Self-praise in microblogging

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Abstract

Self-praise is a speech act that involves uttering a positive statement about oneself, and can thus be seen as a face-enhancing act directed at the speaker. At the same time, it is non-supportive to the hearer, and the assumption in the literature has been so far that self-praise is an interactionally delicate activity. The present study investigates the pragmatic strategies of self-praise performance in microblogging posts by ballet students. This group of users is seen as a community of practice engaged in the construction of a 'hero' identity, i.e. an image of a professional dancer who possesses necessary physical and sociolinguistic competence. Appropriateness of self-praise is contingent on the community of practice; self-praise centred around ballet-related attributes appears to be the norm in this community. Four attenuation strategies emerged in the data: self-praise plus disclaimer, self-praise plus shift of focus, self-praise plus self-denigration, and self-praise plus reference to hard work. Finally, self-enhancement on Twitter may be performed indirectly, by framing the speech act of self-praise as a third party complaint.
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1. Introduction

While politeness theories disagree on what constitutes polite behaviour and whether there are lexical items that are inherently (im)polite, most of them converge in considering self-praise a potentially problematic social activity. Brown and Levinson (1987:67), for instance, list boasting as a face-threatening act which indicates that the speaker does not care about the hearer's feelings. Among his politeness maxims, Leech (1983:132) formulates a special Modesty maxim: ''Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self.'' In a study of compliment responses, Pomerantz (1978) styles out a constraint against self-praise, which conflicts with preference for agreement and leads the recipient to reject the compliment or shift credit. Psychological studies are equally suggestive of the undesirable nature of self-praise in interaction (Jones et al., 1961; Holtgraves, 1990; Holtgraves and Dulin, 1994).

The assumption in the above-listed literature so far has been that self-praise is interactionally risky in bona fide discourse, apart from certain genres such as job applications or interviews where it is expected. However, no empirical studies have been conducted to support it. On the contrary, self-praise emerged as an important element of the speech act repertoire in microblogging of a particular community. Microblogging, represented in my material by Twitter, is a practice of on-the-go posting of short updates. The study focuses on a group of Anglophone Twitter accounts that belong to ballet students and pre-professional dancers, 5 male and 5 female, whose updates during the period 2012–2013 have been organised in a corpus of 1000 tweets.[1] Since my interest lay in examining the connection between social and linguistic

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[1] Four of the subjects were from the USA and the remaining six from the UK, Greater London area. Since neither geographical location nor gender have emerged as significant factors in self-praise use, there will be no further reference made to these factors.

structure, I made the decision to focus on the level of speech acts. In his manifesto for the ethnography of speaking, Hymes noted that a speech act ''mediates immediately between the usual levels of grammar and the rest of a speech event or situation in that it implicates both linguistic form and social norms'' (Hymes, 1972:57). I approached the coding process with no more defined categories in mind than a general notion of 'illocutionary force'. As the purpose of the investigation was to provide an unbiased view of a previously unresearched phenomenon, it appeared important to allow categories to emerge from the data rather than impose a predefined taxonomy. The resulting set of six categories was checked for clarity and usefulness with the second coder. One type of discursive action which presented itself again and again in the data was the speech act of self-praise, which ultimately accounted for 9% (91 tweet units) of the corpus.[2] In the present paper, I report on the identified self-praising practices and hypothesise about their role in ongoing facework.

2. Self-praise

Self-praise involves uttering a positive statement about oneself. Such acts are alternatively labelled face-flattering (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005), face-enhancing (Sifianou, 1995) or face-boosting (Bayraktaroğlu, 1991) and are typically invoked in the context of compliment research (Holmes, 1995; Sifianou, 2001, etc.). Indeed, self-praise is a converse of a compliment: while a compliment is intended to enhance the face of the hearer, self-praise is oriented towards the speaker. This parallel inspires the working definition of an act of self-praise that will be used in this paper. Drawing on Holmes' (1986:485) definition of compliment, I consider self-praise to be a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to the speaker for some 'good' (possession, accomplishment, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the potential audience. As such, self-praise includes announcements of accomplishments as well as explicit positive evaluations of some aspect of self.

Folk notions of politeness associate self-praise with explicit self-promoting statements, which include marked vocabulary such as comparative forms or strong adjectives. However, self-praise often presents in milder form. To accommodate both findings, I turn to Miller et al.'s (1992) distinction between bragging and positive disclosure. Bragging is a more aggressive type of positive self-presentation that involves an element of competitiveness or 'one-upmanship' (Decapua and Boxer, 1999). As Miller et al. (1992) established, a bragger tends to exaggerate and elaborate, and employs dispositional statements (''I am wonderful''), comparison statements (''I am better than others'') and low effort statements (''I didn't even try''). In contrast, observers label the reports 'positive self-disclosure' if they incorporate high effort attributions (''I've worked hard''), 'others helping me' statements (''giving me a chance'' and not wanting to ''disappoint those who helped me'') and honour/gratitude statements (''I am very thankful for this promotion''). Positive disclosure is framed as simple information sharing, but reveals facts about the speaker that are positively valued in a given community. Naturally, the boundary between positive disclosure and bragging is vague. Nevertheless, the distinction is useful since it allows one to account for two distinct societal stances towards self-praise: one is associated with healthy self-confidence and 'being positive', the other with inflated ego and deceit.

There is comparatively little research on self-praise from a linguistic perspective. Underwood (2011) examined how elderly women manage positive self-presentation in autobiographical narrative by performing self-heroicisation. She hypothesised that facework may be realised through identifying oneself with a member of an idealised reference group of the community of practice, i.e. heroes. A hero personifies a set of emblematic features that make up a desired identity: for example, a chronological age, a generational role, and a large family for elderly women. Particularly interesting in the context of my study is the strategy of competitive story topping, where the women took turns in disclosing positive information about themselves or members of their family. This practice is interactionally risky, since it may be perceived as a comparison between the interlocutors in the speaker's favour; and such ''a raising of the self may imply a lowering of the other'' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:39). Underwood's subjects, however, manage to control the face-threatening potential of this strategy by preserving the quantitative balance in the exchange of self-praise. All participants in the event worked to ensure that each woman had approximately the same time for her self-elevating narrative as every other storyteller. This finding supports Herbert's (1990) claim that face-enhancing acts need to be balanced in order to avoid awarding too much status to either co-participant.

Wu (2011) investigated self-praising behaviour in a culture which has traditionally been known for the high value it places on modesty, namely the Chinese. Surprisingly, several practices for accomplishing self-praise emerged in the data. The speakers frequently employed a bipartite turn format – self-praise plus modification – to adhere to the modesty

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² Other speech acts that occurred in the corpus were complaints – indirect (57%) and – direct (2%); info sharing (this collective category can be subdivided further, but the decisions about particular speech acts could not be made for the lack of uptake) (12%); praise (10%); thanks (6%); phatic communion (12%); appeals (14%). The percentages make up more than 100% because one tweet often contains several speech acts. All Twitter names are pseudonyms. All links to Instagram, Facebook or Twitter accounts were substituted with descriptions to preserve anonymity of the subjects.