section 2.1), a natural way to analyze this kind of work is with reference to Spencer-Oatey's (2000) *domains of*

*rapport management*: illocutionary, discourse, stylistic, participation and non-verbal. In the present study we focus on the *discourse* domain (i.e., how talk is organized and sequenced) by looking at person-focused elements in user's openings and closings, and the stylistic domain (e.g. choice of tone and genre appropriate address forms) by examining buyers and vendors' use of pronominal and nominal address forms. The illocutionary domain, i.e., the study of speech act realization is the subject of a separate article concerning buyer requests. Due to the medium, the other domains were not pertinent.<sup>3</sup>

In order to examine the selected domains of rapport management, we draw on ideas from studies on digitally mediated discourse such as Locher (2006) and Arendholz (2013). We will look at whether different user groups tend towards task or person focus (Fant, 1995) and analyze any person-focused strategies employed by users in terms of Scollon and Scollon's (2001) distinction between solidarity (informal strategies fostering closeness) and deference (formal strategies creating distance) politeness. Using observations concerning how interactants' perception of risk (Laver, 1981) and their level of intimacy affects the amount of interpersonal work they will engage in, we hope to uncover whether buyers and sellers in the selected domains see their online interactions as primarily familiar or formal. Specifically, the following are the research questions that we address:

RQ1: Do users employ opening and closing strategies? If yes, which opening and closing strategies are commonly employed? What forms of address are used, if any?

RQ2: Do the preferred strategies reflect person or task orientation? Among the strategies displaying person focus, can a preference for either solidarity or deference be observed?

RQ3: Do buyers and vendors have different preferences, and does it depend on market domain; what does this say about how the different user groups perceive their online relationships?

### 2.2.1 The discourse domain

Among Hispanists, relevant studies concerning opening and closing sequences in face-to-face SE's include, amongst others, Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) and Placencia (2004, 2005). Some of this work highlights regional differences between groups of Spanish speakers with respect to their relatively stronger focus on the person or the task (Fant, 1995), and their preferences for solidarity or deference politeness strategies (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Placencia's (2004) study of non-transactional talk in corner shops in Quito found that most greetings and leave-takings involved a small number of formulaic routines including conventional exchanges such as *how-are-you* inquiries and questions concerning family. However, the occasional appearance of joking language like word-play, provides some evidence that Quiteños value these service interactions on a purely social level.

The way in which interpersonal work reflects speakers' perceptions of the interaction is explored by both Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) who looked at SE in Quito and Montevideo in the context of shops selling clothes and accessories, and Placencia (2005) who compared Quiteños with Madrileños in corner shop interactions (see also Placencia's, 1998, study on interactions in reception counters in public hospitals in Quito and Madrid). Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) looked at how speakers employed solidarity (involvement) and deference (distance-creating/maintaining) strategies and found that the two groups appeared to have very different perceptions of SEs in the context examined. In terms of openings, for example, Quiteños were more likely to use formal greetings such as *buenos días* 'good morning' where Montevideans would use the familiar *hola* 'hello'. Quiteño

openings also tended to be longer and more elaborate (comprising more turns) than their closing sequences, a trend that was reversed for the Montevideans. The authors link these contrasting trends on the one hand, to the Quiteño participants' desire to appear deferential and display respectful distance throughout the encounter and, on the other, to the Montevidean participants' aim to build solidarity and maintain closeness during their encounters.

In relation to Fant's (1995) person- vs. task focus distinction, Placencia's (2005) results showed that Madrileños had a high degree of task focus—engaging in no more than cursory greetings, frequently omitting leave-takings and indulging in very little small talk. Quiteños, in contrast, were more person focused which manifested as elaborate interpersonal work: extended greetings and leave-takings or more extended small talk sequences. Madrileños were also more informal in their greeting sequences than Quiteños. To explain these findings, Placencia (2005) cites Wolfson's (1988) ideas concerning how perceptions of familiarity and distance affect the amount of interpersonal work speakers deem necessary. Wolfson observes that where either intimacy or distance exist speakers see little need for interpersonal work; on the other hand, where there is neither much intimacy nor distance (what Wolfson terms *bulge relationships*), they invest in more interpersonal work. Thus, Placencia (2005) concludes that the task focus of Madrileños suggests that they see service encounter interactions as close or familiar while Quiteños, in contrast, seem to see them as part of the bulge as defined by Wolfson (1988). Seen from this perspective, the Montevideans in Márquez Reiter and Placencia's (2004) corpus appear closest to Madrileños in terms of how they see their SEs.

### 2.2.2 The stylistic domain

Within the genre of SEs, this domain has received the least attention of the two studied here (but see e.g. Murillo's and Michno's studies in this volume). Speakers' choice of address form is often discussed in speech act studies in the context of their use as either solidarity or deference (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) or positive or negative (Brown & Levinson, 1987 [1978]) politeness strategies. There are, however, studies which consider these elements in their own right. Of relevance here, these include (among others) Hasbún Hasbún's (2003) work in Costa Rica; Placencia (2005) in Quito, Ecuador and Madrid, Spain; Placencia (2015) on ML Ecuador; and Rigatuso (2008) in Bahía Blanca, Argentina.

Users' orientation to task or person focus (Fant, 1995) surfaces in some of these studies. For instance, in Placencia (2005), Quiteño shopkeepers and customers, in contrast with their Madrileño counterparts, appeared to use a larger number and range of affiliative nominal forms, thus displaying a stronger person focus than Madrileños. Differences in pronominal address use also emerge in this study, with Madrileños preferring the informal *tú*, and Quiteños, the formal *usted* (see also Placencia, 1998; Schneider & Placencia, 2017, and Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2004).

Placencia's (2015) work on MLE is especially relevant to the present study. Data taken from the pets' domain showed users' overall preference for formal *usted* but a high incidence of familiar *tú*. In addition, nominal address was rare, with affiliative terms such as *amigo* 'friend' being favored above respectful terms such as *señor/a* 'Mr/Mrs' (see also Placencia & García in this volume). This contradicts face-to-face studies where formal, respectful address predominated (cf. Placencia, 1998, 2004). The author links this divergence to the influence of social media characterized by informality, and to how the anonymity of the medium encourages more egalitarian and informal service relationships. In contrast, face-

to-face encounters appear to be more reflective of the traditionally hierarchical Ecuadorian society where the perceived lowly status of shopkeepers requires formality and distance.

### **3. Method**

The corpus for the present study was collected directly from the MLA site (<https://www.mercadolibre.com.ar/>) in 2016. This site is a public forum. Thus, in accordance with *Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR)* guidelines, no permission was required (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). However, identity markers such as pseudonyms were replaced to protect users' privacy. The internet is an almost inexhaustible source of natural data. As such, the limitation for the researcher is the manageability of the sample size (cf. Hine, 2009). This corpus was limited to 145 interactions (question/answer pairs) with the view to expanding the study later.

ML comprises numerous domains selling different types of products and services. Bearing in mind how the characteristics of different environments affect the interpersonal work observed in the face-to-face context, two product domains were surveyed: pets and toys. The domains were selected as very distinct types of product: a live animal requiring care and attention before and after purchase and a mass-produced inanimate object. It was thought that perhaps, in contrast to toy buyers, pet breeders and their customers might be more likely to have ongoing relationships based on the need for high levels of trust and maintaining a good reputation for animal welfare.

The exchanges examined in this study were selected using a random number generator to identify 15 vendors<sup>4</sup> from each domain. Due to the small size of the corpus the number of exchanges taken from any one vendor's page was limited to the first 10 in the thread to avoid the sample being dominated by one user's style. Question/answer (q/a) pairs where one part had been removed (by the site administrators) were discarded leaving a corpus

of 145 q/a pairs—75 from toys and 70 from pets. The majority of buyer-seller interactions in the corpus comprised one q/a pair. While it would be interesting to study the dynamics of multiple-turn interactions, for the purposes of this study, and, considering the rarity of such interactions, each q/a pair was analyzed as a separate interaction.

#### **4. Data analysis and results**

##### 4.1 The discourse domain

The first step was to look at how users structured their posts: specifically, whether they use openings (greetings or other alerters<sup>4</sup>) and closings (thanks or explicit leave-taking formulae). The particular strategies employed were examined next. For the purpose of comparison, the corpus was divided into four user groups: Toys Buyers (TB), Toys Vendors (TV), Pets Buyers (PB) and Pets Vendors (PV).

User habits were analyzed and categorized as to whether they employed only an opening (O), only a closing (C), both (O+C), or whether they produced bare requests/responses without openings or closings (BR). As Figure 1 shows, most users structured their posts with both an opening and a closing.

Please insert Figure 1 here

The exception was PBs who used O more frequently (41%; 29/70) than O+C (30%; 21/70). Using C was uncommon except in the case of PVs where it was the second most common structure (although still a small percentage compared to the use of both: 21%; 15/70 as opposed to 50%; 35/70). With the exception of TVs, where the phenomenon was never seen, BR was common: 20% (14/70) and 25% (19/75) for buyers of pets and toys, respectively, and, 17% (12/70) for PVs.

In face-to-face commercial encounters, opening and closing remarks are common and expected, although their incidence may depend on several factors, for instance, if the shop is busy during certain times of the day. Their omission has been observed in some marketplace SEs (cf. Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; 2015; Solon, 2013) and, as suggested in the introduction, ML shares some features with open-air service environments. In addition, the posts themselves fulfil the attention-grabbing functions of a greeting, and, as exchanges are asynchronous, with users logging on and off the site, they are open-ended and may be re-visited at any time; thus, they are never officially closed. However, what this behavior suggests about users' perceptions of their online relations is a point of debate. It shows a disregard for what might be considered traditional interactional practices within SEs and contradicts findings based on face-to-face encounters where clients cited proper greetings as a feature that made encounters polite (cf. Ferrer, 2003; Julián, 2010). Yet, within the MLA environment, its ubiquity suggests that it is or has become accepted as appropriate.

Considering the data set as a whole, all users seem to prefer a degree of routine: 58% (167/290) of all users structured their posts with O+C. This suggests that all users perceived at least a moderate level of risk in their ML interactions. However, three of the four user groups (i.e., all except TV) also contained a sizeable minority of users who disregarded conversational routine entirely using BR. Taking Laver's (1981) observation that "maximum routine reflects maximum risk"(p. 290), the four user groups in this study can be ranked according to their risk perception based on their adherence, or not, to conventional conversational routines, as represented in Figure 2.

Please insert Figure 2 here.

The *risk perception scale* goes from 0 (low risk perception) to 100 (high risk perception). If all participants in a user group employed the format of O+C (maximum routine) the group would score 100. If, however, a user group employed only BR (minimum routine) that group would score 0. On this scale, TVs appear to see most risk scoring over 90 while PB's see the least risk.

Tables 1 and 2 show users' opening and closing strategies, respectively, the strategies identified were categorized as formal, semi-formal or informal (Placencia, 1997). Within each category they have been arranged to reflect a tendency to deference or solidarity. The omission of openings and closings has been placed outside this scale and will be discussed later.

**Table 1.** User openings

		Strategies	Buyers		Vendors		Total
			Pets	Toys	Pets	Toys	
Formal	Deference	<i>Buenas tardes</i> 'good afternoon' and variations <i>Examples in both domains</i>	2 (3%)	5 (7%)	4 (6%)	2 (3%)	13 (4%)
		<i>Gracias</i> 'thank you' (+ additional phrase) E.g. <i>Gracias por consultar.</i> 'Thanks for consulting.' PV	2 (3%)	0	1 (1%)	0	3 (1%)
Semi-Formal	Deference	<i>Hola buenos días</i> 'Hello good morning' and variations <i>Examples in both domains</i>	7 (10%)	0	0	12 (16%)	19 (7%)
Informal	Solidarity	<i>Hola</i> 'hello' + introduction; how-are-you inquiry; or other person focused phrase E.g. <i>Hola q tal [...]</i> 'Hello how're you [...]' PB	2 (3%)	4 (5%)	2 (3%)	0	8 (3%)
		Other (preparators, explanations, compliments) E.g. <i>Te compre recién.</i> 'I bought from you recently.' TB	2 (3%)	4 (5%)	0	1 (1%)	7 (2%)
		<i>Hola</i> 'hello'	30 (43%)	37 (49%)	29 (41%)	52 (69%)	148 (51%)

	<i>Examples in both domains</i>					
	Use of Nominal Address <i>Perfecto M_____, 'Perfect M_____,'</i> PB	3 (4%)	0	6 (9%)	3 (4%)	12 (4%)
	<b>No Opening</b>	22 (31%)	25 (33%)	28 (40%)	5 (7%)	80 (28%)

Table 1 shows that very few users felt it appropriate to employ formal greetings such as *buenos días* 'good morning' tending to use the familiar *hola* 'hello'. In fact, there were 175 instances of *hola* 'hello' throughout the corpus compared to only 35 instances of any other opening. The use of *hola* 'hello' on its own, was the most popular opening for all user groups (51% (148/290) across the entire corpus). This informality places the users of MLA closer to the Montevideans and Madrileños of Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) and Placencia (2005), respectively.

There were also numerous instances of what could be termed *enhanced greetings* where *hola* 'hello' appeared in conjunction with a formal greeting or accompanied by some other phrase such as an introduction as in (1), or a how-are-you inquiry:<sup>6</sup>

(1) *Caniche mini* 'mini Poodle'

PB19 *Hola. Me llamo Sandra y soy de Lanus. estamos buscando una hembra blanca [...]*<sup>7</sup>

'Hello. I'm called Sandra and I'm from Lanus, we are looking for a white female<sup>Dim</sup> [...]

PV19 *Hola Sandra. Recién hablamos por TE mañana te mando las fotos [...].*

'Hello Sandra. We spoke recently on TE tomorrow I'll send you<sup>T8</sup> the photos [...]

These enhanced greetings show a greater attention to the person than *hola* ‘hello’ alone and are also more elaborate. Indeed, these greetings achieve what might happen in a face-to-face interaction over many turns in a medium which does not lend itself to “normal” turn-taking. In this way, this type of strategy is closer to those favored by the Quiteño speakers of Márquez-Reiter and Placencia (2004). Thus, these strategies have been placed further towards the deference end of the spectrum of greetings than those that used *hola* ‘hello’ alone.

The omission of openings as in (2) was the second most favoured strategy for all user groups except TVs for whom it was the enhanced greeting of *hola* ‘hello’+ formal greeting. Once again, TVs distinguish themselves from the other user groups by appearing to see more risk in these interactions and therefore demonstrating more deference and attention to person.

(2) *Cachorros Dachshund* ‘Dachshund puppies’

PB37 *de donde son?*

‘where are they from?’

PV37 *De Nuñez, sdos<sup>9</sup>!*

‘From Nuñez, RX!’

Referring to Table 2, in terms of closings, buyers and vendors show preferences for quite distinct strategies. As can be seen, in both domains the most popular choices for buyers were either to omit any form of explicit closing formula or to use *gracias* ‘thanks’. Together, these options accounted for nearly all instances (92% or 64/70) pets and 81% or 61/75) toys). For PBs no explicit closing was twice as popular as thanking (63%; 44/70), compared to 29%; 20/70), while TBs showed almost equal preference for each, with thanking being slightly more favored (36%; 27/75, compared to 45%; 34/75).

**Table 2.** User closings

		Strategies	Buyers		Vendors		Total
			Pets	Toys	Pets	Toys	
Formal	Solidarity ↑ Deference	Sign off formula or “Signature” <i>See example (3)</i>	1 (1%)	0	11 (16%)	19 (25%)	31 (11%)
		<i>Gracias</i> ‘Thanks/Thank you’ or <i>Muchas gracias</i> ‘Many thanks’ <i>Examples in both domains</i>	20 (29%)	34 (45%)	0	0	54 (19%)
Semi-Formal		Combination of <i>Gracias</i> ‘Thanks/Thank you’ + <i>Saludos</i> ‘Regards’ (Literally, ‘Greetings’) E.g. <i>Gracias saludos!</i> ‘Thanks regards!’ PB	1 (1%)	5 (7%)	1 (1%)	0	7 (2%)
		<i>Saludos</i> ‘Regards’ <i>Examples in both domains</i>	2 (3%)	3 (4%)	18 (26%)	35 (47%)	58 (20%)
		Informal	<i>Gracias</i> or <i>Saludos</i> + name or person- focused phrase <i>Muchas gracias, C.</i> ‘Many thanks, C.’ TB	0	3 (4%)	15 (20%)	0
Other affiliative moves: e.g. compliments; name only <i>Se ve maravillosa</i> ‘It looks great’ TB			0	3 (4%)	4 (6%)	0	7 (2%)
Abbreviated leave taking <i>Examples in both domains:</i> E.g. <i>SlDs</i> ‘RX; <i>Gcs</i> ‘THX’			2 (3%)	0	1 (1%)	19 (25%)	22 (8%)
		<b>No Closing</b>	44 (63%)	27 (36%)	20 (29%)	2 (3%)	93 (32%)

Amongst vendors the picture was a little different. The most popular option for PVs, as can also be seen in Table 2, was no leave-taking (29%; 20/70), closely followed by the semi-formal option of *saludos* ‘regards’ (26%; 18/70). It was also common for these users to personalize their leave-taking by signing off with their name (20%; 15/70). TVs on the other hand overwhelmingly favoured *saludos* ‘regards’ (47%; 35/75) and strikingly, only omitted leave-taking in 3% (2/75) of cases. Other popular forms of leave-taking amongst this group included two forms which define the extremes of a deference-solidarity scale. At the

deference end, we identified what might be termed a ‘sign off’ formula expressing promises of further assistance, formulated in very formal language:

(3) *Casa de muñecas* ‘dolls’ house’

TV4 *Muchas gracias por su pregunta e interés en nuestro producto. Esperamos su oferta. Nuevamente gracias.*

‘Many thanks for your<sup>V</sup> question and interest in our product. We await your offer. Thanks once again.’

At the solidarity end, taking full advantage of the CMD environment, we found the use of abbreviated forms, particularly *slds* ‘RX’ for *saludos* ‘regards’ and *gcs* ‘THX’ for *gracias* ‘thanks’ (NetLingo, 2018).

The use of deferential formulae was the fourth most common strategy amongst PVs. However, the use of abbreviated forms only appeared in 1% (1/70) of cases amongst these vendors and was similarly rare amongst buyers from both domains. It is perhaps interesting to note that the presence of formal sign-offs amongst vendors means that, in contrast to openings, there was much more formality at the end of posts. It is as though their participation frame (cf. Bateson, 1972) changed within the same post from ‘we are friends’ to ‘we are in a business transaction’.

Considering both openings and closings, 76% (222/290) of all instances across both domains are informal. Buyers were most informal (31%; 90/290) and vendors, the least informal (26%; 76/290). All in all, the strategies used to open and close posts suggest that MLA users in the corpus examined see these interactions as predominantly informal.

Returning to the phenomenon of opening/closing omission, this is certainly a facet of informality and must also be considered appropriate behavior for this environment (60% of

all posts; 173/290). It is possible to conclude that it is also a solidarity indicator (within the ML environment), perhaps between users who are familiar with the platform. In many ways, it is simply a way of shortening the opening sequence to its natural limit and, like the perfunctory openings observed within Márquez Reiter and Placencia's (2004) Montevidean SEs, it may reflect the "... the 'confidence' customers have that their request for service will be attended to" in that they believe that "salespersons are there to provide a service for customers" (p. 134). Following from this, it suggests a high degree of task focus as opposed to person focus.

Comparing these results to face-to-face studies is difficult and in fact there is only one study, namely, Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004), referred to above, that is directly relevant. Certain features such as the formulaic sign offs of PVs are paralleled by the narrow repertoire of opening routines observed amongst Quiteño shopkeepers showing a desire to maintain respectful distance. Other features such as the omission of openings and closings have no parallel and indeed, while it is clearly accepted on MLA, it may be considered inappropriate in many face-to-face contexts. Overall, the use of informal language and a level of willingness to tolerate deviation from normal conversational routines suggests that MLA users, based on the corpus examined, see their SEs as characterized by familiarity and low social risk. In this respect MLA users appear to be closest in their perception of the SE to those observed amongst the Montevideans in Márquez Reiter and Placencia's (2004) study. This is not entirely unexpected considering other similarities between the Spanish spoken in Uruguay and Argentina—in the stylistic domain, for example—, as shall be discussed in the next section.

## 4.2 The stylistic domain

For this domain, openings, main body (request or response) and closings were analyzed separately for instances of address form. The following categories were identified

- 1) familiar pronominal T-form (*vos* or *tú*. with only X instances of the latter);
- 2) formal pronominal V-form (*usted*);
- 3) nominal forms (titles such as *señor/a* ‘Mr, Mrs’, names/username or affiliative terms such as *amigo* ‘friend’)
- 4) address avoidance (Ø address)
- 5) impersonal address: *se* + third person singular or plural (for example: *se puede* ‘can one’) and third person plural on its own (e.g. *venden* ‘do you [plural] sell’)

As can be seen in Figure 3, address avoidance was the most popular strategy within the corpus (73%; 633/870). Openings and closings were almost exclusively delivered without any address form and vendors also avoided address in their responses (for PVs it was the most common, while for TVs it was the second most common strategy).

Please insert Figure 3 here

Pronominal address was the second most frequently used address form (22%; 192/870). Its use was mostly confined to the main body of requests or responses (see Figure 3), although a few instances were also found in openings and closings amongst all groups except TVs where it was used exclusively in responses. It should be noted that within the corpus as a whole, *vos* was used almost exclusively with only two instances of *tú* being recorded. This is in line with the reported widespread use of *voseo* in face-to-face interaction

in the River Plate area (cf. Carricaburo, 1997; MacGregor, 2011). In relation to face-to-face SEs, this use is documented, for example, by Rigatuso (2000).

Impersonal address was used with sufficient frequency (4%; 36/870) to merit its inclusion as a separate category. This form of address was most common amongst both pets and toys buyers. Instances of third person plural as *venden* ‘do you [plural] sell’ as in (4) were counted within this category as a variation on impersonal address. By addressing the vendor in the third person plural, as if there were several recipients, the buyer in (4) has essentially de-personalized the request. However, it may reflect a sense that users are addressing an organization rather than an individual when they are buying online.

(4) *Casa de muñecas* ‘dolls’ house’

TB36 *HOLA VENDEN EL SHOPPING DE PIN Y PON?*

‘HELLO DO YOU [plural] SELL THE PIN AND PON SHOPPING SET?’

Nominal address forms were rare and appeared exclusively in openings within the pets domain (see Figure 3). Forms observed included usernames, and, occasionally, names. This contrasts with Placencia’s (2015) findings on ML Ecuador (MLE) where a variety of nominal forms were employed. In fact, the users of MLE in Placencia’s study seemed to risk appearing inappropriately over-friendly through their choice of colloquial terms despite the lack of familiarity between participants (p. 60).

Formal pronominal address was also infrequent except where it appears in TVs’ formal sign-off (see previous section). This represents an asymmetry within the toys domain between buyers, who were never observed to use formal address, and vendors. This

asymmetry is not present in the pets domain where buyers and vendors used formal address equally infrequently (see Figure 3).

Previous studies note such asymmetries in address usage where power differentials exist—a younger sales assistant will use *usted* towards an older client (cf. Ferrer, 2003; Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2004). In our corpus then, it appears that, uniquely within the toys domain, users perceive a power difference in favor of buyers.

Generally, users were consistent in their choice of address throughout their posts. There were, however, some noteworthy exceptions. For example, the use of formal pronominal address in vendor closings did not always correlate with their use within the main body of responses (Figure 3). Of the eight recorded uses of formal address in closings, five vendors used familiar address within the main body. Instances of this mixing of address forms can be seen in (5).

(5) *Casa de muñecas* ‘dolls’ house’

TV29 *Hola, estamos muy cerca de la av triunvirato, mas datos precisos no me permiten dar, una vez ofertado te pasamos los datos exactos y se lo separamos a su nombre, slds*

‘Hello, we are very close to triunvirato avenue, I can’t give you more specific details they don’t allow me to give them, once an offer’s been made we will give you<sup>T</sup> the exact details and we’ll put the item aside under your<sup>V</sup> name, RX’

Here the vendor uses both familiar and formal address within the same post. This may not indicate a particular strategy as such, instead displaying users’ uncertainty as to how to

address one another—the mixture of anonymity and expectations of informality leading users to mix deference (formal address) and solidarity (familiar address) strategies.

Example (6) shows another instance where a user alters the form of address between two posts in the same conversation:

(6) *Casa de muñecas* ‘dolls’ house’

TB10 *cuanto me sale el envio hasta moron. Gratis*

‘How much will postage to moron cost me. Free delivery [or ‘Thanks’, misspelling]’

TV10 *Hola MONDY114, te comento si no estas muy apurada para la compra y si puedes esperar uno 10 a 12 días [...]*

‘Hello MONDY114, I can tell you<sup>T</sup> that if you<sup>T</sup> are not in a hurry to buy and can wait about 10-12 days [...].’

TB10 *muchas gracias espero entonces para ofertar gracias*

‘many thanks I will wait before offering.’

TV10 *Si quiere puede ofertar, nos ponemos de acuerdo en todo y ya podemos arreglar el día de entrega para que usted la tenga ese día [...].*

‘If you<sup>V</sup> want to you can make an offer, we’ll come to an agreement on everything and then we can fix a day to deliver so that you<sup>V</sup> can have it that day [...].’

Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) observed several instances of speakers in their Montevidean corpus beginning their conversations using formal address then opting for familiar address later. The authors describe a process of negotiation in which the relationship between interactants evolves, from formal to familiar.

In our corpus however, the change of style is from familiar to formal thus it requires a different explanation. In (6), the second communication from the vendor involves a prompt to the buyer to make an offer (underlined). It is possible that this prompting might be perceived negatively and so the choice of formal address in this case may reflect a need to offset this face-threat.

## **5. Conclusions**

Within the MLA corpus examined, the largest differences appeared between buyers and vendors rather than between users of the two market domains studied. Concerning the structure of interactions, while vendors were found to more consistently include an interaction opening and a closing in their posts, a substantial proportion of buyers were found to produce bare request/responses, without an opening or a closing. TVs were most likely to use both openings and closings while PBs were the least likely to use this format showing that the former group had the greatest concern for interpersonal work.

The types of openings and closings used were predominantly informal. The exception to this was seen amongst TV's who sometimes included elaborate, formal closings. The prevalence of informality provides further evidence that users see these interactions as familiar encounters requiring little interpersonal work. Buyers and vendors distinguish themselves once again with vendors tending to be more person focused than buyers.

Familiar address was common amongst buyers and vendors in keeping with the generally informal style of users on MLA. This follows trends observed in Argentinean Spanish where formal address forms are increasingly rare in face-to-face encounters (Rigatuso, 2000).

Address avoidance was another significant feature in this corpus. Openings and closings were almost entirely devoid of address forms and, in this context, we would contend

that it represents a definite strategy choice, most probably another indicator of users' uncertainty about appropriate address due to the newness of the medium for some and/or lack of face-to-face cues. Vendor responses were also most commonly delivered without any form of address but here we must strike a note of caution due to the nature of the interactions, with yes/no questions, for example, just requiring an affirmative or a negative answer (cf. Placencia, 2015).

As a group, the users in this corpus are predominantly task focused, making only minimal efforts with regards to interpersonal work. This being the case, comparing buyers with vendors, the latter showed slightly more person focus. In contrast to buyers, vendors were more likely to adhere to what might be termed a traditionally polite format in their posts by including openings and closings. This suggests a greater perception of risk in the interaction possibly reflecting their greater personal investment in the service encounter. This asymmetry between buyers and vendors may be explained considering that vendors need to maintain a good reputation to encourage purchases. They are perhaps anticipating future encounters (Kong, 1998) and have most to lose if they come across as disrespectful or indeed overfriendly.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some studies exist on other subsidiaries of Mercado Libre, for example Placencia's (2015, 2016) work on ML Ecuador (MLE); see also Placencia & García in this volume on MLE and ML Venezuela.
- <sup>2</sup> This concept is allied to *relational work*: “the ‘work’ individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others” (Locher, 2006, p. x), and Spencer-Oatey's (2000) *rappport management*, defined as the use of language to “construct, maintain and/or threaten social relationships” (p. 12). Our use of the term interpersonal work, however, reflects how we see this work in the context of *interpersonal pragmatics*, rather than as, say, a politeness study (see Haugh, Kádár, & Mills, 2013, for a discussion).
- <sup>3</sup> The use of emoticons might be considered as an online replacement for gesturing in some contexts; likewise, non-standard spellings such as what Androutsopoulos (2000) refers to as prosodic spellings (e.g. the use of multiple exclamation marks for intensification) may replace tone of voice and volume (see also Yus, 2010, amongst others). However, there were few recorded uses of these devices in the corpus examined (see Section 2.2.2).
- <sup>4</sup> See Placencia (2015) for an alternative procedure.
- <sup>5</sup> We borrow the notion of ‘alerter’ from Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) to refer to “an element whose function is to alert the Hearer's attention to the ensuing speech act” (p. 277). While greetings do not appear under alerters in Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) scheme, we think greetings in our context perform the function of alerters as described by these authors.

- <sup>6</sup> Speaker's location information moves such as *soy de Lanus* ('I'm from Lanus') in example (1), like *Me llamo Sandra* 'I'm called Sandra', convey personal information; however, the latter is not essential for the transaction, whereas the former could be important. Moves of this category appear to have a transactional function as they help the vendor assess the feasibility of the transaction (e.g. in this context, whether the pet can be transported or not to a given area).
- <sup>7</sup> <sup>Dim</sup> stands for diminutive; [...] indicates that the rest of the utterance has been omitted.
- <sup>8</sup> <sup>V</sup> stands for 'formal 'you' (*usted*) and <sup>T</sup> stands for 'informal you' (including *vos* and the infrequent *tú* form, see Section 4.2).
- <sup>9</sup> The corpus contained numerous examples of *Saludos* and its abbreviation *slds*. *Saludos* can be literally translated as 'greetings'. Its meaning does, however, vary with context, and here, it represents a semi-formal but friendly closing similar to 'regards'. The abbreviated form *slds* is clearly less formal than *Saludos* and could be translated as 'cheers'. However, the term is also medium specific thus was translated as 'RX', an abbreviation of 'regards' which is in current use on internet platforms (see NetLingo, 2018).