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Right now versus back then: Recency and remoteness as discursive resources in online reviews



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ABSTRACT

This study explores variation in temporal reference within a dataset of 1000 user-generated online consumer reviews, sampled from 5 different websites. Analyzing the proportion of references to recency compared with references to remoteness in these texts, an overall trend toward remoteness was found, which diverges from earlier findings about temporality in other types of social media, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Further considering specific examples from three of the five review sites (*Yelp*, *Amazon*, and *Epicurious*), this paper offers insights into how both the remote past and the present are variably deployed as discursive resources by the authors of these online texts. In addition, the study's findings reveal that whereas lexical resources are used to refer to the present/recent past, references to the remote past rely much more on grammatical resources. Consequently, in order to provide a more complete account of time reference, I argue that it is important to consider a broader range of linguistic features (e.g., grammatical aspect, prepositional phrases) rather than concentrating exclusively on temporal adverbs when making claims about temporality in social media.

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1. Introduction

Any act of communication allows language users to encode some type of temporal perspective on the relationship between events. As Hanks (1996) observes, "It is not only discrete acts or kinds of practice that establish different temporalities. The social fields in which practice occurs contribute as well" (p. 271). One social field that has recently become the site of much research interest is that of social media. Sociolinguistic research on temporality in social media has tended to emphasize spatio-temporal immediacy (i.e., the "here and now") in the discourse of diverse media, such as email (Georgakopoulou, 2007), blogs and wikis (Myers, 2010), and social networking sites (Georgakopoulou, 2013; Page, 2010, 2012). However, it is unclear if this bias toward the recent also applies to other forms of digital media, such as user-generated online reviews, which may be comparatively less recency-focused, given that reviews, by definition, are retrospective accounts. Page (2012) has suggested that a focus on recency may be more prevalent in some forms of computer-mediated communication more than others, noting that this emphasis on the present is most dominant on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and that, in contrast, "earlier social media genres (discussion forms, podcasts and blogs) use temporal references with similar frequency to that

found in offline spoken and written language" (p. 191). Therefore, this study aimed to examine the extent to which this orientation to the present – and near-recent past – appears in user-generated online reviews.

1.1. Online reviews as a type of social media

From a historical perspective, user-generated online reviews can be viewed as an extension of two distinct types of discursive practices: professional review writing and informal word-of-mouth recommendations. Traditionally, professional review writing was practiced by a small body of experts, an elite cadre of individuals writing for publications such as newspapers and guidebooks, who provided their subjective assessments of films, restaurants, hotels, as well as other products and services. However, with the expansion of digital media into nearly all realms of contemporary life, user-generated consumer reviews have emerged as a widespread contemporary vernacular literacy practice (Barton and Lee, 2013). Websites that feature reviews, such as *TripAdvisor*, *Amazon*, *Yelp*, and others, enable consumers to give voice to their experiences in very public way, via a mass-distributed platform. Although professionally-written consumer product reviews have been available via mass media outlets for decades, this more recent ability for any consumer to publicly share his/her experiences and reactions to a product or service – and to reach a wide, global, interested audience in the process – is a digital practice for which there is no precise analog precedent. Typically, user-generated reviews are non-specialist reviews, and this fact is considered by some to

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contribute to the democratization of expertise brought about by the internet (Mellet et al., 2014). Online reviews can certainly be considered a form of consumer empowerment from the point of view of individuals writing reviews. In addition, online reviews also have the potential to empower the consumers who read them – in the sense that consumers no longer have to rely on a handful of experts for information about which restaurants are worth visiting, or which products represent the best available quality. Instead, internet users now have access to a multitude of different perspectives about a wider number of products and services than was ever previously possible.¹

For the past decade, scholars in business and marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) have treated online reviews as a technologically-mediated expansion of word-of-mouth recommendation processes, even coining the term “electronic word of mouth” (eWOM) – or, in a more playful iteration, “word of mouse” (Stringham and Gerdes, 2010). Yet, electronic word of mouth differs from more traditional forms of word of mouth in a number of important ways. First, traditional word of mouth is ephemeral, whereas eWOM usually leaves some type of lasting digital record. Furthermore, because traditional word of mouth is spoken, it tends to reach a relatively small audience. In contrast, eWOM is characterized by both massive scale and rapid speed of diffusion. In other words, “information technologies enable opinions of a single individual to instantly reach thousands, or even millions of consumers” (Dellarocas et al., 2004, p. 3). eWOM can also be considered a quintessentially “late modern” form of interaction, in that it centers around practices of consumption (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), and it takes place in a technologically-mediated form, between an author and a potentially vast audience, both of whom are – and may remain – unknown to one another in an offline sense.

At the present time, online consumer reviews are a predominantly text-based,² asynchronous (and sometimes anonymous) genre of computer-mediated communication. Possessing the defining characteristics of other “Web 2.0” genres – such as being participatory, collaborative, user-generated, dynamic and rich in information – online consumer reviews can be considered a type of social media. Yet, online reviews differ from other popular forms of social media because the social ties among participants on most review sites tend to be weaker than on social networking sites, for example. In this respect, online reviews are best described as a “public” rather than “private” mode of computer-mediated discourse (Androutsopoulos, 2013), characterized by relationships of “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna, 2012). Moreover, most online review sites also differ from social networking sites in that they are more “information-focused,” rather than “relationally-driven” communities (Kozinets, 2010).

Certainly, as far as discourse analytic treatments of social media are concerned, online reviews have received less scholarly attention than social networking sites such *Facebook* or *Twitter*. One of the earliest studies of online consumer reviews (Pollach, 2006) adopted a corpus-based approach and explored linguistic features associated with the genre, such as lexical richness, word frequencies, and distributions of personal pronouns. Subsequent studies have examined the discursive construction of reviewers’ identities, addressing matters of reviewer credibility and expertise (Vázquez, 2014a, 2014b; Mackiewicz, 2010a, 2010b). Other studies have examined the ways in which reviewers evaluate (Skalicky, 2013;

Tian, 2013; Taboada, 2011) and narrate (Vázquez, 2012, 2014b) their prior experiences. However, to date, no studies have specifically addressed issues of time reference, or temporality, in online reviews.

1.2. Temporal references in social media

Research on diverse forms of social media collectively points to a trend of temporally-proximal accounts. Several scholars (Barton and Lee, 2013; Lee, 2011; Myers, 2010) have observed that features of a website’s architecture – especially, the wording of prompts for users – contribute to a strong orientation to reporting on the present moment. For example, as Lee (2011) noted, *Facebook*’s prompts to its users (originally, “*What are you doing right now?*”; and more recently, “*What’s on your mind?*”) promote a focus on recency. Similarly, *Twitter*’s prompts, having been changed from “*What are you doing?*” to “*What’s happening?*” in 2009, are designed as “provocations to report ‘what’s happening’ [...] rather than what has happened” (Page, 2012, p. 13). This orientation to the present is supported by other features of site architecture, such as the use of timestamps (especially those which frame the time of posting relative to the present moment at which the audience views the post – e.g., “*7 min ago*”, “*2 h ago*”) as well as through reverse-chronological archiving.

Media-related affordances also shape the ways in which narrativity occurs on social networking sites. Building on a broader framework of “small stories,” Georgakopoulou (2013) notes that the genre of “breaking news” stories dominates most social media today. Breaking news stories are not only based on recent events, but are “portable” from online to offline contexts, and are also characterized by co-construction of multiple tellers. While the focus of the present study is not on narrativity per se, Georgakopoulou’s observations about the pervasiveness of “breaking news” in social media are certainly consistent with other findings about the overwhelming emphasis on recency in online communicative environments.

In online communication, temporal references serve to situate other events relative to the time of posting. According to Hanks (1996), “when [individuals] make reference to time, using temporal adverbs, day names, dates, and the like, they focalize time relations” (p. 272). As far as more specific linguistic markers of temporality are concerned, users of different social media tend to exploit diverse linguistic resources. Page (2012) points out that temporal adverbs associated with the present (e.g., *today*, *tonight*, *just*, *now*) are especially frequent on *Facebook* and *Twitter* updates. This use of recency-focused temporal markers constructs “a sense of an ongoing present,” resulting in posts that are “less retrospective [...] and more grounded in the events of that particular day and the immediate future” (p. 102–3).

On blogs, there is a similar tendency to emphasize the present, illustrated by the high frequency of the adverb *just*, used to create a sense of “at or just before the present moment” (Myers, 2010, p. 69). Myers also found that bloggers also use relational adverbials (*meanwhile*, *for a week*), deictics (*now*, *yesterday*), as well as grammatical aspect (e.g., present perfect, present continuous) to express time. Occasionally, references to the remote past also appear on blogs, and when they do, they serve as a “link between personal experience and wider political events” (p. 75). Nevertheless, the focus on recency is prevalent, and Myers concludes that ultimately “bloggers are stuck in the present moment” (p. 75).

However, more recent studies (Georgalou, 2015; Honkanen et al., 2015) have demonstrated that online spaces can also enable users to engage in collective remembering, imaginings of the past, and performances of nostalgia, by invoking shared, socio-historically specific, cultural references. This suggests that taking a closer look at references to the remote past in digital media is

¹ A more critical discussion of issues such as equality, representativeness, and “empowerment” related to user-generated content is beyond the scope of this paper, but may be found in Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009).

² Many review sites now offer users the opportunity to add multi-modal information (images, video) to their reviews. However, at this point in time, most of the evaluative information about the product or service being reviewed remains encoded at the textual level.

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