

Advice Online

Miriam A. Locher



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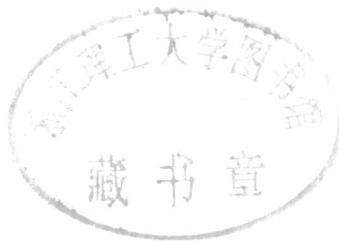
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Advice Online

Advice-giving in an
American Internet health column

Miriam A. Locher

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John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam/Philadelphia



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Miriam A. Locher

Advice online : advice-giving in an American Internet health column /
Miriam A. Locher.

p. cm. (Pragmatics & Beyond, New Series, ISSN 0922-842X ; v. 149)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

1. Health--Computer network resources. 2. Medical care--Computer network resources. I. Title.

RA773.6.L63 2006

610'.285--dc22

2006047706

ISBN 90 272 5392 7 (Hb; alk. paper)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Acknowledgments

My first thanks go to the Internet advice column that is the subject of this study for allowing me to investigate the language used on their site. The people involved in the production of 'Lucy Answers' expressed genuine interest in my research and I hope that the results may prove helpful to them.

This study would not have been possible without the help of many colleagues and friends to whom I am deeply grateful. I would first like to thank Gunnel Tottie and the students of her seminar on "Speech Events" in Zurich (Leata Kollaart, Marylène Lüscher, Jacqueline von Arx, and Michael Wenziger) who gave me the idea to work on advice columns. Thanks also to Anita Kaufmann, who told me about 'Lucy Answers' in particular.

Sebastian Hoffmann helped me in compiling the corpus for this study and worked with me on the topic of *Lucy's* advisor voice in the initial pilot phase of this project (Locher & Hoffmann 2003, 2006), the results of which have found their way into Chapter 8. I am particularly indebted to him for the comparisons with data of the British National Corpus. Thanks also to Iman Makeba Laversuch, who read critically through initial drafts of the paper on *Lucy's* voice and to Benjamin Ruef, who introduced me to XML programming, which proved invaluable for my analysis.

I have written this study while working at the English Department in Berne, where I found many much appreciated colleagues. I wish to thank Richard Watts for his feedback and support. Without the generous amount of time he allowed me to take for my research, this study could not have been completed in the time it was. I am grateful to Anouk Hiedl and Margaret Mace-Tessler for checking the manuscript carefully. The members of the Berne Research Colloquium deserve an especially heartfelt thanks: Anne-Françoise Baer-Boesch, Mathias Kimmich, Danièle Klapproth, Nicole Nyffenegger, Adrian Pablé, Lukas Rosenberger, Philipp Schweighauser and Margun Welskopf. They have accompanied this project throughout with constructive criticism, support and friendship. This study was submitted as a post-doctoral thesis ('Habilitationsschrift') to the University of Berne, where it was reviewed by Sandra Harris, Elke Hentschel, Bruno Moretti, Peter Trudgill and Richard Watts. I wish to express my gratitude to them and to Adreas Jucker and the two anonymous reviewers from Benjamins for

their constructive criticism. I should stress, of course, that I am fully responsible for all shortcomings that remain in this study.

I would also like to thank all those friends and family members who supported me with their love, warmth, and generosity, especially my parents and brother, my cousin Anna, and Lukas. I dedicate this study to my family.

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Introduction*

Human beings give and take advice almost on a daily basis: sometimes we seek and offer advice in private and personal settings, or we turn to professional institutions for help; sometimes advice is specifically requested, and at other times it is given without any explicit prompting from the advisee. There is thus great variation in advice-giving contexts as well as in the way advice is given. This study offers an analysis of solicited advice-giving in 'Lucy Answers' (LA) – a popular and professional Internet health advice column run by a large American educational institution (hereafter referred to as AEI; the names are pseudonyms).¹ The subject of study is thus expert advice-giving in written form in the context of health counseling. I focus on 'Lucy Answers' as a specific 'Community of Practice' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992a), which involves the team of professionals who stand for *Lucy* and the health service of AEI, the questioners who ask for advice, and the Internet readership which uses this site as a resource for information. Every Community of Practice deserves to be studied in its own right, taking into account the specifics that make it unique. By analyzing the question-answer² units in depth, I hope to identify the strategies used in this particular social practice and to contribute to the understanding of advice-giving in general and of advice-giving in the context of professional Internet health sites in particular.

In 'Lucy Answers' a team of professional health educators using the alias *Lucy* answers questions from the anonymous Internet readership. Topics that are covered on this web site include issues of sexuality, sexual health, relationship problems, emotional health, drug use and abuse, fitness and nutrition, and general health. 'Lucy Answers' was chosen because of its professionalism and popularity, which I take to explain its success. It is part of the conventional problem-page genre in that an advice-seeker describes a problem and asks for advice in the form of a 'letter' and receives an answer by an expert which is also in letter format. The notion of a 'letter' will be retained for this study despite the fact that we are dealing with Internet communication, simply because the general format of the problem and response texts corresponds best to the well-established pattern of a simplified letter (see (1.1) below). I will refer to these letters as 'texts' that are produced in the particular discourse of Internet health counseling (cf. van Dijk 1997).

In (1.1) we can see a question-answer exchange that is typical for 'Lucy Answers'. An anonymous questioner describes a problem and asks for advice.

Lucy takes up the questioner’s narrative, analyses the problem and proceeds to give advice.

(1.1) “Talking to yourself” (LA 626, emotional health)*

Lucy,

I frequently drift into talking to myself when alone or even when walking on the street. Is this healthy? I find that so long as I don’t talk for a long time, it leaves a good effect on me. However, sometimes it’s just a sub-conscious way of wasting time. Should I actively try to stop myself from this self-talking, or should I let myself “be natural”? I am twenty-four!

– Self-Talker

Dear Self-Talker,

Most people talk to themselves quite regularly, even when walking down the street; but, it is primarily done silently so it’s not evident to onlookers. Whether or not we talk out loud, or silently, when we talk to ourselves, we are processing our thoughts, solving our problems, or just deciding what we will eat for lunch that day.

Some people have difficulty in making the transition from speaking to themselves out loud when they are alone, to speaking silently when they are in public. This is purely an issue of societal norms. Speaking to yourself out loud is not unhealthy behavior, but it does run counter to what is considered normal in American society. You can either try to speak to yourself silently when you’re in public, or you can continue talking out loud and risk some stares – your choice!

Lucy

* The record number refers to its call number in my database. This information is included to make transparent when examples come from the same record. The title of the record and the topic category in ‘Lucy Answers’ are included to contextualize the examples for the benefit of the reader. The texts of all examples of problem and response letters of ‘Lucy Answers’ are taken over as they appear on the site and are not edited for typing or any other grammatical inconsistencies.

The core ‘piece of advice’ in (1.1) can be located in *Lucy*’s last sentence which contains a suggestion introduced with *can*. However, you could also argue that the entire answer constitutes advice since the final suggestion largely obtains its full scope from being embedded in its context. The pieces of information delivered reassure the advice-seeker that the fears expressed in his or her question (*Is this healthy?*) are unwarranted. In many instances, offering advice is therefore not a matter of giving straightforward imperatives for instruction, but a complex interplay of linguistic realizations of different discursive moves.

According to Searle (1969:67), who contrasts advice with the speech act of request, the former “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.” Advice has thus a weaker directive force than requests. Advice is also closely linked to the speech act type of assessments and judgments. However, advice-giving contains an additional element: a future action is recommended by the advice-giver. It is this combination of assessing, judging and directing that characterizes advice-giving. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines advice as an “[o]pinion given or offered as to action; counsel” (OED, sense 5), the *Collins Concise Dictionary* defines it as a “recommendation as to appropriate choice of action” (1989: 17) and the *American Heritage Dictionary* as an “[o]pinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem; counsel” (2000, online). The advice-giver offers an opinion about how to solve a particular problem and by doing so implies that the suggested course of action is beneficial to the advice-seeker. In this study, it is my aim to find the particular strategies employed to give advice in ‘Lucy Answers’.

This study is organized in four parts (Part I – Part IV) which each include one or several chapters. In Part I, Chapter 2, I will introduce the reader to ‘Lucy Answers’. The site with its various functions will be explained in detail and I shall describe the set of question-answer sequences that form the linguistic corpus for this study, as well as explain how this data was prepared for analysis. This material is presented early in the book so that the reader can keep this particular site and its context in mind when being introduced to the literature on advice-giving in different situations.

Part II contains the literature review (Chapter 3) and the research questions (Chapter 4). Previous research on advice has focused on specific contexts that covered areas as varied as phone-in radio shows, medical and student counseling, therapy, or printed advice columns, among others. In Chapter 3, I will give an overview of the variety of advice-giving reported on in these studies. This overview will serve as background against which I can compare the patterns and strategies found in the analysis of ‘Lucy Answers’. Chapter 4 will then outline the particular research questions to be explored in the study. They are partly derived from a synthesis of the literature review and partly developed from studying ‘Lucy Answers’ itself.

Part III contains the analysis chapters. Chapters 5 to 8 focus on the answers by *Lucy*. Chapter 5 deals with the content structure of the problem letter and the linguistic realization of advice in *Lucy*’s answers. The methodology employed will be both quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative component consists of close readings of individual question-answer sequences in order to establish the discursive moves that make up the answer; the quantitative aspect enters the analysis