

Reseña / Review

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

ISBN 9789027256348. Price: € 95.00

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DOI 10.1515/soprag-2016-0008

In this work, Jenny Arendholz studies the interpersonal behaviour of users of the online message board The Student Room (TSR). The author uses a corpus of 50 threads from TSR message board (3271 posts by ca. 1570 users) and through a detailed analysis, using many examples, she attempts to show how users initiate and manage their online relations identifying a range of interpersonal strategies including politeness.

In her introduction, Arendholz sets out her research questions. She also acknowledges several difficulties in making a quantitative study of politeness online: the heterogeneity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the lack of consensus in defining terms such as politeness and rudeness which mean that any work in this area can only ever provide a narrow snap-shot of online interaction.

In chapter 2, there is a short history of the Internet and the development of hypertext: the common language behind all CMC. The author then moves on to a description of the distinguishing features of message boards and TSR in particular. An important element of this chapter concerns what might be termed the negative stereotypes associated with online communication: its perceived lack of social capacity. Arendholz uses data from her corpus to make a strong argument for the rich social potential of CMC showing how users define the language of CMC rather than the technology being the limiting factor.

Arendholz dedicates chapter 3 to a discussion of TSR as an online community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). She uses this definition to justify how certain ways of relating emerge amongst users of TSR: (over) familiar language and site-specific codes of conduct policed by users themselves.

In the following two chapters the author tackles the problem of coming up with a viable definition of politeness for her study. In chapter 4, she considers several of the major, historical politeness theories (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). A key section is 4.4, where the author sums up the aspects of theory she feels need to be retained and which should be discarded in order to generate a framework to study Internet-based data. For example, although she is a strong critic of Brown and Levinson (1987), she takes O'Driscoll's

opinion that “face dualism is just too valuable to be jettisoned” (O’Driscoll, 1996, p. 4). However, she seeks to make the model more realistic by reintroducing a social element from the original ideas of Goffman (1967).

In chapter 5, the author explores more recent thinking on interpersonal behaviour. The discussion focusses largely on the concepts of appropriate behaviour and relational work (Locher & Watts, 2005), but also includes sections on impoliteness and mock-politeness (see, for example, Culpeper, 1996). Arendholz uses examples from her corpus to gain insight into TSR ideas about politeness (p. 82). In addition, she brings the discussion fully up to date and into her particular area of study by a discussion of *flaming* (section 5.7).

In chapter 6, the author looks at the problem of context, in particular, the way in which users present themselves and how to interpret this information. The author discusses the capacity that users have to manipulate their online personae but rejects the notion of *identity construction* (Locher, 2011) in favour of *face constitution* (pp. 114–115), arguing that a user’s identity is too well established in the physical world to allow for complete reinvention online. Arendholz follows the initial discussion with examples of face constitution and ratification by TSR users.

In chapter 7, we get the first detailed examination of the corpus: its make-up and how users start interpersonal relations through an examination of initial thread postings. Arendholz comments that a majority of users appear only once in her sample indicating a very large CoP with a transitory membership. The content of thread starts is analysed and the author comes up with six broad topic categories: getting to know others; looking for like-minded others; asking for advice; asking for opinions; blowing off steam; offering advice / information.

Arendholz notes that there is valuable demographic information in the face-claims made in initial posts. Users also distinguish themselves by their reputations as either “do-gooders” or “trouble makers” which, Arendholz explains, potentially marks them out for special interest in her analysis.

The author also considers stylistic aspects of thread starts noting the informal tone of many greetings and the use of metapragmatic utterances, including CMC specific phenomena such as smileys, used to clarify entries. At the end of this chapter, Arendholz describes how seven of her fifty initial posts were altered by their authors within hours of being posted. The author speculates that the original post was modified in response to other users’ comments: a first indication of evaluations of inappropriateness.

In chapter 8, Arendholz tackles the main analytical task. She takes each of the thread topics outlined in chapter 7 in turn and uses key examples to tease out the interpersonal strategies involved. To aid her analysis, the author gives each of her threads an *interaction quotient* (IQ) based on thread length and its number

of participants. Threads with similar IQ's are then compared in order to uncover general patterns of behaviour within the corpus.

Arendholz makes a qualitative analysis of the facework employed within each post and assesses other users' responses in order to make a quantitative enumeration of instances of (in)appropriate behaviour. The quantitative results are categorised according to a modified version of the Locher and Watts' framework (2005) (see section 5.3 p. 85). This information is tabulated for each thread topic and there is a detailed summary of all results at the end of the chapter.

The standout conclusion from this final chapter is that TSR is dominated by unmarked appropriate behaviour (92.8% of all communication). Where users are inappropriate the author finds that they opt for rudeness rather than disguising their offensive intent in mock-polite language. Arendholz notes that positive facework dominates over negative facework which is in keeping with the predominantly functional and appropriate language of TSR. She also comments over certain differences that appear in terms of the behaviour of new users compared to regulars: the latter being less reticent and more creative in their postings than the former.

In chapter 9, the author returns to her research questions. She treats each one individually but does not add any further discussion beyond that which has already occurred in previous chapters.

This work represents a first foray into a new area of pragmatics and is both thought provoking and well done. The major criticism of the book as a whole concerns the balance between theoretical discussion and the empirical study. The former takes up the first 6 chapters (over 50% of the book) thus many readers may give up before reaching the main interest of Arendholz' work.

Arendholz states that one of her aims is to disprove some of what she terms the "*unjustified and obsolete myths*" (p. 4) in the literature concerning the quality of interpersonal relations online. Thus the detail contained in the first five chapters is perhaps justified: to address the challenges of studying within an online environment and produce a suitable working definition of politeness for this environment. Unfortunately, many of the arguments presented by the author – such as those concerning the merits of Brown and Levinson's (1987) versus Goffman's (1967) interpretations of face are thoroughly rehearsed in other work. As a result, the discussion lacks interest for researchers already familiar with the field.

In addition, the author makes minimal reference to her corpus within her theory chapters thus there is a certain disconnect between this section of the work and the empirical study. It also means that chapter 8, containing almost all of the analysis, is very unwieldy.

The empirical side of this study has been well done. The analysis is thorough and clearly presented throughout. Arendholz is transparent about her methods and quantitative results are tabulated clearly making her conclusions very testable.

There are however certain places where more information would have been desirable. For instance, the treatment of those thread starts which show signs of alteration (chapter 7, pp. 160–161). None of these threads appear in chapter 8 so it is not clear whether this self-censorship by users was given any particular significance. The author also appears to recycle the initials used to denote individual contributors to a thread: *l* is used to refer to both *Lauren* in thread #1 and *lily-thrash21* in thread #2. This is not explained in the text and is somewhat confusing.

In terms of the analysis itself, this is generally very solid. There are however certain instances where the evidence for a particular interpretation is questionable. As an example, two comments within thread #18 posted by users, *i* and *J* on pages 191 and 193, respectively, have been categorised as mock-impolite. In the first case, the author justifies her designation based on a clarification offered within the post and in the second she excuses the rudeness due to its author's good reputation. Unfortunately, since neither of these posts appear to have received a reply there is no hearer perspective to back their categorisations as *mock-impolite* (appropriate behaviour). Indeed, that the posts are not replied to may indicate that they were in fact judged inappropriate (as the author speculates in another example: thread #1, p. 173) and although the poster's non-offensive intent is fairly clear in the first example, interpolating intent from a user's reputation is more doubtful. As the author notes in another example (thread #13, p. 209) reputation is not always a guide to how a user will behave.

Overall, this book is worth devoting some time to. Readers should, however, direct their attention primarily to the chapters dealing with the empirical work. Arendholz offers some valuable insights into a novel area of pragmatics research: online forums. In so doing, she grapples with several important concepts such as communities of practice and facework. Arendholz provides many insights into the quality and variety of online communication and demonstrates that it is characterised largely by appropriate behaviour with both over politeness and its counterpart, rudeness rarely in evidence. Her analytical approach is sound and contains many elements that could be taken forward by other researchers in this field.

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