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

YLMP 2010

Dr. Louise Mullany
University of Nottingham, UK
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
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

Ask Dr Ann
Got a question for the doc? Ask it here - especially if it's about drugs, alcohol and smoking - we want to know!

Pete's Diary
Sunday. Oo-er. Overheard Mum on the phone to the doc this morning b4 going to school. She thinks Sis has ...

More
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: Male
Age: 14

Ask

Click here for privacy policy

© Teenage Health Websites Ltd 2001  Last updated: 6 January 2003
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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthophemisms</th>
<th>Euphemisms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freq</strong></td>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penis*</td>
<td>3,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagina*</td>
<td>1,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Keywords in comparison with the British National Corpus*
### Slang/taboo terms to describe male/female genitalia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willy</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>Fanny</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knob/nob</td>
<td>185</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hole</td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minge</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cock</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td>C**t</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dysphhemism (Allan & Burridge 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
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 bulimia, oh bother, bulimia - always tend to spell it wrong since doctors are just as dyslexic as everyone else!
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
References/further reading

References/further reading