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Shalom, bitches: Epistemic stance and identity work in an anonymous online forum



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ABSTRACT

How individuals discursively identify themselves through digital media and augment their claims of knowledge and legitimacy is at the core of this study. This article draws on the tools of Conversation Analysis to show how participants discussing the approval of a Hebrew language charter school in an online community forum claim access to particular kinds of knowledge and expertise through linguistic and interactional means. We ask: given the particular constraints and affordances of an asynchronous, anonymous online forum, how do participants position themselves and others with regard to identity? Despite the asynchronous nature of the forum, we show how such identity work is accomplished interactionally through the use of online affordances, as participants position themselves and others to bolster their epistemic stance, or to weaken the epistemic claims of others.

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1. Introduction

One of the more interesting turns in recent years has been the focus on the linguistic and discursive construction of identity in digital discourses. The Internet – which has been the focus of much discourse-analytic scholarship – was originally thought of as an environment that masked identity (Rheingold, 1993) and functioned as a "cyberspace curtain" (Hunkele and Cornwell, 1997), blocking many of the semiotic cues and signifying practices that make up face-to-face interactions (Donath, 1998). Yet, a growing literature effectively demonstrates that Internet interactions (such as those that take place in online discussion forums and chats) are crucial social spaces for self-presentation (Sergeant and Tagg, 2014), where individuals make deliberate discursive choices to communicate their beliefs, establish their cultural knowledge, validate their authenticity, and construct social identities. This article contributes to this discussion by drawing on the tools of Conversation Analysis to show how participants in an anonymous online community forum claim access to particular kinds of knowledge and expertise through linguistic and interactional means.

Compelling research has rejected the notion that online discussions are devoid of interactional positioning and the means by which individuals assert identity, authority, knowledge, and power. Attending to how traditional social hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced and amplified in online discussion groups, Burkhalter (2003), for example, argues that "racial identity is no more ambiguous online than offline" (p. 62), a provocative notion that serves as a reminder that how individuals engage in positioning themselves and others vis-à-vis their words and texts is as relevant in digital and mediated discourses as in face-to-face interaction. Leppänen et al. (2014) argue that participants in online interaction, whether synchronous or asynchronous, engage in categorization of themselves and others using both inclusion ("I am X") and exclusion ("You are not X"), which they describe as "active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness and groupness" (p. 112). Additionally, Vasquez's (2014) research into identity construction in online reviews offers critical insight into the interplay between anonymity, expertise, and asynchronicity, arguing that online reviewers must use linguistic resources to establish their credibility and expertise by invoking identities, either explicitly or implicitly.

How individuals in digital media linguistically identify themselves and augment their claims of knowledge and legitimacy is at the core of this present study. This article challenges notions of the invisibility of identity in digital contexts by shining light on the ways in which individuals circumvent the nonvisual and non-aural properties of the medium of anonymous, asynchronous, online forums to accomplish identity work. Building on micro-analytic research on computer-mediated interactions (Gibson, 2009; Giles, 2006; Giles et al., 2015; Stommel, 2008; Stommel and Koole, 2010; Vallis, 2001), we focus on online forum participants' epistemic stance—i.e., participants' displayed understanding of their own and others' relative access to knowledge – as they discuss the approval of a local charter school in

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Washington DC. We ask: given the particular context of an anonymous online forum, how do participants position themselves and others with regard to identity categories as they display their epistemic stance?

Our findings reveal that self- and other-positioning is relational (i.e., relative to other participants) and categorical (i.e., related to membership to one category or another). We also demonstrate that epistemic positioning is a requisite component of community online discussion forums. Specifically, our analysis reveals several significant findings: first, that the anonymity and disembodied nature of the online forum provide particular affordances that allow and require participants to engage in overt identity work. These online affordances include the use of capital letters for emphasis, timestamps as identifiers, signoffs that function as membership categorization devices (Sacks, 1992), and the use of the reply function as a form of reported speech (Holt, 1996). Collectively, we argue, these "structures of conversation" are utilized by participants to invoke identities (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998, p. 3), in a conversation that is online, anonymous, and asynchronous.

Second, we show that despite the asynchronous nature of the forum, such identity work is interactional in nature, as participants position themselves and others to bolster their own claims to knowledge and expertise, or to weaken the claims of others, invoking overlapping and often competing areas of expertise in their self- and other-positioning. Overall, our study demonstrates the importance of drawing on membership categorization analysis and epistemics to analyze how participants index multiple, overlapping identities in their claims to expertise.

2. Analytic framework

Our analytic framework draws on Conversation Analysis (CA), and particularly conceptual work on membership categorization analysis (MCA) and epistemics (Heritage, 2012a, 2012b). While both CA and MCA derive from the lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992) and can thus be seen as part of the same analytical enterprise (cf. Hester and Eglin, 1997; Maynard, 2013; Stokoe, 2012), the two approaches are concerned with different phenomena (Stokoe, 2012). MCA centers on how participants orient to their own and others' identities in talk (Sacks, 1992), while the primary analytic focus of CA is on sequentiality (Schegloff, 2007c). In this study, we draw from both analytic frameworks to examine the sequential unfolding of an anonymous online forum, looking at how participants identify themselves and others as they display their epistemic stance.

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) draw on and expands Sacks' initial work to outline five principles of a conversation-analytic approach to identity: 1) identity is inextricably linked with categories "with associated characteristics or features"; 2) identity is "indexical and occasioned"; 3) invocations of identity make that identity or category relevant to the interaction; 4) identities are only relevant for analysis when they are relevant to the interaction; and 5) this phenomenon is "visible in people's exploitation of the structures of conversation" (p. 3). This framework underscores that while people may not always make explicit reference to categories in their talk, how individuals make certain identifications salient and meaningful is an inherent part of the sequential meaning of utterances.

Participants categorize themselves and others "as a resource of ascribing properties, explaining and evaluating actions, attributing responsibility and engendering inferences and expectations regarding actions of category members" (Deppermann, 2013, p. 65). In other words, the invocation of categories (explicitly and implicitly) displays participants' orientation to identity in talk. MCA lends itself to analysis of local interactional identities, as well as "morality, culture and other categorial matters" (Stokoe, 2012, p. 278). One interactional resource which may be used as a categorization device is *person reference*, or how speakers refer to themselves or other individuals, whether co-present or absent (cf. Enfield and Stivers, 2007). For example, a speaker might refer to another individual not by name (e.g., *Mary*), but rather by a description (e.g., *that Irish girl in our class*). In this case, by referring to an individual with regard to ethnicity (*Irish*), gender (*girl*), and age (*girl vs woman*), these categories become available and possibly relevant to the interaction.

Categorization is intricately linked to participants' displays of epistemic stance; as Steensig and Heinemann (2016) put it, "social territories of knowledge are matters that participants in interaction display and orient to so that epistemics is closely connected to...identity construction" (p. 606). Heritage (in press) likewise argues that epistemic stance displays participants' sense of "who a person is in the world, where they stand in relation to others concerning some particular information, knowledge and expertise, and where they stand in relation to rights to those things" (p. 26). This study thus brings together two vibrant areas of inquiry, MCA and epistemics, in an examination of how individuals in an anonymous, online community forum invoke their own and others' identities as they display their epistemic stance.

Particularly apropos of the analysis at hand, Hansen (2005) uses MCA to examine a public hearing about a charter school, showing that participants refer to ethnicity in ambiguous and "off-record" ways (p. 70) that nevertheless instrumentally shape the ensuing interactions. Echoing Schegloff (2005), Hansen notes that speakers avoid mentioning ethnicity directly; instead, participants utilize other available discursive resources to invoke ethnicity (e.g., language as indexical of ethnicity). Hansen's study highlights the importance of not only locating identity work in interaction, but demonstrating the relevance of categories to participants (Schegloff, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Stokoe, 2012). For this study, MCA provides a lens for examining forum participants' invocation of identity despite the overt anonymity of the interaction. This study builds on Hansen's analysis of identity in an in-person forum by turning the lens to how such identity work is performed anonymously and asynchronously online.

In demonstrating how individuals signal and report "who they are" in relation to others present, Kiesling (2009) adopts the term epistemic stance (e.g., claims of knowledge and authority), a term we use in our analysis. Heritage (2012a) explains "epistemic stance" as participants' "moment-by-moment expression" of their orientation to who is entitled to talk about certain topics, differential access to knowledge within certain domains, etc. (p. 6). Given the anonymous nature of the online forum in the current study, epistemic *status*, a more stable phenomenon related to participants' access to knowledge, is essentially unknowable, both to participants and analysts, though participants do often make *claims* to superior epistemic access. These claims are, in effect, their epistemic stance. Because we are interested in the interactional and relative nature of participants' claims to knowledge, the present study adopts the term "epistemic stance" to refer to participants' claims about their own and others' access to knowledge (i.e., participants' claims to epistemic status). In choosing this term, we focus on how online forum participants claim access to a particular kind of knowledge and expertise by invoking identity through linguistic means (Holland et al., 2001). Following Heritage (2012a), we see epistemics as a "relational" concept (p. 4). That is, participants' epistemic stance reflects their *relative* claims to access to information or knowledge in the context of other participants' access. Where prior research has demonstrated how interlocutors categorize themselves and others both in face-to-face interaction and online, we advance this thinking by focusing on how anonymous online participants' claims to knowledge (i.e., their epistemic stance), which at times entail the dismissal of others' claims, are discursively accomplished through identity work relative to the other participants in the forum.

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