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14. Internet advice

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1. Introduction

Advice-giving and advice-seeking are common everyday activities. In recent decades, the Internet has been adopted by professionals and non-professionals alike for imparting knowledge, support, and advice-giving. Advice can be studied on the level of speech acts (it is by no means restricted to the performative verb *advise*) and on the level of activity (i.e., text type; see Locher and Limberg 2012: 3–7). In this chapter, the focus is primarily on the text type *advice column*.

Advice has been studied in many different research fields. The main thrusts of research so far have focused either on face-to-face interaction or on print data; in particular, the printed text type of advice columns has received quite some attention in the literature (see section 4 below). With the exception of speech act studies (e.g., Searle 1969), the literature on face-to-face advice has mainly focused on institutional contexts rather than on peer-to-peer advice (but see DeCapua and Huber 1995; Jefferson and Lee 1992). Examples include visits by health care nurses to first-time mothers (Heritage and Sefi 1992), HIV counseling sessions (e.g., Silverman 1997), and medical encounters more generally (e.g., Leppänen 1998; Pilnick 1999, 2001; Sarangi and Clarke 2002). Counseling and advising have also been researched in academic contexts (e.g., Bresnahan 1992; Erickson and Shultz 1982; He 1994; Limberg 2011; Waring 2007) and on call-in radio (e.g., Gaik 1992; Hudson 1990; Hutchby 1995). The fields of cognitive linguistics, psychology, and communication studies have tackled the topic of advising as well (e.g., Goldsmith and MacGeorge 2000; Miller and Gergen 1998; Wood and Griffiths 2007). (For a review of the literature on advice-giving more generally, see Locher, 2006a; Limberg and Locher 2012.) Taken together, these studies show that individual types of advice-giving vary, and each deserves to be examined in its own right; as Leppänen (1998: 210) puts it: “The study of advice should both carefully explicate the details of the production of advice and show how these details are systematic products of the interactants’ orientations to specific features of the institutions”. Leppänen’s recommendation places the study of advice firmly within the field of pragmatics, in that the focus is on language in use as employed by individuals who are part of groups that form practices.

After a brief discussion of terminology pertaining to advice-giving (section 2), this chapter focuses on computer-mediated advice (section 3) and in particular, on the topic of health issues and the text type of expert advice columns. This allows for a comparison of online advice columns with their printed relatives and a dis-

cussion of the extent to which technological mediation influences advice-giving online (sections 4 and 5). The latter discussion is especially inspired by Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. However, while recognizing the importance of technical mediation in shaping interaction, the chapter aims to avoid a computer-deterministic stance. Finally, areas in need of further research are identified in section 6.

2. Background on advice-giving

The study of advice-giving is firmly situated in pragmatics. Searle (1969: 67), for example, contrasts advising with the speech act of requesting and argues that advising "is not a species of requesting. ... Advising you is not trying to get you to do something in the sense that requesting is. Advising is more like telling you what is best for you". This comparison shows that advice is weaker in its directive force than requests. The speech acts of assessment and judgment are also closely linked to advice, since advice-giving recommends a future action. Thus advice-giving is characterized by a combination of assessing, judging, and directing. This is reflected in dictionary definitions of advice as an "[o]pinion given or offered as to action; counsel" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, sense 5), a "recommendation as to appropriate choice of action" (*Collins Concise Dictionary* 1989: 17), or an "[o]pinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem; counsel" (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2000, online).

Hinkel (1994, 1997) observes that in some cultures (e.g., in Japan, Korea, China, Indonesia, and Arabic countries) advice-giving can be a rapport-building strategy and a sign of solidarity or interest. At the same time, advice is considered challenging for interactants by many researchers working on English data. The latter studies point out that advice-giving is a delicate act that involves asymmetry with respect to authority and expertise (e.g., Feng and MacGeorge 2006; Hutchby 1995). For example, DeCapua and Dunham (1993: 519) claim that advice consists of "opinions or counsel given by people who perceive themselves as knowledgeable, and/or who the advice seeker may think are credible, trustworthy and reliable". According to Goldsmith and MacGeorge (2000: 235), this asymmetry is the explanation for the delicate nature of advising in English, because it challenges "the hearer's identity as a competent and autonomous social actor".

There is thus a link between advising and politeness and considerations of *face* (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967). The metaphor *face* refers to the self-image that an interactant wishes to construct during a particular interaction (Goffman 1967). Face is not static, but rather emerges in interaction and is constantly negotiated. Considerations of face have been termed facework or relational work, i.e., the work people invest in negotiating relationships with others (e.g., Locher 2006b; Locher and Watts 2005, 2008). The *ways* in which interactants

impart the content of advice are influenced by how face-threatening people perceive the act to be. In contexts where advice-seeking and advice-giving are perceived as threatening because of asymmetry between the interactants (Goldsmith and MacGeorge 2000: 235), mitigation of advice is likely to occur. This can take the form, for example, of indirectness, hedging, or embedding the advice in further discourse (cf. DeCapua and Dunham 2007; Locher 2006a; Morrow 2006). The actual piece of advice can be realized in many different linguistic forms, from the classic conditional clauses accompanied by *should*-instructions, *I would do X* statements, and indirect statements realizing suggestions, to imperatives and questions inviting introspection and action (e.g., DeCapua and Dunham 2007; Hudson 1990; Locher 2006a). Examples of these categories are given in section 4.

Finally, the difference between information-giving and advice-giving needs to be addressed. Silverman (1997: 154) maintains that non-personalized information can be interpreted as advice in the appropriate context. In the HIV counseling sessions that he studies, there are so-called “Advice-as-Information” sequences, in which the counselor gives general information on HIV and AIDS prevention without fine-tuning it to the counselee’s particular needs. Because this allows the advisee to interpret the text as not relevant, or as relevant for others than him- or herself, this kind of advice is claimed to be less face-threatening to the advisee. At the same time, the context in which this information is imparted makes an interpretation as advice possible. The context¹ of the interaction, or what Waring (2007: 373) calls its “inferential framework”, thus serves as a backdrop for interactants to work out the pragmatic meaning of the information given as advice.

3. Advice on the Internet

Given that advice is neither linguistically pre-determined nor contextually tied to only one type of interaction, we can expect advice on the Internet to occur in numerous formats and to be shaped by different cultures. In terms of technological format, it appears that any type of Internet technology can be employed to impart advice, via asynchronous (e.g., email exchanges or forum posts) or synchronous (e.g., chat support groups) computer-mediated communication (CMC). As regards advice functions, Griffiths’s (2005: 556) findings on Internet sites that offer psychological help to gamblers are valid more generally. He claims that there are three primary functions of information and advice sites: “(1) information dissemination, (2) peer-delivered therapeutic/support/advice (such as self-help support group), and (3) professionally delivered treatment”. Offers of advice on the Internet are wide ranging, from psychological counseling, advice about relationships, dieting, improvement of one’s sexual life, and gardening, to technical computer support and help on how to buy cars. Professionals use the Internet to reach their target audiences, be this to support customers, to sell products (e.g., [Brought to you by | UZH Hauptbibliothek / Zentralbibliothek Zürich
Authenticated | 130.60.18.236
Download Date | 2/8/13 3:27 PM](http://support.micro-</p>
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soft.com/), or to improve public knowledge, such as in the area of health information (an example is the Canadian site “Health Canada” at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index-eng.php>; see section 4 for more examples). Professional syndicated writers make Internet appearances (e.g., the “Dear Abby” column long popular in the United States is available at <http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/>). The World Wide Web is also used by non-professionals who reach out to their peers in order to offer advice and support; an example of this is a forum on breast cancer by an American national nonprofit organization (<http://forums.networkofstrength.org/>).

A cursory search for “advice” using the Google Directory at the time this chapter was prepared yielded 176,000 hits² and displayed a broad range of topics, and this constitutes only a small number of the actual sites that impart advice. To mention but a few of the topics found, Google Directory lists 29,300 hits for love advice, 15,600 hits for relationships advice, and 2,400 advice columns that cover multiple topics.³ Often, the advice-seeker is invited to contact an advisor/expert through an email link or text submission mask on the site, and the advisor writes back. At times this exchange remains private, the site merely functioning as a public entry to advice-giving; in other instances, the exchange is made public online. The advisors are professional and lay people alike, who either give advice for free or charge a fee.

The types of offers of advice on the web differ in their degree of interactivity. While some sites hinge on the exchange of texts by an advice-seeker and an advice-giver (such as in the case of agony aunt sites), there are also sites that offer advice and information in a less interactive way. Such sites take the advice-seeker’s request/question for granted and compile information according to the experience that the advice-giver (team) has gained over time. A good example is the site of the U.S. National Cancer Institute, which offers general informative summaries about cancer, as well as advice sections (e.g., on “What you need to know about brain tumors”⁴). Frequently Asked Questions sections (FAQs) often mimic interactivity, in the sense that the reader is invited to regard the questions as coming from the readership and the answers as given by experts. The questions themselves are likely to be phrased by the advice-giving team, but they can be assumed to reflect the concerns of the target audience, since it is the experts’ aim to cater to them. It is quite common for sites to combine interactive possibilities. Good examples of this type are institutional helpdesk sites such as the IT support site of the University of Basel (<http://urz.unibas.ch/>), which gives advice-seekers the possibility to find solutions by clicking on prepared topic links and FAQs, writing to a member of a support team, or calling for a phone session. Similarly, the psychological help site *GamAid*, which Wood and Griffiths (2007) investigated, is described as

an online advisory, guidance and signposting service whereby the client can either browse the available links and information provided, or talk to an online advisor (during the available hours of service), or request information to be sent via email, mobile phone (SMS/texting), or post. (Wood and Griffiths 2007: 375)

In addition to sites that are clearly identified as imparting advice, there are many others in which advice is less explicitly propagated. Many peer support sites, for example, thrive on the benefits of sharing experience, which can sometimes be construed as advice for action or non-action (see, e.g., McSeveny et al. 2006 on posts to an online weight watchers message board; Kouper 2010 on message exchanges in a motherhood blog community; Morrow 2012 on divorce advice in a Japanese online forum; Placencia 2012 on advice in Spanish *Yahoo!Respuestas*). Similarly, in the context of the above-mentioned American forum on breast cancer, the interpretation of an informative sequence or a narrative as advice depends on the overall frame of the forum, which is meant to be helpful for its readership. That narratives of personal experience can be interpreted as advice was confirmed in a study by Harrison and Barlow (2009) of an online arthritis self-management program. The participants in this program posted their action plans for self-management online and received comments from their group members, in many cases, in the form of narratives of personal experience. Harrison and Barlow highlight that their study “demonstrates the importance of communication context for interpretation. In the context of the arthritis workshops, participants are expecting feedback on their action plans, and are therefore able to interpret the narratives as advice” (2009: 108). If readers turn to a site with the aim of finding advice, they are likely to interpret text as advice even if it is not obviously flagged as such (Waring 2007: 373); this is discussed further in section 2.

Having established that advice can be given online on different interactive platforms and that advice-giving itself is not tied to any single linguistic realization, the question remains to what extent computer mediation influences advice-giving and to what extent advice-giving on the Internet differs from advice-giving in face-to-face interaction or print media. In other words, what are the effects of technological mediation on advice-giving? A tentative answer concerning Internet advice columns is advanced below.

4. Health advice and advice columns on the Internet

Richardson (2005: 1) reports that, in our “medialized world”, “[o]nce Americans have Internet access, it turns out that finding health information is one of the most common ways in which they use it”.⁵ It is therefore no surprise that health organizations, health institutes, and public health educators have long been aware of the potential of the Internet to reach a large readership and their need to have a strong Internet presence in order to inform the population of research efforts, spread knowledge of medical conditions, and contribute to the prevention of the spread of illnesses (e.g., Harvey et al. 2007).⁶ Some professional and lay sites use the well-known format of an advice column; one of these, “Lucy Answers”, is the focus in what follows.

In this chapter advice columns are defined as a particular “text type”, i.e., as a type of written text that is conventionally recognized by people who are familiar with the print media (Hendley 1977). This recognizable format of advice columns consists in the exchange of a “problem letter” sent by an advice-seeker and a “response letter” published by an agony aunt. The term “letter” is used throughout this chapter, since both the advice-seekers and the advice-givers typically adhere to the convention of writing a simple letter consisting of an address form (“Dear Agony Aunt”; “Dear Reader”), followed by the body of the letter and a sign off.

It is important to stress that advice columns are public, while simulating a personal exchange. The advice-givers gear their responses towards the needs of the target readership and use the advice-seeker’s problem as an example. To choose a(n at times fictional) dialogue form to present advice as in advice columns can provide an incentive for the reader to identify with the acting subject and offer the reader the opportunity to take on the role of advisee (Franke 1997: 226). The tension between the public and personal aspect of such texts has garnered research attention (e.g., Fleischhacker 1987; Locher 2006a, Chapter 7; Mininni 1991). It manifests itself, for example, in the choice of which “letter” to answer in public in the first place (usually those questions that are likely to be of relevance to the larger readership rather than just to the individual advice-seeker) and/or in the broadening of the scope of the answer in order to best address the needs of the wider readership. Hutchby (1995), who studied a call-in radio program, found this latter strategy to be important in his data: The radio host prompted the expert present in the studio to answer in more detail than the caller originally asked for, in order to satisfy what was assumed to be the needs of the wider audience.

In addition, many advice-seekers value the possibility of reading and asking questions anonymously. This is especially important when the topic of advice is delicate, such as issues relating to sexuality. Alexander (2003: 548) makes the point that fears and embarrassment about health issues are the reason men write anonymously to the magazine *Men’s Health*. van Roosmalen (2000: 205) observes that problem pages are “forums for the unspeakable” for the adolescent women who convey their experience in letters to an advice column in *Teen Magazine*. The appeal of anonymity is certainly an important factor for many online advice sites, as well.

Advice columns have been in use ever since the advent of newspaper print culture (Hendley 1977), and they are well known in the literate world today (DeCapua and Dunham 2007: 322). They are a popular feature of many print magazines, and for this reason it is not surprising that advice columns are also found on the Internet. According to Hendley (1977: 345, 351), advice columns are “naturally appealing” because people need advice and are curious and nosy by nature. In other words, people read advice columns not just to gain knowledge on action alternatives, but also because they can identify with the advice-seekers and/or are looking for entertainment. Every advice column has a particular flavor that may influence the popularity of the column and that may be in line with its institutional aims and/or the

norms and values of the advice-giver (e.g., Currie 2001; Gough and Talbot 1996; Locher and Hoffmann 2006; McRobbie 1978, 1991; Mutongi 2000; Talbot 1992, 1995; Thibault 1988, 2002). This flavor, or “voice”, is conveyed by the linguistic strategies that contribute to the identity⁷ construction of the advisor persona.

5. Illustration of online advice-giving from the advice column “Lucy Answers”

5.1. Background

Professional organizations that deal with health issues are confronted with the challenge of how best to impart knowledge and how to learn about their “client’s” needs. One strategy is to use the format of advice columns and the medium of the Internet to appeal to and reach a large readership. An example of one such column is “Lucy Answers” (the name has been changed at the specific request of the website), which is run by the health education program of a large university in the United States. According to information on the website, this advice column is meant to complement other services offered by the health education program, such as face-to-face counseling opportunities and printed information material (Lucy Answers 2004). Topics covered pertain to the fields of “alcohol and other drugs”, “fitness and nutrition”, “emotional health”, “general health”, “sexuality”, “sexual health”, and “relationships”. The official aim of the site is to

increase access to, and use of, health information by providing factual, in-depth, straight-forward, and nonjudgmental information to assist readers’ decision-making about their physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual health. (Lucy Answers 2004)

The mission of the site is thus to enable advice-seekers to make up their own minds about the issues covered without being directive (cf. the discussion of the ideal of non-directiveness for professional counselors in Sarangi and Clarke 2002 or Vehviläinen 2003). The site is aimed at college students, while being openly accessible to everybody interested. The questioners are entirely anonymous, and no information is available about their background (Lucy Answers 2004). In 2004, “Lucy Answers” received nearly 2,000 inquiries per week, although only five were answered each week (Lucy Answers 2004) – the choice of which question to publish is determined by the importance of the topic for the public readership. However, this means that the site is not geared to cater for emergencies, a fact that is stressed by disclaimers on the site. The “response letters” are written by a team of professional health educators under the pseudonym “Lucy”. The team thus creates an advisor persona, an agony aunt, with her own particular voice (Locher and Hoffmann 2006).

In section 5.2, I report on the results of a study of the linguistic realization of advice in 280 question and response letters (a detailed report can be found in Locher 2006a). The letters were collected from the online archive in 2002 and 2004.

This brief overview of findings serves as a backdrop for section 5.3, which focuses on the extent to which the advice column is influenced by being published online.

5.2. The linguistic realization of advice in the response letters

In order to illustrate how advice is given in the response letters of the “Lucy Answers” corpus, I first discuss the composition of the response letters, followed by the syntactic realization of advice, illustrations of the preference for non-directiveness and mitigation, and, finally, the self-presentation of the advice-giver persona.

In a content analysis of the letters, the texts were segmented into “discursive moves”, defined as the “kind of contribution that the entry made to the ongoing interchange” (Miller and Gergen 1998: 192). This analysis showed that in addition to advice, the letters also contained passages of assessment of the situation of the writer of the problem letter, general information giving, explanations of points made, metacomments about the structure of the letter, and farewells (see Locher 2006a for details).⁸ An individual letter might contain one or more discursive moves from this list. An analysis of the advisory discursive moves in the response letters showed that there was both direct and indirect syntactic advice-giving; that advice was embedded within the entire composition of the letters; and that the readers were encouraged to make their own decisions by being given options. In what follows, I exemplify some of these findings.

In general, three syntactic types of advice-giving were identified in “Lucy Answers”: declaratives (1), interrogatives inviting introspection (2a) and action (2b), and imperatives inviting introspection (3a) and action (3b):

- (1) In the meantime, you can learn ways to be his friend without enabling his drinking. (alcohol and drugs, “Cocaine versus tequila”)⁹
- (2a) What makes your particular attraction a problem? Is it due to the fact that we almost always see men romantically involved with women who are shorter than they are? Or, is it because it can seem strange to come upon the opposite? (relationships, “Troubled by attraction to tall women”)
- (2b) Since this fine financier isn’t your boss or teacher, why not take the letters A-T-M to stand for Approach That Man. (relationships, “Should I cash in on hot banker?”)
- (3a) Imagine how lonely and frustrating it might feel to always be excluded. (relationships, “How to tell a nosy roommate to step off”)
- (3b) Discuss with him/her whether you might see someone else in Health Services or whether s/he would be willing to refer you to someone off campus with whom you could do longer term work. (emotional health, “Disappointed with therapist?”)

While imperatives can be argued to be the most direct form of advice-giving, they only accounted for 36 % of the advice-giving moves. Questions, both inviting introspection and inviting action, accounted for 11 %, while declaratives made up the largest part, with 52 %.¹⁰ Furthermore, within the declarative category, less directive advice-giving is evidenced in the use of conditional clauses that restrict the number of people to whom the advice is relevant (4), thus stressing optionality, and in the preference for declarative sentences in which the acting subject is not linguistically identified as agent (5):

- (4) If you haven't already, perhaps you and your girlfriend could talk about your concerns and try to reach a mutual decision on what form(s) of contraception you both want to use. (sexual health, "Is pulling out safe?")
- (5) Douching is no longer recommended for a number of reasons. (sexual health, "Douching")

This preference for non-directiveness is also evident in the use of lexical hedges (*perhaps*, *could*, *try* in (4)), which tone down the advice-giving further, as well as in the overall composition of the response letters: Rather than plunging directly into the advice-giving sequences, "Lucy" embeds the sequences in the composition of the letter (see Morrow 2006: 541, for similar results about advice-giving in a discussion forum). For example, the discursive moves of assessments and general information in (6) and (7) are positioned at the beginning of the letter and thus precede advice-giving:

- (6) Dear Reader,¹¹

assessment One of the challenges of college life is learning to share your living space with other people who may have different habits than you. Lucy understands, however, how frustrating it can be when these habits are bothersome.

advice One thing you can do is speak with other students in your residence hall who just might have similar concerns. [...] (relationships, "No one cares about drunken, messy hallmates, or do they?")

- (7) Dear Reader,¹²

general information Nausea is the sensation that accompanies the urge to vomit, though it doesn't necessarily have to lead to that in every case. **advice** If your nausea is combined with vomiting, it's important to consume as much fluid as possible without further aggravating your stomach. [...] (general health, "Nausea: Causes and treatments")

Lucy is a fictional advisor persona, and readers may interpret and construct her "identity" in different ways. At the same time, the linguistic practices described in this section are argued to play a role in the construction of this persona. With respect to the potentially face-threatening character of advice-giving, we have seen that the "Lucy Answers" team prefers non-directiveness. Moreover, the "voice"

that is created for the advisor persona, i.e., the linguistic strategies that contribute to the identity construction of “Lucy”, not only displays awareness of potential face-threats, but also displays a sense of humor (8), as well as empathy and support (9):

- (8) Since this fine financier isn’t your boss or teacher, why not take the letters A-T-M to stand for Approach That Man. (relationships, “Should I cash in on hot banker?”)
- (9) Lucy understands, however, how frustrating it can be when these habits are bothersome. (relationships, “No one cares about drunken, messy hallmates, or do they?”)

Balanced against these strategies that make her appear approachable and informal, the advisor persona uses a number of linguistic strategies to highlight her status as a professional expert: “Lucy” gives detailed background information, quotes facts in numbers and percentages, broadens the scope of the answer, refers the reader to other sources of information, and refers to herself as a health educator (Locher 2006a, section 8.2.2). Richardson (2003: 172) points out that credibility and trust are often at the core of whether an individual’s posting will be accepted or not: In the Internet newsgroups Richardson studied, users employed what she calls “warranting strategies”, which are “designed to give fellow participants reasons to take the information seriously”, for example by referring to (presumably reputable) sources (2003: 172). The strategies mentioned above that highlight professionalism can be claimed to have a similar function in “Lucy Answers”. In addition, the visual appearance of the column – the placement of the university logo, the hyperlinks to the health program, and a description of the history and aims of the service as well as the advisor team behind “Lucy” – situate this practice in a professional context. In this sense, the site is visually different from those of lay people who adopt the format of an advice column. Many such people genuinely wish to help, but they have no further qualifications or training in advising than their own personal experience and common sense – a fact that many admit quite frankly in general disclaimers on their sites.¹³

The strategies of imparting advice discussed in this section on how advice linguistically manifests itself in “Lucy Answers” can be explained in terms of the relational work called for by this text type in this particular context. It seems that advice-giving, which involves the negotiation of asymmetries between interactants (see section 2), is perceived as face-threatening in “Lucy Answers”, despite the anonymity of the site. The health advisor team orients itself to the mission statement of the institution and follows a non-directive path in advising. In this way, the team takes the relational and cultural implications of this text type in this particular context into account (cf. Leppänen 1998).

5.3. Influence of computer mediation on “Lucy Answers” practices

We now turn to the question: To what extent is “Lucy Answers” influenced by the fact that it is computer-mediated text? Herring’s (2007) faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse is a useful means of avoiding the fallacy of simply assuming that technological mediation explains the patterns observed for text on the Internet (cf. Androutsopoulos 2006 and Baym 1995 on computer/technical determinism). Herring (2007: 10) distinguishes two types of influence: medium (technological) (Table 1) and situation (social) (Table 2) variables, each of which contains several subsets of open-ended facets and terms. Herring proposes that a description of a data set along these lines allows researchers to describe the factors that influence a practice and enables the drawing of comparisons to similar or different data sets. The first column in Tables 1 and 2 lists the medium and situation factors taken from Herring (2007), while the second column defines and describes them as they apply to “Lucy Answers”.

Table 1. Medium factors (content of column 1 from Herring 2007)

| Medium factors | “Lucy Answers” |
|--|---|
| M1: Synchronicity | Asynchronous: The problem letter and the response letter writers do not have to be online at the same time. |
| M2: Message transmission (1-way vs. 2-way) | While the problem submissions are sent to the institution, which decides whether or not to publish and answer them, the asynchronous site presents both the initiating and the responding message at the same time. |
| M3: Persistence of transcript | All exchanges are archived. |
| M4: Size of message buffer | Effectively unlimited. |
| M5: Channels of communication | Only text (i.e., no video, audio, photos, or graphics). |
| M6: Anonymous messaging | Guaranteed for the advice-seekers, whose email addresses are scrambled upon submission, and who may give themselves pseudonyms; the advisor team writes under the name “Lucy”. |
| M7: Private messaging | Not available. |
| M8: Filtering | Not available. |
| M9: Quoting | There is no technical means that allows or facilitates quoting. |
| M10: Message format | Simulation of letter exchange posted on site that draws on the well-known print text type of advice columns; there is no interaction between the advice-seeker and advice-giver beyond this exchange of letters. |

Table 2. Situation factors (content of column 1 from Herring 2007)

| Situation factors, and Herring's examples | Observations for "Lucy Answers" |
|--|---|
| <p>S1: Participation structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – One-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many – Public/private – Degree of anonymity/pseudonymity – Group size; number of active participants – Amount, rate, and balance of participation | <p>Institution-to-many, via "personal" letters intended to reach the general public; the advice-seekers remain anonymous; more than 2,000 submission per week, but only five are chosen for publication; the interaction is structured and dominated by the institution, but the advice-seekers play along by adhering to a letter format; there is no interaction between the "partners" beyond this exchange of letters.</p> |
| <p>S2: Participant characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demographics: gender, age, occupation, etc. – Proficiency: with language/computers/CMC – Experience: with addressee/group/topic – Role/status: in "real life"; of online personae – Pre-existing sociocultural knowledge and interactional norms – Attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and motivations | <p>No demographic details of the advice-seekers are available, but the target readership is college students/young adults, who can be assumed to be computer literate; the advisor persona "Lucy" is created by professional health educators, who are orienting themselves to the text type of an "advice column" and the ideology of non-directiveness in counseling as specified in the mission statement of "Lucy Answers" (see section 5.1.). The choice of a female advisor places the agony aunt in a longstanding American tradition (cf. Dear Abby, Anne Landers, Dr. Ruth).</p> |
| <p>S3: Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Of group, e.g., professional, social, fantasy/role-playing, aesthetic, experimental – Goal of interaction, e.g., get information, negotiate consensus, develop professional/social relationships, impress/entertain others, have fun | <p>The imparting of information and advice about health issues to as many individuals of the target group as possible (see "Lucy Answers" mission statement).</p> |
| <p>S4: Topic or theme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Of group, e.g., politics, linguistics, feminism, soap operas, sex, science fiction, South Asian culture, medieval times, pub | <p>"Alcohol and other drugs", "fitness and nutrition", "emotional health", "general health", "sexuality", "sexual health", and "relationships".</p> |

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Of exchanges, e.g., the war in Iraq, pro-drop languages, the project budget, gay sex, vacation plans, personal information about participants, meta-discourse about CMC | |
|---|--|

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|---|---|
| <p>S5: Tone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Serious/playful – Formal/casual – Contentious/friendly – Cooperative/sarcastic, etc. | <p>Professional, yet approachable and not too scientific; display of humor, support, and empathy, as well as criticism.</p> |
|---|---|

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|---|---|
| <p>S6: Activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – E.g., debate, job announcement, information exchange, phatic exchange, problem solving, exchange of insults, joking exchange, game, theatrical performance, flirtation, virtual sex | <p>Advisory exchange: problem letter – response letter.</p> |
|---|---|

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>S7: Norms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Of organization – Of social appropriateness – Of language | <p>Norms of organization: No restriction on access or submitting; what is answered and displayed is up to the institution, as the more powerful partner in the exchange.</p> <p>Norms of social appropriateness: The response letters are influenced by the text type of advice columns, the ideal of non-directiveness in counseling, and the mission statement; the advice-seekers also orient to the text type of an advice column.</p> <p>Norms of language: See section 5.2.</p> |
|--|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>S8: Code</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Language, language variety – Font/writing system | <p>Standard English, lacking computer language features identified elsewhere, such as abbreviations or emoticons; Roman alphabet.</p> |
|---|---|

In what follows, I comment on those factors that most influence the “Lucy Answers” discourse. These are the medium factors M3: Persistence of transcript, M6: Anonymous messaging, and M10: Message format, and the situation factors S1: Participation structure, S2: Participant characteristics, S3: Purpose, S5: Tone, and S7: Norms. Since these factors influence each other, the sequence of discussion will not follow the ordering of factors given in the table, which is for ease of reference only and does not reflect degree of importance, as Herring (2007) points out.

With respect to S7: Norms of language, the syntactic strategies illustrated in section 5.2. are not unique to online interaction. They are in fact all-pervasive and gain their specific meaning through their combination in a particular social prac-

tice. Pragmatic meaning in this case is created by the orientation of the interactants to the text type of an advice column and to the mission statement of the health institution. The level of non-directiveness can be explained by the orientation of the health educators to empowering their readers with knowledge rather than deciding for them. DeCapua and Dunham (2007) found very similar linguistic results in a study carried out with native speakers of English who had to compose response letters in the format of an advice column in a discourse completion task, despite the fact that these native speakers were not professionals in the fields of advice. The non-native speakers of diverse cultural backgrounds in the same study, however, generally formulated more direct and less mitigated and embedded responses, indicating a lack of knowledge of and/or orientation to the socio-pragmatic norms of the text type (see Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990 for similar findings with respect to the lack of pragmatic competence in non-native speakers in academic advising sessions).

DeCapua and Dunham's (2007) native speakers were all adults or young adults. The age and experience/expertise factor (S2: Participant characteristics) may explain the different picture that emerges for peer-to-peer Internet sites covering similar topics, such as the Studentcenter's TeenAdvice section (Studentcenter 2004). Here there is a lack of mitigation or seeming awareness of the delicate nature of advice-giving, as evidenced in the blunt and often face-threatening manner in which advice is given, often not in the typical letter format. The fact that the native speakers in DeCapua and Dunham's (2007) study employed similar linguistic strategies as the advice-giving team of "Lucy Answers" might indicate that both groups orient themselves to the face-threatening character of advice-giving and to the conventions of the text type "advice column" because they are more experienced in reading and engaging in this particular text type.¹⁴

With respect to S3: Purpose, S5: Tone, and S7: Norms of language, I suggest that the purpose of the advice column has a stronger impact on the choice of language (S5 and S7) than the fact that the site belongs to computer-mediated discourse. Advice columns are not written in a social vacuum; the ideals and aims of the institution responsible for a site or of a private individual who runs an advice column will have an impact on the language used. In the case of "Lucy Answers", the clear mission statement leads the team of health educators to use Standard English, lacking computer-mediated language features identified elsewhere (e.g., abbreviations or emoticons; see Bieswanger, this volume), to impart knowledge in a "factual, in-depth, straight-forward, and nonjudgmental" way. At the same time, the vocabulary employed is not too scientific or formal (i.e., it is straightforward), and there are displays of humor, support, and empathy, as well as criticism (cf. Locher 2006a, Chapter 8). In addition, the goal of "Lucy Answers" is to reach and educate as many individuals of the target group as possible. This public dimension (S1) also influences the composition of the response letters, as shown in the dual strategies of choosing a problem to answer that is of relevance to the general public

and within the scope of “Lucy Answers”, and of broadening the scope of the answer in order to best cover the needs of the wider readership.

The composition of the texts is also influenced by the fact that both the problem letter writers and the advisor team orient themselves to the text type of established print “advice columns” that make use of the format of “letters” (address terms, body of text, in some cases farewell sections, signatures), and by the fact that one problem letter is followed by one response letter (M10: Message format and S1: Participation structure). No further possibility for interaction between the advisor team and the individual advice-seeker is envisaged by the technological set-up of the site. The advice-seekers cannot be contacted for clarifications of their problem, as their email addresses are scrambled upon submission, nor can the advice-seekers reach “Lucy Answers” publicly for a follow up. In this way the technological set-up of the site differs, for example, from threads in an advice forum or blog, where advice-seekers post problems and receive (multiple) answers to which they can react if they wish. The advice-seekers on “Lucy Answers” can try their luck and submit a further request to the site, or they can respond in the “reader response section”, a possibility they rarely take advantage of (see below).¹⁵ Because the problem letters are quite sparing in the amount of information they provide (on average only 78 words) and the advisor team has no way to ask for clarifications as in a face-to-face counseling situation, the team often makes transparent the fact that the advice given is based on insufficient background knowledge – a practice that mostly occurs in the assessment moves or in advice sentences realized by *if* clauses. The latter restrict the advice to a certain group of people, i.e., to those for whom the condition holds. While the restriction of the participation structure (S1) to one turn only also holds for print advice columns, “Lucy Answers” readers have the option of clicking on further links to related questions and answers and reader responses, so that they are involved in a much wider communication process (see also the comments below on the archive).

Several researchers have pointed out that anonymity (M6: Anonymous messaging and S1: Participant structure) is a major advantage for online interaction, in that it allows advice-seekers to enquire about their sometimes delicate problems without revealing their identity (e.g., Alexander 2003; van Roosmalen 2000; Wood and Griffiths 2007: 385). Comparing problem-seekers’ formulations with face-to-face counseling on sexual issues, Harvey et al. (2007: 771) noted that the teenagers who wrote to the email advice service www.teenagehealthfreak.org “described themselves, their anatomy and their identities in meticulous detail, (...) whereas previous research on sexual health has discovered the use of vague terms and euphemisms”. Anonymity might be a factor allowing for this detail – or, in the case of “Lucy Answers”, it might be a reason for turning to the site in the first place, as opposed to making use of the face-to-face counseling option available on campus. In “Lucy Answers”, anonymity is guaranteed, in that any submission information that might lead back to the advice-seeker is destroyed. In the case of

print advice columns, however, advice-seekers often do not identify themselves either, so there is no fundamental difference between online and print practices in this respect.

There are nevertheless a number of factors related to computer mediation that influence advice-giving in “Lucy Answers” and that characterize the site in comparison to its print relatives. The first has to do with the medium factor M3: Persistence of transcript. The site offers an archive of problem and response letters, which provides information at a mouse-click by allowing information searches. In fact, the advice seekers are encouraged to first search the archive, which is organized into the seven major topics and their subclasses, before submitting a problem letter themselves. This is because they are more likely to find an answer to a related problem in the archive than to be among the five people whose letters are answered every week. Since the site wishes to provide accurate and current information, this means that the stored exchanges have to be updated on a regular basis to ensure quality advice. This accessibility and updatedness is clearly not available to users of print versions of advice columns. In addition, the archive of letter exchanges influences the construction of new response letters and revisions of the old in several ways: Hyperlinks to previous related letters are added at the bottom of the text (example 10), previous letters are mentioned in the text (example 11), or, more generally, texts are shortened, since aspects of a problem have already been answered more comprehensively elsewhere (example 11):

(10) **Related Q&As**

Breathing patterns while working out

Dizzy after exercise

(fitness, “Is it okay to feel lightheaded and dizzy after running?”)

(11) Dear Too big,¹⁶

Lucy has answered this question any number of times already, in a variety of ways. Please see the answers to “First sex for two virgins?” and “Painful intercourse” in Lucy’s Sexuality archives. The basic gist is that [...].

Lucy

The growing body of letter exchanges – the history of the site – thus influences the creation of new texts, as well as the process of updating old texts. It is also possible to argue that the archive influences the creation of the problem letters, on the assumption that advice-seekers first “lurk” – in the case of “Lucy Answers”, browse the archive and read numerous exchanges – before they actively submit a question themselves. In this way, they may be influenced by the way in which the problem letters are structured, both with respect to the adherence to the general notions of letter writing (address terms, body, signature) and with respect to particular styles of writing (e.g., problem statements and narratives to describe problems).

The Participation structure (S1) of the platform also allows readers of the column to comment on the exchange of problem and response letter. While the “Lucy Answers” team does not take any responsibility for the content accuracy of these comments, the reader response texts form a corpus of their own in which support and advice, as well as criticism, are given. The reader response comments are visible as hyperlinks directly below the problem-answer exchange. This is the result of a general layout change to the site that took place in the early 2000s. Before that, it was difficult to find the comments, and by 2004 the corpus contained only 446 contributions, while the archive of problem and response letters already contained 2,286 exchanges. It is not possible to search the reader response corpus as such. The comments are thus accessible solely via the original “problem letter” – “response letter” sequence to which they are linked. That is, the site wishes to give its readers a more active outlet than before, but does not want the reader responses to be included in the search for information, since the advisor team cannot guarantee the quality and accuracy of the information contained in the reader responses. Nevertheless, these texts complement the professional site in an informal way, and may add to the appeal of the site more generally in that a sense of online community is created (cf. Baym 1998). The advice-seeker who turns to the “Lucy Answers” column thus has more interactive opportunities and more access to advice than the reader of a print advice column.

6. Conclusions and future research

Giving and receiving advice has been discussed in studies of language in use from the perspectives of many different fields (pragmatics, applied linguistics, psychology, health related disciplines, etc.). The Internet offers a platform for advice-seeking and advice-giving to both professionally-trained advisors and lay people, for profit or free of charge. This chapter focused on advice in the context of online health issues. Advice in this realm has important potential real-world consequences, and professionals need to ask themselves how to impart information and advice to their target group in such a way as to augment the likelihood that the advice is heeded (cf. Feng and MacGeorge 2006), at the same time adhering to institutional constraints, such as for example an ideal of non-directiveness.

DeCapua and Dunham (2007: 319) point out that “the socio-pragmatic rules or norms governing the appropriate enactment of any given speech act vary greatly among cultures and languages”. In the case of the advice column “Lucy Answers”, the texts are composed in such ways that the face-threatening character of advice is toned down. The mission of the health program to which the site belongs is of utmost importance in this context, since it propagates an ideal of non-directiveness. The practice observed is characterized by the mitigation of advice, the use of humor, empathy, and support. Using Standard English, “Lucy” engages in strat-

egies that stress her expertise (e.g., presenting well-researched, in-depth information, quoting, and referring to information sources), while still remaining approachable.

Outside the context of professional health counseling, however, many advice columns are not primarily intended to impart quality advice alone, but are there for entertainment reasons, as well. In those cases, implicit norms of delicacy may be suspended. Some columnists certainly have made a name for themselves through their blunt and non-mitigated commentaries, as evidenced in the popular column “Savage Love”, run by Dan Savage on <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/savage-love>. The tone of his column is very different from that of the institutionally run “Lucy Answers”. While also quoting relevant literature, Dan Savage uses less mitigation than “Lucy Answers”, uses profanity frequently, and can at times be face threatening towards his advice seekers. More research is needed to investigate how professional and lay people construct their expert identities in order to project themselves as trustworthy persons to turn to and/or as entertaining advisors: As noted above, the age of the target readership and the experience of the advisors as lay persons or professionals, the topic, and the overall aim and ideology of the column are likely to cause variation in these strategies.

Further research should also tease out what impact different computer-mediated forms have on advice-giving. For example, it would be interesting to compare the set-up of advice contexts with advice threads in forums (e.g., Morrow 2006) and blogs (e.g., Kouper 2010), which allow for more follow-up interaction on the part of advice-seekers and advice-givers. Such studies could contribute to an understanding of how people employ language differently in different advisory settings and how they orient to the particular parameters of the context in which they find themselves (Leppänen 1998: 120). In this way, the pragmatic study of advice-giving online can add to an understanding of language use in the “complexity of its cognitive, social, and cultural (i.e., meaningful) functioning in the lives of human beings” (Verschuere 2009: 19).

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Notes

1. In this chapter, context is defined as “the degree to which the participants share a common set of cultural expectations with respect to the social activity and the speech events making up part of that activity” (Watts 1992: 33); this includes “the degree to which the participants share a common set of assumptions with respect to the information state ... within which the strip of interaction is developed” (Watts 1992: 51). Interactants thus take prior knowledge of activity types (which form discourses on a larger level) and the immediate context of interaction into account when interpreting language.
2. <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=advice&btnG=Search&cat=gwd%2FTop> [accessed 09/04/2010]
3. <http://www.google.com/> [accessed 09/04/2010]
4. <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/brain/> [accessed 09/04/2010]
5. This statement is based on the [pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org) reports (Madden 2003).
6. Site providers in the professional health domain range from international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/en/>), national institutions, such as the Federal Office of Public Health in Switzerland (<http://www.bag.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en>) or the National Institutes of Health in the United States (<http://www.nih.gov/>), to many institutional organizations in the field of public health more generally. Examples of the latter are the many official sites of the States/cantons on public health issues, or organizations dedicated to particular conditions (e.g., <http://www.aids.ch/>, www.multiplesklerose.ch/). In addition to these professional sites, many lay sites are dedicated to sharing information and experience about medical conditions as well as support (e.g., Hamilton 1998, who studied online bone marrow transplantation narratives and Harrison and Barlow 2009, who analyzed an online arthritis self-management program).
7. In this chapter, the concept of identity is not seen as a fixed given but as “intersubjectively rather than individually produced and interactionally emergent rather than assigned in an a priori fashion” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587).
8. In rare cases, “Lucy” also offered her own experiences as illustration.
9. The information in parentheses indicates the topic category and the header of the exchange.
10. These numbers add up to 99 % instead of 100 % due to the effect of rounding.
11. The question prompting the response was: “Lucy, If no one in my dorm seems to care if students come in drunk, creating noise and messes, what can I do?”
12. The question prompting this response was: “Hi Lucy, I wanted to know what I can take for nausea and what causes it?”
13. An example of a lay advice column is <http://ms.liss.tripod.com/UnconventionalWisdom/index.html>, which also contains a disclaimer.
14. An alternative reading, suggested by Susan Herring, is that the teenagers sought to index solidarity in their interactions, with the bluntness in the TeenAdvice section reflecting an absence of social distance.
15. The advice-seekers can, however, make a face-to-face appointment with a health counselor if they belong to the primary target group of the site, i.e., students at the university that hosts the “Lucy Answers” site.
16. The question prompting this response was: “Dear Lucy, This is sort of embarrassing, and you touched on it in a previous message, but ... how do you decrease penis size? I'm serious. Is there some sort of surgery? I ask because my girlfriend says mine is too large, and it sometimes hurts her. Please answer. Signed, Too big”

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