Balancing Expert and Peer-Student Identities in Online Discussion Forums

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Abstract

This paper analyses how students collaborating to improve a translation in online discussion forums construct credibility by projecting an expert image. The analysis focuses on the writing style of three prestige-prominent students, and how they manage to balance the conflicting goals of demonstrating expertise to legitimize their status as advice-givers and asserting their student identities to mitigate imposition. They present themselves as 1) knowledgeable and trustworthy, by using academic and specialized language, adopting a professorial role, citing reliable sources or claiming personal experience; but also 2) as sensitive towards other participants through displays of honesty, humility and in-group solidarity. Their distinct ways of balancing expertise and peer-solidarity arguably explains their relative prominence in the forums rendering their contributions more reliable and acceptable, consequently more worth reading by their colleagues, while also probably securing them better grades. The findings have pedagogical interest for the teaching of academic online discussion skills.

Keywords: discussion forums, expert, identity, peer-advice

1. Introduction

Issues of identity are central to the study of computer-mediated communication and social media discourse (Locher et al., 2015), where identity is constructed or "performed" by participants in interaction to further their discourse goals. The construction of an expert identity, in particular, plays a key role in many online communication contexts where "there is no pre-configuration of expertise" (Richardson, 2003), and has been especially well established in online peer-to-peer advice situations, notably in health-related online forums (Armstrong et al., 2012; Richardson, 2003; Rudolf von Rohr et al., 2019; Sillence, 2010). Unlike in institutionalized settings, such as doctor-patient interactions, where credibility and trust are automatically granted to the adviser, participants in peer-to-peer advice forums have to gain credibility through displays of expertise. As Richardson (2003) explains, "Participants who offer information and opinion cannot rely upon their reputation (…) the information offered must be formulated with a view to having it accepted as reliable by other participants." (p. 174-175). Richardson lists several *warranting strategies* employed by non-experts to make their advice more "acceptable": referring to reliable sources, citing one's personal experience, referring to one's own or a friend's expertise on the matter and using specialized language, an implicit claim to expertise, therefore your credibility as advice-giver. However, giving advice is potentially impolite, especially in peer-to-peer contexts, because it presupposes an asymmetry in the status of the participants, which results in the possibility of the adviser coming across as imposing, vehement or rude. To downplay the inherent face-threat of advice, participants in these forums use various strategies, including a preference for non-directive expressions (Locher, 2013) and various positive and negative politeness devices, like hedges, humour and various forms of expression that construct the advice-giver as a friendly and approachable person (Harvey & Koteyko, 2013).

Current research into advice discourse spans media, online and off-line, and various personal and professional contexts (Limberg & Locher, 2012), including academic settings such as office hours, where students get advice from teachers (Limberg, 2010; Waring & Hruska, 2012), as well as peer-tutoring, where students support other students in the learning process (Angouri, 2012; Waring, 2005, 2012). In these peer-tutoring sessions, attempts to construct an adviser-advisee relationship are often problematic and met with resistance on the part of the tutees (Waring, 2005). The root of the problem is that there is potential conflict between the student tutors' expert and peer identities. Tutoring students' natural response is to try to compensate the participant asymmetry created by the tutoring situation by making language choices that seek to downplay their role as advice givers (Angouri, 2012). While there are some accounts of how these tensions are resolved in face-to-face tutoring, we do not know how this is achieved in online peer-to-peer interaction, for example, in online discussions where students exchange advice to perform collaborative tasks online.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how students negotiate the potential conflict between their role as peers and their role as experts giving advice in a series of online discussion forum. Our aim is to gain insight into the different ways in which a small number of prominent students in these forums build an expert image to gain credibility and legitimize themselves as advice-givers, while, at the same time, strive to assert their student identities by coming over as approachable and solidary. We believe that these students' ability to strike a balance between their dual identity as experts and student colleagues might account for their prominence in the social network of the participants in these forums. The analysis focuses on the similarities but also on the differences between these students' online participatory styles.

2. Materials and methods

Materials consist of a selection of posts from the SUNCODAC corpus of academic forum discussions (Cal Varela & Fernández Polo, 2020) The context is a blended-learning undergraduate course in translation at a Spanish university. The total number of students enrolled in the course is around 150, about one third being exchange students with various lingua-cultural backgrounds. The working language is English, used as a lingua franca. The core of the forums are the suggestions made by participants in their *feedback posts* for the improvement of another student's (*forum moderator*) translation proposal of a set text, a form of peer-tutoring where student peers give each other advice, comparable to peer-advice, for example, in health-related forums (see above). In SUNCODAC, lecturers open each forum with a post describing the task and close it with a post where they summarize the main points of the debate and appraise and highlight participants' most significant contributions. All feedback posts are graded and count towards the students' final assessment.

The paper provides an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the strategies used by the three most "prestige-prominent" students participating in the forums organized during a one-semester course, to project an expert identity and gain credibility before their peers. Relative prestige in the forums' social network was established with Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). Gephi is a tool for the study of social networks, to understand their structure and behavior, based on "relational data obtained from different resources, including content available on web pages, user interaction logs and social interaction information provided by users" (Wai & Thu, 2015), among others. Prestige measures in Gephi tally up the number of sending and receiving relations between different nodes in a network, in our case the number of times each participant cited and was cited by others, as well as the relative prestige of the "citing" nodes, a measure of "how well connected is a node to other well connected nodes".
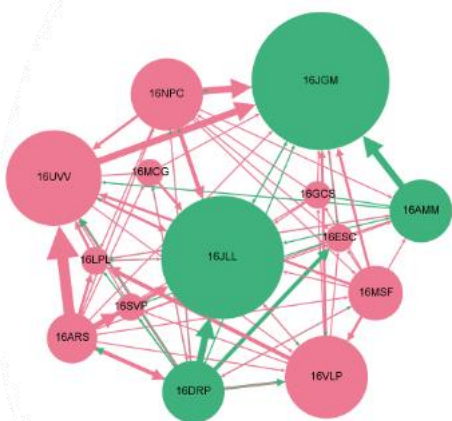

Figure 1. Participant prominence in SUNCODAC using Gephi.

The analyzed corpus consists of the 43 feedback posts (over 10,000 words) produced by these three students, one female (UVV) and two males (JGP and JLL), over the four-month course period. Our aim is to describe both the variety of strategies they use to construct an expert identity for themselves, and the ways they manage to maintain an equilibrium between their conflicting identities as experts and student peers.

3. Findings

The three students use various strategies to construct their expertise into being in the forums and legitimize themselves as credible advisers.

- Citing sources. Citing a source adds trust to your claim. It is a way of shifting responsibility as far as trust is concerned. Obviously, sources are assumed to be reliable. This can be authoritative sources like dictionaries, encyclopaedias, mass media or, simply, general usage. Lecturers are also "citable" authoritative back-up: ***As we have seen in class** , passive constructions are very often in English but it that often in Spanish* [sic].

- Using specialized language. Jargon is strategically used to impress colleagues and lecturers: If you speak like an expert, it is to be assumed that you are an expert. In SUNCODAC, most of the specialized terminology used by students to claim expertise comes from the fields of linguistics and translation studies: *it just sounds better for me in **sentence initial position***; *I decided to make a **"cultural adaptation"** for the Spanish reader*. In this last example, the very use of the inverted commas marks the expression "cultural adaptation" as an alien code, as the language of specialists. By using their language, the student is presenting him/herself as a credible connoisseur.

- Using formal and academic language. Students use formal words, academic vocabulary and grammar, and essay-like structuring devices like numbering, bulleted lists, etc. to give their posts an aura of sophistication and boost their claims as legitimate advice-givers: *I'd like to make a couple of **remarks upon** some details; **The rarity of this word** is probably due to **its length.***

- Boasting encyclopaedic knowledge. We generally admire people who know a lot about different topics. Students may display their broad knowledge of different subjects, like geography, Renaissance art or Bible studies, like in the following example, to present themselves as knowledgeable, educated people, whose ideas are worthy of attention, and thus boost their proposals: *I checked the word " unigénito " and it actually has a strong connection with religion . Indeed , it appears explicitly in the **Bible (John , 1 : 14)***.

- Behaving as a perceptive observer. Claiming to possess an up-to-date knowledge of the language and special critical skills as language observers may be adduced to legitimize you to tell others what is correct or incorrect in terms of language use: *Although " salir al campo " is not wrong , I think " saltar al campo " is **more common and natural in our language***.

- Assessing other participants' work. Assessing or evaluating either the moderator's proposal or other students' suggestions is normally a lecturer's

prerogative. When exerted by a student, it becomes an implicit claim to expertise, presupposing the possession of the knowledge and skills that justifies your right to assess other students' work: *Your translation is **perfectly correct**!; **Awesome translation**, by the way*.

All these warranting strategies (Richardson 2003) were systematically tapped into by these three students to highlight their expert condition and boost their adviser competency. However, these strategies were also carefully balanced in their posts against other forms of expression that, this time, were intended to reinforce the interpersonal relationships with the group by helping mitigate the potentially face-threatening asymmetry inherent to the advice.

- Preference for non-directiveness. This was a tendency observed by Locher (2013) in peer-to-peer health forums, which is also recurrently found in our students' posts. When they make suggestions, they clearly avoid using imperatives and, more generally, any syntactic structure that mentions the advisee explicitly as a recipient of the advice. Non-directiveness is also reflected in the frequent use of hedged expressions intended to soften the imposition, to "downplay dogmatism" (Sillence 2010), e.g., *I know it is the perfect translation (...) but **I would maybe** translate it (...). I know it is a very free and adventurous translation but (...) the tone of the text **may fit** in some "free translations" (...)*
- Giving advice as personal narratives. Narratives may be used to display expertise without creating power imbalance, adding "to the construction of a non-threatening environment" (Kouper, 2010). Arguably, personal narratives reinforce solidarity with the addressee by constructing an identity of the poster as an equal, someone with whom readers share experiences and feelings of satisfaction, frustration, etc.: *I'd like to point out that **a difficult aspect of the translation for me** was to decide (...) **I was not sure** whether (...) . **Eventually**, I chose the first one*.
- Using informal language. The three students downplay authority in their posts by using language that make them appear as approachable (Angouri, 2012; Locher & Hoffmann, 2006), such as informal vocatives and salutations that contribute to relax the tone, or fuzzy expressions (*kind of*, *sort of*, etc.) that mitigate the stiffness of the academic and specialized language otherwise used to display expertise in different sections of their posts.
- Coming across as understanding and supportive. In general, the three students do a lot of facework in their posts, constantly trying to balance exhibitions of expertise with manifestations of friendship and solidarity. One way of doing this is by portraying themselves as well-wishing and supportive classmates, for example, when they excuse a partner's mistakes: *I think **you know and you are aware** that "Dutch" is not*

*German , but "los holandeses", and it was **obviously just an lapse!***

The three students demonstrate great dexterity in achieving a privileged position among their peers, by constructing authority through recurrent displays of expertise, while emphasizing their student identity and thus preserve a good relationship with their student mates. Their ability to balance these two conflicting goals may explain their prominent position in the forums' social network: their posts are the most frequently read and cited over the semester, and it is reasonable to conclude that there must be something in their writing style that accounts for this success. Actually, each of them has their own idiosyncratic way of achieving prominence in the discussions, by modulating the degree to which they heighten or downplay their expert and student identities in the forums.

JGM
JGM constructs himself as a competent and legitimate advice-giver mostly, and paradoxically, by downplaying his expert condition, while emphasizing his student identity. In his posts, he strives to sound natural, unpretentious and close. Some of his suggestions are heavily hedged to counter the risky self-attribution of competence inherent to advice-giving, which would place him above his classmates, e.g., ***In my opinion, if I am not wrong***, the author of the text **might** have chosen this verb instead of an other, due a sepcial reason (sic). Additionally, he downplays his expertise by employing very little specialized jargon, while scattering informal language and orality features all over his posts, making him appear approachable and friendly, e.g. ***Congrats** again 16UVV and **kind regards to all!!***).

In his writing, there seems to be a premediated intention of creating an impression of improvised speech, with its high-involvement features (Chafe, 1982), including constant self-monitoring. He writes as he thinks, without much planning. Vocabulary is sometimes fuzzy and imprecise (*You have **done** it very well!*; *If we look up the meaning of splash , we **get** " salpicar , chapotear "*), and he does not seem to spend much time revising his text before posting it either. His writing, in general, is careless and contains many language issues, in grammar (*a little aspects*), phraseology (*to make word games*), spelling (*an other*; *sepcial*), haphazard punctuation, cohesion (e.g., there is a point 1 but no 2), etc.

High-involvement is also reflected in the (Chafe, 1982) numerous self-references and reader references in his posts, with either the forum moderator responsible for the draft translation or the group of students participating in the discussion being constantly addressed, directly (*you*) or through solidary, reader-inclusive *we* pronouns. Another way of making readers participate in the text is by posing them questions (*What do you think?*), showing consideration for the readers, by inviting them to express their opinion on the topic, an implicit and polite recognition of their expertise.

UVV

UVV is the only female in the trio. In her posts, she comes across as a humble, respectful but also extremely conscientious, rigorous, and therefore reliable, advice-giver. She does a lot of facework, stressing the positive aspects of the moderator's proposals (*I think you're right*; *is correct*; *could be okay as well*), while downplaying the significance of the identified issues (*this is a minor point*) and the value of her own contribution. On one occasion, she announces her intention to make *only a couple of suggestions*, and then goes on to produce a thorough appraisal of the moderator's proposal, raising no less than seven points that need improving. Her criticism and suggestions tend to be strongly hedged to minimize the importance of her ideas, as illustrated in the following examples: ***I'm not really sure*** *about 'cocina campechana'*; ***Perhaps*** *'adoran' is* ***a bit strong*** *here*; ***I thin****k we should go through 'la parpadelle'*; ***I'd suggest*** *using the expression 'dolce fare niente' here*, etc.

On the other hand, in her posts, UVV also uses some of the characteristic *warranting strategies* (Richardson, 2003) frequently used to demonstrate expertise and boost credibility in advise forums.

UVV's speciality is the citation of websources to back up her suggestions, of which she cites three times as many as the other two students. She makes it a point to support all her ideas with information and examples of usage from carefully selected sources – reference works, the media, etc. – to reinforce the value of her proposals.

She also uses a lot of technical vocabulary to highlight her expertise as a language expert (*connotation*, *article*, *agreement*, *persuasive text*, *plural noun*, *singular form*, etc.) therefore her competence as an advise-giver on language usage topics. She also makes frequent use of metatextual devices, like bullet points or numbered lists, to structure her posts and facilitate reading, Bulleted and numbered lists underscore her expert image by presenting her as a knowledgeable person who has a lot to say on the topic. They also contribute to portray her as an orderly painstaking writer, who carefully plans her text in advance, enhancing her image as a reader-friendly, considerate writer.

JLL

JLL's strategy to build an expert image principally consists in making rhetorical choices that portray him as an authoritative and trustworthy advice giver in the forums.

Unlike JGM, his writing is streamlined, with no redundancies and very few grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes. His texts are carefully crafted, rich in textual metadiscourse, with text structure, relationships and transitions between ideas clearly signalled, indicating a writer who is both in control and considerate towards readers. His posts seem to have been carefully planned and subsequently revised to ensure that everything is in order. He seems to have a predilection for precise, technical language (*structure*, *sentence initial position*, *subjunctive*, *collocation*, *inconsistency*), including specialized acronyms that are left unexplained (*As we can see in the* ***DEL****: "Reforzar una postura o una condición"*). His

writing style is academic, full of nominalizations (*the rarity of this word is probably due to its length*) and complex sentences. He is also capable of composing complex and well-structured arguments, demonstrating outstanding analytical and reasoning skills only exceptionally found in a second-year undergraduate. His writing style is likely to impress both colleagues and lecturers and will eventually garner respect for his ideas.

In his posts, JLL manages to build for himself an image of an educated, intelligent and self-confident person, who demonstrates extended encyclopaedic knowledge in a variety of topics, ranging from Bible studies to Italian Renaissance art. He projects a strong personal voice, presenting himself as someone who is constantly making decisions (e.g. *I consider that*; *I decided to*) and displaying critical skills (*an interesting collocation*). He takes up a professorial role when he assesses his colleagues' contributions (*I think there is nothing to be changed in this flawless translation*) or encourages them to think and share their views (*I would like to know your opinion*); he does not hesitate to bluntly criticize a colleague's proposals or even challenge ideas shared by the group (*We talked about the word 'auge' in class, and we agreed that it suggested that English cannot go further than where it is now. But* ***that's not true****, so I used 'ascenso' instead, because this word transmits the idea of a progression*). In general, his writing style is forthright and far less hedged than those of the other two students, transmitting confidence and authority.

However, from time to time, he also shows himself as an empathetic person (*The translation [...] is not easy*), capable of demonstrating humility (*I tried to keep*) and using humour (*I wouldn't say 'compartir una vida' because we only have one (I guess)*). And he seeks to relax tensions and reinforce the connections with the group by using informal, fuzzy language (*I would like to make* ***a couple of remarks***; *it's* ***kind of*** *colloquial*; *apart from* ***the 'cortex' thing*** *that many of my partners have pointed out*).

4. Conclusions

The three students in this study employ multiple strategies to highlight expertise and build up their image as credible advisers: they present themselves as knowledgeable and trustworthy by using academic and specialized language, adopting a professorial role, citing reliable sources and quality examples, displaying encyclopaedic knowledge, claiming personal experience, etc. However, the analysis also reveals another, rather different, image of these students in the forums. They show sensitiveness towards other participants, including the forum moderator, through frequent displays of honesty, humility and in-group solidarity, in the form of reader-inclusive pronouns, disclaimers, self-confessions and humour, among others. Such duplicity arises from the conflict of identities that is enacted in these exchanges, where one must sound "credible, trustworthy and reliable" self (DeCapua & Dunham, 1993, pp. 519), without sounding haughty before their peers.

Each of the students has his/her own idiosyncratic way of

balancing these conflicting goals. JGM's advice-giving strategy consists in writing posts that sound very much like a friendly, informal conversation with the reader, emphasizing rapport, while downplaying expertise. UVV manages to balance expertise and solidarity, by presenting herself as a serious, hard-working and rigorous person, but also as a humble, respectful and well-wishing classmate. Of the three, JLL is the one who puts more emphasis on presenting himself as an expert: he projects a strong personal voice, shows independence of judgment, uses specialized language strategically to underscore his expertise, etc. All three approaches seem to be equally effective as self-promoting strategies: irrespective of their different writing styles, the three students enjoy a most prominent status in the group, receiving a lot of attention and credit from their classmates. The findings should be of practical relevance for the teaching of academic writing skills in computer-mediated settings.

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