

Non-minimal response tokens in English and Russian professional discourse: A comparative study

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Elena N. Malyuga^{a, @}Michael McCarthy^{a, b}^aPeoples' Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russia, en_malyuga@hotmail.com;^bUniversity of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Abstract: Non-minimal response tokens (NMRTs, e.g. *great*, *absolutely*) and their functions in turn-initial position have been discussed in relation to everyday English conversation. In this paper, we look at the occurrence of NMRTs in business and professional contexts, using English and Russian corpora of spoken discourse. We investigate cases where the NMRT constitutes the sole item in the speaking turn, where it is accompanied by an item or items of a similar type or is prefaced or modified, and where it prefates a longer turn. We examine the distribution and functions of a selection of NMRTs in the two datasets, consider issues of comparability of the two corpora and of the NMRTs, and conclude on what NMRTs might point to about the characteristic linguistic repertoires of different professional cultures. The paper summarises the three key points drawn from the comparative study: a comparatively low percentage of Russian items used as single-word turns; a contrast in the most frequently encountered single-word turns; and general orientation towards positive assessment of the interlocutor in both languages. The corresponding inferences regarding English and Russian professional cultures and prevailing linguistic repertoires are made in light of the said three points.

Keywords: dialogue, English, oral discourse, professional communication, Russian

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Неминимальные ответные единицы в английском и русском профессиональном дискурсе: сопоставительное исследование

Елена Николаевна Малу́га^{a, @}Майкл Маккарти^{a, b}^aРоссийский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Россия, en_malyuga@hotmail.com;^bНоттингемский университет, Ноттингем, Великобритания

Аннотация: Неминимальные ответные единицы (НОЕ, такие как *great*, *absolutely*) и их функции в начальной позиции в коммуникативном ходе получили освещение в рамках исследований повседневной коммуникации в английском языке. Настоящая статья ставит целью анализ употреблений НОЕ в деловом профессиональном контексте с использованием англо- и русскоязычных корпусов разговорного дискурса. В статье рассматриваются случаи, когда НОЕ занимает весь коммуникативный ход, либо сопровождается схожей единицей или единицами, либо используется

непосредственно перед более развернутым коммуникативным ходом. В работе анализируются распределение и функции отдельных НОЕ в двух наборах данных, рассматриваются вопросы сопоставления как используемых корпусов, так и самих НОЕ, делается вывод о том, какие характеристики лингвистического репертуара различных профессиональных культур могут быть описаны через анализ НОЕ, преобладающих в разговорных практиках. В ходе сравнительного анализа выявляются три основных факта: сравнительно низкий процент русскоязычных единиц, используемых в качестве заполнителей целого коммуникативного хода; различие в наиболее частотных НОЕ, занимающих весь коммуникативный ход; и общая ориентированность на позитивную оценку собеседника в обоих языках. Соответствующие заключения об английской и русской профессиональных культурах, а также преобладающих лингвистических репертуарах, делаются на основе данных трех наблюдений.

Ключевые слова: английский язык, диалог, профессиональная коммуникация, русский язык, устный дискурс

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we consider how non-minimal response tokens at turn-openings reflect the concerns and goals of business and professional discourses. We use data from Russian and English spoken corpora and investigate cases where the response token constitutes the sole item in the speaking turn, where it is accompanied by an item or items of a similar type, and where it prefaces a longer turn. We examine the distribution and functions of a selection of response tokens in both languages, consider questions of comparability in the two datasets, and conclude on what response tokens tell us, if anything, about English and Russian professional cultures in terms of language being used.

We define a non-minimal response token (hereafter NMRT) as a lexical item which reacts and responds to previous talk and which offers more than a minimal acknowledgement but does not constitute a change of current speaker. Some examples will serve to illustrate our approach. Examples (1)–(3) from [CANBEC] show, respectively, the NMRT *absolutely* occupying the whole turn, in the company of similar items, and preface further content.

- (1) — *The stock's churning out, isn't it?*
— ***Absolutely.***
- (2) — *You've gotta sell some lifts though, haven't you?*
— ***That's right. Absolutely.***
- (3) — *And the price is fixed.*
— ***Absolutely.*** *So, there's not a lot of fat in to cater for this.*

The NMRTs in bold are sometimes referred to as “assessments” [Goodwin 1986]; they evaluate the current speaker's talk rather than simply acknowledge it [Antaki 2002], which differentiates them from backchannels (such as *yeah, uh-huh, hmm*) that lack evaluative semantics [Yngve 1970]. NMRTs may be places of transition relevance, “places where current speakers can or should exit” [Sacks et al. 1974: 708]. This allows another party to speak or continue speaking without feeling interrupted and suggests that speakers who use NMRTs without further content do not see themselves as taking over the current speaker role. Equally, NMRTs may preface further content, where the user fully assumes the current speaker role, what is in some studies referred to as “resumptive reopeners” [Clancy et al. 1996: 362–364].

Assigning the label “current speaker” has been a matter of long debate, and a range of participant responses have been considered relevant, from body language (head-nods, etc.), through intonational contours [Selting 2000], vocalisations such as *mm*, *uhuh* and *ah*, minimal *yes/yeah/no* responses, non-minimal lexical responses employing a set of adjectives and adverbs (*absolutely*, *great*, *right*, etc.), short phrasal and clausal responses (*that’s good*, *I see*, *no way*), to extended turns [Duncan 1974]. In this paper, we focus on NMRTs, partly because backchannels have received adequate attention from scholars over the years, and partly because it is the non-minimal lexical items which most readily evidence the pragmatic dimension.

2. Investigating response

2.1. Everyday conversation

Ch. C. Fries looked at a range of utterances by listeners during telephone calls, including vocalisations such as *unh* and *hunh*, *yes*, and lexical expressions such as *I see* and *good* [Fries 1952]. Later, V. Yngve proffered the notion of the backchannel, as manifested in reactions such as *uh-huh*, *yes*, *hmm* [Yngve 1970]. Speakers using the backchannel are not deemed to assume the speaker role. However, NMRTs would seem to exist on the borderline between backchannels and turns of a new “current speaker”, located somewhere on a cline of “obtrusiveness” as discussed by [Norrick 2012]. G. Tottie’s view, which we concur with, is that the response tokens we investigate “grease the wheels of the conversation but constitute no claim to take over the turn” [Tottie 1991: 255].

[Duncan 1974] included in the notion of backchannel items such as *right* and *I see* (see also [Gardner 2001; Stubbe 1998]). Listeners do not just listen; they show their engagement with what they have heard by doing more than just making vocal noises or saying *yes* and *no*. To undervalue the role of listener, in E. Schegloff’s view, tempts us to see the conversation as “a single speaker’s and a single mind’s product” [Schegloff 1982: 74]. Similarly, F. Erickson [1985: 299] characterises listening as “an activity of communicative production as well as one of reception”.

H. Tao [2003] sees turn beginnings as particularly important. This observation was also immanent in [Sacks et al. 1974: 36], who described the three internal components of a turn, including a first part which “addresses the relation of the turn to a prior”. Tao [2003] showed that turn-initial items in English conversation are mostly lexical and are generally syntactically independent items. High-frequency items such as the definite article, which commonly begins sentences in written discourse, were notable by their infrequency. Turn-initial items are instead dominated by items such as *yes*, *well*, *right*, *okay* and pronouns attached to fixed expressions such as *I think*, *you know*, *I mean*, etc. The turn-initial position witnesses speakers frequently choosing items which show interpersonal engagement and convergence, and which facilitate goal-orientation, features which are essential to successful business and professional communication.

Studies investigating Russian NMRTs in everyday conversation also fall within the scope of research concerned with communicative engagement, defined as “extent of cognitive and behavioural involvement into the process of communication” [Gulyaeva 2017: 87]. Other adjacent fields of research include verification discourse markers [Kobozeva et al. 2019], speech acts of agreement [Agmanova, Kul’maganbetova 2013], understanding [Lazarev 2009] and confirmation [Mosaleva, Sharonov 2017], etiquette provisions of communication [Mikhal’chuk 1992]. Probably the weightiest NMRTs that have received a lot of attention in Russian language studies are *nu*, *konečno* and *razumeetsja*, of which *nu* is possibly the most overwhelmingly complex as it may convey numerous meanings that are often only discernable from context, intonation and/or based on the tokens immediately preceding or following it (see [Baranov, Kobozeva

1988] and [Dobrovol'skij, Levontina 2017] for a comprehensive study of *nu* as a response token in Russian). I. Kobozeva, O. Ivanova and L. Zakharov refer to NMRTs such as *konečno* and *razumeetsja* as “discourse markers expressing positive verification” [Kobozeva et al. 2019: 37] and explore their operation as markers — often occupying the entire speaking turn — indicating agreement with the information conveyed in the previous turn. Russian NMRTs such as *xorošo*, *opredelëнно*, *verno* are investigated as part of the communicative strategy of agreement, and are described as items expressing a varying degree of concord in the response, often associated with no explicit intention of taking over the current speaker turn [Agmanova, Kul'maganbetova 2013; Orazalinova 2012; Mikhal'chuk 1992; Mosaleva, Sharonov 2017]. Research on intentional expression of support and understanding in Russian communicative practices also covers tokens with both subtle (as in *ponjatno*, *jasno*) and overt evaluative component (as in *otlično*, *zamečatel'no*) [Lazarev 2009; Dobrushina 1993; Zakharova 2011].

2.2. Response in specialised contexts

P. Clancy et al. [1996] discuss differences in the frequency and placement of backchannel reactions as observed in Japanese, Mandarin and English. They identify a set of “reactive expressions” which are lexical items similar to those we focus on here. They find that English and Japanese conversations display a higher frequency of reactive tokens than does Mandarin and conclude that Mandarin speakers are more likely to take the floor when speaking than their English and Japanese social counterparts, whose contributions are more likely to be supportive, non-floor-grabbing contributions.

Cross-cultural comparability and translatability of response items is addressed in [Amador-Moreno et al. 2013] which offers a study of English and Spanish response tokens. They conclude that frameworks elaborated for English are sufficiently robust for the purposes of comparison with Spanish conversational data, with some caveats related to cultural differences. They give examples of potential translation pitfalls and ways of varying the pragmatic force of response tokens (e.g. reduplication) which may not always be the same across two languages.

A. O'Keeffe and S. Adolphs [2008] compare British English and Irish English data. As well as investigating single-word response tokens (e.g. *right*, *absolutely*), they looked at two-word (e.g. *oh right*, *very good*), three-word (e.g. *are you serious?*), and four-word (e.g. *oh yeah yeah yeah*) clusters. Some differences in the occurrences of forms were noted, for example, the use of *grand* as a response in Irish English but not in British English, and *quite* in the British but not in the Irish data. In a complementary study, though with a different procedure, M. McCarthy [2015] also examines turn-initial items in British and Irish English. That study automatically isolated single-word turns and additionally investigated immediate following adjective collocates of turns beginning with *that's* and *it's* (and the equivalent *tis* in Irish English). McCarthy concludes that cross-cultural differences are reflected in the higher incidence of religious references in NMRTs in Irish English.

J. Evison [2013] studied more than 13,000 turn-openings in academic discourse. She argues that simply extracting lexical items in a corpus (e.g. in a raw frequency list) misses the significance of item position and distribution. Evison demonstrates that, although items occurring at turn-initial position reflect the character of everyday conversation, their distribution among speakers is what matters: lecturers and tutors regularly open their turns with items that students far less frequently have access to (e.g. *okay*).

F. Farr [2003; 2011] investigates “engaged listenership” in a teacher-education context, using a corpus of post-teaching feedback meetings between tutors and student teachers. Farr tracks the distribution and function of responses and argues that they are essential to the success of interactions between tutors and students. Face needs and affective factors at the pragmatic level as well as transactional goals are involved. *Right*, for instance, is often a token of the acceptance

of corrective feedback by the student teacher, as well as being an acknowledgement of the receipt of information [Farr 2011: 152].

In the business domain, M. Handford's study of meetings and negotiations within and between companies includes a look at NMRTs such as *good* and *right*, as well as non-lexical contributions such as *oh* and *ah* [Handford 2010]. The researcher observes that it may be pragmatically inappropriate in formal business meetings to use some of the more emotive responses found in everyday conversation such as *lovely*, which emerges from analysis as a negative keyword, i.e. a word whose lower frequency in the business corpus when measured against a benchmark conversational corpus, is statistically significant. M. Handford also notes that the enthusiastic NMRT *sure* is more frequent in inter-company meetings than within companies, underlining the need to nurture good relationships and to attend to face needs [Handford 2010: 179].

3. Data

3.1. Data comparability

Elsewhere, we have discussed problems of comparing data across corpora which are not identical in size, representativeness, annotation or searchability constraints [Malyuga, McCarthy 2018], which may cause the researcher to give up an uneven struggle for an unattainable goal. The problem of comparability is acute in relation to spoken corpora. For unscripted and unrehearsed spoken data, very rarely if ever will two corpora be sourced equally from different contexts of utterance in different languages or produce closely similar content and quality. Recent computational studies acknowledge a lack of consensus as to how comparability could be precisely established, especially in terms of data quality (e.g. [Li, Gaussier 2013]). Parallel corpora, where translations of one set of documents into another give access to two highly comparable datasets, have provided workable data (e.g. [Johansson, Hoffland 1994]), but creating parallel corpora of unscripted spontaneous spoken language is an extremely challenging enterprise and remains an elusive goal.

In [Malyuga, McCarthy 2018], we consider (and dismiss) the possibility of using the largest available datasets in two different languages with the aim that truly massive amounts of statistical data will yield large-scale generalisations and obscure local differences. The paradox is that large-scale statistics based on vast amounts of data may yield far less insight than close observation of pragmatic features in local phenomena such as turn-allocation and face preservation, not to mention the near-impossibility of manually examining in depth many thousands of occurrences of a particular linguistic feature. One could, for example, compare the whole of the British National Corpus (BNC) with the whole of the Russian National Corpus (RNC) to ultimately come up with high-level generalisations about the statistical occurrences of items such as NMRTs in the two languages. However, they would tell us less about their in-context use than we might obtain from smaller, targeted corpora, especially as regards pragmatic features related to specific group identities.

The solution we proposed in [Malyuga, McCarthy 2018], and which we would argue yielded interesting and useful cross-linguistic insights, was to use as adequate a set of comparable data as was available by using a sub-corpus of Russian, and to acknowledge the fact that our two corpora do not have the same classification, annotation or searchability. The English data was collected in more narrowly circumscribed contexts (business meetings) than the Russian data (a broader range of business and professional talk), but set alongside each other, they provide contexts which narrow down the types of speakers represented to a conventionally recognisable professional, goal-oriented stratum of society. We present the data as being as comparable as is practically possible, and sufficiently robust as to yield numerically-supported insights into NMRT distribution and pragmatic functions.

This paper relies on previous studies, reviewed in Section 2, to derive the list of the most common English and Russian NMRTs. To obtain an accurate picture of their distribution in the two corpora we used (see the next sections), each item was analysed in terms of the following:

- 1) rank-order of frequency of the chosen NMRTs at the turn-initial slot;
- 2) occurrences of each item in the immediate company of other response tokens;
- 3) number of times the item occurred alone, as a single-word turn.

The distribution of English and Russian data was further compared. Qualitative discussions of functions follow for both sets of results, and conclusions are drawn in relation to equivalence, identity-creation and other potential cultural issues. In this way, we hope to look into how business and professional group identities and cultures emerge and are supported, along with any observable cross-linguistic differences. Because the two corpora are not parallel corpora [Mikhailov, Cooper 2016], only limited claims are made as to comparability and generalisability of the findings. This article is therefore not a corpus-linguistic study in the conventional, statistically-driven sense. It is, rather, a multi-pronged investigation using the quantitative potential of corpus data but drawing on approaches to the data from conversation analysis (e.g. turn construction) and pragmatics (e.g. questions of face and politeness and pragmatic marking) to better understand the contexts of utterance of NMRTs in two languages.

3.2. English data

This study uses the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus [CANBEC], a spoken corpus of just over 900,000 tokens. The audio recordings were made from 2001 onwards at 26 large and small industrial and service enterprises involving mainly middle- or upper-management UK speakers; around 10% of the speakers were expert users of English as a second language. The businesses include makers of industrial equipment (e.g. cranes and lifting gear), pharmaceuticals, service industries (e.g. hotel and pub chains, financial services, consultancy). The settings included external (inter-company) meetings and internal (intra-company) meetings. Topics include common problems and procedures, production schedules, decision-making, logistics, pricing, sales and marketing, and human resources. Further information on the CANBEC corpus and detailed analyses may be found in [Handford 2010]¹.

3.3. Russian data

The Russian data were derived from the Russian National Corpus [RNC] via a manually filtered sub-corpus of spoken business and professional communication. A few important initial observations need to be made. Firstly, the RNC is the only major source of corpus data for Russian, and as such it does not offer any ready-made field-specific material similar to CANBEC. However, the RNC can be investigated via its in-built search engine, where various filters can be applied to narrow down the context — as in sphere of operation (formal business), text types (conversation-related), and subject matter (business-related) — a narrowing process which [Malyuga, McCarthy 2018] found to yield sufficiently comparable data, and which we apply here. Secondly, the overall size of the RNC is over 600 million tokens. However, after filters were applied to configure the sub-corpus of spoken business and professional discourse, a total of 950 thousand words was generated. Thirdly, while no ready-made lists of NMRTs exist for

¹ The CANBEC corpus is Copyright Cambridge University Press, from whom permission to quote or use its data must be sought.

Russian, such a list can be derived from previous research on conversational discourse markers of this type. Thus, sets of both English and Russian NMRTs are derived based on previous research on English and Russian response tokens, which will ensure identical methodological routine, provide equitable grounds for comparison, and minimise possibility of privileging one language over the other.

3.4. Annotations used in the extracts for both datasets

+ indicates the start or continuation of a latched turn;

<\$=> and <|\$=> indicate a curtailed or aborted turn;

<\$E> and <|\$E> indicate a pause.

4. Results for English and Russian datasets

The main sources of the list of English NMRTs for the present study were those provided in [McCarthy 2002; 2003], since those studies were based on corpora of British and North American conversational data. Although the present CANBEC data was predominantly UK-sourced, the availability of the American lists offered an extra safeguard against missing potential NMRTs.

[McCarthy 2002] looked at the top 2,000 words in two sub-corpora, which rendered 21 potential NMRTs in the British corpus occurring more than 100 times and 19 items in the American data. Backchannels, *yes/no* responses and high-frequency discourse markers (e.g. *well, okay*) were excluded and the author focused on assessment items with higher interpersonal import (e.g. *good, exactly, wonderful, fine*). These were rank re-ordered based on their occurrence as single-word turns. [McCarthy 2003] additionally provided data for the occurrence of the selected NMRTs in turn-openings immediately after function words such as *yes* and *no* (e.g. *Yeah right*). The present paper uses the British list and includes figures for occurrence at the start of extended turns as well as single-word turns.

Although the authors' previous lists [Malyuga, McCarthy 2018] were considered a viable basis for looking at the interpersonal assessment type of NMRTs, an automated search for turn-openers was also done to obviate the risk of missing items which may be more common in or unique to business discourse. A cut-off point of a minimum of 10 occurrences for inclusion in the final list was employed to ensure an adequate amount of data for qualitative analysis. No unique items were found in the data, but two of the most frequent lexical turn-openers, *well* and *okay*, exhibited interesting differences in regard to turn-length, and so were included in the list. They will be commented on briefly but not analysed in depth, as their extremely high frequency would merit a separate study.

Additionally, the search yielded two modal items, *probably* and *correct*, which had not met the frequency criteria for inclusion in earlier lists. Therefore, the final list of English turn-opening items included those which formed the lists used in [McCarthy 2002; 2003], with the addition of *well, okay, correct*, and *probably*. The frequency of each item was extracted from the CANBEC data and rank-ordered as shown in the left-hand section of Table 1, with 17 items having a frequency of greater than 10 occurrences.

The next stage of the analysis investigated how many times each of these items occurred as a single-word turn, i.e. as a stand-alone NMRT not acting as a preface to further content. These stand-alone occurrences are of interest in that they offer evaluative responses which are non-incremental in terms of content and are not floor-grabbing. Their function is one of interactive engagement, of supporting the current speaker and enabling the discourse to move towards

its goals, something which is clearly important in business meetings and negotiations. The middle section of Table 1 ranks the items in order of their occurrence as single-word turns alongside their total occurrence in the turn-initial slot. Occurrences as a single-word turn were also expressed as a percentage of the occurrences at the turn-opening slot (right-hand section of Table 1), indicating which items display a greater proclivity to occur as single-word turns: the table reveals a wide range of percentages, from almost 90% to zero.

Table 1

Turn-initial items in English business data: Total occurrences, occurrences as single-word turns and percentage of single-word occurrences (rank-ordered)

No.	Total occurrences	Occurrences as single-word turns		% of single-word occurrences	
1. okay	2417	right	1150	really	88.64%
2. right	2073	okay	765	correct	84.62%
3. well	1688	well	62	sure	76.67%
4. alright	80	exactly	46	exactly	70.77%
5. absolutely	67	sure	46	great	69.70%
6. exactly	65	really	39	cool	63.64%
7. good	64	absolutely	36	good	57.81%
8. sure	60	good	35	excellent	56.10%
9. really	44	alright	31	right	55.48%
10. excellent	41	excellent	23	absolutely	53.73%
11. fine	35	great	23	fine	45.71%
12. great	33	fine	16	alright	38.75%
13. actually	27	cool	14	definitely	38.10%
14. cool	22	correct	11	okay	31.65%
15. definitely	21	definitely	8	well	3.67%
16. probably	16	actually	0	actually	0.00%
17. correct	13	probably	0	probably	0.00%

Similar to the above part concerned with English NMRTs, the list of Russian tokens was compiled drawing on previous research into the Russian language that covered issues such as back-channel items, assessment tokens and verification discourse markers (regardless of the sphere of their functioning). The frequency of each item was extracted from the RNC data and rank-ordered as shown in the left-hand section of Table 2, with 13 items having a frequency of greater than 10 occurrences (frequency threshold parameters have eliminated three Russian items *sobstvenno* (9 occurrences), *dejstvitel'no* (9 occurrences) and *zdorovo* (no occurrences) as not sufficiently featured). The next step involved specifying how frequently the items were used as stand-alone NMRTs (Table 2 middle section). Occurrences as a single-word turn were also expressed as a percentage of the occurrences at the turn-opening slot (right-hand section of Table 2), indicating which items display a greater proclivity to occur as single-word turns.

Table 2

Turn-initial items in Russian business data: Total occurrences, occurrences as single-word turns and percentage of single-word occurrences (rank-ordered)

No.	Total occurrences		Occurrences as single-word turns		% of single-word occurrences	
1.	nu	2404	razumeetsja	988	razumeetsja	54.86%
2.	konečno	2218	konečno	813	otlično	51.61%
3.	razumeetsja	1801	xorošo	139	konečno	36.65%
4.	xorošo	382	ponjatno	35	xorošo	36.39%
5.	ponjatno	104	jasno	20	ponjatno	33.65%
6.	jasno	89	otlično	16	verno	27.27%
7.	otlično	31	nu	7	opredelënno	25.00%
8.	zamečatel'no	21	okej	5	okej	23.80%
9.	okej	21	vozmožno	4	jasno	22.47%
10.	vozmožno	19	opredelënno	3	vozmožno	21.05%
11.	imenno	17	verno	3	zamečatel'no	9.52%
12.	opredelënno	12	zamečatel'no	2	nu	0.29%
13.	verno	11	imenno	0	imenno	0.00%

5. Commentary and discussion

Notable in English data results is the cliff-edge drop-off in frequency between the top three items and the rest. *Okay*, *right* and *well* are extremely high-frequency items (2417, 2073 and 1688 of total occurrences, respectively), which is not surprising, given their ubiquitous functions as discourse markers, signalling stages in the progression of the discourse. Studies include [Merritt 1984] on *okay*, [Schiffrin 1987] on *well*. A. O'Keeffe, M. McCarthy and R. Carter illustrate the high overall frequency of *well* and *right*, and the fact that *okay* is among their top 20 statistically significant keywords [O'Keeffe et al. 2007: 206–210]. Goal-orientation and moving efficiently from one stage of a meeting or negotiation to another and indicating progress with these markers is a central feature of business language, and one which confirms the identities of the users as competent members of their communities of practice. On 72 occasions, *okay* and *right* occur together occupying the whole turn, marking a clear resolution of a piece of business, after which a new sub-topic begins, as in (4).

- (4) — *I think the best thing to do is just give me a buzz let me know that C J's having leave at a particular time and is that okay sort of thing.*

— **Okay. Right.**

— *That's, that's probably the best thing to do.* [moves on to discuss a new sub-topic]

On two occasions, *okay*, *right* and *well* occur together, as in (5).

- (5) [Speakers have been discussing a problem with a client company and what to do to resolve it]
 — **Okay. Right. Well.** *Set a meeting up.* <\$=> *And* <|\$=>
 <\$E> 1.5 secs <|\$E>
 — *That's all right then.*

While *right* (55.48%) and *okay* (31.65%) both seem to offer considerable potential for occurring as single-word turns, *well* displays a strikingly lower tendency (only 3.67%). Almost all turns beginning with *well* in the CANBEC data contain further matter. This can be explained by the common function of *well* as indicating a divergence from the assumptions of the previous turn(s), for example, as a preface to an answer to a yes-no question where the answer is not or cannot be *yes* or *no*, in other words, a response that is in some way dispreferred [Schiffrin 1987: 102] and for which considerable pragmatic facework is demanded. The fact that *well* needs, and overwhelmingly receives, further elaboration could also be seen as an example of meta-pragmatic or metacognitive awareness (for a discussion, see [Culpeper, Haugh 2014: 235ff]). In business discourse, a single-word *well* response without further comment could derail the smooth progress of the discourse and could be heard as face-threatening; it would seem pragmatically imperative to account for one's use of *well*, so as to maintain understanding and good relations.

As data show, 10 of the 17 items occur as single-word turns in more than 50% of their turn-initial occurrences. Four of the items (*really*, *correct*, *sure* and *exactly*) show more than 70% as single-word turns, and it is to these that we now give greater focus.

Really has two common realisations: spoken with a falling intonation and spoken with a rising intonation (indicated by a question mark in the transcripts). 25 of the 39 single-word turns are transcribed with a question mark. In addition, there are four occurrences of *Oh really* with falling intonation, where it generally acts as an acknowledgement of interesting or relevant information. With rising-intonation, the function is typically a checking one, but often with some element of surprise or an indication of being impressed or enthused, as in (6), reinforced by the co-presence of *wow* by the same speaker.

- (6) — *Since then we've built another site for a company within the group and their site works very well. It's very efficient very quick. Erm, they've got more products on it and they are marketing it more+*
 — *Yeah.*
 — *+but it's doing nine times.*
 — **Really?**
 — *Yeah.*
 — **Wow.**
 — *So we've got the formula right.*

Correct also has a high return as a single-word NMRT. It is reaffirming and projects a confident certainty on the part of the speaker. It is used not only to confirm facts and figures but also to agree with opinions and judgements, an important interpersonal function. In (7), its brevity and finality and its placement in overlapping speech enables the other speaker quickly to propose a course of action.

- (7) — *Yeah. I think <\$=> I think what <|\$=> my brief on that one was you're not desperate during the summer but you need to shift it round about September+*
 — **Correct.**
 — *+October. Yeah so we need to do a deal on it.*

Sure mostly acts as positive and friendly assent to requests and proposals and to show agreement, as well as to confirm understandings. M. Handford notes a higher occurrence of *sure* in inter-company meetings (as opposed to in-company meetings) and puts this down to the expectation

that positive face will be an important factor when dealing with external relations, thus protecting professional identities as well as ensuring efficient progress [Handford 2010: 161–162].

- (8) — *Would you be able to let me have some prices on that+*
 — *Yeah.*
 — *+just to give me some ideas?*
 — ***Sure.***
 — *Don't go to lots of effort.*

Finally, *exactly* typically indicates enthusiastic support for proposals and judgements, here used twice by the same speaker in (9).

- (9) — *And I know I shouldn't say this but we can do it a lot cheaper.*
 — *Yeah.*
 — *Because we've got the pulling power to advertise that+*
 — *Yeah.*
 — *+exhibition and get a stand free of charge.*
 — *Well that's right. You can play one off against the other. I mean you can.*
 — ***Exactly.***
 — *Yeah.*
 — ***Exactly.***
 — *Yeah.*

A further seven items to exceed the 50% mark in the English data were *great*, *cool*, *good*, *excellent*, *right* and *absolutely*. *Absolutely*, additionally, occurred seven times followed by *yeah* in two-word turns. All of them can indicate positive and enthusiastic responses to incoming information or to successful completions of stages of business, and are sometimes found in each other's company and in the company of other items whose frequency did not meet the minimum cut-off point for present consideration (e.g. *wonderful* in (10)).

- (10) — *Then we'll er see what happens.*
 — *Yeah.*
 — *Yeah.*
 — ***Wonderful.***
 — ***Excellent.*** <\$E> 2 secs <\\$E> ***Good. Good.***
 — *All right? Thank you very much.*
 — *Thank you.*
 — *Yeah.* [meeting ends]

Right is seen to act in its two major functions of discourse marker and acknowledgement token, which perhaps explains its around 50%-50% distribution as a single word turn and as a preface to further talk (typically the current speaker moving things on to the next micro- or macro-stage).

Although the procedure for including an item in the table above was strictly concerned with its occurrence as the first word after a change of speaker annotation in the corpus, the number of turns beginning with *Oh* and followed by one of the items in our list was notable. Those exceeding 10 occurrences were *Oh right* (285 occurrences), *Oh that's* (39), *Oh okay* (33), and *Oh well* (32). *Oh* has been discussed in the literature in its functions with regard to the organisation of information (e.g. the realisation of the relevance or unexpectedness of something) and reacting to incoming talk, whether positively or with a degree of surprise, disapproval or challenge [Schiffrin 1987; Aijmer 2002]. In the CANBEC data, *good*, *lovely*, *definitely* and *absolutely* follow shortly after the four high-frequency items mentioned above in the list of immediate collocates of *oh*. In this list, the tokens *God* (13 occurrences), *crikey* (3 occurrences), and *Christ* (2 occurrences) are the only prominent negative or potentially challenging uses. *Oh* and its collocates further confirm the overall positive and supportive engagement of participants

in the English data and is a marker of the importance of meta-pragmatic awareness, hard work at the interpersonal level in the creation and maintenance of group identities.

Some of the items in the NMRT list can be followed by *not*. These are *absolutely*, *definitely* and *probably*. However, the low frequency of occurrence with negation further underlines the general desire to avoid responding negatively. *Definitely not* occurs only twice, in both cases followed by further explanation/elaboration, while *probably not* only occurs three times, in comparison with the 16 turn-initial occurrences of *probably*. There were no occurrences of *absolutely not*.

The items in our list often occur side-by-side as repetitions, in the company of other items in the list, or in the company of similar NMRTs not in our list. Examples (2), (4), (5), (6), (9) and (10) have already illustrated these phenomena; some further examples here underline the way items cluster, especially in co-constructed discourse elements where more than one speaker may contribute to affirming the current pragmatic state of play (e.g. example (10) above).

- (11) — *We've got a big chart on the wall.*
 — *Have you. What, sort of a World Cup planner?*
 — *Yeah. <SE> laughs <\SE>*
 — **Excellent.**
 — **Lovely.**
 — **Good. Well okay.**
- (12) — *But if I give you a call Friday will that be*
 — **Fine. Yeah.**
 — *Will that be okay?*
 — *Yeah yeah.*
 — **Terrific. Okay.**
- (13) — **Okay** guys. *Look I'm gonna have to step out now.*
 — **Okay. Fine.**
 — *Erm there's a couple of things here I need to talk to you about.*
 — **Sure. Sure.**
 — *Erm but if I give you a call in the morning about that.*
 — **Yeah fine.**

The data show that the frequent use of *well / nu* is similar in the two languages, where both items are overwhelmingly used as linking elements prefacing further content, ensuring a successful transition to further new, or divergent, content and often serving as a face-preserving device in business and professional conversations.

One of the most conspicuous conclusions to be drawn from Table 2 is that Russian items occur as single-word turns in no more than about 55% of their occurrences as turn-initial (compared to the highest 88% in English data), which suggests Russian speakers' greater proclivity towards longer response turns. Importantly, only two of the Russian items used in single-word turns exceed the 50% threshold — namely, *razumeetsja* and *otlično*.

Razumeetsja, discussed above, is used to express complete, confident agreement or comprehensive understanding, and was observed to co-occur with *konečno* on five occasions, as in (14).

- (14) — *Pri etom ostanovka proizvodstva budet imet' ves'ma udručajuščie posledstvijsja.* 'And suspension of production will carry discouraging consequences.'
 — **Razumeetsja. 'Absolutely.'**
 — *Daže esli my govorim o samyx minimal'nyx sroках.* 'Even if it is a very short period of time.'
 — **Konečno. 'Sure.'**

Otlično is a frequent NMRT used to express positive assessment or approval of the interlocutor's suggestions, proposals, speculations, findings, etc.

- (15) — *Tak čto otrekulirovat' postavki ne sostavit truda.*
 'So, we'll have no difficulty adjusting the supplies.'
 — *Da, eto ne problema.* 'Yeah, not a problem.'
 — **Otlično.** 'Excellent.'

A set of less frequent single-word turns with about 30% occurrence rate include *konečno*, *xorošo* and *ponjatno*. *Konečno* is used to show continuous engagement in the conversation and reassure the interlocutor that their contribution is accepted. *Konečno* follows both interrogative and affirmative turns, as illustrated in (16)–(17).

- (16) — *Vy uvereny, čto grafik rabot ne nužno budet menjat' v bližajšee vremja?*
 'Are you sure we won't have to modify the work schedule in the near future?'
 — **Konečno.** 'Sure.'
 — *Potomu čto nam stoit obsudit' takuju vozmožnost' zaranee.*
 'Because we need to discuss such possibility beforehand.'
 (17) — *Podrjadčiki ne smogut načat' ran'se ponedel'nika.*
 'The contactors won't be able to start until Monday.'
 — *Da...* 'Yes.'
 — *Tak čto zdes' nam pridětsja byt' gibkimi.*
 'So, we'll have to be flexible about that.'
 — **Konečno.** 'Sure.'

Xorošo and *ponjatno* are neutral and broadly applicable items expressing mild consideration or agreement. On 18 out of 139 occasions, *xorošo* was used by those lower in hierarchy as a response to a request, which is a non-typical pattern for English, which would probably use *sure* or *absolutely* instead of *good* in this kind of context.

- (18) — *Mne nužno, čtoby etot dokument podpisali segodnja.*
 'I need this document signed today.'
 — **Xorošo.** 'Sure.'

As mentioned, *nu* was only used as a single-word turn on 7 out of 2404 occasions, which matches the observation made about *well* in the English data in connection with dispreferred sequences.

The Russian data also reveal a tendency towards clustering of NMRTs. The most frequent clusters are (1) *nu* + *razumeetsja*, (2) *nu* + *vozmožno*, (3) *razumeetsja* + *konečno*, and (4) *jasno* + *konečno*.

The key inference following from a comparatively low percentage of Russian items used as single-word turns (the maximum of 54.86% vs 88.64% in English) is that Russian and English business/professional conversational practices seem primarily to differ in the proportion of longer turns. This difference may suggest a variation in the pragmatic conventions prevailing in English and Russian business and professional cultures: while English business speakers are more inclined to maintain the flow of conversation by embedding non-floor-grabbing NMRTs as indicators of engagement, agreement and/or understanding, their Russian colleagues may prefer to embark upon longer, more contentful turns. This phenomenon might be attributed to a more competitive and hierarchy-dependent nature of the relevant Russian community, reflected in conversational practices. These characteristics are, in turn, ones which confer membership of a community of practice with a shared professional culture and linguistic repertoire. However, it is important to note that such a conclusion must be provisional, since we have acknowledged the problems involved in comparisons of data that are not constructed under strictly identical or near-identical criteria. The value of such inferences as we can make is to act as a spur to further research and to pose questions for a time when closer-matched data becomes available. Secondly, the most frequent single-word turns in Russian are represented by *razumeetsja*, *konečno* and *xorošo*, while English single-word response slots are most commonly filled by *right*,

ok and *well*. This might suggest a less competitive or, perhaps, more reserved and even provident nature of the English conversational practices, as these tokens are less assurance-based as compared to their more overtly endorsing Russian counterparts. This inference, in its turn, depends on the reliability of translation equivalents; at the present time, such equivalents may be derived from reliable lexicographical sources and the researchers' own cross-linguistic competence. It is a well-known and non-controversial fact that corpus-informed dictionaries have often led to a re-alignment of conventionally accepted definitions and/or senses of lexical items. Once again, with more corpus-based lexicography in both languages, and most especially, lexicographic investigations in specialised contexts such as business and professional discourse, inferences may be built on more solid ground. Thirdly, *nu* and *well* are used in a parallel way, mitigating dispreferred sequences and adding appropriate content to the turn, which may be considered as a feature of face preservation and maintenance of group identity in both cultures. This would seem a reasonable inference given that dispreferred responses in any language might be expected to, at the very least, hold up the conversational flow that is so crucial to successful business and professional talk. Finally, and as a corollary to the previous inference, general orientation to positive assessment of the interlocutor is a prominent common feature in both languages, a clear indicator of a similar context for the establishment and maintenance of business and professional cultures in English and Russian, where mutually supportive conversational practices and goal-orientation stand out as priorities shared among the community members.

6. Conclusion

Although there are inevitably problems associated with the comparability of non-parallel corpora across languages, especially unscripted spoken ones, which we have fully acknowledged in this article, we consider that fruitful and useful, though cautious, comparisons can be made between datasets originating in different practices of corpus design, compilation, annotation and searchability, especially where the data represent similar communities of practice or groupings within society. It would be surprising if the two cultures exhibited identical linguistic behaviour, both formally and functionally, and our data suggest some potential differences meriting further research. It is naturally to be hoped that future corpus-informed research may have more equally balanced data to investigate. However, there does seem to be sufficient similarity in the occurrence and use of NMRTs across our two datasets, revealing a commonality of interpersonal- and goal-oriented pragmatic behaviour which aligns with the relationships and purposes of spoken business and professional interactions and the creation and maintenance of group identities within those worlds. NMRTs can be seen not only as conversational tokens indicating comprehension of incoming talk, but also as pragmatic devices that help support and preserve face, maintain community belonging, reveal awareness of pragmatic appropriacy, and acknowledge the role of supportive interpersonal acts for successful professional interaction.

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