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# THE PRAGMATICS OF THE HANDSHAKE: A POLITENESS INDEX IN BRITISH AND ITALIAN USAGE

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Schiffrin's (1981) paper on handwork is an early attempt to come up with a description of the communicative significance of the quasi universal greeting and leave-taking ritual, the handshake. She follows Goffman (1971: 80) in viewing the gesture, on greeting, as an 'access ritual', increasing intimacy and thus, carrying rights and obligations for both parties. Her description aligns the modern day handshake with its roots in ancient Greece, with the medieval 'handclasp' between a king and his knights, and associates it with such values as 'mutual trust', 'solidarity' and 'friendliness'.

As a form of non-verbal communication the handshake must concern researchers of politeness phenomena, as well as being of general sociological (and socio-linguistic) interest. This study proposes to add some data to Schiffrin's theoretical considerations, and to add an intercultural dimension by means of a survey conducted online with Italian and British respondents.

It is a commonplace of intercultural communication, in fact, that differences exist between contexts that can be broadly distinguished as British/Anglo-Saxon on the one hand, and Mediterranean/Latin on the other. Some of these differences are in the area of physical contact, and the business of shaking hands can therefore be a useful index for exploring such issues (Hall and Spencer Hall 1983: 249). Through analysing responses to the survey and the personal narratives provided this paper aims to add ballast to notions that are otherwise mere intercultural stereotypes, and to explore possible meanings attached in both social contexts to this most basic of human gestures.

**Key words:** Politeness, Non-verbal communication, National stereotypes, Handshaking, Linguistic ethnography, Cross-cultural pragmatics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to do two things; firstly, it attempts to explore the pragmatic significance of the handshake. Specifically, building on the foundations laid by Schiffrin (1981), it attempts to add some empirical data to her ground-breaking exploration of this most basic of human gestures. At the same time, however, it is also concerned with intercultural questions, probing similarities and differences between the significance of handshaking in the British and the Italian context. For this part of the study, an online survey was used to collect data and personal testimonies from members of the two cultures.

### 1.i. Politeness and non-verbal communication: the handshake

There is already a consolidated body of research, from a variety of traditions, exploring various aspects of non-verbal communication (e.g. Goffman 1971, Argyle 1973, Hall and Spencer Hall 1983, Kelly and Barr 1999, Jaworski and Galasinski 2002). Handshaking, as a quasi-universal gesture, can arguably be seen as a special case in this context. Its significance is not circumscribed to a specific national group (forefinger and index finger held up in a 'V' in the UK, forefinger and little finger held up with the middle fingers in the palm in Italy); rather, it is found worldwide as an interpersonal gesture of greeting or leave-taking.

Politeness has a non-verbal as well as a verbal dimension. Although largely absent from most influential accounts of politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1978, Watts 2003, Culpepper 2011), non-verbal communication is clearly a vital dimension of human social interaction. Politeness studies have tended to focus on linguistic rather than more broadly behavioural aspects of communication, and, unfortunately for the purposes of this paper, this is also true of the studies in Hickey and Stuart (2005), *Politeness in Europe*, which includes chapters devoted to politeness in Britain and Italy.

In Brown and Levinson's seminal work, the range of human behaviour contemplated clearly includes non-verbal actions:

“[...] certain kinds of act intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee [...] By ‘act’ we have in mind what is intended to be done by a verbal *or non-verbal communication*” (Brown and Levinson 1978: 65, my emphasis).

However, in the discussion that follows — and, indeed, in most of the book — the acts discussed are verbal.

In the same way, Leech's influential work on pragmatics deals mostly with oral language, and his discussion of politeness is in the context of Grice and Searle, exploring how the ‘tact maxim’ operates in the case of specific speech acts (Leech 1983: 104—129). It is, however, noticeable that he resorts to a *non-verbal* example to explain the basis for polite human verbal behaviour, the celebrated illustration involving two people colliding in a doorway (ibid: 112).

The handshake, as a physical gesture involving actual bodily contact, clearly has potential to constitute a face-threatening act if wrongly performed. The ‘bone-cruncher’ or its opposite, the ‘wet fish’, are equally unpleasing to the recipient. Moreover, the handshake could present intercultural difficulties between members of different speech communities. On what occasions should it be offered? Should you be the first to proffer the hand, or wait to be invited by the other? Wrong decisions in this area could lead to a person being seen as ‘pushy’, ‘stand-offish’ or otherwise socially inept. Thus, respecting the pragmatics of the handshake, in its local understanding, will have a role to play in acculturation.

### 1.ii. The handshake

Schiffrin (1981: 240) cites Mauss and Evans-Pritchard (1967) in comparing the handshake to the ancient custom of gift-giving, or ‘prestation’, wherein a gift would carry with it the obligation to make return in kind. She describes it as a welcoming sign in ancient Greece, and one of ‘mutual trust’ between knights and their king in the Middle Ages. She cites Goffman in conveying the emotional warmth of a typical handshake, in which “a little dance is likely to occur; faces light up, smiles are exchanged, eyes are addressed” (Goffman 1971: 78).

The principle pragmatic functions of the handshake as a ritual gesture concern the signalling of *introduction*, *greeting*, and *farewell* (Schiffrin 1981: 240, see also Kendon, 1990: 179—91). Schiffrin follows Goffman again, identifying its main pragmatic function in the area of *access*; for instance, that when two people who know each other shake hands, this has at least three distinct meanings (ibid: 243):

- a) It renews the mutual access shared in the relationship;
- b) It prepares for the exchange of access that might follow on this occasion, and
- c) It shows that the relationship has not been affected by separation.

Closing handshakes, too, likewise indicate that a period of ‘heightened access’ has just been shared by the two individuals concerned, and that access may be shared between them during the period of separation (ibid: 246).

Naturally, such access will only be real where the two parties have a real interest in enjoying it, and Schiffrin distinguishes such cases from others in which the handshake may be a mere ritual observance, such as the campaign handshake, where a politician simulates the offer of such access without a real intention to fulfil his obligations. It is not physically possible for a prominent politician to offer access to all his electors, but the intention to do so is symbolised by the gesture.

Two other cases she identifies are the handshake as a public gesture of reconciliation, and as the intention to behave correctly before a sporting encounter. The former signals a renewal of the mutual access which had been disturbed by the occasion of disagreement. In the latter, the gesture is a way of asserting that the face-threatening gestures about to be performed (the buffets, blows and curses of a normal sporting encounter), though they might appear to threaten the relationship, will not be permitted to do so.

Schiffrin also explores the pragmatic/politeness aspect of the handshake, in her discussion of a refusal to return an offered hand, an almost unthinkable act of rudeness that transcends cultural divisions (Schiffrin 1981: 239).

And yet, there are caveats before the handshake can be established, alongside politeness itself, as a sort of ‘universal’ feature of non-verbal communication. It may be found across the globe, but there are nuances within the gesture which may have meanings both within the confines of a single culture, and across the boundaries of one culture with another. Gumperz (1982: 140—41), indeed, suggests that cross-cultural misunderstandings are frequently caused by “variant perceptions and interpretations of seemingly trivial [...] gestural signs”. Among these may be different meanings attached to the handshake, different styles of performing it, subtleties that enable the user to communicate something known to members of an in-group but not to strangers. The hip-hop community, for example, eschews the traditional mode of shaking hands to develop elaborate rituals of its own, expressive of youth, spontaneity and rebellion. The notorious secret handshake of groups like the Freemasons convey, no less dramatically, a covert message of belonging to a society within a society, using subtle variations on this apparently ‘universal’ gesture for their own purposes.

### 1.iii. National stereotypes: Britain and Italy

In E.M. Forster’s 1908 novel, *A Room with a View*, many of the British characters are shown in the throes of post-Victorian sexual repression, whilst their Italian counterparts have fewer hang-ups in the area of sexuality and physical contact. A persistent trope, in fact, when comparing British and Italians, will have it that the former are *cold, stand-offish, distant, reserved*, etc. in contrast with the *hot, sensuous, spontaneous, open*, etc. connotations of the latter. One of the earliest studies to explore national stereotypes was that of Katz and Braly (1933), who found that respondents tended to accept traits like ‘*artistic, impulsive, passionate, quick-tempered, musical, imaginative*’ for the Italians, and ‘*sportsmanlike, intelligent, conventional, tradition-loving, conservative*’ for the British. British ‘reserve’, indeed, is one of the truisms mentioned by Schneider (2004: 527) in his introduction to the section of his book dealing with national stereotypes, alongside German efficiency and American brashness.

Both the British, as prominent global representatives of the Anglo-Saxon races, and the Italians, of the Latin, have been present in many studies of national stereotyping. In one study reported on by Peabody (Hofstede’s 1983 study; in Peabody 1999: 70), for example, a dimension of ‘tightness-looseness’ was probed. Italians came among the ‘loose’ group, being associated with evaluative adjectives like *generous*, *spontaneous*, *extravagant*, *impulsive*. The British were in the tighter group whose descriptors included *thrifty*, *stingy*, *self-controlled* and *inhibited*. Peabody himself explored these findings in his 1985 study, and describes the usefulness to his analysis of Max Weber’s well-known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which connects the role of Calvinist self-control with the western origins of modern capitalism. He concludes that: “Some countries may still have the legacy of a Calvinist/Puritan tradition — for example [...] the British”, while “the [...] Italians represent opposites of the Protestant ethic” (Peabody 1999: 70).

Hofstede’s study involved 88,000 respondents working for IBM, from over 50 countries. Among other findings of interest is his proposition of a connection between emotionally expressive cultures and avoidance of uncertainties and ambiguities, a somewhat counter-intuitive finding. Peabody’s comments on this apparent paradox are relevant to the current paper:

It might seem natural to expect cultures where it is more acceptable to express emotions to be less avoidant. [...] Peabody (1985) found that French (and Italian) cultures put unusual emphasis on impulse control, although these nationalities appear to be relatively impulse expressive. The resolution proposed was that precisely because impulse control was relatively less “internalised”, there was more deliberate emphasis on impulse control. In contrast, northern European nationalities would have more internalization of impulse control, and need less explicit emphasis. (Peabody 1999: 78)

The table below is from Schneider’s 2004 book, and uses Peabody’s 1985 data to enable at-a-glance comparison between the different national groups:

**TABLE 13.3. Traits Assigned to People from Different Countries**

Traits	English	Germans	French	Italians	Russians	Americans
Thrifty-extravagant	0.9	1.1	-0.8	-0.8	1.2	-1.3
Stingy-generous	-0.4	-0.3	0.7	0.7	0	1.3
Self-controlled-impulsive	1.8	0.6	-1	-1.7	0.5	-0.3
Inhibited-spontaneous	-0.2	0	1.4	1.5	-0.2	1.4
Cautious-rash	1.4	0.9	-0.2	-0.6	1.3	-0.6
Timid-bold	0.4	1	0.6	0.5	0.7	1.2
Calm-agitated	1.6	0.4	-0.8	-1.6	0.7	-0.3
Inactive-active	0.8	1.4	1.3	1	1	1.6
Peaceful-aggressive	1.2	-0.6	-0.3	-0.6	-0.2	-0.3
Passive-forceful	0.6	1.6	0.5	0.2	1.1	1.3
Modest-conceited	-0.4	-0.9	-1.2	-0.8	0.4	-1.4
Unassured-confident	1.4	1.4	1.3	0.8	1	1.8
Cooperative-uncooperative	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.9
Conforming-independent	0.1	-0.1	0.7	-0.3	-0.9	0.8
Practical-impractical	1.2	1.3	0.2	-0.2	0.9	1.1
Opportunistic-idealistic	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.6	-0.2

*Note.* Positive numbers indicate that the countries are seen to possess the trait on the right, negative numbers that they possess the trait on the left. Data from Peabody (1985).

**Table One:** from Schneider (2004: 529)

Here, in fact, it is possible to see this apparent paradox strikingly illustrated. The English, curiously, emerge with a high value for ‘impulsiveness’, though they are, at the same time, ‘inhibited’. The Italians, though extremely ‘spontaneous’ are also ‘self-controlled’.

While some of the data from Schneider’s table fit comfortably into the kind of British vs. Italian national stereotypes we have been discussing, others do not. In the former category would be British *stinginess* vs. Italian *generosity*, British *aggression* vs. Italian *peacefulness*, British *independence* against Italian *conformity*, and British *inhibition* against Italian *spontaneity*. Others are not so self-apparent. Britons would appear to be less practical than Italians, whilst the stereotype has it that Italians lack organizational ability. Britons would also appear to be, amongst all the various nation groups, the most impulsive! This is extraordinary if we remember that to keep a ‘stiff upper lip’, to control one’s emotions, is a central feature of British ‘reserve’, paradigmatically associated with the British since the period of empire, and persisting in the popular imagination until comparatively recent times, certainly until the time of Peabody’s study. To account for this, one might tentatively apply Peabody’s account of the Italian ‘self-control’ paradox; i.e. that it is because Britons, on some level, know themselves to be potentially impulsive that they encourage, or tolerate, a compensatory degree of inhibition.

#### **1.iv. The handshake. Cross-cultural issues**

A personal anecdote. Having lived in southern Italy for some years, I was nevertheless unprepared for what occurred once when I met my accountant an elderly man in the town High Street. Instead of simply shaking my hand, he clasped me in an embrace, and proceeded to walk arm in arm with me for quite some distance before letting me go. I have since observed that this was not unusual behaviour. A degree of physical contact, above what would be the norm between people of the same gender in Britain is expected in Italy, and cross-cultural misunderstandings might result from a failure to appreciate this. Had I withdrawn from his embrace, I would no doubt have given offence. Yet for a British man, to walk arm in arm with another man, in a public place, has connotations that may create embarrassment. The same can apply to same sex kisses on greeting and leave-taking, which are a feature of Italian social behaviour between friends.

Watts (2003: 14) notes that Greeks understand politeness (*evgenia*) in terms of the “expression of intimacy and the display of warmth and friendliness”, whereas “formality, a discrete maintenance of distance, a wish not to impose upon addressees” are characteristic of the British. One might tentatively hypothesize, then, if there is any foundation in the national stereotypes just discussed, that possible problems with ‘correct’ use of the handshake might occur if the Italian ‘oversteps the mark’ in some way, or if the Briton shows himself too reluctant to engage in physical contact. This broad statement represents the research hypothesis which the current paper sets out to explore.

## 2. METHOD

Data for the survey was collected through internet, via an email sent to my Italian and British contacts<sup>1</sup>. Respondents were directed to a website which contained a questionnaire for each group<sup>2</sup>. Most of the questions were multiple choice or yes/no, but some also invited personal narratives, which needed to be sent in a private email. It was intended to obtain a broad, general picture rather than detailed or nuanced information, which may be sought in a follow-up study. The data was collected and graphs created for each of the questions, using Microsoft Excel.

### 3.i. Data

In this section I present the graphs of the questionnaire findings, with some preliminary observations.

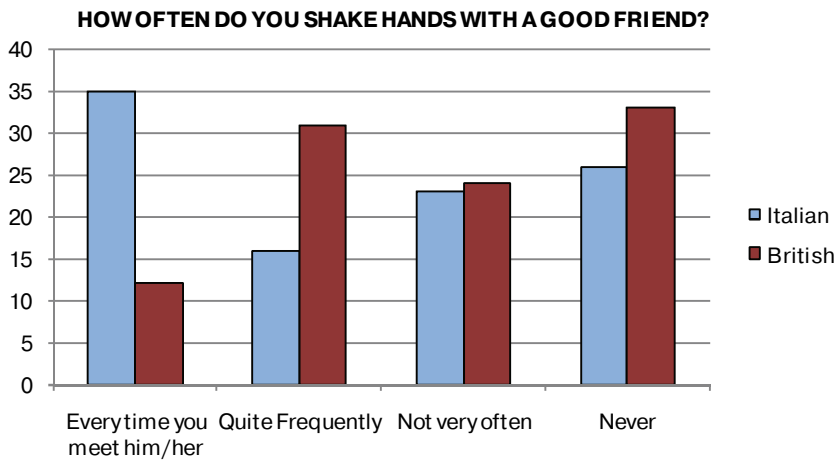


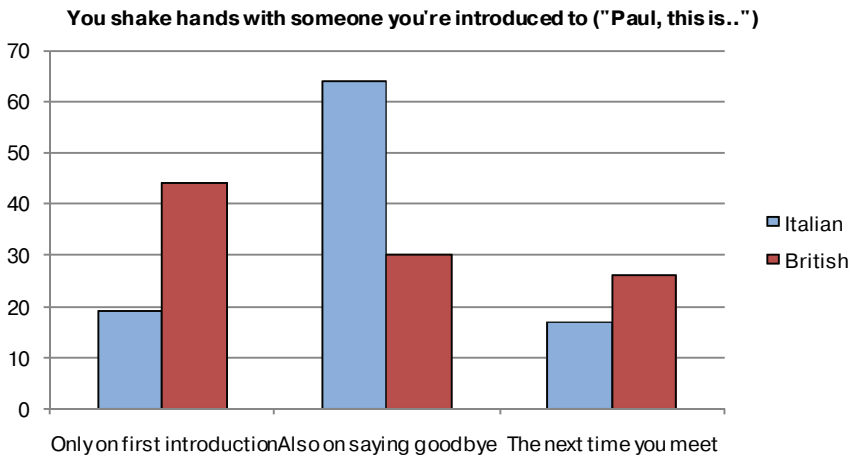
Table Two: a good friend

Responses to this question show that 35% of Italians shaking hands on every time they meet with their good friends, compared to only 12% of British. Perhaps this could be an early indication that the national stereotypes have some foundation, but as we shall see, such a conclusion could be premature.

For example, it appears from table three (above) that it is the British who accompany a ritual verbal introduction with a handshake more than Italians (42% to 19%), although Italians are much more likely to shake hands when saying goodbye. Handshaking on formal introduction could be part of the ritual for the British, while the high percentage (62%) of Italians shaking on saying goodbye suggests that, in the context of a formal greeting ritual, this feature is actually more important than the initial handshake.

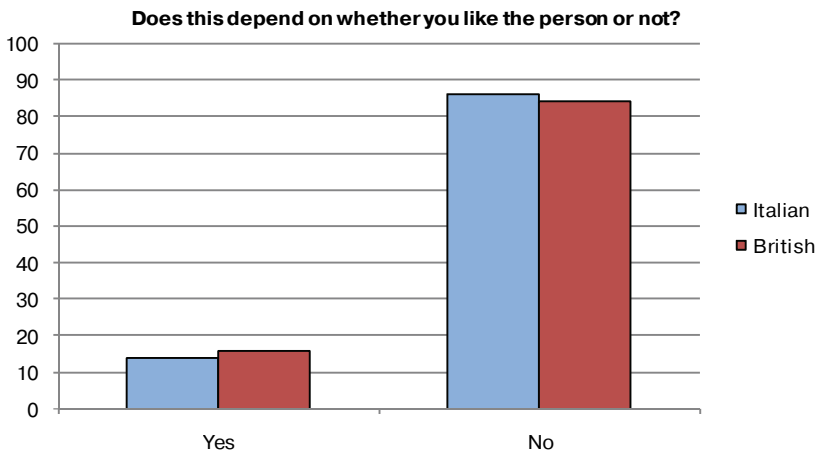
<sup>1</sup> This latter group was a broad one not excluding Americans, Canadians, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A. For other information about the survey, details of the participants, etc. see Appendix B.



**Table Three:** Introduction

The following table (table four, below) shows that these features are independent of whether the person to whom one is introduced is liked or not:



**Table Four:** Personal feelings

The high proportion of No's here (>80%) suggests that such behaviour is prescribed as part of the ritual, and must be performed independently of personal feelings. This is as true for the supposedly impulsive Italians as it is for the supposedly self-controlled British.

In the next two tables, the issue of social power/authority is explored. In table five, the social actor encountered is a bank manager.

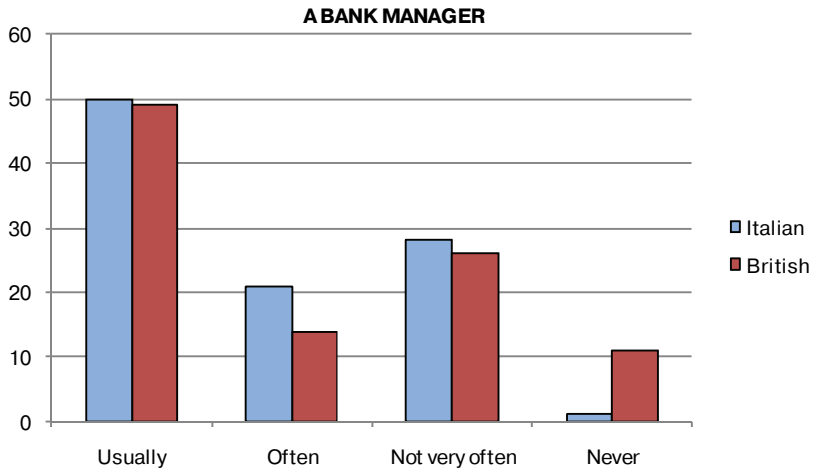


Table Five: A bank manager

There is a striking similarity here in the proportions likely to shake hands when meeting with the bank manager (almost 50%). The most significant difference is that more than 10% of the British never shake hands with their bank manager, against only 1% of Italians.

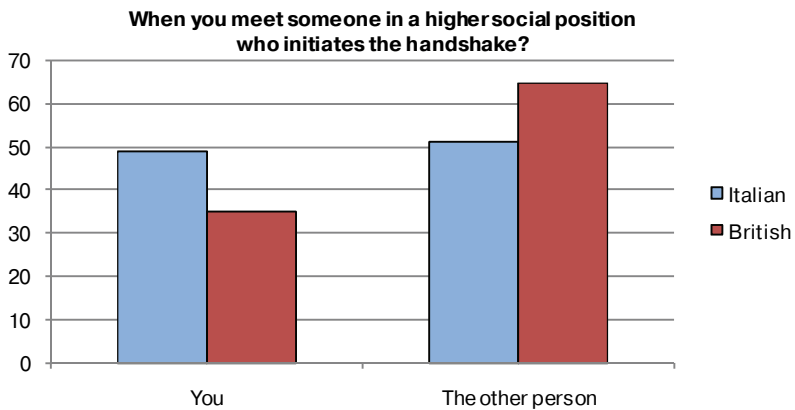
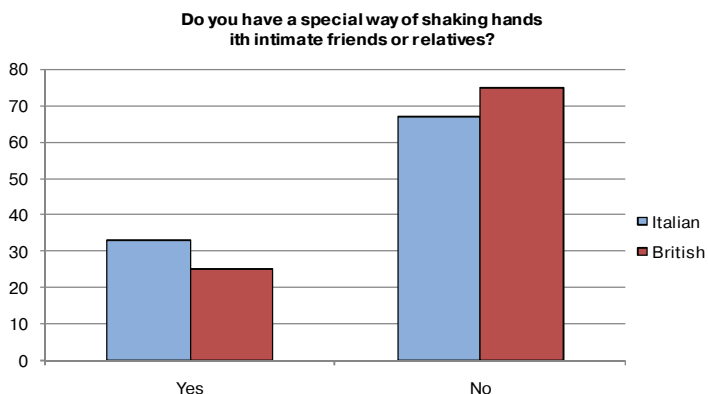


Table Six: higher social position

Here the finding conforms to the racial stereotype, i.e. that it is the spontaneous, outgoing Italian who tends to initiate handshakes with a more powerful social actor. However, the result (49—35%) is closer than one might have expected.

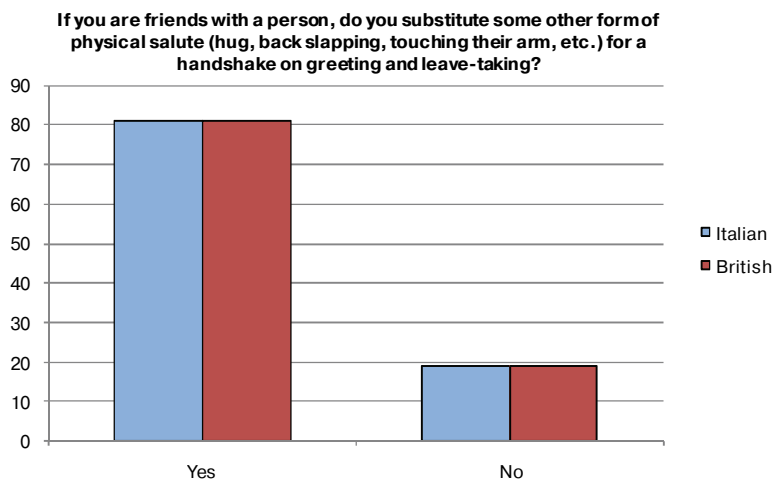
Finally, the last two questions focused on style asking, firstly, whether intimacy with a person resulted in the development of a specific way of shaking hands. Results here were unexpectedly low, for both national groups.





**Table Seven:** style

As table 7 shows, more than 60% of Italians, and 70% of British, denied having a special way of shaking hands with intimate friends or relatives. Possibly an explanation is offered by table 8, in which the two national groups were agreed — in exactly the same proportion (81%) — that friendship seems to entail a change in style of greeting, from the handshake to some other form of more affectionate physical salutation:



**Table Eight:** substitutions for the handshake

### 3.ii. Data (ii) Narratives of handshaking

As well as this quantitative data, the survey also collected some narratives from participants (table nine, below).

Firstly, a recurrent theme in the Italian accounts is intra-national differences between social customs in the North and South (1, 3, 7). Summarising, it would seem that similar regional stereotypes are invoked to those which distinguish Italians generally from Britons. In other words, people from the south are warmer, more impulsive, and closer to each other than their northern counterparts.

<b>Data: Italian</b>	
1	As you well know, Italy is not unique but is actually divided into three. In fact, in the north, where relationships are a little more formal, the handshake is the only way to greet a person, regardless of social status. Maybe the kids use the kind that basketball players use. In the centre things change, often it's enough just to call the name of the other, while in formal relationships the classical handshake is okay. In the south, however, especially in Sicily, the handshake, after the introduction, is replaced by a double kiss on the cheek.
2	On the question of whether the handshake is due or not to the fact that sympathy is felt towards the person, I put yes, but actually I believe this depends on the trust you feel towards them
3	If when I meet a relative or a close friend I shake hands differently: I can tell you that I always accompany the gesture with a smile or a hug, this is my custom. Of course, in my opinion, the context in which greetings occur makes a difference, also in the case of family and close friends. In such cases, I don't show the same enthusiasm when I'm outside that I would, or might have, at home. Maybe it's a matter of privacy, I don't know. But I think the context in which greetings occur makes the difference! And then, it is important in Italy to emphasize the differences that exist between North and South. I was in Piacenza for a few years, and I noticed a lot of indifference and coldness in greetings even among people who consider themselves friends and relations. Thus, even in Italy the handshake changes from region to region.
4	For some years now, at least in Italy, it has been common to replace the handshake with a kiss between friends, even not intimate ones, also between males and between males and females, young or old. Something that never happened in the past.
5	To friends and close friends a kiss on both sides of the face more than a hug
6	I wanted to emphasise that here, a good friend or relative is usually greeted with two kisses, at times accompanied by a handshake. Just a handshake is usually a more formal greeting.
7	Meeting a person of higher social position, they often hold their hand out first; but I prefer to take the initiative, because in the classic etiquette manual it is the woman who decides whether or not to offer her hand. In addition, the handshake may only be formal, but it can be richer in meaning, and this depends on the situation. Finally, it would be interesting to analyse the frequent use in Italy, and especially in the South, of kissing, even with only slight contact, or hugging on meeting, which are probably due to ancient customs, typical of a society with archaic and family-oriented features.
<b>British</b>	
8	I tend to shake hands more often than most, I think — for instance going round the guys gathered for football on Sundays — and often on meeting friends and acquaintances — when they might not be expecting it. But usually they respond. I shake hands with my son in greeting if we haven't met for a while — though most often we combine a hug. Some of the answers here I couldn't give — the social status thing I wouldn't be consistent on — sometimes I do sometimes I don't.
9	A lot of the handshake impulse depends on the nationality of the other person- and there is gender interference too. I'm thinking of my Italian teacher, Stefano- he initiates the handshake every time he arrives, but we just say hi when he leaves. With my female Spanish teacher I never shake hands- perhaps only did so the first time I met her and when she left the school after the interview, that first time. Since then it's just 'Hi'. Interestingly, Gianluca- an Italian student I worked with recently, wanted to give me that weird kiss thingy when he said goodbye the last time- it seemed very important to him to do that.
10	After working in France for a year I had the handshake reflex bigtime- to meet and say goodbye in France with colleagues was the norm, but it soon wore off.. like bad pinard

**Table Nine:** Handshake narratives

Secondly, in the Italian data, the practise of kissing is referred to (1, 4, 5, 6, 7) as having become more prevalent in recent times (4), as being found even between same gender friends who are not especially intimate (4), as being a feature of the South, and especially of Sicily (1, 7), as a more common form of greeting between intimate friends and family than the handshake (6), and as more common than the hug (5). Interestingly, two of the participants give contrasting explanations for the phenomenon, with (4) claiming that this custom is an entirely new phenomenon, whilst (7) explains it in terms of ancient Sicilian social practices.

The British responses are also of interest. (8) says that his own practice of frequent handshaking is socially unusual. It is not normal among 'the guys' with whom he plays

football on Sundays, nor do his friends and acquaintances usually expect it, though they do ‘respond’ (as we saw above, not to do so would be to commit an act of impoliteness, probably greater than the writer’s ‘offence’ of proffering an unwanted hand-shake). (9) expresses a British *puzzlement* (not to use stronger terms such as *contempt*, or *disgust*) in the face of what he calls ‘that weird kiss thingy’ among same gender acquaintances. (10), meanwhile, identifies the practice of shaking hands with colleagues as a specifically French habit, which can be contagious, but which ‘wears off’ on return to Britain — by inference, it is not normal for British work colleagues to shake hands. Again, the reference to ‘bad pinard’ indicates that this is a foreign custom for which the writer has no particular admiration.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Politeness involves more than saying the right thing. Body language and gesture, including knowledge of local norms governing handshaking are also vital. The handshake is an instance of what Watts (1992: 50) calls ‘politic behaviour’, or socio-culturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group.

However, since acceptable forms of behaviour are culturally determined, there is clearly potential for intercultural issues to occur.

From the perspective of Gianluca, the Italian student referred to in the narrative of (9), above, it was ‘very important’ to him to kiss the writer. We can surmise that he had some particular social reason for doing so, possibly connected to the expression of gratitude or affection. Or perhaps this was, for him, simply the appropriate form of leave-taking. In his own region his action would have occasioned no surprise. Yet it is hard not to pick up a sense of mild revulsion in the writer’s phrase ‘that weird kiss thingy’. This example can be seen, in an intercultural sense, as confirming the sort of stereotypical picture referred to above, as follows:

<p>ITALY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Hot, passionate, sensual</li> <li>— Closeness</li> <li>— Physical contact</li> <li>— Joyous</li> <li>— Spontaneous, impulsive</li> <li>— Latin</li> <li>— Catholic</li> </ul>	<p>BRITAIN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Cold, self-controlled, rational</li> <li>— Distance</li> <li>— Cerebral</li> <li>— Melancholy</li> <li>— Rigid, methodical</li> <li>— Anglo-Saxon</li> <li>— Protestant</li> </ul>
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**Figure One:** Italy and Britain national stereotypes

For Gianluca, then, his action, though ‘polite’ in his own terms, was seen in some ways as ‘impolite’, as an FTA, by the British recipient, because it invaded his space, it came closer to him than was normal in the local culture.

As for responses to the questionnaire, the picture is less clear. One counter-intuitive finding was that which relates to the role of social status, or *power*. Normally, one effect of power is to endow the more socially powerful participant in discourse with control over the structures in which the interaction occurs (see Fairclough 1989: 15), and one would expect this to include initiating handshakes. This is the more so since physical

contact is potentially face-threatening. Yet 50% of Italians initiate handshakes with their bank manager, and nearly 50% initiate handshakes with other more important social figures. That they should exceed the British in this area is in keeping with the stereotypical picture, but it is of interest that the British are not far behind.

It does seem that, in close friendships, Italians are much more likely to shake their friends' hands on meeting (35% to 12%), a result confirmed by the testimony of (8), who says there is something 'unusual' about his habit of shaking his friends' hands. However, in introductions, the British outscore Italians (42% to 19%). It would seem that the introductory handshake is normal for British while, as mentioned above, in Italy it is also given on leave-taking following introductions.

Table eight, finally, shows the British scoring the same as Italians on the question of having substituted a different physical gesture (back-slapping, hugging, etc.) for the more formal handshake on meeting close friends or family members. Thus, it would seem that, when British people become friends, their behaviour on greeting is remarkably similar to the Italian group.

Indeed, it would seem from the questionnaire results that the two nations are not so far apart as the stereotypes might suggest. Partly this may be due to social changes since the days of E.M. Forster. Foreign travel and even the migration of populations between the two countries is far more common nowadays. Familiarity with the other nation's culture has increased dramatically, thanks to the effects of mass media and, particularly, of web-based social media. Virtual communities are created online, which include many British and Italian members who may never meet, but may develop friendships.

It is also true that the old 'stiff-upper lip' stereotype of the emotionally-constrained Brit is disappearing. Where the Hollywood British 'type' used to be the formal, slightly stiff, immaculate 'English gentleman' David Niven, today's role models are Hugh Grant and Colin Firth, much freer emotionally and harder to locate within the boundaries of the stereotyped Englishman. The picture is the same if we look at the new generation of royals, where Prince William and especially Harry come over as emotionally liberated, in comparison with the apparent self-control manifested by their father and — when he is not committing a *faux pas* — by the Duke of Edinburgh. Featherstone (2009: 175) suggests that Lady Diana became a national and international icon because of her projection of contradictory images that undercut traditional notions of female royalty:

The most memorable photographs of Diana were those that were uncertainly poised between formality and informality; evidently performing a public function, her body was shown to be transgressing conventions of royal behaviour.

Diana's apparently innocent projection of an unconscious sexuality, in her early career, later became self-conscious mastery of the media, as she embodied a change in the "continuity of English tradition" (ibid). The same author also describes how new images of British masculinity were projected abroad by the emergence of a new brand of footballer in the person of Paul Gascoigne, whose willingness to shed tears after defeat was emblematic of changes in the national *zeitgeist* (ibid: 135—139).

To interpret the findings of the handshake survey in this light, it would appear that the results indicate a less dramatic distinction between habits than would have been suggested by the existing stereotypes. One would have expected to find greater for-

mality, and distance among the British group, and a corresponding greater closeness and willingness to engage in physical contact among the Italians. But some of the findings show that the two groups are closer than from the stereotypes suggest predictions; they even, in some cases, seem to be identical. It must be added, however, that the verbal narratives are more in conformity with the stereotypical picture, though here it would be necessary to obtain a greater sample before conclusions can be drawn.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Two general conclusions can be tentatively advanced. The first is that, from the results of the questionnaire, it would appear that British and Italian practice in the area of handshaking and greeting rituals generally are not as divergent as might be suggested by popular national stereotypes. It is probable that this is a result of changes in British behaviour, under the influence of modern, globalised mediated culture; that the British have 'loosened up'. This is a more plausible explanation for convergence than that the Italians have become more formal in recent years. However, as just mentioned, the British narratives collected seem to show that traces of the old British reserve, the suspicion of 'foreign' social practices, remain.

Secondly, and following this, the narratives do seem to suggest a picture that is more in keeping with the stereotypes. The Italian narratives refer to a greater degree of interpersonal closeness (kissing among same-gender friends who are not necessarily intimate, etc.), whilst the British narratives testify that handshaking among friends can be seen as 'unusual' behaviour, and same sex kisses resisted as 'weird'. However, the quantity of personal narratives collected is really too few to do more than provide some colourful insights into the processes involved.

It would, then, be a useful follow-up to this survey to do more ethnographic work on the handshake, perhaps with interviews, to explore a members' perspective on the phenomenon. At the same time, the quantitative picture could be reinforced, and new questions added, perhaps probing the respondent's attitudes towards perceived infringements of the local code.

What is certain is that handshaking represents an under-explored area of potential intercultural misunderstanding; a necessary skill, whose local routines must be acquired by anyone hoping to integrate with the culture, or even to avoid unfortunate episodes such as that involving Gianluca, who unknowingly transgressed against his British host's personal space requirements.

The pragmatics of body language, and of non-verbal interpersonal rituals like the handshake, are relatively under-appreciated research fields, to which I hope this paper may represent a contribution.

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**APPENDIX A:  
HANDSHAKE SURVEY (ENGLISH VERSION)**

I am researching the question of HANDSHAKING in British and Italian culture, and I would be very grateful if you could take a couple of minutes to respond to the following questions.

The site does not permit me to insert a box for replies (unless I pay £). So, if you have some answers you wish to pass on, please just send me an email and thank you again.

ARE YOU:

- Male
- Female

2

AGE:

- Young
- Middle aged
- Mature

3

WHEN & HOW OFTEN DO YOU SHAKE HANDS WITH:

Someone you are introduced to by a mutual friend (“Paul, this is...”)

- Only on first introduction
- On first introduction and when saying goodbye
- The next time you meet this person

4

Do these replies depend on whether you like the person or not?

- Yes
- No

5

A GOOD FRIEND

- Every time you meet him/her
- Quite Frequently
- Not very often
- Never

6

A BANK MANAGER (OR SIMILAR)

- Usually
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

7

When you meet someone in a higher social position than you, who initiates the handshake?

- You
- The other person

8

Do you have a special way of shaking hands with intimate friends or relatives?

- Yes
- No

You might like to add some email feedback, if you answer 'yes' for this.. or a short video 🤖 .. same goes for the next (and last) question

9

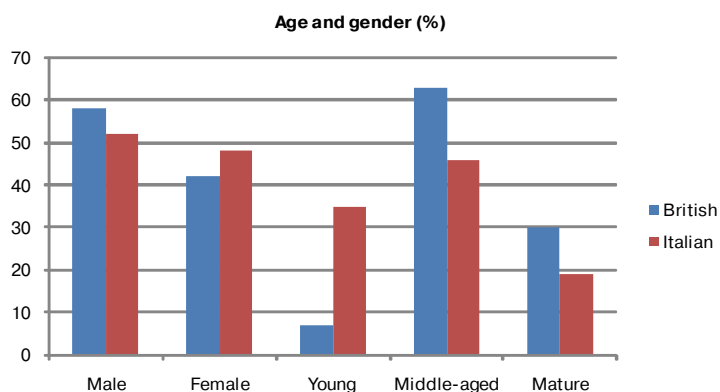
If you are friends with a person, do you substitute some other form of physical salute (hug, back slapping, touching their arm, etc.) for a handshake on greeting and leave-taking?

- Yes
- No

## APPENDIX B

Number of participants: Italian: 108, British: 71

Age and gender:



The survey was conducted using the free services provided by Kwiksurvey:  
<https://www.kwiksurveys.com/>