

“holy shit that is awesome good for you!” – The study of speech acts in online comments

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This paper explores the possibilities of studying speech acts in large corpora. In corpus pragmatics, the study of speech acts has been mainly concerned with finding ways of identifying and searching for these pragmatic constructions in electronic corpora. This is because most speech acts are defined with regard to their function rather than the specific linguistic form in which they appear in texts. Consequently, previous research has often studied either a closed set of verbs and constructions that typically function as a specific speech act (e.g. sorry or apologise for the speech act of apology, see Deutschmann 2003) or analysed the metacommunicative potential of these expressions, studying both performative and discursive uses of speech acts (see e.g. Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014).

In this study, we elaborate on a new methodological approach that involves studying one particular type of text at a time as well as focusing on a specific position within the text to uncover manifestations of speech acts (Lutzky and Gee 2018). We present the results of a contrastive analysis of online comments drawn from two corpora that were compiled by the Research and Development Unit at Birmingham City University. These include a sub-corpus of 86 million words of comments on blog posts, which were published on the WordPress and Blogger hosting sites between 2000 and 2010 and form part of the Birmingham Blog Corpus (<http://www.webcorp.org.uk/blogs>), and a second dataset of 280 million words of reader comments which were left on articles on The Guardian website between 2006 and 2010.

The analysis of online comments on blogs and newspaper articles illustrates how the use of specific speech acts may be identified by focusing on the initial position in this type of text. The contrastive perspective allows insights into similarities and differences with regard to the way in which blog and newspaper comments are initiated and to the types of speech acts appearing in these comments. The results show that while blog comments reflect more positive attitudes, with speech acts such as complimenting and thanking occurring frequently at their onset, newspaper comments appear to be more matter of fact and argumentative in nature, with speech acts such as asserting and suggesting appearing at the start of the comments.

References

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