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2013

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Citation for published version (APA):

Pöldvere, N., Glynn, D., & Paradis, C. (2013). *Stance-taking and social status in an online bulletin board*. Abstract from Utterance interpretation and cognitive models IV, Brussels, Belgium.

Total number of authors:

3

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Stance-taking and social status in an online bulletin board

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This study examines epistemic and evidential lexical verbs, such as I think, it seems, I find, etc., in rhythmic gymnastics bulletin board conversations. It employs the Cognitive Linguistic analytical framework and corpus-driven Dialogical Discourse Analysis to examine the expression of stance relative to the extra-linguistic dimension of social hierarchy (rank). The study shows that similarly to communication in face-to-face interaction, social hierarchy and its linguistic expression is transmuted to virtual communities.

The expression of stance is at once one of the most common and complex functions of language. Naturally occurring language is indisputably characterized by varied and complex epistemic and evidential expressions, which are constantly chosen to convince one's interlocutors of a given construal of the world. In Functional Linguistics (Biber & Finegan 1989, Aijmer 1997, Scheibman 2002, Kärkkäinen 2003, Hunston & Thompson 2003, Martin & White 2005, Englebretson 2007), work has sought to understand the structures used in the expression of stance. Additionally, such discourse approaches to text and talk as Conversation Analysis have limited themselves to the external behavior of interaction at the expense of conceptual representations. This study advances our understanding of the phenomenon in numerous ways. Firstly, it employs a conceptual analysis, especially construal and grounding (Langacker 1990, Brisard 2002), in order to explore the construction of subjectivity between a perceiver and the object of perception. Secondly, it adopts a corpus-driven and socio-cognitive methodological framework, namely Dialogical Discourse Analysis (Markova et al. 2007, Linell 2009), to account for the sequential and thematic organization of stance, and show that stance is a socially as well as cognitively constructed phenomenon that emerges in dialogical conversations between two or more co-participants.

The data for the study are extracted from an online rhythmic gymnastics bulletin board. The study benefits from the dialogical and conversational style of the mode, where the exchange of views and opinions is a prominent feature (Claridge 2007). The members of the board are seen as having formed a virtual community that is characterized by linguistic as well as social variation. Therefore, we have divided the users into three ranks in terms of activity (number of posts) and status (e.g., moderators) in the community. The sample consists of two controversial and engaging threads of 242 messages extracted from the bulletin board. All instances of epistemic and evidential mental predicates are annotated and studied in interactional discourse units in which they are generated to see how bulletin board users across three hierarchically different ranks accentuate or reduce the strength of their propositions in accordance with their conversational co-participants.

The initial results show that the lexical verb constructions are an important tool for accomplishing intersubjectivity between members of the bulletin board. Rsg.net users align stance constructions with their conversational partners in terms of type (epistemic vs. evidential) and strength, which shows that their construal of the world through stance is closely interdependent with that of others. Therefore, the Cognitive Linguistic framework and Dialogical Discourse Analysis implemented in our study will help explore the dialogicality of human cognition and linguistic structuring, and consequently support our hypothesis that bulletin board users on a higher rank are more likely to use assertive and authoritative epistemic and evidential mental predicates to express speaker stance than members on a lower rank.

Keywords: stance, corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, Dialogical Discourse Analysis

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