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Hedges and Tweets : Certainty and Uncertainty in Epistemic Markers in Microblog Feeds

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Researchers traditionally employ oral and written data for their studies, yet within the past twenty years, new fields of data have become available via the Internet. As language is in a constant state of flux, tools now enable researchers to take advantage of large data that show real-time usages and changes in language; these changes have also resulted in the creation of new language analytical tools. Many internet microblogs require interlocutions made in abbreviated forms, these though can result in fuzzy issues that consequently lead to constructs being misinterpreted, and when considering the geo-spatial and socio-cultural tones of postings there is a potential for confusion. This study's aims are two-fold. The first underscores the need to understand how a microblog's limited word amounts affect the dialogic interaction of stance, and the second provides a look at how visual analytics can provide new insight into the dynamics of stance in discourse.

This synchronic dialogic study of epistemic stance markers utilizes microblog data connected to the pre- and post-release of the long-awaited movie, *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. We address the question of how hedges, e.g. markers of uncertainty, are composed in our microblog data, and how visual analytic tools help to further our understanding of this phenomenon. Our analysis is couched in DuBois' (2007) stance framework of evaluation - position – alignment; furthermore we describe hedges as “an unwillingness to make an explicit and complete commitment” (Hyland, 1998, p.3), i.e. “I hope that”, “I had hoped that”, “I think it might”, “I wasn't sure if”, etc. By analysing the interlocutor's expectations of the movie, we found that hedges were used to mark uncertainty, and subsequent posts aligned or deviated from these expectations, even in these shortened, and sometimes unusual, forms of dialog.

Methods used combine data analyses of epistemic hedge markers and visual analytics to study how microbloggers use this interactive yet very abbreviated mode of communication to convey hedges. We employ traditional concordance tools resulting in textual data as well as visual images to examine the collected data. These same data are subsequently analyzed within a separate, prototype visualization tool. Overall, this contribution constitutes the first attempt to automatically examine stance-related phenomena, by employing a refined corpus of microblog posts gathered from a truly large-scale dynamic data set and analyze the results with a multi-faceted visual analytical tool that gives a new awareness to how the phenomena of stance is expressed and negotiated in microblogs.

References:

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