



# Gendered discursive practices on-line

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to gain in-depth understanding on whether and how asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC), exemplified by advice giving in web-based discussion forums, is instrumental in the construction of gender identities and can thus be taken to reflect gendered discursive practices. While there is a growing body of literature on this topic, this paper extends the discussion into a less explored issue in the area of gender and advice, namely, the potential effect that the sex of the recipient may have on the linguistic structure of the message. Unlike advice-givers, advice-seekers unambiguously reveal their sex in their posts, while typically omitting other personal information or identifying features. Sex is thus the only identifiable variable. This study therefore examined how men and women are given advice – not just on how they produce advice – in terms of directness, politeness considerations and affect display. The picture that emerges is complex and points to potential changing discursive practices and gender role expectations.

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## 1. Introduction

The use of social networking has grown exponentially into a cultural phenomenon that reaches every age demographic. One of its more curious manifestations is the proliferation of peer-to-peer on-line advice between strangers. With the world at their fingertips, increasing numbers of people are asking for, obtaining, and presumably acting upon, advice dispensed by unknown peers. This trend can be found in a wide range of areas such as travel (e.g., Tripadvisor), health (e.g., eHow) and relationships (e.g., Yahoo Answers). Given its increasing popularisation and ease of accessibility, this thriving computer-mediated discourse practice can be used to explore societal norms and expectations through the examination of authentic language usage.

This study aims to gain in-depth understanding on how (or if) asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC), exemplified by advice giving in web-based discussion forums, is instrumental in the construction of gender identities and can thus be taken to reflect gendered discursive practices. While there is a growing body of literature on this topic, most of this work has focused on interactions in English. This paper extends the discussion into Spanish, examining mostly Argentinian websites through the systematic use of content analysis.

## 2. Gender anonymity or display in cyberspace?

Due to its wide availability and popularity across all demographics, the Internet was initially hailed as an inherently democratising medium that would enable access to all those with literacy skills and technological savvy, making social differences irrelevant or invisible on-line (Graddol and Swann, 1989; Herring, 2000). Spears and Lea, for instance, claimed

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that CMC “can serve to reduce the social barriers to communication and thus the impact of status differentials, resulting in greater equality of participation” (1994:428). This expectation was partly based on the absence of “gating features” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004:37), that is, social and physical cues as to the message sender’s characteristics such as age, sex, class, physical attractiveness, or (dis)ability, that may impact interactions in face-to-face encounters. Thus early studies raised the prospect that a new gender-neutral style of interaction would typify communication on-line.

However, it is now widely recognised that a democratising technology cannot in itself guarantee social equality, nor erase social, political and cultural factors that impact on its adoption and use. One of these potentially influencing factors is gender differentiation, an important aspect of culture that is often expected to reflect in, and be constructed through, language use. Contrary to early expectations, claims of widespread gender equality have not been supported by most research on on-line interaction (Harp and Tremayne, 2006; Herring, 2000). Indeed, a growing body of research has found that certain phenomena associated with stereotypical characterisations of gender linguistic behaviour were not diminished but actually reinforced on-line. For instance, studies have shown that women are still underrepresented in electronic bulletin boards, blogs and discussion groups, well below their proportional representations on those sites (Herring, 2004), and that in mixed-sex public discussions men still dominate interactions in terms of both quantity of speech and aggressiveness in responses (Herring, 1993, 2004, 2008; Selfe and Meyer, 1991), replicating findings that have been reported for off-line interactions (Coates, 1993; Herring, 1994; West and Zimmerman, 1983).

Herring (2000) thus pointed to an apparent paradox: that gender disparity still persists in an anonymous medium that allegedly renders sex invisible. For email communication, this can be partly explained by the tendency of most users to give off their real names in email addresses, a practice also common in blogs (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). But, even in the absence of clearly identifiable information such as names, nicknames or avatars, users can often signal their gender identity discursively. One explanation, consistent with self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987), proposes that people internalise group prototypes and activate them when a particular category becomes germane to the interaction. Thus, gender-relevant interactions increase the salience of gender identity, and lead people to behave in a gender-consistent manner (Palomares and Lee, 2010; Postmes and Spears, 2002). From this perspective, participants construct and express self-designated sexual identities through gendered language usage, and thus can identify each other’s genders and act accordingly; Herring (2004), for instance, describes this expected behaviour as women showing same-sex solidarity and men harassing women.

The notions that through language women exhibit same-sex solidarity and “support” whereas men harass and “control” (Fishman, 1978) or that women “rapport talk”, i.e., talk to foment or enhance relationships, while men, “report talk”, i.e., talk to solve problems, are among the most entrenched generalisations found in popular culture and early studies of gender and language (Tannen, 1990). Although these characterisations were proposed as applying to face-to-face communication, early scholarship on language, and gender in CMC expected that on-line interactions would report similar findings.

Yet results of on-line studies about these characterisations have been mixed.<sup>1</sup> Some empirical studies on the use of emoticons, for instance, have supported the expectation that females use more emoticons than males in on-line messages (Witmer and Katzman, 1997), and that in instant messaging males rarely use emoticons with other men. However, they do use them when messaging females, while females use an equal number of emoticons when interacting with both sexes (Lee, 2003). Huffaker and Calvert (2005), however, in their study of gender and language use by teenage bloggers, found that expectation challenged. Of those who used emoticons, males used more than females – not only flirtatious ones, as predicted, but also sad ones. The same study also found that, contrary to predictions, there were no clear gender differences for aggression favouring males, nor were there differences favouring females in passivity (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Cooperation was found across both sexes.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Rodino (1997) in her study of interactions in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), documented multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which users perform gender, and suggested that binary categorisations of gendered behaviours are inadequate, as they assume gender to be an identity already pre-formed when interactions occur, rather than a performance that is accomplished through interactions (conf. Butler, 1990). Furthermore, some recent studies have indicated a trend towards a more neutral language use in younger generations (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005) and in large mixed groups (Baym, 1996; Herring, 2008). These contradictory findings indicate that gendered linguistic behaviour is highly context-specific, and that the context of the interaction may be more important than gender in determining linguistic behaviour (Cameron, 1992; Rodino, 1997). Thus, rather than looking for universality in behaviours, current scholarship focuses on localised instances. It examines gender and language from a perspective “that roots each in the everyday social practices of particular local communities and sees them as jointly constructed in those practices (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992:91)”. Fruitful in examining the construction of gender through language has been the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), defined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices emerge in this course of mutual endeavour” (1992:464). Participants in the present study, however, do not constitute a community in the strict sense of the term as their interactions are usually limited to a single exchange, which is insufficient to develop common practices. It is likely then that in giving advice participants are drawing on pre-existing norms of how this speech act should be expressed.

<sup>1</sup> Mixed results have also been reported in off-line interactions, but this issue reaches beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted though that, since in both instant messages and blogs personal details of the writer are on display, the results may not represent the findings in anonymous interactions.

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