

ONLINE SEMINAR

**EXPERT AND LAY VOICES IN ONLINE
HEALTH COMMUNICATION**

**24 April 2024
Institute of English Studies
Jagiellonian University**

**SEMINAR ORGANISERS:
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Book of abstracts

The seminar is funded by the programme Excellence Initiative —
Research University at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków



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Patterns of empathy in two online fora for diabetes and for eating disorders

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Linguistic empathy represents a dynamic interpersonal system of language that varies according to the communicative setting. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that there are different patterns (or styles) of empathy construction specific of each type of interaction. In the present study, we examine the empathic strategies deployed by participants in two online support groups: a recovery forum from an eating disorder (ED) and a forum for diabetes. The sample from the ED forum includes 50 threads, with a total of 82.562 words. For the diabetes forum, the sample comprises 18 threads, and a total number of 40.932 words. The results indicate that in the ED forum the most common empathy moves are primary emotional reactions and taking the other's perspective (cognitive empathy). In the diabetes forum, instead, the most frequent strategy was sharing the illness practices as proof of affiliation with the recipient. This contrast in the kind of empathy moves used in each community is related to the different experience of diabetes and EDs.

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Exploring transparency and persuasion in detox discourse: a linguistic analysis

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'Detoxification' is a legitimate medical term that has been co-opted as a marketing strategy to add credibility to various 'detox' products and services that lack scientific evidence (Harvard Health, 2008). This paper analyses the discourse surrounding alternative detoxification treatments that are proliferating on the internet. Our analysis is based on Hopp and Fisher's (2021) psychological model, which suggests that transparent communication promotes reader learning. We obtained a dataset of online texts via Sketch Engine and analysed it using a corpus-based approach to discourse study (Baker, 2006). The investigation centres on textual features, including questions, explanations, markers of self-reference, and directives, to identify patterns of reader engagement and persuasion. Questions emerge as a central strategy for engaging readers, while explanations are used sparingly, suggesting a limited informational purpose. Furthermore, the author's perspective appears to be dialogic and other-focused, which could potentially be interpreted as a cue for deception (DePaulo et al., 2003). This analysis aims to shed light on the complexities of online detox discourse and the importance of transparency within it.

Maria Cristina Gatti, (PhD) is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Bolzano (Italy), where she also directs the Center for Academic Writing. She is an advisory member of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue (CID). Gatti is an applied linguist interested in language and discourse in intercultural and multilingual contexts. She is currently leading research programmes on the role of English in multilingual education and professional environments, language variation in transnational communication contexts and narrative in multilingual and multicultural settings. As a discourse analyst, she is particularly interested in issues related to social interaction in intercultural communication including identity, trust development, multisensoriality and to cognitive-semiotic approaches to spatiality and temporality.

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Textual and multimodal identity creation in online health communication: the case of researcher-generated dissemination articles

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Encouraged by the post-Covid health context, non-specialised audiences have refined their reception competences, overcoming malinformation and disinformation (NavasEchazarreta et. al, 2022), and directly turned to trustworthy digital scientific recontextualisation sources such as *The Conversation.com* to be informed. This paper aims to explore how health researchers construct their identity in this Internet research dissemination platform addressed to a wide public. Hence, I firstly focus on the generic nature of the articles of *The Conversation.com*. For such study, Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) approach to electronic genres is followed. The aim is to determine whether it could be considered a reconfigured, emergent, hybrid genre, a new research dissemination genre or a cluster of digital scientific popularisations. Secondly, the paper seeks to identify the discursive features and the multimodal devices (Adami, 2015) which may be associated to the creation of medical experts' identity on this digital platform. Therefore, a manual study of 10 articles from the Sci-Dis author-generated health corpus is conducted. The analysis dives into the identity strategies used in researchers' self-representation (Lorés and Diani, 2021) focusing on the discourse features associated to researchers' research as the object of study and researchers' agency as human actors and agents of the research process. Besides, attention is also placed on how experts attempt to engage with the potential readership (D'Ángelo et al. 2021). Results suggest that in this digital platform researchers vividly self-represent themselves and their research for a demanding non-specialised audience, who need -or want- to be up-dated with the latest scientific findings for which they surf this specific site. Undoubtedly, intersemiosis creates meaning in *The Conversation* and also creates a community, or in other words; a Social communitive digital space.

Isabel Herrando-Rodrigo is a senior lecturer in the Department of English and German Studies at the Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain) where she teaches language and linguistics. Her research interests focus on written discourse analysis, writers' visibility, genre analysis and digital genres in the field of medicine. She is a member of the research group CIRES and she is currently participating in the national research project Sci-Dis (*Processes of recontextualisation in the transfer of knowledge: A pragmatic, linguistic and multimodal study of digital scientific discourse for dissemination purposes* - PID2021-122303NB-I00 -)

Technicality of vocabulary in non-translated and translated English, Spanish, and Catalan health information websites on HIV and TB diagnostic testing

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The ideal multilingual health information website is relatable to all readers. Natives and immigrants need websites in each their own language hosted by their place of residence that impart the facts and incite a call to action to improve health, and ultimately reduce disease in the diverse community. The writer's word choices as conveyed through the text influence the reader's decision-making process. This paper examines the technicality of vocabulary characteristics between the non-translated and translated English, Spanish, and Catalan multilingual health information websites on HIV and TB diagnostic testing. A comparable corpus of seventy-three multilingual health information websites underwent a mixed analysis. The methodology is based on adaptations of Clerehan et al.'s (2005) Evaluative Linguistic Framework and Ha and Hyland's (2017) Technicality Analysis Model to assess technicality of vocabulary. There exist significant differences as regards textual multimodality between the non-translated and the translated Spanish texts. These results should serve researchers and professionals in the translation and language sciences as well as the public health field for, respectively, future studies and techniques to improve the composition of multilingual health information text in culturally diverse countries.

Amy Dara Hochberg has a PhD in Translation Studies and Language Sciences and two masters: in Translation Studies and in Public Health. In addition to post-doctoral research, Amy Dara translates academic and medical texts from Spanish to English and Catalan to English. Her multilingual abilities belie her profound hearing loss.

Exploring rare diseases: a perspective on digital health disparities

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The global dissemination of knowledge has been significantly transformed by the rapid advancement of digital technology, leading to changes in both the quantity and reliability of information accessible online. This impact is particularly evident in the medical field, where a plethora of digital tools enable both experts and laypersons to access and share health-related information. While the Internet facilitates the transfer and dissemination of medical knowledge, the quality and accessibility of this information, including its reliability, accuracy and clarity, must be carefully considered. It is particularly important for individuals affected by rare diseases, who require reliable, engaging and easily understandable medical information. Therefore, specialised medical websites play an important role in providing reliable and up-to-date sources of information for patients with rare disease. In addition, the increasing use of digital platforms for health-related information highlights the importance of analysing the linguistic aspects of online texts in order to ensure their effectiveness in conveying health concepts. By examining vocabulary, discourse register, syntactic structures, and lexical phenomena, researchers can gain insights into how laypersons present and understand information. As a result, the results of such analyses can be used to design and disseminate health information on the internet, highlighting the need for active involvement of medical professionals in ensuring its accuracy and relevance.

Vanessa Leonardi is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the Italian University of Sapienza in Rome. She was born in Italy and raised bilingual. She graduated in Modern Languages at the University of Coventry (UK) in 1998. In 1999 she was awarded an MA in Translation Studies from UMIST (Manchester, UK) and in 2004 she received her PhD in Translation and Comparative Studies at the University of Leeds. She also holds a TEFL Diploma. Her research interests lie mainly in the fields of Translation Studies, Gender Studies, ESP and English language teaching.

Communicating obesity online: linguistic strategies to address healthcare professionals and the public

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As the prevalence of obesity expanded significantly worldwide, scholars have emphasised the role of healthcare communication in improving inter-professional collaboration and in spreading awareness amongst the public (Werder et al., 2020; WHO, 2021). In this paper we focus on how obesity is communicated online, since the web is an impactful medium (Baker et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2014). Our goal is to investigate the different strategies in the management of online information about obesity that is addressed respectively to clinicians and to the public. To achieve our goal, we built two corpora of texts on the topic of obesity from two Italian online magazines: *MediciOggi.it* and *Focus.it*. The former is addressed to healthcare professionals, the latter to the public. We base our analysis on a quali-quantitative approach, first exploring the readability of both corpora through READ-IT (Dell’Orletta et al., 2011), then focusing on a case-based qualitative investigation to identify peculiar lexical choices specific to the addressee. We expect to be able to show preliminary results on the characteristic textual features engendered by the change of the addressee. We further expect to gain insights regarding the potential role of dissemination magazines in the ‘decision making ecosystem’ (Bigi et al., in press) of people affected by obesity.

Chiara Midea is a PhD student in Linguistics at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. She has previously obtained a Master’s degree in Specialised Translation. Her research interests center around intralingual translation, text linguistics and pragmatics. Specifically, her research focuses on how the narration of information in health communication varies along a chain of communicative exchanges between different stakeholders involved in treatment of rare diseases, i.e. pharmaceutical companies, pharmaceutical sales representatives, clinicians, and patients. She is part of the team of Healthy Reasoning Lab (<https://www.healthyreasoning-lab.eu/team-partners>).

Sibilla Parlato is a PhD student of Linguistics at the Department of Linguistics and Foreign Literatures, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, Italy. Her doctoral research focuses on linguistic strategies used to increase credibility and quality of

information of public health communications. Prior to her doctoral studies, she gained a master's degree in Specialised Translation and Interpreting at Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma. Her research interests include text linguistics, pragmatics, and Language for Specific Purposes. She is part of the team of Healthy Reasoning Lab project (<https://www.healthyreasoning-lab.eu/team-partners>).

Dissemination of clinical research results made accessible: a corpus analysis of layperson summaries

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In typical doctor-patient communication, the social asymmetry between the two participants presents a first obstacle, since only doctors have institutional authority. A second type of asymmetry is of epistemic nature, based on different levels of specialised knowledge between communication participants (Heritage, 2012). In this situation, language can become an instrument used by doctors to highlight their “ritual territory” (Goffman, 1967), which, needless to say, negatively affects communication and comprehensibility. Phenomena like patient empowerment (or autonomy, cf. Schulz and Hartung, 2014 or Magris, 2016) and the language simplification movements are now changing the excessive asymmetries in external special communication. The present talk is dedicated to a specific text genre belonging to the field of expert-lay communication in medicine, i.e. the layperson summaries of clinical trials, required by European legislation (Regulation No. 536/2014) to guarantee transparency and written in what is known as Plain Language. The results of a trilingual (English, German, and Italian) corpus analysis conducted on 180 texts downloaded from pharmaceutical company portals (Bayer, Novartis, GSK, and Roche) available online will be discussed. Particular attention will be paid to aspects belonging to the lexicoterminological, morphosyntactic, textual, and graphical level which have an impact on comprehensibility, in order to determine which levels are more problematic and can be further improved to guarantee accessibility to non-experts.

Giulia Pedrini is currently an Adjunct Professor at the University of Trieste, where she teaches German-Italian translation. She has also won a contract to be a researcher at the same university, in the field of German and English linguistics. After completing a Master’s Degree in Specialised Translation and Conference Interpreting, she has written a PhD dissertation in the field of expert-lay communication, analyzing the translations of layperson summaries of clinical trials by means of a trilingual corpus (English, German, and Italian). Her main research interests are accessibility and language simplification, expert-lay communication (Pedrini, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2023), LSPs, medical terminology and terminography (Pedrini, 2020).

From misleading to informative: a diachronic study on the changing role of patient information leaflets in the UK

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In recent years, health communication, particularly the communication of health issues to non-expert audiences, has become increasingly significant as patients require sufficient information to make an informed choice about whether to take a particular drug or adhere to a particular therapy (Oxman et al., 2020). This need for information and communication is part of a general trend to involve patients in their health and the decisions that affect them (Askehave and Zethsen, 2002). If they are properly informed, people can take part in decisions about their medicines, as proposed in the concordance model of medicine taking, thus improving adherence and therapeutic goals (Atal et al., 2019). Over the past two decades, the need to inform and educate the patient has resulted in the implementation of several laws that have led to the regulation and protection of these processes and also to the emergence of new genres of patient communication, such as the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). PILs are technical documents, provided by the manufacturer, included in every medicine package to offer written information about the medication, its administration, precautions, and potential side effects (Herber et al., 2014). We often take these documents for granted, but their effectiveness and compliance with requirements involve multiple actors and can have ranging consequences. Surprisingly, the implementation and use of PILs as they are known today is a recent practice. Although before the recent legislation (MHRA, 2020), some manufacturers did issue PILs with the medication, it was not compulsory to do so and their content was not subject to such strict regulations as are in existence today, thus allowing the employment of unusual, albeit dangerous, rhetorical strategies (Raynor et al., 2009). Early examples of PILs only provide subjective accounts of the effectiveness of drugs, contributing to a style similar to that of advertisements where the main aim is to persuade, not inform, the user to purchase the drug. Moreover, the lack of factual information implies that the first recipients of PILs (patients) were not considered entitled to precise information on their drugs, thus indicating a clear asymmetry of power in favour of medical professionals, who retained specialist knowledge. This study conducts a contrastive analysis of two corpora of patient information leaflets marketed in the UK: one from the early 20th century (1900-1930) and the other from the early 21st century (2010-2020). This contribution will investigate the evolution of the PIL and the development of its communicative prerogatives, from its origins to the best practices for its drafting today. The diachronic perspective of this study will not only shed light on the linguistic-pragmatic evolution of these documents, but will also allow for an in-depth insight into the ideological and socio-cultural variations in society regarding this topic, at the beginning and end of the 20th century.

Nicola Pelizzari is a third-year PhD student in Applied Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth, specialises in analyzing the readability of Patient Information Leaflets using Corpus Linguistics. His work, which aims to enhance healthcare communication, is marked by a synthesis of linguistic research and practical application. Nicola has authored several monographs on specialised English discourse, underlining his interest and scholarly contributions to the field. He is also actively engaged in teaching medical discourse to university students, demonstrating his commitment to applying linguistic insights in academic and healthcare settings.

“I'm an RN and looked up the medications”: a corpus pragmatic approach to negotiating lay and professional expertise in a digital dementia support group

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This study investigates processes of identity negotiation within a digital Community of Practice, focusing on the care partners of individuals living with dementia. Situated within a larger project analysing metapragmatic reflections on care couple interactions, our investigation sheds light on how participants navigate their roles as care partners and position themselves in relation to other (medical) experts, their persons living with dementia, and dementia itself in the ongoing discourse. Drawing on a dataset of 27 threads from an online support group with over 28,000 members, we employ a mixed-methods corpus-assisted approach. Our findings reveal a dynamic where care partners typically position themselves as lay experts based on their experiential knowledge gained in daily care couple interactions. This position is also foregrounded by care partners with professional medical expertise, with minimal discussion of their dual roles. While professional know-how is referenced to underscore the well-founded nature of information and advice provided in the forum, microlinguistic choices (e.g. the use of verbs) indicate the care partners' confidence in their lay expertise.

Birte Bös is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. Her research interests include synchronic and diachronic pragmatics, discourse analysis and media linguistics. She has investigated the communicative practices in historical and modern media. Birte is the co-author of *News as Changing Texts* (2015, 2nd ed), and she has co-edited several books, e.g. *The Discursive Construction of Identities On- and Offline: Personal – Group – Collective* (2018). Together with Carolin Schneider, she has published several papers exploring discourses with and about dementia.

Carolin Schneider is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in English linguistics specialising in pragmatics at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Her research areas include digital health communication, multilingualism, (critical) discourse analysis and interpersonal pragmatics in online and offline contexts. Her most recent publication *An Ethno-Social Approach to Code Choice in Bilinguals Living with Alzheimer's* (2023) investigates how English-Spanish bilinguals living with dementia draw on their linguistic repertoires in conversations.

Drinking it in: mythbusting and the shaping of discourses of underhydration

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Recommended quantitative measures of daily water consumption appear in popular reporting as how much water people should drink, measures of desired urine color, amount of skin elasticity, etc. Examination of a self-compiled corpus of 80 English-language online newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, and health information sites shows competing assumptions about hydration: Desire for quantifiable approaches: (“How Much Water Should You Drink a Day?” “8 Smart Tips for Preventing Dehydration”) vs. mythbusting of readers’ existing beliefs: (“8 glasses of water a day ‘an urban myth’”; “No, you do not have to drink 8 glass of water a day”). Such reporting exemplifies a continuing cycle of quantities reported and refuted. Less analysed is how these distilled competing recommendations emerge from wider social forces, including the increased marketing of bottled water and hydration products to consumers, even when clean tap water is available (Wilk, 2006); the discursive framing of underhydration as a medicalised state (Conrad, 1992; Brinkman, 2016); and the exploiting of health and climate anxiety by lifestyle journalism to increase readership. Thus, not just medical science, but also commercial goals, flavor the advice found online for those seeking health information on water consumption; even creating the desire for this information in the first place.

Laurel Smith Stvan is an Associate Professor in the department of Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Texas at Arlington, where she teaches Pragmatics, Corpus Linguistics, and Lexical Semantics, served for eight years as department chair, and advised on an NEH grant to develop UTA’s Certificate in Medical Humanities. Her research examines interpretations of polysemy in health communication, bare singular count nouns, and discourse markers within digital humanities and open educational resources. She has published in volumes on social media corpora, nominal determination, and OER resources and in the journals *Communication & Medicine*, *Lingua*, and *Corpora*.

De-institutionalising traditional medical services: the diagnosis turned into a mystery game

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Within a social media-critical discourse study perspective (SM-CDS, KhosranoviNik, 2018a), my investigation explores social media platforms as used by individuals to obtain (first or second) opinions in the form of crowd-diagnosis (Nobles et al., 2019), which involves a large group of people (crowd) for a common goal. In broad terms, crowd-diagnosis represents a paradigmatic shift in the roles and actions conceptualised within traditional medical encounters. Powered by social media, this practice is grounded in the construct of ‘the wisdom of the crowd’, which refers to the collective knowledge and opinion of a crowd of people expressed as an alternative to specialist knowledge. More specifically, this study explores the communicative ‘territory’ of medical history presentation and reports data on the communicative skills employed by online users to both present their own history, and design it as challenging. To this end, this work adopts a critical discourse-based perspective on the language used for history-giving. I shall focus on the communicative resources which are employed by patients to be ‘visible’ at the intersection between health and media discourse. Since patients’ medical narratives are turned into medical mysteries addressed to potential case solvers, known as ‘medical detectives’, it is evident that this digital discursive practice truly modifies traditional healthcare methods of diagnosis. This paper could help to bring to the surface the opportunities and challenges of health exchanges between patients and crowdsourcers, which, individually and contextually, reflect frameworks for how health discourse is framed in social digital contexts.

Marianna Lya Zummo is Associate Professor of English Language and Linguistics in the Department of Humanities at the University of Palermo, Italy. Her research is primarily related to issues in health communication in online contexts and communication dynamics, with associated interest in political communication in digital environments and corpus-assisted critical discourse analyses. She has published extensively in these research areas at both national and international levels.