

Research Project

Language and health online

Third-party funded project

Project title Language and health online

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This linguistic project investigates e(lectronic)-health interaction in asynchronous, written computer-mediated communication. By exploring this interface from a particularly linguistic perspective, we endeavor to contribute to a better understanding of e-health practices. The project consists of two parts: "Persuasion in smoking cessation online" and "Relational work in email counseling", which pursue joined as well as individual research questions.

In the last decades the Internet has evolved to become an important source of information for health concerns (cf. Richardson 2005). There are many professional information sites, peer-support sites for patients, mailing lists, etc. This makes online health communication an important research field for different disciplines. The linguistic study of online health practices sheds light on how language is used to create meaningful exchanges between professionals and patients and between lay people. A linguist study of these practices is especially pertinent because e-health is predominantly a written mode, relying crucially on language. We are focusing on two areas of health practices that share an element of persuasion: Anti-smoking campaigns and smoking cessation help sites as well as email therapy contain aspects of "attempt[ing] to evoke a specific change in the attitudes or behaviors of an audience", which is the definition of persuasion provided by Jowett et al. (1999: 28). We wish to study these 'sites of persuasion' as an interactive process from a linguistic perspective.

Professional health Internet sites usually have either a mandate to inform and enlighten a particular target population (cf. e.g. the national and governmental sites) and/or they have the clear aim to contribute to risk prevention and change in behavior of the target group. In a similar vein, online therapists strive to help their patients find their way through a problem by means of the 'talking cure', although – crucially for our project – carried out in the written mode. Language is thus exploited for persuasion to achieve these goals. While persuasive strategies on smoking cessation might be expected to be more straightforward than in the non-directive genre of therapy, it is our goal to learn what linguistic persuasion strategies emerge in the different practices. Our methodological approach is positioned within interactional discourse analysis in that we study language in use and wish to explore the variation that we encounter. We are particularly interested in interpersonal pragmatics, i.e. the study of language in use that focuses on the relational side of the practices involved. A combination of the study of the relational aspect of language with language use for persuasive means is an important combination for our research of e-health communication. It is important to stress that we are going to operationalize persuasion by looking at linguistic surface strategies as found in the practices that contain a persuasive orientation rather than looking at psychological effects of persuasive acts in the readers.

To investigate the interactive process of persuasion in the frames of smoking cessation and therapeutic discourse, we will address the following overarching questions: (1) What characteristic activities are employed in the different practices (e.g. conveying information, giving advice or reflecting on interactants' interpretations of events or relationships, inviting introspection, . . .)?; (2) What linguistic strategies are employed to achieve these activities?; (3) What is the relation between the patterns of linguistic strategies and the creation of interpersonal effects (e.g. solidarity, empathy, power, the therapeutic alliance)? The close collaboration and continual exchange of results between both parts of the project will provide important insights into the dynamic, discursive construction of two online health communication practices from a distinctly linguistic perspective, will add to linguistic theory in the field of interpersonal pragmatics, and will be useful for practitioners.

Keywords relational work, Internet communication, websites, fora, email, persuasion, health risk

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Add publication

Published results

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