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Stancetaking in interest-based online communities: a corpus pragmatic comparative analysis

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The author defended her doctoral dissertation *Stancetaking in Interest-based Online Communities: A Corpus Pragmatic Comparative Analysis* (Dissertationes Universitatis Helsingiensis 57) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, on 11 November 2023. The opponent at the public defense was Professor Birte Bös (University of Duisburg-Essen), and the defense was chaired by Dr. Turo Hiltunen (University of Helsinki). The following is the introductory talk delivered at the start of the viva.

1. Introduction

Even if you do not use social media yourself, you have no doubt noticed how inescapable its presence is. It is a convenient way to stay in touch with friends and family, but beyond of your own private network, I ask you to think about the social media where people can connect with strangers from all over the world. Platforms like Twitter a.k.a. X, Instagram, TikTok, or Reddit. These are the early twenty-first century global soap boxes. On these platforms, at least in principle, anyone can read and talk about anything – within (or approaching) the limits of social norms and legislation. We hear about new trends from social media, we see news outlets reporting about the latest buzz online, and many of us have probably used discussion forums, if not to write, then at least to read ideas or recommendations about the topics that interest us personally. For many users, perhaps the most attractive use of this kind of social media is that we can find others who engage with the same things as we do – people around the world, who are interested in the same opinions, ideas, stories, and memes as us.

For better or worse, this has created 'online communities based around shared interests', which are the focus of my dissertation research. Online communities are no longer a new setting of public discussions. Thirty years ago, the communication scholar Howard Rheingold wrote about 'virtual communities', calling them "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 2000 [1993]: xx). These communities are not communities in the traditional sense. Although some of them might have meetups in the real world, the ones I study are so big and so spread out geographically, that most

of their members do not know each other. However, they have a sense of connection and belonging born from the similarity of their interests (e.g., Koh & Kim 2003; Papacharissi 2015).

In a nutshell, my project aims to find out how people express their personal viewpoint in these communities. Expressing one's viewpoint may seem like mundane communicative action, and yet it is quite meaningful. For some people online communities are spaces where they can finally share their nerdy opinions with likeminded people who share their niche interests. Sometimes like-mindedness and shared viewpoints go too far, and this has been an increasing cause for concern in the past decade, because online communities can also be established around misinformation or discrimination, with dissenting voices being shut out . This is why the expression of viewpoint is not simply a matter of what one thinks. It is connected to matters such as a person's self and their sense of belonging in a group, and it is also a way of drawing or blurring the line between personal opinion and truth. Studying perspective through language is a natural choice. In the interest-based online communities that I study, the main form of communication is written language, typed messages uploaded for the world to see, or at least for the target audience to see. Moreover, language, as a medium of communication, is used for negotiating and conveying the concepts of 'self', 'belonging', and 'truth' that are so important to the 'human feeling' – to borrow Rheingold's terms – that makes these communities tick.

2. What is stance?

When a person expresses their own viewpoint towards something, they can be said to be taking a stance towards that something. In linguistics, the word 'stance' or the act of 'stancetaking' essentially refer to the explicit expression of personal viewpoint or attitude (Gray & Biber 2012). An act of stancetaking can have many functions. Take a look at this social media post from my data:

1. I love seeing people's reactions. I definitely hope i added something to this community with my theories.

We say that this person is 'taking a stance' towards 'seeing people's reactions' because they are expressing an opinion or making a claim about it. Observe also how the word *definitely* emphasises the stance. Notice how all this is the person's own subjective stance, as indicated by the reference to *I*, the writer, who is situated as interacting with *people* in the setting of *this community*. Although example (1) can be said to be 'about the topic of posts online', it also tells us something about the writer themselves: that they are someone with this kind of attitude and that this is the kind of attitude and the kind of image about themselves that they want to express to others, at least right now in this situation (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012: 440; Bolander & Locher 2015: 113). Stancetaking is not so much about one's own attitude as it is about the explicit vocalisation of a viewpoint that the writer wants to share with the people with whom they are interacting. It does not matter if the writer has some alternative hidden viewpoint or if the stance is a pretence, the only thing that matters here is what attitude the writer decides they want to share with the audience for some rhetorical purpose. That is why stance can be said to be performative, or part of a role (e.g., Englebretson 2007).

In my dissertation I look at how stancetaking like the above is used in online community contexts to express viewpoints, and I also analyse what nuance it adds to the interaction between the users. Through four case studies, presented in distinct articles, I analyse instances of stancetaking in messages posted on Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr, three popular social media sites, where users can discuss just about anything. My primary research goal is to explore the contextual functions of specific linguistic features used to express stance explicitly. My dissertation draws from and builds on the body of research (e.g., Hyland & Tse 2004; Ädel 2006) that has looked at words like *I, here, now* for expressing personal, subjective viewpoint and position. I also look at mental verbs such as *like, hate* or *know* to express emotions and cognition, and evaluative adverbs and adjectives such as *definitely* or *perhaps* to evaluate the probability of information. And, as I discuss in the first article of my dissertation (Biri 2021), in a dialogue online, the writer is not only discussing their own perspective but also reflecting it to the viewpoints expressed by other writers in the online community. I see these phrases as part of interaction, because even when a writer is writing for their personal blog or profile, they have a specific reader or audience in mind (Marwick &

boyd 2011; Zappavigna 2014), for example other people in the community, who are assumed to share the writer's stance or are perhaps invited to do so (see Martin & White 2005: 95). As example (1) shows, marking a viewpoint as personal, as the writer's own, acknowledges that there are readers, who may have their own viewpoints, whether similar or different. Stance is a way to situate the writer in relation to the reader and to manage their relationship, which is useful in a community where people lack face-to-face contact and do not know each other from before.

3. Community variation

Besides my goal of analysing the functions of stance, I also want to compare how and why different communities vary in terms of stancetaking. An in-depth study of a single community can provide great detail of that community, but it's risky to generalise the findings to other communities, even to ones that on the surface seem similar. That is why my research design is comparative, and I analyse stancetaking on different types of communities and platforms. I collected multiple corpora, or 'sets of text data', that represent text posts from different communities. My chosen methodology, corpus linguistics or more specifically corpus pragmatics (e.g., Aijmer & Rühlemann (eds.) 2014), allows for the quantitative comparison of stance in the different datasets. Effectively, I used a computer program to identify and count the words that potentially indicate stancetaking in each dataset. I then analysed what function each instance has by hand, and then compared how many of each stance function can be found in each dataset, that is, how frequently stance is used in each community.

Different types of social media platforms differ in terms of how communities are structured and how the members interact. I argue that these differences impact the use of stance. In my case studies, I only look at three platforms: Reddit, Twitter, and Tumblr. But because these three differ in their structures and usage, they already represent different platform and community contexts of language use (e.g. Herring 2007; Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017: 37–39).

Reddit is a discussion forum that is divided by topic into subforums, each of which can be said to create a single community interested in that topic

(e.g., Leuckert & Leuckert 2020). The subforum consists of multiple discussion threads, each of which can be the setting of a dialogic interaction between commenters. Even if people disagree on a topic (as they often do), a site like Reddit is a setting for a conversation. Accordingly, the function of stancetaking is to contrast varying but similar opinions, by softening of tone and admitting uncertainty of the writer's opinion or by accounting for the reader's opinion by using the pronoun *you* to address the reader.

Tumblr and Twitter, on the other hand, are not structured as discussion forums: instead, they are personal blogs where hashtags in the posts can be used to target the larger interest-based community. Tumblr might be targeting a more limited audience, because Tumblr users themselves are a more niche group (McCracken 2017). But on Twitter in particular, posts that use hashtags are often seeking attention from quite a large crowd, because Twitter has become part of a wide public discourse and is used for broadcasting also by professionals or would-be professionals. This means that unlike Reddit posts, Tumblr and Twitter posts are not necessarily part of a dialogue. This lack of dialogicity means that stance is less commonly used for accounting for the reader's opinion. Especially in two of my case studies looking at climate change discourses (Biri 2022, 2024), I noted that Twitter posts can be reader-engaging if they are opinion polling the readers (for example), but when participating in a public hashtag discourse, they often contain less focus on the reader's perspective and instead present quite bold claims, with less softening of information. Leaving out words like *maybe* or *perhaps* creates a sense of urgency and certainty of what is happening.

This is where the role of stance in negotiating opinion and truth becomes relevant. Opinions are not necessarily presented as personal ideas, rather as supposedly neutral objective statements or even as accepted facts about the state of the world. But in the end, how we communicate – and consequently, how stancetaking is used – depends on the goals that platforms are used for, what kind of communication users engage in and why.

As you can imagine, the goals of communities on the same platform can be quite different. As I stated at the beginning, there are different types of communities, some based around enthusiasm around niche interests, and some based around ideologies. In some of the advice communities that I study in my first case study (Biri 2021), stance is used to manage writer-and-

reader relations, which relates less to admitting uncertainty and more to telling personal experiences or giving support to other community members, sometimes featuring explicit references to *community* or to *us, here, on this platform.* In the second case study about a fan community of a comic book and its TV adaptation, I find participants evaluating characters, storylines, or pop culture that matters to these fans (Biri 2023). The data contains affective evaluation that echoes the general enthusiasm for the show or criticism of some aspects of production, for example. Both kinds of opinions are entirely in accordance with the typical practices of a fan community. The act of taking a stance is itself a fun and meaningful goal for this community, so by taking a stance in line with the community consensus, the writer is engaging in the shared practices of the community.

Finally, a community based around an ideology might be interested in strengthening or spreading that ideology and converting outsiders. The difference in opinion between the insiders and outsiders becomes a question of identity and purpose in itself. The expression of opinion is part of a politically charged call-to-action to get the attention of the community. In cases like discussions about partisan elections or climate change, it is clear just how much stance is a rhetorical performance, because in claims about contested topics, the expression of personal perspective becomes political. Maybe more important than *my stance* is the idea of a *our stance* in contrast to *their stance*, with *us* and *them* forming two opposing sides in a struggle, with *us* as the one backed by facts and morality. By using the pronoun *we* to refer to a group, the writer situates themselves among the ingroup *us*, and can reinforce its viewpoint (see Marín Arrese 2013: 430).

4. Conclusion

In summary, stance has different functions, used by writers as needed, to make their arguments clear or convincing. Stancetaking shows us where the writer is situated – in relation to their writing, in relation to the reader, and in relation to the world. That is why stance as a viewpoint can be social and dialogical, but it can also be rhetorical and ideological. Both are essentially matters of the stancetaker aligning themselves with or belonging in a community, at least in terms of how they choose to present themselves in the

current situation. In my dissertation, my main argument is that the use of stancetaking depends on the structure of the platform and the sociocultural norms of the community.

The prevalence of social media makes it a worthwhile object of research. Technical development is moving fast, and it is difficult to say what is next on the social media front. Researchers and decision-makers agree that it is important to study social media practices that spread misleading opinions under the guise of facts. But even the trivial or silly parts of social media are important to understand. After all, they form part of the modern-day human condition. Even as new platforms emerge, comparing viewpoints with strangers seems to be a hobby for so many people. The linguistic study of online communities benefits from studies in social sciences, social psychology, and information technology, which explain the reasons why users might use a platform or engage in a community. But I believe that the study of stancetaking can provide a window into understanding how users see each other, how they compare and contrast their opinions, and how the shared beliefs or practices of a community are reinforced. Stance is an essential part of the discussions and the human feeling that makes the communities emerge. N

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