PRAGREV
Pragmatics.Reviews

Online Publication of the

European University VIADRINA

Volume 2, Number 2

June 2014

Facework in online communities of practice

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Jenny Arendholz. 2013. *(In)Appropriate Online Behavior. A pragmatic analysis of message board relations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

The linguistic analysis of Computer Mediated Communication has been all the rage for the last two decades. And for good reasons: the dialectic way in which the traditional thesis and antithesis of orality and scripturality are "aufgehoben" in CMC is certainly interesting, and the plethora of new genres that CMC has spawned provide ample new fields for research. Jenny Arendholz's monograph on the genre of message board communication is positioned within these fields. A few characteristics of the book might seem peculiar to an Anglophone audience, such as the fact that only the last two of seven main chapters of the monograph subtitled "a pragmatic analysis of message board relations" are actually dedicated to such an analysis, while most of the preceding five chapters are theory-heavy, but hardly contain any concrete analyses. The acknowledgments section thankfully clarifies that the monograph was originally submitted as a PhD thesis at a German university, which explains its culturally determined structure.

Not that there is that much wrong with the theory chapters at all. After a short introduction, chapters 2 and 3 give a technical and a social perspective respectively on online network communication. The unclear genre distinction between message boards and fora (pp. 13-17) is instructive, although the author's decision to define her object of analysis, the UK based online community *The Student Room*, as a message board rather than a forum (simply going by the layout), does not appear as much of a logical necessity for the reader as for the author. Chapter 3 introduces *The Student Room* as a community of practice and has an unfortunately very short and preliminary discussion of implicit and explicit multi-addressing so typical for online message boards and fora (p. 44). "Multi-addressed", by the way, is certainly not a bad English translation for the German adjectival term "mehrfachadressiert" (p. 43), it definitely beats the perceived internationalism "polylogue" that the author also uses in the book (e.g. p. 185). "Polylogue" is not only an etymological abomination, a wrong derivation of "dialogue" (the etymological equivalent of "monokini" for a bikini without a top), it is also hardly as much of an English internationalism as German academics in linguistics and media studies seem to think.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the concepts of (im)politeness and face. Anyone who knows what sort of terminological snake-pit politeness research has become over the last decades can only congratulate the author for the sovereign way in which she deals with the ideologically sensitive f-word (I mean "face", of course), coming up with a handy working model of face

and facework which is rather a good tool for her own analysis (pp. 75-77). Arendholz's adapted model of relational work (p. 97), unfortunately does not appear quite as unquestionable, even in the context of her own analysis. Why exactly "mock-impolite" behaviour would be "positively marked" as banter, but "overpolite" or "mock-polite" behaviour, on the other hand, only appears as "negatively marked", is not entirely clear, all the more since some of the examples the author characterises as "mock-impolite" could easily be understood as really impolite by another observer (e.g. p.193), while "mock-polite" utterances might be seen as banter (e.g. p. 199).

Chapter 6, "Prelude to the analysis: gathering contextual factors" is also a bit of an anticlimax. Not only is the factor of the board moderators as arbiters of "appropriateness" and their power to block contributors (and possibly delete contributions they consider inappropriate) not clearly taken account of – deleted contributions would certainly give a biassed impression of the average appropriateness of contributions to the board. The courage that the author has proven in her dealing with the f-word *face* seems to have deserted her when it comes to the c-word *culture*. That "cultural background" is only seen as a personal factor, while "social norms shared between interlocutors" as an interpersonal factor are not seen as equally "cultural" (p. 126) and the relation between "communities of practice" and "subcultures" is not discussed are probably not faults that would have to be pointed out in a PhD thesis. However, the monograph presents itself in the grown-up context of John Benjamins' *Pragmatics and Beyond* series, and here slightly different criteria must be applied.

The analyses of thread starts (chapter 7) and thread interaction (chapter 8) are good, within the limits of the author's theoretical framework as discussed above. One aspect sorely missed is any in-depth discussion of addressivity in CMC – not in the wide Bakhtinian sense of the term, but more in – although not entirely restricted to – the narrower sense of Cristopher Werry's seminal article of 1996 "Linguistic and interactional features of Internet Relay Chat" (a text that actually appears in the bibliography of the Arendholz's book). A lot of questions of cultural and subcultural appropriateness of individual thread contributions analysed by the author could have arguably been answered better if she had taken the often subtle changes of addressivity within such contributions into account, such as addressivity to a single online interlocutor, multi-addressed utterances and generic use of address (such as generic "you").

As far as the paratexts of the monographs are concerned, it is absolutely commendable that the author made the effort of compiling name and subject indices, although it is not immediately clear why the latter has an entry for "postmodernism" but lacks one for "address[ivity]". The list of references is extensive, although not overly so, and it seems to

indicate little editing of the original PhD thesis for the monograph published in 2013 that, in a fast-moving field such as CMC research, the most recent works cited are four texts from 2011. All in all, the text is well readable, and typos (such as the renaming of Werner Kallmeyer as "Kallenmeyer", p. 276) as well as mistakes that are possibly based on L1 German interference (such as "a bad record" for "a bad reputation", p. 263) are few and far between.

Within its limits and with its limitations, the monograph is a valuable contribution to CMC pragmatics research that successfully tackles a number of important problems (such as the definition of online genres, communities of practice and facework).

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His research interests include: pragmatics, terms of address

Heinz Leonhard Kretzenbacher: Review on *(In)Appropriate Online Behavior. A pragmatic analysis of message board relations*. 2013. In PRAGMATICS.REVIEWS 2014.2.2