



The University of  
**Nottingham**

# **Analysing health communication: The intersection of linguistics and medicine in adolescent health care**

YLMP 2010

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# Introduction

- Applied linguistics in action
  - Researchers–practitioners
  - Reciprocity
- 
- Corpus Linguistics
  - Pragmatics
  - Sociolinguistics



# Background

- Health care and computer-mediated-communication (CMC)
- Face-to-face v CMC:

Written versus spoken

Disembodied identity performance



# Health care online

- Reach a large number of people: disparate and global
- Provide information rapidly
- Provide up-to-date information
- Provide the possibility of searching archives
- Allow anonymous searches and request for information on 'delicate' topics



# Health care online

- Practitioner opinions of CMC

Key issue:

- Ensuring reliability of sources
- In the UK, always use appropriately qualified health care practitioners affiliated to the NHS on non-commercial websites



# Health care data

Interdisciplinary research since 2004:  
linguists, healthcare practitioners,  
pharmacy academics, sociologists  
focusing on:

- *Teenage Health Freak* website

Various projects have taken place in  
collaboration with website medics

[www.teenagehealthfreak.org](http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org)



# Adolescent health care

- GPs and adolescents: Communication barriers:
  - Fear of confidentiality breaches
  - Marginalisation
  - Embarrassment

(Jacobson et al. 2001; McPherson 2005)



# Teenage Health Freak Website

Provides complete anonymity:  
disembodied identity performance

Popularity: 52,864 visits per day  
**Non-emergency** medical advice




# Homepage of the Teenage Health Freak Website



# Doctor Ann's Virtual Surgery

## Doctor Ann's Virtual Surgery



### Ask Dr Ann


If you have a health question and can't find the answer to it on my website, just ask. I'll do my best to answer, but as I receive a lot of emails, I can't answer all of them - just a selection each week. Ask away...

Sex:

Age:

[Click here](#) for privacy policy

[email this page to a friend](#)



- ↑ Home ↑
- Notice Board ↗
- Index →
- Emergency Room ↑
- Quizzes and Surveys ↑
- ← Not Feeling Well ?
- Drugs and Alcohol →
- ← Sex
- Smoking ↘
- Weight and Eating →
- Body Changes: Girls →
- ← Body Changes: Boys
- Moods ↑
- The Website of a Teenage Health Freak →



# **Project 1: Corpus approaches and pragmatics**

2007-present (Mullany and Harvey 2007;  
in preparation)

- Giving/receiving advice: face-threatening: competency and autonomy are threatened

(Locher and Hoffman 2006)

- Advice: beyond individual: for any visitor to the site

- Mixed-methods: quantitative and qualitative



# Methodology

- Over 60,000 email texts from adolescents
- Corpus approach: 1 million words
- Quantitative and qualitative methods
- Responses: qualitative analysis

# ***Top 20 keywords in the 'teenage health email' corpus***

	<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>%</b>
1	MY	27,575	2.73
2	I	71,064	7.02
3	AM	9,946	0.98
4	SEX	8,043	0.80
5	IM	6,714	0.66
6	HELP	5,628	0.56
7	ME	13,483	1.33
8	PENIS	3,711	0.37
9	DONT	3,328	0.33
10	IS	18,850	1.86
11	PREGNANT	2,804	0.28
12	2	2,537	0.25
13	HAVE	17,328	1.71
14	ANN	3,220	0.32
15	PERIOD	2,330	0.23
16	DR	2,198	0.22
17	BOYFRIEND	2,284	0.23
18	DO	15,703	1.55
19	HOW	6,792	0.67
20	WORRIED	2,139	0.21



# Euphemisms and face saving

- Dr-patient face-to-face encounters:  
Euphemisms used to refer to sexual body parts to save face
- Can hamper effectiveness of medical advice/lead to miscommunication  
(Stewart 2005; Weijts et al. 1993)
- Current emphasis on 'openness' in Dr-patient communication in the NHS  
(Tayler & Ogden 2005)

# ***Frequencies of words describing sexual body parts in teenage health email corpus***

<b>Orthophemisms</b>			<b>Euphemisms</b>		
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>		<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Penis*</b>	3,711	0.37	*****	796	0.07
<b>Vagina*</b>	1,065	0.11	Down there	135	0.01
			Down below	87	—
			Downstairs	11	—
			Privates	9	—

**\*Keywords in comparison with the British National Corpus**

## ***Slang/taboo terms to describe male/female genitalia***

	Freq	%		Freq	%
Willy	257	0.03	Fanny	231	0.03
Knob/nob	185	_____	Hole	154	_____
Dick	80	_____	Minge	16	_____
Cock	44	_____	C**t	12	_____

Dysphemism (Allan & Burrige 2006)

Impoliteness and appropriacy: Our data give access to **all** messages , not just those that are selected on the website





# Advice giving

- Negotiation of politeness and power
  - Formality-informality
  - Solidarity-social distance
  - 'Expert' power
  - Empathy/rapport-building



# Rapport building

Balance : informed friend and expert power

*Dear dr. Ann, What is paranoid scytsophrenia?  
Dear 'what is paranoid schizophrenia', I think this is what  
you mean-it is a difficult word to spell.*

Dear Dr Ann, it's not me it's my friend. I'm dead worried about her eating. She's always going on about dieting and stuff and we both try not to eat chips too much and everything...

O.K, so let me get this right – you used to worry that she was anorexic, and now you're worried because she binge eats and then makes herself sick so that it all comes back? *That's called bulemia, oh bother, bulimia - always tend to spell it wrong since doctors are just as dyslexic as everyone else!*



# Rapport building: Empathy

‘Dear ‘I feel suicidal’ - I am so, so sorry that you feel this way - it must feel really terrible. But you have taken the first step to feeling better by telling someone else about how you feel. Actually we almost all feel suicidal at one time or another during our lives, and by far the best way of helping oneself with these feelings is being able to talk to someone else about it.’

‘Dear ‘very depressed about glasses’,  
As somebody who is also very short sighted, I can really understand your feelings!’



## **Project 2**

# **Diachronic study: Corpus linguistics and Sociolinguistics**

- 2010-2011 *Economic and Social Research Council* funded (Adolphs and Mullany)
- Methodological integration between corpus linguistics & sociolinguistics
- Research outputs of practical relevance



# **Areas of investigation**

- Diachronic study
- Mixed-methods: quantitative and qualitative
- Methodological innovations: spelling variation
- 3 million words over a 5 year period
- Register and styles
- Communication accommodation and strategies of empathy by advice givers



# Research outputs

Dedicated website  
Encyclopaedia

- GPs/other healthcare advisers
- Adolescents
- Educators
- Teachers
- Parents



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