“You may very well feel like a small fish in a big pond”:
A linguistic analysis of the constructions of mental health
in two Internet advice columns

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“You may very well feel like a small fish in a big pond”: A linguistic analysis of the constructions of mental health in two Internet advice columns

- Comparative study
- Two advice-giving online resources
- UK and US-based, though access is global
- Emotional health: depression
Background: CMC and health discourse

The Internet offers the following opportunities to health educators:

• reach a large number of people
• provide information rapidly
• provide up-to-date information
• provide the possibility of searching archives
• allow searchers to anonymously look for information on delicate topics
Background to *Lucy Answers*

**Internet advice column:**
`Lucy Answers`, since 1993 (part of a professional and institutional health program at a US university)

**Declared mission:**
provide quality healthcare, “by providing factual, in-depth, straight-forward, and nonjudgmental information to assist readers’ decision-making about their physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual health.” (LA 2004)

**Topics:**
relationships, emotional health, sexuality, sexual health, drugs, general health, fitness and nutrition
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Background to *Lucy Answers*

**Format:** exchanges of a problem and response ‘letter’

**Readership:** college students from the home university;
accessible to other people as well

**Advisors:** a group of professional health educators,
publishing under the pseudonym ‘Lucy’

**Popularity:** 2,000 inquiries a week, only 5 are answered
every week

**Archive:** updated content, search function

**Data:** sub-corpus of 50 response letters in the category
‘emotional health’
Background to *Dr. Ann*

**Format:** Email of a query/problem and doctor’s response

**Readership:** teenagers, school children

**Advisors:** 2 GPs who specialise in child and adolescent health, reporting under the pseudonym ‘*Dr Ann*’

**Popularity:** 560 emails weekly, only limited number answered

**Archive:** updated content, search function

**Data:** entire corpus: 1 million words
Background to *Dr. Ann*

**Internet advice column:**

‘Teenage Health Freak’, online since 2001 (part of a privately owned, GP-run website)

**Same topics as *Lucy Answers*:**
relationships, emotional health, sexuality, sexual health, drugs, general health, fitness and nutrition
Background to *Ask Dr. Ann*

**Declared mission:**

“To provide web-based, accurate and reliable health information to teenagers in a contemporary, cringe-free, entertaining and informative way…in a format that enables young people to take effective responsibility for their health related actions within an appropriate moral framework.”

“To provide a database that can also be used by parents, teachers and health professionals.”

(THF 2001)
Comparing the corpora

Differences:

Age of target group:
Ask Dr. Ann: aimed at school children (teens) in UK
Lucy Answers: aimed at college students in US

Similarities:

Educational aim of site
Means chosen to impart information (advice column)
Creation of a female advisor persona
Open access and archive function
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Research questions

(1) Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

(2) Do they use medico-technical jargon?

(3) Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

(4) How do the questioners legitimize/foreground their emotional problem?
Caveats and foci

(1) Focus on ‘depression’
(2) Lay perceptions
(3) Professional perceptions
RQ (1): Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

**Psychiatrization**

- Tendency to self-diagnose oneself with an emotional disorder

- Seeing everyday problems of living as becoming pathological and medicalized.

- The boarders of psychiatric diagnosis have been widened (Rose 2006).
RQ (1): Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

- Some advice-seekers self-diagnose

“I’m pretty sure that he is clinically depressed” (LA)

“I have severe clinical depression” (DA)

“I have Asperger syndrome, depression, migraines, seasonal affective disorder” (DA)
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RQ (1): Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

- Reaction the same in Dr. Ann and Lucy Answers:

  * empathy
  * normalization
  * pathological definition of ‘depression’
  * advice
Dear Lucy,
I am actually asking for a friend of mine since this situation is getting worse, and I don't know how to help. The problem is that my friend is very depressed, and has very, very low self-esteem. While sometimes able to be cheerful and "happy," he claims to rarely feel that way and mostly just hates himself. [...] I feel like being strong for him is just not enough, and I can't quite convince him that counseling may do some good. [...] Is there anything you can suggest for me to tell him or suggest to him? Any help will be greatly appreciated, because I just don't how to help him. Thank you so much.

-- A friend on-the-line
RQ (1): Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

Dear A friend on-the-line,

Everyone feels "blue" at certain times during his or her life. In fact, transitory feelings of sadness or discouragement are perfectly normal, especially during particularly difficult times.

* empathy
* normalization
RQ (1): Do we see evidence of the psychiatrization of emotional distress?

But, a person who cannot "snap out of it," or get over these feelings within two weeks, may be suffering from the illness called depression. Depression comes in many kinds and degrees. Demoralization is usually part of depression, but it's not the whole story.

Pathological definition of ‘depression’

- Depression is an illness
- Raising awareness of its complexity
### Some Symptoms of Depression
- Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and irritability that seem to have no cause
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities, including sex

[8 more points]
Not all of these features are present in every depressive episode.

Gently and directly talk with your friend about your concerns while setting limits for yourself because you are not a professional therapist.  
[more advice]

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Pathological definition of ‘depression’
Advice
RQ (2): Do they use medico-technical jargon?

Advice-seekers in both advice columns: yes (see before)

*Lucy Answers* and *Dr. Ann:*

- General avoidance of medical jargon
- If unavoidable, jargon is explained
- If the advice-seeker initiates medico-technical questions, the advice-givers will take them up and explain
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

**DEPRESSION IS DOWN**

**Advice-seeker:**
“downhearted but hopeful” (pseudonym; LA)

**Advice-giver:**
“if you feel very down and depressed” (DA)
“You also appear to be experiencing some downtime at the moment, which can compound feelings of low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and low self-worth” (LA)
“I’m so sorry you’re feeling so low” (DA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

DEPRESSION IS A JOURNEY

Advice-seeker:
“help me, just give me direction” (LA)
“I don’t want to be here” (DA)

Advice-giver:
“sinking into depression” (DA)
“break the cycle” (DA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

DEPRESSION IS VISION (COLOUR)

Advice-seeker:
“things seem much rosier at those times” (LA)
“Thanks, feeling blue” (pseudonym; LA)
“its making me blue” (DA)

Advice-giver:
“Everyone feels ‘blue’ at certain times during his or her life.” (LA)
“be patient because depression fades” (DA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

ILLNESS IS WAR

Advice-seeker:
“its [the depression] is hitting me hard” (DA)

Advice-giver:
there are many ways of fighting back” (DA)
“Lucy encourages you to follow through on your work in fighting this depression and your eating disorder.” (LA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

DEPRESSION IS ISOLATION

Advice-seeker:
“I constantly feel paralyzed, trapped, as if there is ‘no way out’” (LA)
“I can’t help feeling trapped inside my mind” (DA)

Advice-giver:
If you and one of these friends are both interested in taking the next step toward romance, let the heat between you melt away the ice that now keeps you frozen in friendship. (LA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

DEPRESSION IS ‘this animate, ungovernable, unwieldy, uncontrollable force’

Advice-seeker:
“There is something bugging my brain, making me feel this why but i am not sure what” (DA)

Advice-giver:
“you have a huge load on you” (DA)
“Life feels out of control (DA)
RQ (3): Do they draw on figurative language to describe their emotional state?

- Metaphors are a significant means of communication on emotional health between patients and health professionals

- Figurative language is not part of the discourse of diagnosis in the official statistical criteria (DSM)
RQ (4): How do the questioners legitimize / foreground their emotional problem?

- Punctuation: HELP!
- Capitalization: HELP!
- Adverbials & syntax: I really do feel like shit.
- Adjective: I am so worried
- Descriptions: Please help me before it is too late

Since not all the questions are answered, the advice-seekers need to distinguish themselves from the crowd.
Conclusions

- computer-mediated advice columns have a great potential for health communication
- anonymity as an asset
- addition to face-to-face counselling
- text genre suitable for health communication
- concerns of teenagers and young adults
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References of our work on this topic:


Harvey, K., M.A. Locher and L. Mullany. 2008a. "Is the aids virus difficult to catch?": A linguistic analysis of two Internet advice columns on sexual health. Paper presented at COMET 08, Cape Town, SA.


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Thank you for your attention!

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