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On the dual role of expressive speech acts:

Relational work on signs announcing closures during the Covid-19 pandemic

Eva Ogiermann and Spyridoula Bella

Abstract

This paper provides some new insights into the dual function of expressive speech acts discussed in pragmatic theory as either expressions of genuine emotions or conventionalised acts of courtesy. Drawing on the framework of interpersonal pragmatics, it analyses signs displayed on the doors of closed businesses in Athens and London during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. These closure signs are characterised by a heavy use of relational features, including four expressive speech acts, namely greetings, apologies, thanks and wishes, which form the focus of the analysis. The relational work performed by these speech acts reflects the social changes brought about by the pandemic as well as the business owners' attempts to retain their customers. The expressive speech acts featured on the signs are evaluated against the norms set out by the genre of closure signs. The comparative angle of the study, on the other hand, links the discussion to norms related to the display of emotions and to the use of conventionalised formulae in the two countries under study, thus revealing culture-specific perspectives on the dual function of expressive speech acts.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, expressive speech acts, public signs, Greece, UK

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on people's lives, their relationships with others and the ways in which they interact with them. When the first lockdown was announced and restrictions on face-to-face contacts were introduced, the interactions with one's friends and loved ones largely shifted online. At the same time, the lockdown brought with it new ways of community building. Neighbours started talking to each other more often, and whole neighbourhoods joined in rounds of applause for health services. Posters thanking the NHS and key workers appeared in the windows of private homes and local support networks emerged, offering help to isolated and vulnerable community members.

The pandemic also deeply affected businesses' relationships with their customers. Shops deemed 'essential' had to implement social distancing measures and make sure that they are being observed. The majority of businesses, however, had to close their doors to their customers, not knowing when (and if) they will be able to reopen – and whether their

customers will come back once they do. Many of these businesses reached out to their customers by producing elaborate closure signs. One of the features that distinguished these signs from signs commonly found on closed businesses was their personal and emotional character, reflecting an effort on the part of the businesses to maintain a relationship with their customers. The present study focuses on these relational aspects of closure signs, specifically those that appeared on the doors of closed businesses in Athens and London during the first Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020.

The paper starts with an introduction to interpersonal pragmatics, which serves as the theoretical framework for our analysis, and then zooms into pragmatic work on expressive speech acts, which form the focus of the analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the cultural norms governing the expression of emotions in Greece and Britain. The methodology section starts with a brief discussion of Linguistic Landscapes, a field that has traditionally studied public signs. We then describe the data collection procedure followed in the study and explain how the theoretical framework chosen for this study will be applied to the analysis of the data. The first section of the analysis provides an overview of the structure and contents of the signs while the remaining four sections are devoted to a contrastive analysis of greetings, apologies, thanks and wishes, respectively. The discussion section evaluates the different uses of these expressive speech acts in our data while the conclusion returns to the impact of the pandemic on interpersonal relations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Interpersonal pragmatics

The present study is situated in the field of interpersonal pragmatics, a research area that offers “a pragmatics perspective on interpersonal aspects of communication and interaction” (Haugh et al. 2013: 9) and focuses on the ways in which language choices affect relationships (Locher and Graham 2010: 2).

Although relational aspects of communication had already formed the focus of the first wave of politeness research (Locher 2014: 309), Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) limited their treatment to their function as devices mitigating face-threat.¹ The approach taken within interpersonal pragmatics is much broader as it engages with “all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice” (Locher and Watts 2008: 96). Another limitation of Brown and Levinson’s approach that has been tackled within interpersonal pragmatics is that it equates linguistic structures with politeness, largely ignoring the context-dependence of pragmatic meaning and the situated nature of politeness.

¹ It needs to be noted, however, that many empirical studies following Brown and Levinson’s framework had moved away from the focus on face-threat and highlighted the face-enhancing or face-supportive functions of certain speech acts, such as compliments or apologies (e.g., Holmes 1995).

An alternative treatment of the relationship between linguistic structures and the different forms of relational work they perform has been offered by Watts (2003). Rather than regarding them as politeness strategies, he has linked their use to politic behaviour, defined as “linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction” (2003: 19). While politic behaviour tends to go unnoticed, politeness is a salient form of behaviour resulting from an increased use of the structures associated with politic behaviour. Work conducted in interpersonal pragmatics has also pointed out the importance of norms and expectations for the study of relational work, and the central role of one’s past experiences in shaping them. While Watts (2003) introduced Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* into im/politeness research, Locher and Watts (2008) draw on the concept of *frame* which they define as “cognitive conceptualisations of forms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour that individuals have constructed through their own histories of social practice” (2008: 78).

The present study applies this framework to the study of public messages displayed during the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, it scrutinises public signs that business owners used to communicate with their customers during the first lockdown. While closure signs constitute an established frame (or genre) constrained by specific rules and scripts, guiding the readers’ expectations, this study looks at this form of business communication in an entirely unprecedented context for the people in Greece and the UK.

Business interactions are *transactional* in nature, which means that they primarily contain language that “serves in the expression of ‘content’” (Brown and Yule 1983: 1). Relational work, in contrast, bears close resemblance to the *interactional* function of language, i.e., “the function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes” (ibid). The signs under study fulfil two main transactional functions: they announce the closure and redirect customers to alternative forms of services. At the same time, they contain an unprecedented number of interpersonal features, not commonly found on closure signs. It is these optional, interactional elements of the signs, whose sole purpose seems to be the reaffirmation of the relationship with customers, that form the focus of our analysis. This enables us to examine how, by reaching out to their customers, the business owners project a certain public self-image and how, through their linguistic choices, they exploit the genre of public closure announcements to re-connect with their customers during lockdown. The background of the pandemic and the comparative angle of our study further illustrate how these communications are “embedded in cultural context and interrelated with historical and social processes” (Locher 2014: 316) as the data provide insights into the impact of the pandemic on people’s lives in two countries.

While the approach taken within interpersonal pragmatics differs from politeness theory in that it moves away from face-threat mitigation and beyond politeness, these two areas do not substantially differ in their units of analysis (see e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2013: 123). Ultimately, both focus on “linguistic strategies that are used for interpersonal effect” (Locher 2014: 318), with speech acts retaining a central role within interpersonal pragmatics (Grainger 2013: 31). Likewise, this paper focusses on linguistic strategies that are conventionally used to perform the expressive speech acts of greeting, apologising, thanking and wishing. At the same time, the analysis conducted in this paper aims to demonstrate the multifunctional, culture- and genre-specific nature of the examined linguistic structures, as well as their new uses emerging within the context of the pandemic.

2.2 Expressive Speech Acts

The speech acts under scrutiny, namely apologies, thanks, wishes and greetings, fall within the category of *expressives* (Searle 1976). Although speech acts “always have an interpersonal or relational side” (Schneider 2010: 254), it is predominantly expressive speech acts that “deal with social and interpersonal relations” (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2010: 159). Within classical pragmatic work, they are defined as expressions of feelings or emotions (Austin 1962, Searle 1976, Norrick 1978, Bach and Harnish 1979). They are generally produced for the benefit of the hearer and thus inherently polite (Leech 1983: 105, Escandell-Vidal 2012: 643). Yet, although interpersonal rapport lies at the heart of expressive speech acts, they tend to be highly routinised (Coulmas 1981: 70).

The speech act category of *expressives* goes back to Austin’s (1962) class of *behabitives* “concerned roughly with reactions to behaviour and with behaviour towards others and designed to exhibit attitudes and feelings” (Austin 1962: 83). Searle (1976) narrows down Austin’s broad category to those speech acts that lack a direction of fit.² Following Searle, Norrick (1978: 279) specifies that, unlike other illocutionary acts, expressives do not express “emotions directed at future states (the world-to-word direction of fit aimed at getting the world to correspond to what is said), but emotions which arise in response to given states of affairs”. Bach and Harnish (1979: 51), who refer to this speech act category as *acknowledgements*, suggest that they “express, perfunctorily if not genuinely, certain feelings towards the hearer”. Their definition already suggests that expressive speech acts do not always convey true emotions. For Austin, speech acts performed without the required feelings do not render the act infelicitous but merely insincere (1962: 40). And according to Searle, “wherever there is a psychological state specified in the sincerity conditions, the performance of the act counts as an *expression* of that psychological state” (1969: 65, original emphasis) – whether the act is sincere or not.

At the same time, Austin distinguishes performatives from “purely polite conventional ritual phrases” (1962: 84), a view supported by Weigand (2010) who describes them as “empty routines” that “have nothing to do with sincerity conditions” (2010: 179). Yet, within her taxonomy, both are regarded as speech acts, so that acts such as thanking or apologising can be assigned to different speech act categories. Whenever they express genuine emotions, they classify as *emotives* and when their linguistic realisations are purely formulaic, they belong to the category of *declaratives*.³

These observations on the dual nature of expressive speech acts are reminiscent of Watts’ (2003) distinction between politic and polite behaviour. He associates the former with “highly

² More technically, he defines them as speech acts whose illocutionary point is “to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content” (1976: 12).

³ Weigand defines *emotives* as affective speech acts where “mental and emotional states of affairs are expressed with emotional emphasis” (2010: 198) and which “aim at empathy and compassion” (2010: 166). *Declaratives*, an extended category of Searle’s *declarations*, in contrast, do not express genuine feelings. Instead, they “create a specific state of affairs”, namely “what is expected as civilized behaviour” (2010: 146). It is thus the *declarative* rather than the *emotive* variants of expressive speech acts that perform interpersonal functions by creating “social relationships by the use of politeness conventions” (2010: 179).

routinised sequences” such as “greeting sequences, leave-taking sequences (i.e. saying goodbye), request and acceptance sequences, apology sequences, addressing other interactants, etc.” (2003: 132). Rather than associating politeness with the expression of genuine feelings, however, Watts seems to view it as strategic as he draws a parallel between politeness and money, where politeness consists in paying with linguistic resources “more than would normally be required in the ritual exchange of speech acts” (2003: 115). But although Watts does not link politeness to sincerity, given that politeness is ultimately viewed as a form of evaluation, one could argue that it needs to be perceived as genuine in order to be evaluated positively.

In theoretical work on expressive speech acts, the subjective nature of such evaluations has been linked to the fact that it is not always possible to “precisely define the emotion expressed in an expressive illocutionary act or the degree to which it is felt” (Norrick 1978: 281). The extent to which expressive speech acts convey true emotions or function as mere routine formulae has been linked to their linguistic (and prosodic) realisations, which range from brief, even elliptical, to more heartfelt variants with “lengthier, less formulaic phrases” (Norrick 1978: 285). But even if the feelings expressed cannot be regarded as genuine “in our society they are generally regarded as acts of courtesy” (Bach and Harnish 1979: 53), their function being to satisfy a social expectation (ibid. 41), which can be viewed as a form of politic behaviour.

In line with Watts’ approach, early work on expressive speech acts had already suggested that these expectations depend on a number of factors that go beyond the speech act itself, such as the relationship between the interlocutors (Bach and Harnish 1979: 54) and the “particular situation involving moral considerations” (Norrick 1978: 280).⁴

In our data, the expectations of those reading the signs will be guided by their relationship with the sign producers, i.e., one between service providers and customers. The signs will not only be judged against the transactional nature of the interactions they customarily have, but their interpretation will also be influenced by their readers’ experiential norms related to the genre of closure signs. At the same time, they will be read within the context of the pandemic and the social changes accompanying it. Ultimately, all these factors may be assessed differently in the two countries under study, leading to culture-specific formulations and interpretations of the signs and their relational features.

2.3 Cultures and emotions

Whether the use of expressive speech acts is primarily associated with their genuinely emotional or their conventionalised functions, and the extent to which they are likely to be evaluated positively, will vary across cultures. Emotions have been described as “socially constructed entities that are highly culture specific” (Langlotz and Locher 2017: 292, referring to Harré 1986) and relational work has been shown to follow culture-specific norms, including those regarding the display of emotions. And while many would agree that members of Mediterranean cultures are more likely to display emotions than members of northern

⁴ To illustrate this, Norrick compares an apology for stepping on somebody’s foot with one for setting fire to somebody’s house. While the former is likely to satisfy the hearer even when it is mumbled and comes across as highly formulaic, the latter will need to come across as heartfelt to be accepted (1978: 279-280).

European ones, there isn't any systematic research to show that Greek people are more likely to openly show and appreciate the display of emotions than British people.

The only points of reference we have found to support such claims are Lewis' (2006) model of cultural dimensions and Brown and Levinson's (1987) distinction between negative and positive politeness cultures,⁵ as well as the criticism directed at their treatment of emotions by Greek scholars (see below). Lewis classifies Greece as a multi-active culture, one of whose characteristics is that it places emphasis on the expression of feelings. The UK, in contrast, has been defined as a linear-active culture, characterised by the avoidance of expression of feelings (2006: 42).

Brown and Levinson introduce the concept of 'ethos', which they define as the "the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society" (1987: 243) and on which they draw in their distinction between positive and negative politeness cultures. Unfortunately, they do not elaborate on this distinction, merely linking it to the assessment of the weightiness of FTAs and referring to positive politeness cultures as "friendly, back-slapping cultures" and members of negative politeness cultures as "standoffish creatures like the British" (1987: 245). However, the very understanding of politeness underlying their theory has been repeatedly shown, mainly by researchers from positive politeness cultures, to be skewed towards the authors' culture-specific understanding of social norms. The expression of emotions, within their theory, is regarded as face threatening (1987: 67-68), something that needs to be suppressed to make "communication between potentially aggressive parties" possible (1987: 1).

While Brown and Levinson equate politeness with "formal diplomatic protocol" (ibid.), foregrounding the importance of conventionalised linguistic expressions⁶, Greek scholars suggest that "politeness is not just a means of restraining feelings and emotions in order to avoid conflict, but also a means of *expressing them*" (Sifianou 1992: 82, our emphasis). Bayraktaroglu and Sifianou (2001: 7) further distinguish between "politeness of manners" and "politeness of the soul" and suggest that "the former may hide real intentions and be hypocritical while the latter reflects the essence of true politeness". Although the present study is not concerned with politeness per se, these culture-specific attitudes towards displays of emotions and the use of formulaic phrases will help us interpret the dual function of expressive speech acts in our British and Greek data.

⁵ While frameworks categorising cultures tend to treat them as homogenous, we do, of course, acknowledge that this is not necessarily the case – and that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the language used on our signs and the culture of those producing and reading them. Given the comparative nature of our study, however, and in line with previous contrastive pragmatic research, any differences emerging between the two languages will be interpreted as indicative of cultural preferences.

⁶ For Brown and Levinson, "negative politeness is the most elaborate and the most conventionalized set of linguistic strategies for FTA redress; it is the stuff that fills the etiquette books" (1987: 130).

3. Methodology

3.1 Linguistic Landscapes

Public signs, broadly defined as “the linguistic items found in the public space” (Shohamy 2006: 110), have primarily been the subject of Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies, a field that emerged in the context of societal multilingualism (see Gorter 2013 for the development of the field). Hence, much of the research conducted in LL studies focuses on signs displayed in multilingual cities and the ways in which they represent the languages spoken by different population groups residing in these cities⁷ (e.g., Backhaus 2007). Studies that go beyond quantifying the languages found on the signs, in contrast, view LL as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 2). They draw on ethnographic methods and treat signs as “multimodal objects rather than as linguistic ones” (Blommaert 2013: 41).

Hence, while traditional LL studies limit their scrutiny of language to the identification of languages used on the signs, alternative approaches shift the focus towards the emplacement of signs and the discourses surrounding them, rather than the messages communicated on them. Relatively few studies have analysed the language used on signs, perhaps because they generally feature very simple texts (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 13). Those that have done so are few and far apart and have focused on directive signs (Wierzbicka 1998, Bonner 1998, 2007, 2016, Mautner 2012, Wagner 2015, Ferencik 2018, Svennevig 2021).

The present study scrutinises the messages communicated via closure signs that appeared on the doors of businesses in London and Athens during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike most of the signs analysed to date, those analysed here are highly transient and responsive to new realities, with signs being removed or replaced with new ones as the situation changes. Following Blommaert, these signs can thus be viewed as “a historical trace of social action” making the study of signs “an instrument for historical research” (2013: 51). This new form of sign that has emerged in response to the containment measures introduced by governments across the world not only allows us to capture “the very quick, almost immediate moments of change” (ibid. 119) but also to interpret them as part of wider social changes occurring during the pandemic.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection for this project began in March 2020, when the first Covid-19 related signs started appearing in public places, and continued throughout the lockdown during daily walks

⁷ Although London is a highly multicultural and multilingual city, all but two of the signs in our data were written exclusively in English, while a small proportion of the signs displayed in Athens featured English translations. At the same time, a word of caution needs to be voiced with regard to what we refer to as our ‘English data’ as we were not able to identify the first language of the authors of the signs. But while our data do include signs displayed on independent shops, including a few selling ethnic foods, these tended to be brief. The majority of the London signs were displayed on chain stores and it is mainly these signs that included lengthy messages and made use of emotive language.

(the one form of exercise allowed per day) in four boroughs of London and eight municipalities in Athens, with four researchers systematically covering all streets within walking distance of their homes. While the collection is ongoing and contains a wide range of Covid-19 signs, this study focuses on signs announcing closures during the first lockdown.

Our data consist of 295 English and 283 Greek signs displayed on a wide range of businesses. The majority of the signs were found on the doors of shops, ranging from those selling cars or building materials to fashion stores and jewellers, as well as restaurants and coffee shops. These included both independent businesses and chains, with signs on the former often being less elaborate and sometimes even scribbled on a piece of cardboard. The latter were commonly printed on simple A4 paper, often using the same text across different outlets of a chain. Such signs generally index flux and temporality (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 137), they “have a more volatile and ‘unofficial’ character than signs produced by lettering and printing shops, and are usually temporary signs or signs that point towards an emergent, inchoate form of organization” (Blommaert 2013: 62).

Among the English businesses announcing closures, there were 81 retail chains – 21 of those charity shops – and 59 independent, local shops. Restaurants, pubs and coffee shops made up a total of 51 of the 295 signs found on London businesses. The third biggest group comprised estate agents (27) and the fourth hairdressers and beauty salons (19). The majority of the Greek signs were found on independent retail stores (153) and retail chains (72), with only 33 of the 283 signs featuring on restaurants and coffee shops. Apart from signs announcing closures related to the pandemic, we have also compiled a small reference corpus of 60 ‘pre-pandemic’ closure signs (30 per language).

3.3 Analytical framework

Unlike previous research on public signage, the present study adopts an approach drawing on pragmatic theory and Watts’ (2003) concept of politic behaviour to examine the dual function of expressive speech acts found on Covid-19 closure signs. This framework has been mainly applied to the study of naturally occurring interactions, where the focus has been on the interactants’ evaluations of each other’s behaviour as im/polite.

While its application to the study of spontaneous, multimodal interactions has proved challenging (Ogiermann 2019: 148), the present study focuses on written texts, that is, a purely verbal one-way form of communication. There is no evidence of how the linguistic structures used on the signs are evaluated – apart from the interpretations of the authors of this paper, who have experienced the pandemic in the two countries under study and are thus participant observers. Yet, as Jaworski and Thurlow (2011: 13) argue, sign producers make choices “to create particular effects in their intended recipients; the idea known in sociolinguistics as ‘audience design’ (Bell, 1997)”.

In addition, while Watts admits that there are “no objective criteria for determining politic behaviour” (2003: 166) in everyday conversations, the relational work performed on the signs studied here can be judged against the existing genre of closure signs. Hence, while the signs have to be viewed within the context of the pandemic, they also need to be interpreted in

relation to the texts they draw on, allowing us to establish a connection “between the present meaning of words and the meaning they had before and elsewhere” (Blommaert 2013: 118). The analysis, therefore, begins by identifying linguistic structures that do not contribute to the transactional function of the signs and thus perform some form of relational work, with a focus on linguistic structures associated with the four expressive speech acts under study.

The use of a small reference corpus, and our knowledge of closure signs as participant observers in the two countries, will enable us to identify “salient linguistic behaviour *beyond* the structures” associated with politic behaviour (Watts 2003: 141, emphasis in the original), i.e., interpersonal features that are not commonly found on closure signs and thus potentially go beyond their formulaic functions.

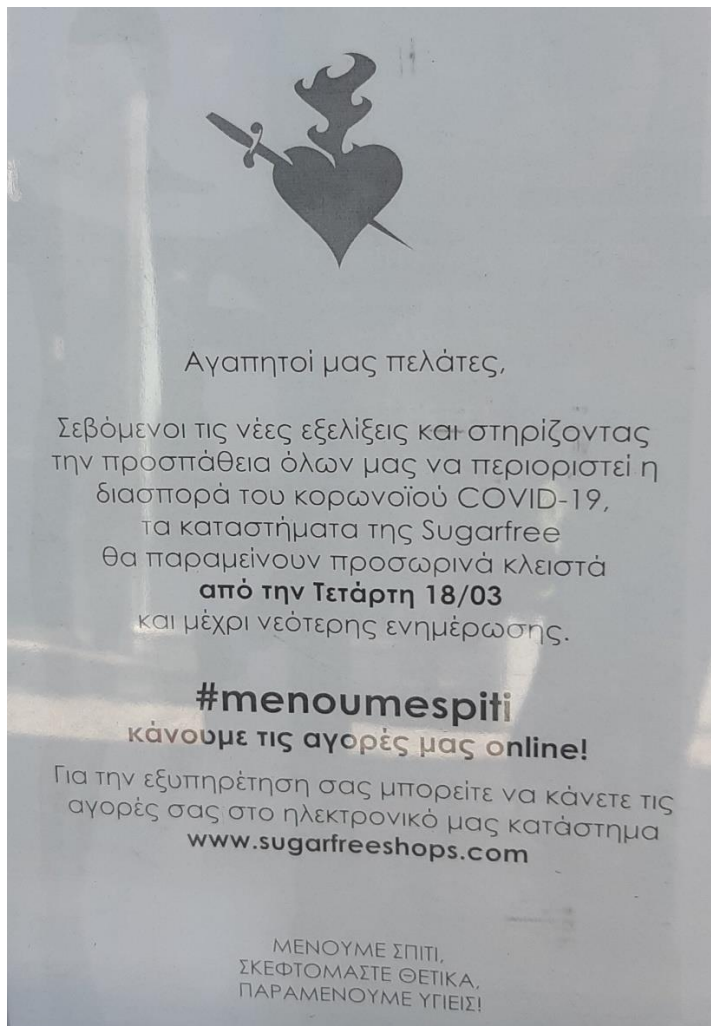
4. Analysis

4.1 Sign structure

The messages on the closure signs that appeared in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic differed significantly from closure signs commonly seen on closed businesses. The signs in our reference corpus were all brief, their primary function being to announce the closure. While most of the signs, especially the English ones, did not go beyond stating the closure, some provided a reason or stated the dates of the closure. This was especially the case in the Greek data, where most of the closures were related to holidays, which is also why a few of these signs included wishes, such as Easter wishes. Another difference between the two languages was that a few of the Greek signs ended with a sign off formula in the form of thanks, while nearly all English signs preceded the announcement of the closure with the apology formula *sorry*.

Since during the lockdown, the closures were announced by the respective governments and any potential customers were expected to stay at home, there was no need to announce the closures locally or to justify them. Yet, many business owners took the trouble of producing elaborate closure signs, containing much more information than traditional ones. While our analysis focuses on the expressive speech acts found on these signs, it needs to be borne in mind that they appear within longer texts and form part of a specific sequence. Hence, we will begin our analysis by discussing two signs displayed on chain clothing stores in Athens and London, respectively, and presenting the full range of discursive moves characterising our data.

Sign 1 [GR040]

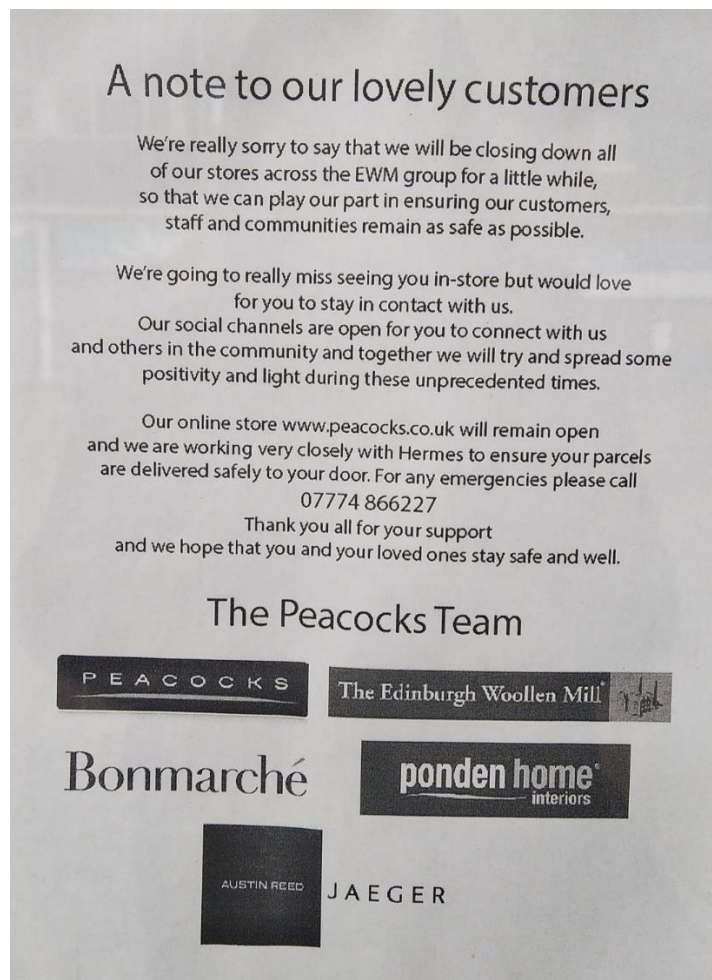


Translation:

*Our dear customers,
Out of respect for the new developments and in support of the effort of all of us to restrict the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19 the Sugarfree shops will remain temporarily closed from 18/03/2020 until further notice.
#westayathome
we make our purchases online!
For better service you can make your purchases through our e-shop www.sugarfreeshops.com
WE STAY AT HOME, WE THINK POSITIVELY, WE REMAIN HEALTHY!*

The message starts with a salutation naming the shop's customers as the intended addresses. The announcement of the closure is preceded by stating the reasons behind it, first indirectly (νέες εξελίξεις / 'new developments') and then through a direct reference to the pandemic. The shop closure is portrayed as a contribution to a joint effort (προσπάθεια όλων μας) to contain the virus. The next line reproduces the governmental slogan (#menoumespiti), which is made explicit by the inclusion of a hashtag. The slogan is extended by a syntactically parallel construction directing the customers to online shopping, which is then followed by an explicit invitation to shop online. The message ends with another creative extension of the slogan *menoumespiti* where the requirement to stay at home is linked to being optimistic and remaining healthy.

Sign 2 [UK012]



The English sign, rather than starting with a salutation, begins with a heading which serves as an attention getter and defines the purpose of the sign. It not only refers to the intended addressees but also describes them as *lovely*. The announcement of the closure is preceded by an intensified apology and followed by a justification very similar to the one found on the Athenian sign, namely contributing to ensuring everybody's safety.

The next paragraph of the message refers the customers to social media which are portrayed as a community building instrument spreading positivity. They are then delegated to the online store, and another means of contact, a phone number, is provided. The message ends with expressions of thanks and wishes, as well as a signature.

Despite marked differences in the linguistic choices, both signs contain similar discourse moves and do similar relational work. Apart from the two transactional elements, i.e., announcement of closure and redirection to online services, they underline the businesses' contribution to the fight against the pandemic, while appealing to a joint responsibility in containing the virus and creating a sense of community.

These two examples also demonstrate that the signs under study contain a much larger variety of moves than typical closure signs. As illustrated in Table 1, the most frequent elements of

the messages are the announcement of the closure, often accompanied by an explanation (see Bella and Ogiermann, in press), and the provision of contact details. The first two coincide with the main elements found on conventional closure signs and, as they appear on more than 50% of our signs, they can be regarded as obligatory moves of the genre (Li and Ge 2009: 96). However, it is mainly the elements preceding and following these core elements that do relational work. This includes headings and salutations which feature at the beginning of the messages and address the passer-by, as well as the elements making up the (pre-)closing sequence, including apologies, thanking, wishes and advice, occasionally disrupted with security warnings in the English data.

While Table 1 lists discursive moves rather than speech acts, which form the focus of the present analysis, there are clear similarities between the concepts of speech acts and moves when one considers that the latter are viewed as performing “a coherent communicative function” (Swales 2004: 229). Similarly to speech act analysis, the move structure of a text is analysed according to pragmatic functions (Vergaro 2004: 182) or “functional values that are assigned to linguistic forms” (Bhatia 2001: 85).

Table 1. Discursive moves that appear in more than 10% of the signs in at least one of the languages (in the order of their frequencies).

Discursive Move	Example	London N=295	Athens N=283
Announcement of closure	This store is currently closed.	239	244
Contact information	Please feel free to continue shopping with us at XXX	204	160
Justification of closure	As per the government guidelines ...	165	193
Sign off	Kind regards	85	71
Heading	Polite notice	109	40
Resumption of business	We look forward to being part of your daily lives again soon.	103	24
Advice	Stay clean, stay healthy and stay inside!	42	43
Salutation	Dear customers	34	49
Signature	The team at Tenby & Penny	59	24
Closure dates	Closed from 24/3/20 until further notice.	17	62
Thanks	Thank you for your understanding.	77	/
Wishes	We wish you and your loved ones good health.	27	35
Apology	Sorry for any inconvenience this may cause.	34	3
Security warning	All money has been removed from the premises.	35	/

Yet, although some of the moves listed above take the form of speech acts, they represent the functions they perform within the text rather than those commonly associated with their linguistic forms. While some of the discursive moves have been labelled according to speech act categories, in which case these two categories coincide, speech acts – or linguistic expressions associated with them – also appeared within other moves, which already points to the dual functionality of the speech acts we aim to examine.

Hence, while apologies tended to appear within the extended closing sequences of the messages, they also accompanied the announcements of the closure. Likewise, wishes and thanks appeared either right after the closure announcements, where they retained their functions, or at the end of the closing sequence where they functioned as sign off formulae.

The reason why, according to Table 1, there are no discursive moves performing the function of thanking in the Greek data is that all of them served as closing formulae. And while the salutations in our data function as greetings, in terms of the relational work they perform, it is also crucial how they refer to the addressee – something that is also accomplished within headings in the English data, as well as in some expressions of thanking.

4.2 Greetings - addressing the customer

Greetings are probably the most routinised of all expressive speech acts and are generally not viewed as expressions of attitudes or feelings (Duranti 1997: 69). According to Searle (1969: 67), they have no sincerity conditions and no propositional content, while their essential condition “counts as courteous recognition of H by S”. Weigand (2010: 179) places them within her extended category of declaratives and claims that they “keep alive or establish, social relationships which can be propositionally specified as ‘recognizing and acknowledging the other human being’”.

Bach and Harnish (1979) seem to be the only scholars who retain the distinction between routine formulae and expressions of genuine emotions for greetings. For them, greetings express either “pleasure at seeing (or meeting) H” or merely aim at satisfying “the social expectation that one express pleasure at seeing (or meeting) someone” (1979: 52).

While greetings are generally regarded as “a response to finding oneself within someone’s visual and/ or auditory range” (Duranti 1997: 69), within written communication, like the one under study, they perform a different function. In this asynchronous form of communication, greetings are not responsive acts acknowledging someone, but acts that address the intended interlocutor. The absence of the addressee at the time of writing is also the reason why salutations in written messages are much more likely to be accompanied by address forms than are face-to-face greetings.

Address forms have been defined as expressions used by speakers to “designate the person they are talking to while they are talking to them” (Fasold 1990: 1-2). Since public signs are addressed to those who choose to stop by and read them, they can also be viewed as devices aimed at getting the attention of their intended audience. At the same time, one could argue that closure signs are most likely to be read by past and future customers, which is perhaps why they do not normally feature address forms. Hence, the salutations and forms of address found in our data can be understood as a way in which the business owners reach out to their customers in an attempt to maintain and potentially negotiate their relationship with them.

While in the Greek data all references to the addressee took the form of the salutation *dear X*, as used in private business correspondence rather than on public signs, the English data included a wider variety of direct references to the intended readers of the messages. Forty-nine of the Greek signs in our data started with a salutation. Among them, 37 used the form *αγαπητοί πελάτες* / ‘dear customers’ and 19 of those also contained the possessive plural pronoun *μας* ‘our’, making them considerably more personal. Although *αγαπητοί μας πελάτες* translates as ‘our dear customers’ into English, the placement of *μας* ‘our’ before the noun leads to a literal reading as ‘customers that are dear to us’. Therefore, rather than functioning as a mere possessive pronoun, *μας* conveys positive emotions towards the customers, portraying them as valued and appreciated. The remaining twelve Greek signs employed the

address form *αγαπητοί φίλοι* / 'dear friends' or *αγαπητοί μας φίλοι* / 'friends dear to us', thus avoiding altogether a reference to the service provider – customer relationship and transforming it into one of friendship.

In the English data, 34 signs included the salutation *dear X*, with 20 instances of *dear customer(s)* and two of the more formal *clients*. The remaining salutations featured the nouns *guest* and *visitor* as well as the neutral *all*, thus extending the intended audience to all individuals finding themselves in front of the closed businesses. Unlike in the Greek data, where the noun *φίλοι* 'friends' was used in nearly one third of all salutations, among the English salutations, the noun *friend* appeared only twice.

While the English signs contained fewer salutations than did the Greek ones, further explicit references to the addressees were found in 27 of the 109 headings directing the addressee's attention to the message. Although headings feature on some public announcements, they do not normally appear on closure signs. Their addition thus creates an additional opportunity to reach out to and gain the attention of passers-by. Sixteen of them simply stated *customer notice* or *a notice / message to / information for our customers*. The possessive pronoun *our*, which links the customers with the business, was used on eleven headings. Some formulations made this relationship explicit by mentioning the name of the shop, e.g., *To all Emma Claire Hair and Beauty Spa clients* [UK055], as did the salutations discussed above, e.g., *Dear Pret Customers* [UK246].

Another relational feature emerging in relation to forms of address in the English data is the use of adjectives, describing the customers as *loyal*, *valued* or even *lovely* and *awesome*, as in: *Dear valued customers* [UK043] on a chain jewellery shop or *To all our awesome customers* [UK214] on an independent shop selling craft beer. Further explicit mentions of the addressee appeared among the expressions of thanking (see Section 4.4), where we also find (*our*) *wonderful* and *amazing (customers)*.

Salutations or explicit references to the recipient did not appear on any of the signs in our reference corpus, suggesting that they do not normally feature on signs announcing closures in either country. Accordingly, they go beyond what is expected, and can be interpreted as attempts at genuine relational work going beyond politic behaviour.

Further evidence supporting such an interpretation can be derived from linguistic features that not only do not normally appear on public signs but also go against the expectations governed by the genre of business communication. Our Greek data contained references to customers as 'friends', combined with the possessive pronoun *μας* 'our', which would be unusual in itself, and which appeared within a word order that created a new, even more personal reading. While the English data contained fewer salutations, explicit references to the customers could also be found within some of the headings and expressions of thanking. Some of these were pre-modified with adjectives assigning positive attributes to the customers, serving a function similar to complimenting, and ultimately aiming at negotiating the relationship with the customers by seeking intimacy.

4.3 Apologies

Apologies are the most multifunctional and controversial of expressive speech acts (Ogiermann 2015). They are generally viewed as reactive speech acts intended to remedy an offence, such as “violation of social norms or failure to fulfil personal expectations” (Fraser 1981: 259). Their ultimate aim is to elicit forgiveness, which makes them more “important to society than such acts as thanking and congratulating, which by comparison are its pleasant by-products rather than functional principles” (Norrick 1978: 284). Yet, as with other expressive speech acts, scholars have distinguished between substantial and ritual apologies, with the former expressing genuine regret for the committed offence and the latter aiming at fulfilling social expectations (Goffman 1971, Fraser 1981). Moreover, the main English apology formula (*I’m*) *sorry* has been viewed critically as an expression used “with little pretense at sincerity and even to express annoyance” (Borkin and Reinhart 1978: 65).

Another functional distinction relevant to the present study is that between remedial and disarming apologies. While apologies produced in response to an offence can express genuine feelings, be formulaic or even insincere, disarming apologies are necessarily formulaic as they function as negative politeness strategies mitigating the illocutionary force of another speech act (see Ogiermann 2009: 49-56 for a detailed discussion). Research on apologies in customer service contexts has focused almost exclusively on the use of remedial apologies in response to negative online feedback (e.g., Page 2014). The remedial and disarming apologies that are commonly found on public messages (though not in all countries), where they also serve as a means of maintaining customer satisfaction and image management, have been so far largely overlooked.

Of the 82 apologetic expressions found in the data only three appeared on Greek signs. All of them were formulaic remedial apologies and referred to *αναστάτωση* ‘inconvenience’ as the object of the apology, as occasionally found on signs reporting disruptions to services in Greece. One of them contained the expression *ζητούμε συγγνώμη για την αναστάτωση* / ‘we are asking for forgiveness’, while the other two took the form of *απολογούμαστε*. This is noteworthy in that *απολογούμαι* means ‘to speak in one’s defence’ in Greek, and it was originally borrowed with that meaning into English. Yet, it seems that it is now increasingly being used in Greek with the meaning it has developed in English, i.e., ‘to apologise’. In addition, the two shops that used this verb form on their signs, although located in different areas of Athens and representing different independent businesses, produced exactly the same text *and* provided an English version.

The English data contained 79 instances of expressions that have been shown to function as apologies, namely the expression of regret (*we’re*) *sorry*, expressions containing the noun *regret*, the adverbs *regrettably* and *unfortunately*, the performative *we apologise* and the plural noun *apologies* (see Ogiermann 2009: 95-97 for a discussion of these forms). Of those 79 apologetic expressions, 32 appeared towards the end of the messages and served the same function as did the apologies found in the Greek data, i.e., they were formulaic apologies following the pattern of: *sorry / apologies / we apologise for the / any inconvenience (caused / this has caused to you)*. Two of the London signs, however, featured more elaborate apologies that also provided a justification for the closure:

1. *Sorry for any inconvenience caused but hope you will understand we are doing this in an effort to protect our community.* [UK160]

2. *We apologise for any inconvenience caused during these extraordinary times but the wellbeing of our colleagues, customers and suppliers is our absolute priority.* [UK169]

Unlike the apologies discussed so far, these two apologies go beyond their formulaic functions. The accounts supporting them depict the closure as a way of protecting the community (1) and as motivated by the wellbeing of all concerned parties (2), thus juxtaposing the inconvenience caused by the closure with safety concerns.

The use of adjectives, such as *extraordinary* and *absolute* (2) not only serves to justify the closure, but also has an emphatic and emotional effect. While both examples contain the possessive pronoun *our*, in Example 2, the authors assume the role of those responsible for the wellbeing of all the named groups, whereas in Example 1, the pronoun is inclusive, portraying the community as everybody's shared responsibility. The expression *hope you will understand* further reinforces this feeling of responsibility towards the community and strengthens the justification of the closure. Thus, these two extended apologies can be viewed as expressions of genuine concern, though they also take the form of impression management devices positioning the business owners as responsible and caring.

The 34 apologies discussed so far all consisted either of the expression of regret (*we're*) *sorry* or the more formal *we apologise* / *apologies* combined with a complement expressing the inconvenience caused by the closure. They functioned as remedial apologies and constituted an independent move within the signs. The remaining 45 apologetic expressions identified in the English data, in contrast, appeared at the beginning of the messages and functioned as disarming apologies. Rather than constituting a speech act in their own right, these apologies softened the announcement of 'bad' news, i.e., the closure.

3. *Due to the Coronavirus outbreak we are sorry that we are currently unable to open this shop.* [UK013]

Similarly to this example, 28 of the disarming apologies contained the expression of regret (*We are*) *sorry* and were followed by the announcement of the closure, as in *Sorry we are now closed* or *We are sorry our shop is temporarily closed*. The remaining 17 instances of expressions signalling an apologetic attitude found in the data, namely *unfortunately*, *regrettably* / *with regret* and *sadly* also accompanied the announcement of the closure. Although these disarming expressions add a dispreferred quality to accounts, rather than constituting apologies in themselves (Ogiermann 2009: 112), in our data they were less routinised than apology formulae expressing regret in that they tended to go beyond merely announcing the closure:

4. *Regrettably, it has been necessary to temporarily close this branch.* [UK222]

5. *Unfortunately, after doing our research we have decided that it is in everyone's best interest that we remain closed during these crazy times.* [UK113]

Although both formulations portray the closure as unfavourable, they differ in how their authors position themselves in terms of agency. Example 4 describes it as an unavoidable necessity, also reflected in the choice of the passive voice. The authors of Example 5, in contrast, position

themselves as active agents making informed decisions (see Bella and Ogiermann, in press for a systematic treatment of agency in these data).

The most striking finding regarding the use of apology formulae in our data is that they were much more frequent in English than they were in Greek. Apologies are clearly a lot more conventionalised in English, even in contexts where no offence has taken place, and both their remedial and disarming variants commonly appear on public signage. In Greek – as well as other languages (see Ogiermann 2009) – apologies are closely linked to the acceptance of responsibility, which is probably why the Greek business owners, who were not responsible for the closures, did not use them. In addition, two of the three apology expressions that appeared in the Greek data were used on signs where the message was accompanied by an English version of the text and may well have been translated from English. The use of *απολογούμαστε* ‘we apologise’ with its English meaning supports such an interpretation.

The majority of the apologies found in the English data were highly conventionalised, serving their standard function on public signs. More than half of them functioned as disarming softeners modifying the force of the closure announcements. Yet, some of the English apologies were considerably more emotional and personal than what one would expect from closure signs, as they expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic not just on their businesses but on people’s lives in general.

4.4 Thanking

Like apologies, expressions of thanking are reactive speech acts. They count as an expression of gratitude on the part of the speaker for a past act performed by the hearer (Searle 1969: 67), from which the speaker has benefited (Norrick 1978: 285) and which is thus acknowledged and positively evaluated (Jautz 2013: 7).

Expressions of thanking “balance politeness relations between interlocutors” (Coulmas 1981: 81) but can also “engender feelings of warmth and solidarity” (Eisenstein and Bodman 1993: 64). At the same time, thanking expressions can function as highly formulaic conversational routines (Coulmas 1981, Aston 1995, Weigand 2010, Jautz 2013) and even as markers of interactional segments (Hymes 1971: 69), without necessarily communicating gratitude, as for instance noted in the context of the closings of service encounters (Aston 1995). Occasionally, thanks can be offered in advance, in which case they do not function as reactive speech acts acknowledging a past act. Since they precede the object of gratitude, they merely assume it.⁸ This use of thanking formulae is especially likely to occur in asynchronous written communication, like the one under study.

All 52 thanking expressions found in the Greek data appeared at the end of the messages, thus marking their closure. The most common formulation, amounting to 33 instances, was *(σας) ευχαριστούμε / ευχαριστώ (πολύ) / ‘we / I thank you.PL (very much)’*. The second most frequent formulation, which was used on 16 signs, additionally named *κατανόηση*

⁸ According to Norrick “an act of thanking in advance can have the social function of assuring the addressee of future gratitude and/or of making him feel guilty if he does not perform the favor requested” (1978: 85)

‘understanding’ as the object of the expressed gratitude: (σας) ευχαριστούμε για την κατανόηση (σας) / ‘thank you for the/your understanding’. Expressions of thanking are commonly found on Greek public signage, in particular in final position. Ευχαριστούμε ‘We thank you-PL’ is often employed as a closing on public announcements and ευχαριστούμε για την κατανόηση / ‘thank you for the understanding’ as a closing of announcements of disruptions of various services in particular. However, these expressions of thanking are not normally intensified or accompanied by the pronoun σας, which makes them more personal. Our data, in contrast, contain 20 instances of σας ‘you-PL’ and twelve of πολύ ‘very much’. Although these linguistic devices go beyond what is expected from Greek public signs, with expressions such as (σας) ευχαριστούμε (πολύ) coming across as more heartfelt, they essentially function as a polite closing. The addition of κατανόηση ‘understanding’, in contrast, presupposes this understanding based on the information provided in the message – thus functioning more like a *request* for understanding.

There are only three instances of thanking in the Greek data that could be regarded as expressing gratitude for a past act, namely those that name εμπιστοσύνη ‘trust’ shown to the business as the object of gratitude, e.g., σας ευχαριστούμε για την εμπιστοσύνη σας / ‘thank you for your trust’. Such expressions may be found in correspondence directed at specific customers in specific circumstances, but do not normally feature on public signs.

The English data contained a total of 108 expressions of thanking, with only 19 of them consisting of a simple *thank you* or (*with*) *thanks*, closing the message. The remaining 89 expressions – including a further 12 closing formulae – included a complement (or several) naming the object of gratitude, with the most frequent ones being (*continued*) *support* (40) and *understanding* (22). The business owners further thanked their customers for their *patience* (10), *cooperation* (8), (*continued*) *loyalty* (6) and *custom* (5) – as well as *help*, *enthusiasm*, *vigilance*, *kindness*, and *kind words of encouragement*. This wide range of objects of gratitude is highly untypical of public signage, with the two commonly found on signs being *thank you for your understanding* (on signs announcing disruptions to services) and *thank you for your cooperation* (on directive signs).

Expressions of thanking in our data that contain the complements *understanding* and *cooperation*, as well as those referring to *patience*, suggest a reading as a polite request (to be understanding, cooperative, patient) rather than as an expression of gratitude for displaying these qualities. Other nouns, such as (*continued*) *loyalty* and *custom* seem to refer to past encounters and thus could express genuine gratitude. With some other complements, however, it is difficult to determine what they refer to, as in the following example:

6. *Thank you for your help and patience during these extraordinary times.* [UK127]

It is not clear what kind of *help* a business can be receiving from its customers when being closed, but the reference to *these extraordinary times* in the above example does seem to link both *patience* and *help* with the closure. Similarly, expressions of thanking for the customers’ *support*, the most frequently named object of gratitude in our English data, remain ambiguous as to what kind of support is referred to – unless more context is provided, as in Example 7.

7. *I would like to thank all of you for your kind words of encouragement and support over the last 4 years.* [UK103]

On the other hand, *support* could merely refer to what the business owners wish for, for instance that their customers continue to buy their products during the lockdown via their online shop. As Examples 8 and 9 illustrate, the use of the adjective *continued* does suggest a timeframe spanning from past to present.

8. *Alongside our amazing team, we thank you, our customers for your continued support.* [UK040]

A total of 77 of English expressions of thanks performed the function of thanking – rather than serving as sign off formulae as they did in the Greek data – and 30 of those were elaborate and personal. Many of them referred to the businesses' longstanding relationship with their customers and the difficult circumstances brought about by the pandemic (9), thus establishing common ground and creating a sense of community.

9. *Thank you for your continued loyalty and support, even during these uncertain times.* [UK322]

While the majority of expressions of thanking found on the London signs consisted of the formula (we) *thank you*, a few of the signs used less common and less routinised expressions of gratitude, with five of them containing the adjective *grateful* and two the verb form *we appreciate*. The use of *grateful* combined with the intensifier *really* comes across as particularly sincere and heartfelt.

10. *We know this is a very difficult time for everyone and we're really grateful for your patience and understanding.* [UK009]

Overall, the thanking formulae in our data performed a range of functions. All thanking expressions in the Greek data and more than a quarter of those found in the English data served as sign off formulae, functioning in similar ways to expressions such as *best wishes* or *kind regards*. The majority of the thanking formulae in the English data contained a complement referring to abstract nouns such as *understanding* or *support*. The meaning of these abstract nouns remains ambiguous, with only a few of them becoming clearer through their co-text. Yet, most of the thanking formulae containing these complements cannot be interpreted as genuine thanking expressions.

At the same time, the above analysis has revealed considerable differences in how expressions of thanking were used on the London and Athens signs. Although thanking expressions do occasionally appear on Greek closure signs, these expressions serve primarily as sign off formulae. This is also the function they performed in our data – albeit enhanced with the inclusion of the pronoun *σας* 'you-PL' and the intensifier *πολύ* 'very much'. Since English closure signs do not normally feature expressions of thanking, their use in our data can be regarded as a conscious effort to reach out to the customers. The English data not only contained considerably more thanking formulae than the Greek data, but they made reference to the businesses' relationship with their customers and to the difficult times caused by the pandemic, making them sound more like genuine and heart-felt expressions of gratitude.

4.5 Wishes

Wishes have received considerably less attention in both theoretical and empirical work compared to thanking, apologising and greeting. They also differ from these acts in that they do not fulfil Searle's condition for expressive speech acts, which are defined as acts that lack a direction of fit (1976: 12). But even though wishes are future-oriented and thus do have a direction of fit, they are generally treated as expressive speech acts in the literature (e.g., Prokop 2010, Ronan 2015) or placed in equivalent categories such as acknowledgements (Bach and Harnish 1979: 52-53). According to Ronan, wishes express "ideals that the speaker has, but which are not matched by the state of affairs" (Ronan 2015: 36), while Prokop refers to them as benefactive speech acts – a subgroup of expressive speech acts. She defines them as acts bringing about a positive change or maintaining the recipient's favourable attitude towards the speaker (2010: 126), which is also in line with Leech's (1983) concept of convivial speech acts.

The Greek data contained a total of 35 instances of wishes which either followed the announcement of the closure or appeared at the end of a message, where they functioned as sign off formulae. Twenty-two of them were delivered by means of the performative verb *ευχόμαστε* 'we wish', reflecting the more formal style of the Greek signs. The remaining 13 expressions, however, were informal and more typical of spoken language, including expressions such as *καλή δύναμη σε όλους!* / '(good) strength to all', *να είστε όλοι καλά!* / 'be all well'. The wishes referred primarily to the recipients' well-being:

11. *Ευχόμαστε σε όλους υγεία και ασφάλεια!* [GR147]
'We wish health and safety to all!'

The two most commonly used complements of the wishes were *υγεία* 'health' and *δύναμη* 'strength', each of which appeared 14 times in our data. Even though these wishes mainly served the function of closing formulae, the implicit references to the pandemic made them sound personal and genuine.

The London signs, in contrast, present a more varied and slightly ambiguous picture, since some expressions conventionalised as wishes were used in a more literal sense, acquiring a directive force. For instance, formulaic expressions such as *take care*, conventionalised as a (wish serving as a) parting formula, were often embedded in formulations such as *Please take care of yourselves and each other* [UK035]. Hence, the distinction between wishes and directive speech acts becomes blurred in the English data and their classification as either wishes or directives had to be based on individual formulations and their co-text, with expressions as the one above being coded as advice (see Ogiermann, in press).

Accordingly, of the 52 wishes in the English data, only 27 indisputably classify as belonging to this category. Twenty of them contained the performative verb *wish* or the plural form of the corresponding noun, which clearly identify the expression as a wish, and were commonly followed by the complement *good/best of health* (12). A further four instances of wishing formulae featured the verb *to hope* (13).

12. *I would like to wish you all the strength and resilience you need to stay in the best of health.* [UK325]
13. *... we hope that you and your loved ones stay safe and well.* [UK012]

Thirty-one of the London signs featured formulaic, conventionalised expressions that functioned as both a wish and a closing formula, most of which took the form of imperative constructions, namely *take care*, *keep/stay well* and *stay/be safe* – as well as combinations thereof, as in Examples 14 and 15.⁹

14. *Keep well and stay safe.* [UK151]

15. *Until then take care and be safe.* [UK125]

While *take care* has become conventionalised as a parting formula over the last couple of decades, *keep/stay well* is a formula generally associated with health contexts. *Stay safe*, on the other hand, only started being used more widely in the context of the pandemic. During the first lockdown, it took on the function of a parting formula replacing *take care*, especially in email communication, thus becoming a wish directed towards the addressee's well-being (but see Ogiermann, in press).

Overall, even though the majority of the wishes found in our data functioned as closing formulae, their linguistic realisations went beyond what is expected in the context of closure signs – or any public signs. The references to health and safety they contained addressed current concerns of potential readers, at the same time portraying the authors of the messages as caring and rendering them personal and heartfelt.

5. Discussion

This paper has analysed public signs that emerged on the doors of closed businesses in the context of the first lockdown imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. These highly transient signs provide a rare documentation of a historical event and two countries' struggle in dealing with it. They not only tended to be more elaborate than traditional closure signs but they drew on a range of texts. On the one hand, they adopted formal features of official public announcements and personal business correspondence and reproduced current governmental messages and the discourses surrounding the pandemic. On the other, they contained features of informal and even intimate spoken language, as if attempting to reduce social distance and thus renegotiate the relationship with customers in the light of the pandemic.

Our analysis has focused on the relational work performed on the signs, as represented by the different uses of four expressive speech acts: greetings, apologies, thanking and wishes. Unlike other speech acts, expressives primarily fulfil interpersonal functions. They have been defined as hearer supportive and inherently polite, with the relational work they perform either taking on the form of formulaic acts of courtesy or genuine expressions of emotions.

Our findings shed new light on this dual function of expressive speech acts and the criteria that can be drawn on in interpreting them. Apart from pragmatic theory (see Section 2.2), our

⁹ In total, the data contain 16 instances of the expression *take care*, 14 instances of *keep / stay well* and 62 instances of the expression *stay safe*. Whether they are more likely to serve as wishes or directives had to be decided on a one-to-one basis.

analysis has drawn on Watts' (2003) concept of politic behaviour which describes the use of certain linguistic structures as appropriate and expected in a given context. The expected features of our signs have been established in relation to the genre of 'traditional' closure signs and whether a given expressive speech act is conventionalised within that genre, in which case it is likely to serve a purely formulaic function and go unnoticed.

The Covid-19 signs contained expressive speech acts that do not normally feature on closure signs, they contained more of those that do occasionally appear on closure signs, and they used more effusive formulations than ordinary closure signs. Hence, the expressive speech acts appearing on Covid-19 signs go beyond the audience's expectations. They are more likely to be noticed and less likely to be interpreted as routinised formulae.

The fact that the linguistic realisations of expressive speech acts can serve as an indication of their function, with minimal formulations more likely reflecting formulaic functions than elaborate and effusive formulations, was already noted by pragmatic scholars. In addition, in our data, the inclusion of emotive vocabulary and references to the pandemic can also be interpreted as aiming at achieving certain relational effects going beyond the recipients' expectations.

The co-text surrounding the expressive speech acts under study provided additional clues for their interpretation. While supportive moves accompanying the speech acts, in particular references to the pandemic and the wellbeing of the community, generally made them sound more genuine, there are some signs in the English data where the co-text cancels out the effusive nature of the adjoining formulations. The following sign, for instance, was displayed on the chain bakery Greggs [UK090]:

Sign 3 [UK090]



While this sign contains an effusive expression of thanking, supported by a statement foregrounding the customers' importance, this is followed by a security message aimed at preventing burglaries. This message begins with the informal expression *Just so you know*, creating the impression that it continues addressing the *wonderful customers* referred to in the preceding sentences.

Yet another criterion distinguishing the different functions of expressive speech acts that emerged in this study is whether a given linguistic expression does in fact constitute a speech act – something that had already been noted by Austin (1962: 84). Previous research pointed out that apologies can serve the function of negative politeness strategies (Ogiermann 2009, 2015) and that expressions of thanking can merely delineate interactional segments (Hymes 1971). Accordingly, while Table 2 illustrates the overall frequencies of expressive speech acts in our data, a detailed qualitative analysis has shown that their functions varied according to their sequential position within the text. Hence, more than half of the apology expressions found in the data were used to mitigate the announcement of the closure. And the majority of expressions of thanks and wishes appeared at the end of the message, serving as sign off

formulae. Accordingly, linguistic expressions conventionally associated with expressives that support another speech act, or develop a secondary illocutionary force, adopt functions different from those represented by these expressive speech acts.

Table 2. Expressive speech acts in Greek and English data.

	Greetings	Apologies	Thanks	Wishes	Total
Greek	49 (17%)	3 (1%)	52 (18%)	35 (12%)	139 (49%)
English	34 (12%)	79 (27%)	108 (37%)	52 (18%)	273 (93%)
Total	83 (14%)	82 (14%)	160 (28%)	87 (25%)	412 (71%)

Since greetings do not normally appear on closure signs, their inclusion goes beyond what is expected and could therefore be interpreted as an attempt at making the signs sound more personal. Given the asynchronous mode of signs, greetings are also used to address potential audiences, which provides further opportunities for negotiating the relationship with the customers. In the Greek data, this was accomplished by referring to the customers as *friends*, as well as using the possessive pronoun *μας* ‘our’ in an expression signalling to the customers that they are being valued. The English data made use of a variety of adjectives attributing positive qualities to the customers, such as *loyal*, *lovely* or *awesome*, which could be interpreted as a form of compliment. The use of these adjectives went beyond the salutation move, also appearing in headings and thanking expressions.

Apologies appeared almost exclusively in the English data, where more than half of them took the form of disarming apologies accompanying announcements of closure. As they typically appear on English closure signs, and were significantly more frequent in our reference corpus (87%), they can be said to merely follow the genre’s conventions. Remedial apologies, in contrast, can occasionally be found on signs announcing disruptions, but they rarely feature on closure signs. Yet, we found 34 such apologies on the London signs, with some of them taking on quite elaborate forms.

Expressions of thanking were the most frequent expressive speech act in our data. As with apologies, their position in the text determined their function. All thanking expressions in the Greek data appeared at the end of the message and served as sign off formulae, in both the Covid-19 and the reference corpus. Although there were no thanking formulae in the English reference corpus, the Covid-19 corpus included numerous thanking expressions, serving as both sign off formulae and actual speech acts of thanking, with fewer than a third of them serving a purely formulaic function. The effusive thanking expressions found in the English data, some of which implicitly paid compliments to the customers, clearly went beyond what the recipients would expect – from closure signs and their communications with business owners in general.

Wishes were absent from our English reference corpus though they did feature on Greek signs announcing holiday related closures. Their use on Covid-19 signs went beyond what one may expect from closure signs, with only a quarter of the wishes serving as sign off formulae. The majority of the wishes consisted of elaborate formulations implicitly referring to the pandemic by wishing the recipients health and strength, even if they appeared in final position.

Sign off formulae were, in fact, the most miscellaneous category in our data, most clearly illustrating the dependence of the function of speech acts on their position in a text. Apart from formulaic forms of speech acts such as wishes and thanking formulae, this move consisted of a wide range of expressions, from the highly formal *Με εκτίμηση* / “with esteem” in the Greek, to *Sending love to you and your family* in the English data.

While the criteria discussed above provide some indication of whether the expressive speech acts that appear on the Covid-19 signs perform purely formulaic functions, their interpretation as expressions conveying genuine emotions is less straightforward. On the one hand, this creative form of customer communication can be interpreted favourably in the context of the pandemic and the feeling of community it created, on the other, it can be viewed as a strategic attempt at customer retention. The interpretation of the relational work performed on Covid-19 signs ultimately lies with the recipient, whose perceptions are likely to be guided by culture-specific norms and conventions. Since British culture has been linked to negative politeness, characterised by restraint and a preference for formulaic language, and Greek culture to positive politeness, allowing for a free expression of emotions, further insights can be derived from a comparison of our two data sets.

Both the English and the Greek data contain original uses of language, going beyond the formulations on traditional closure signs. In both countries, business owners used closure signs to negotiate their relationship with their customers within the context of the pandemic. This was, to a great degree, accomplished through an increased use of expressive speech acts and the formulation of more elaborate and emotive variants. Yet, the English signs contained more expressive speech acts and more creative and personal formulations than the Greek signs, where an overall higher level of formality was retained.

Given that politeness in British culture is associated with the suppression of emotions and viewed as a form of restraint, the use of effusive and personal formulations found on the London signs is rather unexpected – as is the fact that in a country where the display of emotions is evaluated positively the signs contained far fewer expressive speech acts. While the formulations of the wishes in both sets of data were clearly motivated by the pandemic, there were stark differences in the use of apologies and thanking formulae in the two languages.

Apologies are highly ubiquitous in British English and were also frequent in our data. The reason why the Greek data did not contain apologies may well be that, having been told by their government to close their businesses, the Greek business owners did not feel like there was anything they should apologise for. Equally, while all the thanking expressions in the Greek data took the form of sign off formulae, resembling their use in our reference corpus, the English data contained a high number of effusive thanking expressions, referring to the customers with adjectives full of praise. Yet, while these expressions can be interpreted as emotional, they are less likely to be interpreted as genuine.

Within Watts’ (2003) framework an excessive use of politeness structures can be evaluated both positively and negatively and although he does not discuss sincerity as a precondition to politeness evaluations, one could argue that for a message to be interpreted positively, it needs to be interpreted as genuine first. This, however, may differ in cultures that rely on

formulaic expressions to express politeness and cultures that tend to reject superficial politeness routines as insincere (Sifianou 2013: 98).

These differences not only reflect cultural preferences but also norms concerning language use in customer service in the two countries. Given the relationship between the sign producers and the intended audiences, the effusive and intimate character of some of the expressive speech acts could clearly be viewed as overstepping the line. This could be the reason why the adjustments made on the Greek closure signs were relatively moderate. While a negative interpretation is also possible in the British context, this will not necessarily be the case if the expressions are not taken at face value in the first place. What our data, therefore, show is that expressive speech acts are more likely to assume purely formulaic functions in English than they do in Greek.

6. Conclusion

The rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown during spring 2020 had a great impact on people's relationships, interpersonal communication and the relational work performed therein – even in business contexts, as illustrated in this paper. But although the pandemic continued well into the following year and more lockdowns followed, the first lockdown remains unique in this respect. During the autumn lockdown, considerably fewer businesses displayed closure signs. Some recycled the signs they used during the first lockdown and some used generic ones. Some shops expanded their services by creating websites and offering delivery and produced new signs to share this information with their customers.

The weekly clapping rounds for the NHS stopped, even though hospitals were admitting even more Covid-19 patients than they did during the first lockdown. The rainbow posters in the windows of residential properties faded or disappeared altogether. The governmental slogan *menoumespiti*, which was enthusiastically reproduced by businesses and shared across social media in Greece during the first lockdown, was soon forgotten. The feeling of togetherness and shared responsibility spread at the start of the pandemic came to be replaced with coping with what had become the new normal.

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