

Aesthetic Conventions and Pragmalinguistic Devices in Computer-mediated Communication. Q&A Websites as a Case Study

Abstract: The aim of this article is to investigate the aesthetics of informal text-based Computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as the Q&A websites (e.g.: Stack Exchange, GitHub, Quora, Yahoo! Answers, etc.) conceived of as a distinctive medium of communication based on cosmopolitan *brand communities* that share the same field of expertise and a common interest in a particular topic. Since these Q&A websites have gradually become one of the major sources of information today, surpassing corporate websites in terms of influence on purchasing decisions, the scope here is to detect whether their success is also due to a set of powerful pragmalinguistic devices, which may reveal that clear questions can make people more willing to help.¹

Furthermore, these assumptions will also help to outline new and different insights into the role of context in Q&A websites, thus providing evidence for the existence of possible relationships between the reputation of community members, the specialised domain, and the uniqueness of the temporal-historical dimension in on-line interactions. By interacting in digital communities and in on-line forums or social networks, users can ask questions and receive feedback regarding specific topics, opinions, and experiences, thus generating debates, the exchanging of ideas and the raising of emotions. More specifically, by adopting sentiment analysis for recognizing the positive/negative semantic orientation of texts and their emotional style,² we will attempt to demonstrate that the aesthetics of such informal texts written by using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is influenced by how we express, understand, and are affected by the shaping of subjectivity;³ how we associate emotions and opinions with certain linguistic aspects, such as specific words or syntactic patterns;⁴ and how we can classify linguistic expressions according to the type of opinion that they convey.

Keywords: *computer-mediated communication, English as a Lingua Franca, digital communities, pragmalinguistic devices*

1. Introduction

The worldwide diffusion of social media has profoundly changed the way we communicate and access information. Indeed, nowadays the Internet has become a prime venue for social interaction⁵ through online services such as emails, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs and Twitter, where people share aspects of their daily lives, talk about interests with like-minded others, keep in touch with family and friends, and express their opinions without formality and constraint. In the midst of all this social

¹ See Muhammad Asaduzzaman et al., “Answering Questions about Unanswered Questions of Stack Overflow”, *Proceedings of the 10th IEEE Working Conference on Mining Software Repositories (MSR 2013)* (San Francisco: IEEE Press Piscataway, 2013), 97-100.

² See Nicole Novielli et al., “Towards Discovering the Role of Emotions in Stack Overflow”, in *Proceedings of the 6th International Workshop on Social Software Engineering* (2014), 33–36.

³ See Claudia Caffi and Richard W. Janney, “Toward a Pragmatics of Emotive Communication”, in Claudia Caffi and Richard W. Janney, eds., *Involvement in Language*, special issue of *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22.3/4 (1994), 325–373; Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

⁴ See Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan, “Styles of Stance in English: Lexical and Grammatical Marking of Evidentiality and Affect”, *Text*, 9 (1989), 93–124; Susan Hunston, *Corpus Approaches to Evaluation: Phraseology and Evaluative Language* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ See Mary L. D’Amico, “Internet Has Become a Necessity, US Poll Shows” (1998), <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9812/07/neednet.idg/>.

activity, people are forming relationships with those whom they meet on the Internet, thus setting the tone for particular types of interaction and enabling both identity expression and community building. As a result, identity and community have long presented focal concepts of interest for new media researchers, who have recently focused on the private/public balance present in each social networking site, as well as on the structural and design elements of online social networks employed to foster connection-sharing, social capital generation and effective communication.⁶

On these premises, this study aims to understand and examine how social networks and interactions become successful when using structural and thematic features that facilitate communication and create what Castells⁷ termed a culture of “real virtuality” (358), that is, the symbolic representations of everyday communicative routines that these social networks create for their users, so as to understand the significance of virtual architecture and multimodal aesthetics. While websites may include photographs, music clips, and immersive virtual worlds, millions of participants experience online communities through text: people go online to talk (write) and listen (read), and so written text is a key factor for the success of both the communities as a whole and their individual members. Indeed, people start conversations hoping to derive benefit from the group; depending on the response they get, current and prospective members will either continue to participate or they will leave.

Furthermore, it becomes apparent from relevant research that the investigation of linguistic factors, that is, looking at how questions, answers and comments are formulated,⁸ can influence the success or the failure of an interaction. Accordingly, this study will review some of the most relevant theories related to social networking, several of which can inform the linguistic processes and choices underlying the architecture and the aesthetics of informal text-based computer-mediated communication. To this end, echoing Austin’s⁹ influential assumption that the basic units of communication are not individual words and phrases, but that we are always “doing things with words” (92), this study takes into consideration a small corpus of excerpts from the online community of Yahoo! Answers related to golf and golf resorts. The selection¹⁰ of these excerpts serves to demonstrate that the minimal unit of communication is not necessarily a full sentence, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, exchanging opinions, etc.¹¹

From a genre perspective, the analysis of authentic small units of informal text-based computer-mediated communication poses a number of interesting questions related to the study of how individuals or organizations cope with this variety of communicative contexts, the classification of communicative events sharing communicative purposes and recognised conventions accepted by a

⁶ See Danah Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13.1 (2008), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>, 5 November 2008; Judith Donath, “Signals in Social Supernets”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13.1 (2007), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/donath.html>, 5 November 2008; Nicole B. Ellison et al., “The Benefits of Facebook ‘Friends’: Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12.4 (2007), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/ellison.html>, 5 November 2008.

⁷ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

⁸ See Tim Althoff et al., “How to Ask for a Favor: A Case Study on the Success of Altruistic Requests”, in *Proceedings of the 8th International AAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, ICWSM / New York: Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence*, (2014), 12-21; Tanushree Mitra and Eric Gilbert, “The Language that Gets People to Give: Phrases that Predict Success on Kickstarter”, in *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (New York: ACM, 2014), 49–61.

⁹ See John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁰ The selection takes into account questions and answers generated on the Yahoo! Answers website from July to October 2017.

¹¹ John R. Searle et al., *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), vii.

discourse community,¹² the definition of text construction and organization, and the identification of the specificities and regularities of language use which make digital discursive practices easily recognisable and susceptible to being categorised into genres. It is also important to note that the introduction of informal text-based computer-mediated communication into existing genres has not only generated a spate of new studies exploring them, but also a kind of “genre-networks”,¹³ typically comprising a whole set of genres, as well as combining obligatory elements and genres that may characterise specific types of interactions. All these genre-related features have contributed to the growing success of digital communities in which people increasingly participate both to ask and to resolve domain-specific problems through Question and Answer (Q&A) websites, such as Yahoo! Answers, Stack Overflow, GitHub, Quora, etc. Since these Q&A websites have gradually become one of the major sources of information today, the scope here is to detect whether their success is also due to a set of powerful pragmalinguistic devices, which may reveal that clear questions can make people more willing to help.¹⁴ Finally, by adopting sentiment analysis for recognising the positive/negative semantic orientation of texts and their emotional style,¹⁵ we will attempt to demonstrate that the aesthetics of such informal texts written using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) are shaped by how we associate emotions and opinions with certain linguistic aspects.

2. Issues of Genre and Computer-mediated Communication (CMC): An Integrated Approach

The term “social media” is often used in public discourse as an umbrella term for a range of digital media that may be used to interact with others through network technologies, such as blogs, wikis, social book-marking, social network sites, photo and video sharing, and other primarily Internet-based phenomena. As a result, a new era of networked, interactive forms of communication has emerged in recent years which affects the interpersonal exchange and personalised expression of ordinary users, and which facilitates mutual orientation and content creation framed in terms of “user-generated content” and “users as producers”.¹⁶ Against this background, the aim of this section is to set the informal text-based computer-mediated communication¹⁷ like that generated on the Yahoo! Answers website within a genre-based framework for social media and to introduce a new set of linguistic features and aesthetic conventions enacted in such text-types as Q&A websites. To this end, a brief

¹² See John Swales, *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1990); John Swales, *Research Genres. Explorations and Applications* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004); Vijay K. Bhatia, “Methodological Issues in Genre Analysis”, *Hermes, Journal of Linguistics*, 16 (1996), 39–59; Vijay K. Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View* (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹³ Marina Bondi, “Language Policy in Web-Mediated Scientific Knowledge Dissemination: A Case Study of Risk Communication across Genres and Languages”, in Ramón P. Alastrué and Carmen Pérez-Llantada, eds., *English as a Scientific and Research Language* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 85–111: 88.

¹⁴ See Muhammad Asaduzzaman et al., “Answering Questions”.

¹⁵ See Novielli et al., “Towards Discovering”; Novielli et al., “The EmoQuest Project: Emotions in Q&A Sites”, in *Proceeding AVI'16, Proceedings of the International Working Conference on Advanced Visual Interfaces, ACM* (New York, NY, USA, 2016), 334–335.

¹⁶ Boyd and Ellison, “Social Network Sites”, 92; Marika Lüders, “Conceptualizing Personal Media”, *New Media and Society*, 10.5 (2008), 683–702: 685.

¹⁷ In the last decade, the alternative term “Electronically mediated intercultural communication (EMIC)” has been proposed. It involves intercultural interactions through mediated digital devices. According to Sangiamchit (Chittima Sangiamchit, “ELF in Electronically Mediated Intercultural Communication”, in Jennifer Jenkins et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, 345–57) the term EMIC replaces CMC in order to illustrate the more varied ways of current digital communication. It is defined as intercultural interactions through computer mediated networks on electronic devices, such as computers, laptops, mobile/smarthphones and tablets. EMIC brings distinctive characteristics to the communication process, and this results in dynamic and highly flexible online intercultural communication. These characteristics are delineated across four aspects: multilingualism and multiculturalism, multiway communication, multimodality, and mobility.

review of the concept of genre as it has been used in CMC research can help to explore the relationship between media text production and reception, and the shift from traditional narrative forms of telling to the innovative aesthetic conventions of digital stories.

Genre analysis has developed within several research disciplines, among them – and, for the present purpose, most importantly – in CMC, applied linguistics, and pragmalinguistics.¹⁸ Most of the studies of genre in CMC are grounded in either functional-linguistic genre theory¹⁹ or rhetorical genre theory²⁰ and draw on classic methods for textual analysis. In all three of the fields mentioned above, a functional perspective of genre has become influential, one that shifts the focus of genre analysis from content/form-based description and classification to an understanding of genre in terms of function and purpose.²¹ At a functional level, genre constitution entails a continuous process and negotiation of relevant skills and knowledge through communicative practices. According to Yates and Orlikowski,²² the constitution of a genre is only realised insofar as the communicative practices, conventions and expectations linked to the genre are socially shared and recognised among a group of users and recurrently expressed in text. As a result, with CMC ordinary users increasingly become producers, texts are constantly modified and expanded, and the separation of audiences and senders becomes consequently obsolete.

In keeping with this, we can argue here for the relevance of a more interactionist-pragmatic approach within functional genre theory, stressing how such genres as those related to CMC emerge and are negotiated, stabilised and destabilised online over time. This approach is integrated by applied linguistics as primarily associated with the works of John Swales, whose genre definition emphasises the communicative purpose as follows:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.²³

The emphasis on communicative purpose, or why people in a discourse community use language the way they do, entails an analytical focus on the detailed use of language in terms of linguistic style and content by acquiring meaning from the social context in which it is embedded. With this in mind, Miller²⁴ introduces and emphasises the pragmatic context in which the genre is used for understanding the social action that it accomplishes. This pragmatic concept of genre is in a sense more open, dynamic and flexible, since it is not necessarily defined by a specific form or type of content,²⁵ but by a communicative or compositional structure.

All these assumptions raise the question of whether the concept of genre must be reformulated – theoretically and methodologically – in the study of social media in general and in the specific case of Q&A websites. The latter can hardly be seen as constituting a single genre: they are “hypergenres” or

¹⁸ In line with Leech (Geoffrey N. Leech, *The Pragmatics of Politeness*, New York: Oxford U.P., 2014) by pragmalinguistics we mean the interface between pragmatics and linguistic form, i.e., the way a language (both polite and impolite forms) is used for politeness as a characteristic of human behaviour.

¹⁹ See Bhatia, “Methodological Issues”; Swales, *Genre Analysis*.

²⁰ See Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge. The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70.2 (1984), 151–167.

²¹ Morten B. Andersen, “TV og genre”, in Peter Dahlgren, ed., *Den Mangtydige Ruten* (Stockholm: Skrift serien JMK, 1994) 207–225: 17.

²² See Joanne Yates and Wanda J. Orlikowski, “Genres of Organisational Communication: A Structural Approach to Studying Communication and Media”, *Academy of Management Review*, 17.2 (1992), 299–326.

²³ Swales, *Genre Analysis*, 58.

²⁴ Miller, “Genre as Social Action”, 163.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

“genre-networks”,²⁶ typically comprising a whole set of genres and combining obligatory elements and genres that may characterise specific types of interactions. As we are going to discuss later on in this section, the adaptation of existing genres to the web-mediated communication and the introduction of new web-native genres like Q&A websites has generated informal text-based, computer-mediated forms of communication, characterised by specific aesthetic features and conventions which help to attract the attention of the audience amidst a vast universe of online information. This new textual aesthetics has been announced in the past decade by a shift from genre studies to narrative studies, particularly with respect to a growing recognition of the diversity of digital text types and activities. Indeed, several scholars have turned their attention away from “large” autobiographical narratives to “small stories”, which occur spontaneously in every virtual domain and community.²⁷ Coincidentally, the analytical focus on small stories comes at a moment in history when more narrative activities are taking place in online contexts than ever before. Research in the field of digital narratives has only recently begun to catch up with trends and developments in information and communication technologies, and with their related unexplored digital genres. Among the most influential studies in the field, we can mention Georgakopoulou’s contribution on emails,²⁸ Myers’s²⁹ on blogs and wikis, and Page’s³⁰ on Facebook. Though focusing on different genres, all these narrative scholars indicate “nowness”³¹ and recency, as opposed to pastness and reflection, as pivotal and distinctive features of narratives in CMC contexts.

Online question and answer fora related to some specific topics, as well as requests for suggestions and recommendations – sometimes referred to by marketing scholars as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) – constitute a genre that continues to grow in both popularity and influence. Since narratives concerning Q&A websites have not been extensively attested or systematised, later on in this study (section 4) we also focus on the ways in which digital users of Q&A sites address, reach out to, and engage with the readers of their small narratives by shaping an emotional aesthetics and style based on a specific set of pragmalinguistic features. This issue is a relevant one, since, given the overwhelming amount of information confronting today’s Internet users, digital narrators must find ways of engaging and connecting with their unknown audience. Therefore, because the attention here is to what authors of Q&As do to engage their audience with their narratives, we draw on Besnier³² and adopt the following descriptors, which are commonly associated with involvement in discourse:

- the attention that speakers pay to the needs of their interlocutor;
- the interactional aspects of communication;
- the cooperative construction of discourse and the display of positive affect toward interlocutors;
- conversationalists’ willingness and ability to initiate and sustain verbal interaction;
- the creation/display of “engagement”; and
- interpersonal dynamics (e.g., the maintenance of a good rapport among participants).

²⁶ Bondi, “Language Policy”.

²⁷ See Mark Freeman, “Life ‘on holiday’? In defense of big stories”, in Michael Bamberg, ed., *Narrative. State of the Art* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), 155–164; Id., “Stories: Big or Small. Why Do We Care?”, *Ibid.*, 165–74; Alexandra Georgakopoulou, “Thinking Big with Small Stories in Narrative and Identity Analysis”, in Bamberg, *Narrative*, 122–30; Id., *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See Greg Myers, *The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis* (London: Continuum, 2010).

³⁰ See Ruth Page, *Stories and Social Media* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³¹ Myers, *Discourse*, 69.

³² See Niko Besnier, “Involvement in Linguistic Practice: An Ethnographic Appraisal”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22 (1994), 280–289.

These descriptors reveal that “involvement” can be understood as consisting of a range of discursive resources that index some type of connection or interaction among participants. Specifically, in the case of Q&A websites, involvement between the asker and the answerer is also activated and made explicit through several other textual components. Adapting the traditional Labovian narrative elements³³ to the purposes of this study, we introduce here the narrative architecture characterising a typical Q&A interaction followed by illustrative excerpts³⁴ taken from the dataset:

1. The abstract takes the form of a summary statement, which introduces the general topic of a question and an answer. It is an optional component and, in most of the Q&As, tends to coincide with the story preface.
2. The story preface, which used to be a convention of oral narratives, is carried over into a digital context. In an asynchronous online narrative such as Q&A websites, a story preface becomes a symbolic resource. In the examples shown below, askers open their questions by drawing their readers into their stories through the use of resources such as first-person singular or plural pronouns, a verb with an explicit reference to their previous experience, and the posing of a question concerning the new experience for which they are asking for.
3. The orientation section provides background information about the story’s who, when, and where. This is a recurring component, given that Q&As related to golf and golf resorts tell about and ask for golf settings, hotel stays, and travel information. In these specific small pieces of stories, orientation takes on a special relevance since it can provide reviews or reports of planning activities and experiences that took place prior to travel. In addition, as can be seen in the example below (question 9), the orientation segment in the Q&As may also be optional or coincide with another narrative component, that is, the complicating action.
4. Evaluation is another defining feature of a Q&A structure, and it can occur in any and all phases of the narrative. Therefore, it is not surprising that 100% of the examples in the dataset include some form of explicit evaluation in the formulation of both the questions and the answers. That is, the main purpose of the online Q&A collected in the dataset is to rate, evaluate, describe, and, on that basis, to ask for questions or to provide recommendations to others for – or against – a particular golf resort or service. As the examples below show (answer 2; question 2; answer 2), evaluation appears frequently, is expressed using a variety of pervasive evaluative syntactical (e.g., “would be no problem”) and lexical forms (e.g., “he was lovely and very helpful”; “the food was delicious, absolutely fantastic!!”; “the staff there are really nice and down-to-earth”; “it seems really nice”; “he had a wonderful time and the reception was excellent”; “It’s nice to see that you had a great stay”), and can be found in every excerpt.
5. Along with evaluation, a complicating action is traditionally the other defining feature of a Q&A narrative. The complicating action is normally realised linguistically via a series of past tense clauses that are sequentially ordered. In this genre, the most highly narrative accounts tend to include forms of temporal deictics. In several cases, rather than being comprised of actions and events (as one would expect), the complicating action is instead built up through negative descriptions marked by a simple listing of unpleasant or negative characteristics (see question 9: “it was horrible, the worst hotel I’ve ever stayed in”) that can constitute the

³³ See William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experiences”, in June Helm, ed., *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts: Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Ethnological Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), 12–44.

³⁴ From now on since all the examples are reported from the original online texts, several mistakes can appear here and there.

complicating action. Sometimes, the latter can replace or can coincide with the orientation statement, as in the same question 9.

6. Like the abstract and the orientation, the resolution is optional. It serves as an end to the narrative personal experience shared in the question and/or in the answer.
7. The coda, which is also an optional element of a Q&A structure, nearly always takes the form of some type of advice, suggestion, warning, directive, or admonition. The coda is one of the sections of the Q&A narrative structure in which the askers or the answerers appeal directly to readers, commonly through the use of second-person pronouns or adjectives, as seen in question 9 (“I just wanted your feedback”).

Question n.4: We go away twice a year on a golfing holiday and play a comp against each other. However we play it over 9 holes and then change the teams for the 2nd 9 of the day etc. We have managed to find a few places that provide accomodation includnig meals etc. But they seem to be hard to find. What we need is: Accomodation, Breakfast and Dinner Included, the ability to book tee times for each 9. (So we can play 9 holes have a break then play the other 9. Rather than go straight round). Any ideas of places would be great. We are based in essex but driving is not a problem. Would like sum where within 4 hours if possible. thanks guys.	ABSTRACT
	STORY PREFACE
	ORIENTATION
Answer n.2: If you come to the states I have the perfect place for your group - Etowah Valley Golf Club in North Carolina. They have package deals, rooms, great breakfast buffet, and dinners included as well as all the golf you can play each day for a set price. They have three nine hole layouts and would be no problem scheduling your nine hole matches with a break inbetween. Might be worth the airfare to play this wonderful course in a beautiful setting.	ORIENTATION
	EVALUATION
	RESOLUTION
Question n.9: BallyKisteen Hotel and Golf Resort? has anyone been to this hotel? because...i have stayed in it, the staff was absolutely fantastic! They were always cleaning up or checking up on people to make sure they were okay. i was reading the reviews and such on them and people were saying it was horrible "the worst hotel I've ever stayed in" I have to strongly disagree. There was one staff member in particular his name was Thomas...wish I knew his last name :/ so I could tell the front desk that he was lovely and very helpful. The food was delicious, absolutely fantastic!! The rooms were clean and big andhad everything you needed basically. (I stayed in one of the apartments) I just wanted your feedback.	ABSTRACT
	STORY PREFACE
	ORIENTATION + COMPLICATING ACTION
Answer n.2: Honestly, I live 2 minutes up the road from it and I never have heard any bad feedback from it. I have used the public swimming pool and gym there many times and I agree that the staff there are really nice and down-to-earth. It seems really nice from the outside and a lot of my male friends are actually members of the golf course there. My manager got married there recently and he told me he had a wonderful time and the reception was excellent. Its nice to see that you had a great stay so I'd recommend that you put your feedback up at some Irish hotel website. I know that they would appreciate that back at the hotel :)	EVALUATION
	RESOLUTION
	CODA
	STORY PREFACE
	ORIENTATION + EVALUATION
	RESOLUTION
	CODA

From the examples above, we can infer that, in emergent informal text-based computer-mediated communication, genres intersect when user interactions unfold across such dynamic practices as Q&As by introducing new constraints as well as new affordances for narrative activities.

3. The Language Politics of Online Communities: No ELF, No Help

From international business to the Internet and from science to music, English is the new lingua franca. Indeed, it has become commonplace to identify the rise of English as a world language characterising both human and virtual interactions. Crucially, since the emergence of the Internet has reinforced an interconnectedness between people across the globe, English has become the most dominant language in online communication and an important means for wider communication among users belonging to different first languages and cultures.³⁵ In this light, no area of media production exemplifies the growing importance of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) better than social networking, where users are routinely addressed by large numbers of messages in English regardless of their cultural heritage and native language. More specifically, along with Seidlhofer's definition of ELF as "a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages",³⁶ Jenkins³⁷ offers an extended definition that involves communication in English between participants who have different "linguacultures" (164), whether they are categorised as native speakers, second language users, or foreign language users.

Substantial descriptive research on ELF has been under way for more than a decade now, to the point where the acronym ELF refers not only to a particular context of language use (that is, situations in which speakers of different first languages use English as their main communicative medium of choice), but also to a new research paradigm in linguistics documenting a set of various shared and stable features and processes. ELF is, in fact, essentially defined and characterised by its variability, flexibility, and linguistic creativity.³⁸ Thus, the aim of ELF research is to approach language contact as a social and pragmatic phenomenon by looking at how it manifests itself linguistically in a group of speakers. However, since within online communication studies ELF research is still in its infancy,³⁹ this section aims to provide some theoretical assumptions investigating the pivotal role that ELF plays in the shared practices of digital communities developed around Q&A websites. Indeed, since ELF is most often used as the lingua franca of online communication among users from a multitude of linguistic and cultural backgrounds,⁴⁰ we attempt to capture the multidimensional realities of ELF use in such communities as perceived by their members in terms of a language used to both represent

³⁵ See Paul Bruthiaux, "Squaring the circles: issues in modeling English worldwide", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13.2 (2003), 159–178; M. Dewey, "English as a lingua franca and globalization: An interconnected Perspective", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17 (2007), 332–354; David Crystal, "Two thousand million?", *English Today*, 24 (2008), 3–6; Alastair Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (London: Routledge, 2007); Paola Vettorel, *English as a Lingua Franca in Wider Networking: Blogging Practices* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014).

³⁶ Barbara Seidlhofer, "English as a Lingua Franca", in Albert S. Hornby, ed., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005), 339.

³⁷ Jennifer Jenkins, *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2007).

³⁸ See Maria Grazia Guido, *English as a Lingua Franca in Cross-Cultural Immigration Domains* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008); Marie-Luise Pitzl, "World Englishes and Creative Idioms in English as a Lingua Franca", *World Englishes*, 35.2 (2016), 293–309.

³⁹ See Christopher Jenks, "Are You an ELF? The Relevance of ELF as an Equitable Social Category in Online Intercultural Communication", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13.1 (2013), 1–14; I-Chung Ke, and Hilda Cahyani, "Learning to Become Users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): How ELF Online Communication Affects Taiwanese Learners' Beliefs of English", *Systems*, 46 (2014), 28–38; Paola Vettorel, *English as a Lingua Franca*.

⁴⁰ See Maria Grazia Guido and Barbara Seidlhofer, "English as a Lingua Franca: Theory and Practice", *Textus*, 27.1 (2014), 7–16; Paola Vettorel, *English as a Lingua Franca*; Philip Seargeant et al., "Language Choice and Addressivity Strategies in Thai-English Social Networks Interactions", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 16.14 (2012), 510–531.

shared experiences and knowledge and to create those experiences. All this inevitably entails a consideration of membership in a “discourse community”⁴¹ that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting.⁴²

Discourse community has also been reconceptualised by Jenkins⁴³ and Seidlhofer⁴⁴ in terms of ELF communities of practice. To the end of this study, we can conceive here online users who regularly interact with each other in such Q&A websites by means of a shared communicative repertoire as an example of an ELF community of practice. The concept of a community of practice was first introduced by Lave and Wenger⁴⁵ as part of their theory of situated learning, but they did not specify the term in detail. One year later, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet recognised and explored as follows the concept of a community of practice as an analytical tool for their sociolinguistic research on language and gender:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.⁴⁶

The prominence Eckert and McConnell-Ginet give in their definition to emerging “ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations” as these aggregates’ shared “practices”, will be shown to prove particularly helpful for an examination of ELF in its social contexts, to identify and describe in-group social parameters and how these govern its members’ linguistic and communicative behaviour.

Some years later, Wenger⁴⁷ restored the concept of a community of practice and offered as an additional heuristic device the following list of features which indicate whether and to what degree a community can be shaped:

1. Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual;
2. Shared ways of engaging in doing thing together;
3. The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation;
4. Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process;
5. Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed;
6. Substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belongs;
7. Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise;
8. Mutually defining identities;
9. The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products;
10. Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts;
11. Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter;
12. Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones;

⁴¹ Sandra L. McKay, *Teaching English as an International Language: Rethinking Goals and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2002).

⁴² See Claire Kramsch, *Language and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1998).

⁴³ See Jenkins, *English as a Lingua Franca*.

⁴⁴ See Seidlhofer, “English as a Lingua Franca”.

⁴⁵ See Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991), 97-98.

⁴⁶ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, “Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21 (1992), 461–490: 464.

⁴⁷ See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), 125-126.

13. Certain styles recognised as displaying membership; and
14. A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world.

A close reading of these features reveals the full communicative complexity of language dynamics in digital communities, in their varied manifestations, and in their multilayered repertoire. Incidentally, these language dynamics characterising the community of practice have been recently problematised and expanded by Ehrenreich⁴⁸ as a powerful analytical tool developed around three criterial dimensions: mutual engagement, its joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. For a community of practice to evolve as a coherent group, its members need to interact on a regular basis. A community of practice only evolves as a result of the relationships that its members have established through their mutual engagements. Additionally, a joint enterprise is the goal or purpose that motivates the participants' interrelated actions, as their negotiated response to their situation on the basis of a shared repertoire which can be very heterogeneous and can comprise both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. English (as a Lingua Franca) is most probably part of a community's "shared repertoire", inextricably linked with the community members' mutual engagement and their joint enterprise.⁴⁹ All three of these dimensions, which are not fixed at any given point in time, but mutable and adaptive, can enable pragmatic explorations and empiric analyses of ELF in digital communities of practice.

More specifically, from a pragmatic perspective ELF research has developed exponentially in recent years, and the initial emphasis on systematic and recurrent features has been replaced by a focus of ELF's flexibility and fluidity, which has translated into more contributions on pragmatic criteria, conventions, and devices. These latter aspects are discussed in more concrete detail in the next section of this study with a thorough analysis of the excerpts collected in the dataset. However, what is worth mentioning here at least is a brief introduction to some of the most relevant discourse markers and strategies which contribute to theorising ELF talk as a joint achievement of the interlocutors, who successfully engage in their interactional and interpretive work in order to sustain the appearance of normality.⁵⁰ Strategies such as repetition and self-repetition, paraphrasing and reformulation, monitoring and self-monitoring, repair initiation and self-repair, are used as proactive measures which allow speakers to negotiate their meanings and routinely support each other, and to resolve a communication problem afterwards. By resorting to their own strategic pragmatic competence, ELF participants appear to adopt a "let-it-pass" principle, that is, in Firth's terms, "an interpretive procedure that makes their interactional styles robust and consensual by accommodating anomalous usage and ambiguous linguistic behaviour".⁵¹ Generally, such pragmatic strategies are introduced by specific discourse markers which express meanings of information management and also mark the interpersonal relations between interlocutors. They range from very short, fixed expressions to longer units of more or less variable sequence. Among them, we focus here on two prototypical expressions (i.e., "I think" and "I don't know") which appear with a high frequency in digital interactions as demonstrated by the following excerpts:

Question 2:

Hi. Anyone stayed at the Oasis Golf Resort in tenerife? What's it like?? Thanks xx

⁴⁸ See Susanne Ehrenreich, "Communities of Practice and English as a Lingua Franca," in Jenkins et al., *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, 37–48.

⁴⁹ See Susanne Ehrenreich, "English as a Lingua Franca in Multinational Corporations. Exploring Business Communities of Practice", in Anna Mauranen and Erina Ranta, eds., *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Finding* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 126–151.

⁵⁰ See Alessia Cogo and Juliane House, "The Pragmatics of ELF," in Jenkins et al., *Handbook of English*, 211.

⁵¹ Alan Firth, "The Discursive Accomplishment of Normality: On 'Lingua Franca' English and Conversation Analysis", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26 (1996), 237–259: 247.

Answer 1:

Ignore the previous answer **I think** he/she is just trying to wind you up. what that person (I'm being polite) describes does exist in Tenerife as it does in every city, town and holiday resort throughout Spain, in the southern resorts of Tenerife most of that type of activity occurs in Playa las Americas in a district called Veronicas which is some distance from where you are staying, there are plenty of places to go to enjoy your holiday without going near the Veronicas. Have a nice holiday.

Question 3:

Are the Scottish happy about Donald Trump building a huge Golf Resort in Scotland?

Answer 5:

If it genuinely is a world class course and attracts inward investment to the country **I think** it is a good thing. We have a lot of good courses already so if just another run of the mill golf course **I think** it is unnecessary. Wildlife will still be able to live on the golf course, it is not that damaging to the environment from my experience a golf course is a good use of natural land.

Question 7:

Has anyone ever stayed at the oasis golf resort in tenerife, and can you tell me what its like?

Answer 2:

I think this is part of the Fiesta hotel chain? If so, I stayed at the Fiesta Oasis Floral hotel in May in Playa Paraiso, Tenerife. It was lovely. The staff were polite and helpful. It was as clean as clean can be and the pool area was quite large. The only complaint I had is a bulb out in one of the lifts. I didn't realise 'til I got in and the doors closed! It was pitch black and I sh*t myself. Also, if you're going all inclusive it has pretty decent food. It's foreign enough to make you feel a little exotic, but English enough to ensure you don't go hungry. Oh and they had fridges full of sandwiches and freezers with ice creams in by the side of the pool for you to snack on during the day. I'd rate it 8/10 overall. Ofcourse, if this isn't even the same hotel group as yours then this has been absolutely helpless, but hey - hope it was a nice read :-D

Question 26:

Can someone tell me the email address for Ocean Blue & Sand Golf & Beach Resort in Dominican Republic? I booked via my bank so I want to email them direct and make sure we get two beds in our room and not just one king size.

Answer 1:

here's a website, **I think** it is them. there is an email address at the bottom but it might just be for bookings

Question 28:

What is the best way fo a golf holiday package to thailand?

Answer 1:

Thanks Doug. Here I am. Hopefully the guy who ask the question is not really a hecker. Otherwise, I should really like to be introduced!!!!? Just came back from a game myself and played really bad, for not playing for three weeks. My group played worse though, so I got all the money!!!! Went all to lunch! I am gonna watch Bristish open now. About the golf tour in Thailand, there are so many. I think there are more than 200 golf courses throughout Thailand. If you really like the exotic of it, there is one golf course on an island called Samui Island. The name of the course I think is Santiburi (the town of peace). The famous course in Thailand is the Blue Canyon on the island of Phuket (hosting of the Johny Walker Classis that Tiger won I think over Ernie) [...]

Question 37:

Soviva resort? Has anyone any knowledge of this resort in tunisia. Am going there in May and can,t get much info

Answer 1:

are you talking about the resort at vinaros, costa del azahar. if so it is a small resort ,good golf a very nice quiet area.about 5/10k to beaches. the coast around there is not as built up as other costas, yes there are english there but it is mainly Spanish. **I think** to get the best out of the area you need transport.

Question 43:

st andrews golf clubs are they any good ????? need help as i am thinking of buying a full set

Answer 3:

The name sounds like something off brand like a starter set. They add a famous golf name like St. Andrews to make them sound fancier than they really are. This is not the case for these clubs. I am not sure if these are the same clubs you are considering. I visited the website listed below and **I think** these clubs would be cool to play with. It was not too long ago that I swung an old fashioned wood, the kind with the metal plate on the bottom, screwed in with wood screws. It was a nice club and I hit it about as well as I hit my 5 wood. It would be classic to have a set of these. They do seem a bit pricey though.

Question 6:

Victoria Golf and Beach resort - Dominican Republic. Not sure if I can be bothered carrying them all the way over. Is the course worth it????

Answer 1:

I'm not a golf player , but have seen the golf course , **i don't know** what does and doesn't make a good golf course . however its set in lovely surroundings and there were always people playing on it . pretty sure you could hire the clubs anyway especially as now your baggage weights and hand luggage as changed ! enjoy your holiday . p.s. just mailed my Friend in Dominican republic she says yes its worth it , quite challenging , and nice club house with excellent food . hope this helps have nice time ..

Question 16:

I want to go to Alicante in June. I have never been there before and want some advice. I am going with my friend and we prefer resorts. We love to play golf, and want to try a few courses. Does anyone has a suggestion for me?

Answer 1:

I can recommend La Finca Golf & Spa resort, that is located near the coast in Algorfa, Torrevieja, Alicante. It is a 4/5 star resort, with 3 golf courses. These golf courses are owned by the hotel itself and are very beautiful. I have been there myself, and **don't know** much other good hotels. Hopefully, it is helpful, but you can have a look on their website: <http://www.lafincagolfresort.com/>

Question 28:

What is the best way fo a golf holiday package to thailand?

Answer 3:

don't know answer to your question but unlike icecube I do know that it is THE OPEN not British Open

As shown by the Q&As above, ELF speakers frequently use “I think” and “I don’t know” in their prototypical meanings and opt for formal structures.⁵² More specifically, “I think” is used to express the speakers’ subjective opinion, and “I don’t know” is used to express speakers’ insufficient knowledge about a topic of the discourse. Both markers are much more frequent in the formulation of answers than of questions and the more fluent speakers are, the more they use these situational and interactional expressions. Finally, all the general aspects discussed in this section underlie the importance of using ELF in the Q&A interactions within digital communities in a way that helps to meet the needs of individual members and the group as a whole. Indeed, it is through ELF communication that digital community’s members determine whether the potential benefit of membership is worth the cost of participation, thus becoming aware that no ELF no help.

4. The Emotional Aesthetics of Q&A Websites

In this last section, we want to demonstrate that the emotional style of a question does influence the probability of promptly obtaining a satisfying answer by investigating two main research goals: (a) how the language used in Q&As varies with respect to the communicative intention and question typology, thus making it possible to distinguish between subjective and objective statements; (b) how the effectiveness of Q&As can be associated with certain linguistic aspects, such as specific lexical items, syntactic patterns, and distinctive pragmatic expressions which convey emotions and opinions appropriately through text in order to better achieve interactional goals in Q&As.

In line with Gray et al. (2013),⁵³ language use in question-asking can be viewed as an activity meant to enact an episode of social capital conversion. Emerging from the sociological tradition but now employed by a range of disciplines, social capital theory has been used to study outcomes such as educational outcomes and civic participation, but, in this study, it refers to the benefits associated with online sharing practices which individuals resort to in order to harness the latent resources of their personal connections by asking questions and requesting other kinds of assistance. Although most of the questions may elicit answers that have the potential to be useful to the asker, not all questions are attempts to solicit actual information or action. Some may be mere attempts to initiate conversation, communicate a need for social support, or achieve other interpersonal goals. For example, Morris et al. labeled these questions as “rhetorical” and defined them as “aimed at prompting discussion rather than eliciting practical answers”.⁵⁴ More specifically, we have adapted Morris et al.’s question typology to the present study in order to identify the specific types of questions appearing in our dataset in an attempt to gain a sense of how the type of information solicited might be related to the quality of responses and relationships with responders.

Question examples were rated according to the following distribution of question categories:

⁵² See Nicole Baumgarten and Juliane House, “*I Think and I don’t know* in English as Lingua Franca and Native English Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42.5 (2010), 1184–1200.

⁵³ See Rebecca Gray et al., “Who Wants to Know?: Question-Asking and Answering Practices among Facebook Users”, *CSCW ’13*, February 23–27, 2013, San Antonio, Texas, USA, 1213–1223.

⁵⁴ Meredith R. Morris et al., “What Do People Ask Their Social Networks, and Why?: A Survey Study of Status Message Q&A Behavior,” in *Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM* (Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 2010), 1739–1748: 1743.

Question type	Number of instances (% of total ⁵⁵)	Examples from the dataset
Suggestion/Recommendation	14 (28%)	“What golf course would you recommend playing on the algarve?”
Factual knowledge	7 (14%)	“Soviva resort? Has anyone any knowledge of this resort in tunisia. Am going there in May and can’t get much info”
Social coordination/invitation	0 (0%)	0
Request/favor	22 (44%)	“Can anyone help me im looking to book a golf and im trying to find a golf resort somewhere in europe to go”
Opinion/poll	11 (22%)	“Has anyone ever stayed at the oasis golf resort in tenerife, and can you tell me what its like?”
Rhetorical	2 (4%)	“Are the Scottish happy about Donald Trump building a huge Golf Resort in Scorland?”
Non-questions	0 (0%)	0

Table 1: Distribution of questions categories from the dataset

Studying these instances in Q&A websites can offer insight into the ways digital interactions and tools are changing the fabric of everyday life for their users with respect to their communicative intentions, by helping them not only to achieve interpersonal goals but also to get things done – resolve problems, get advice, share opinions and information, learn about new opportunities, and participate in sundry other activities that help day-to-day life go more smoothly. Additionally, the focus on language use in Q&As typology is also important for investigating the emotional aesthetics underlying these small texts, thus expanding their classification and distinguishing between subjective and objective statements. Indeed, by relying on sentiment analysis – also referred to as subjectivity analysis, review mining, or appraisal extraction – we can determine the emotive quality (the sentiment) of a piece of text. Sentiment can be characterised as positive or negative evaluation expressed through language. Research on sentiment analysis⁵⁶ extracts information about informal

⁵⁵ The total of the percentages is bigger than 100% since the same question can correspond to more than one category.

⁵⁶ On these premises, we also need to mention that the state of the art of sentiment analysis has been outlined under different umbrella terms in linguistics and other social sciences. In linguistics, studies of affect (See C. Daniel Batson et al., “Differentiating Affect, Mood, and Emotion: Toward Functionally Based Conceptual Distinctions”, in Margaret. S. Clark, ed.,

texts from positive and negative words (i.e., tokens, stems, lemmata), from the context of those words, and from the linguistic structure of the text. With the worldwide diffusion of social media and digital communities, a huge amount of such textual data has been made available, thus attracting the interest of researchers in this domain and posing new challenges due to the presence of slang, misspelled words, hashtags, and links, thus inducing researchers to define novel approaches that include consideration of microlinguistic and extralinguistic features.

In particular, research in linguistics, communication, and psychology has explored, on the one hand, how we express, understand, and are affected by the expression of subjectivity or objectivity⁵⁷ in the language use of digital interactions and communities, but also how the effectiveness of Q&A can be associated with certain linguistic aspects, such as specific lexical items, syntactic patterns, and distinctive pragmatic expressions,⁵⁸ which convey emotions and opinions appropriately through text. Exploring the effectiveness of asking questions on Q&A websites, Morris et al.⁵⁹ found that characteristics of the question itself predicted the quality, quantity, and speed of responses. Crucially, a concise style of question-asking, a defined scope (or audience), and the inclusion of a question mark were associated with more and higher quality responses within shorter periods of time (26). However, only recently has research begun to investigate other linguistic factors, looking at how questions are formulated.⁶⁰ Among them, it is worth mentioning here the visible presence of lexical cues of gratitude and appreciation which make a request more likely to be successful, as the following examples from our dataset show:

Question 2:

Hi. Anyone stayed at the Oasis Golf Resort in tenerife? What's it like?? **Thanks** xx

Question 10:

Hi, I was just wondering if anyone has been to the gloria golf resort in turkey. **please** could you give your opinions/what to expect and tips for going. **please** could you also state when you went and at what time of year. **Thanks in advance!**

Question 12:

Emotion: Review of Personality and Social Psychology, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992, 294–326), subjectivity and point of view (See Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982; Ronald W. Langacker, “Subjectification”, *Cogn. Linguist.*, 1, 1990, 5–38; Elizabeth Closs Traugott, “Subjectification in Grammaticalization,” in Dieter Stein and Susan Wright, eds., *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P., 1995, 31–54; Id., “(Inter)subjectivity and (Inter)subjectification: A Reassessment,” in Kristin Davidse et al., eds., *Subjectification, Intersubjectification and Grammaticalization*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010, 29–74), evidentiality (See Alexandra Aikhenvald, *Evidentiality*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2004; Wallace Chafe and Johanna Nichols, *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986), attitudinal stance (See Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan, “Adverbial Stance Types in English”, *Discourse Process*, 11, 1988, 1–34; Id., “Styles of Stance in English”), modality (See Joan Bybee and Suzanne Fleischman, eds., *Modality in Grammar and Discourse*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1995; Frank Palmer, *Mood and Modality*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986; Paul Portner, *Modality*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2009), and appraisal (See James R. Martin and Peter R. R. White, *The Language of Evaluation*, New York: Palgrave, 2005) all aim to explain how we use language to convey emotions, evaluation, and subjectivity.

⁵⁷ See Claudia Caffi and Richard W. Janney, “Toward a Pragmatics of Emotive Communication”, in Claudia Caffi and Richard W. Janney, eds., *Involvement in Language*, special issue of *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22.3/4 (1994), 325–373; Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*.

⁵⁸ See Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan, “Styles of Stance in English”; Susan Hunston, *Corpus Approaches to Evaluation*.

⁵⁹ See Meredith R. Morris et al., “What Do People Ask Their Social Networks.

⁶⁰ See Althoff, “How to Ask a Favor”; Mitra and Gilbert, “The Language that Gets People to Give”.

My boyfriend and I and another couple are travelling to Alicante this June but we need a cheap transfer company to take us to our resort, La Finca Golf Resort in Algofa. If anyone could help that would be great. **Thanks!**

Question 19:

Has anyone stayed in the Houda beach and Golf resort in Tunisia If so I would be most grateful of any views you are willing to share. If so **I would be most grateful** of any views you are willing to share.

Question 27:

Hi ive been looking for honeymoon places and a person told me that sandles was brilliant and I have just had s look and it does look beautiful. Does anyone know around houw much it cost or has anyone been before/ **Thanks for you help.**

As theorised by Althoff et al.,⁶¹ expressing gratitude in a question has been found to positively correlate with the success of the request because it can be seen as a sign of positive disposition and politeness towards the future answerer. In order to measure the sentiment load of a text, that is, the overall positive/negative polarity of a text as well as the sentiment strength, we can look not only for affective lexicon in the body of questions, answers, and comments, but also for such morphosyntactic patterns as the use of first-person pronouns and their related possessive adjectives; the use of second-person pronouns and their related possessive adjectives, and the use of modal verbs. Crucially, the research goal here is to show how these three categories appear in the dataset as specific pragmatic features of Q&A interactions engendering positive or negative emotions in order to better achieve the users' communicative goals. Specifically, in line with some influential studies in pragmatics and applied linguistics,⁶² it is known that pronouns establish a relationship between the sender and the addressee. In particular, first-person singular pronouns and adjectives (*I, me, my*) may indicate a sort of closing down behaviour, whereas first-person plural forms (*we, us, our*) create a sense of solidarity and social identity. On the other hand, second-person forms (*you, your*) may suggest a social distance. From these general assumptions, we can infer that the pragmalinguistic category of personal pronouns and adjectives implicitly reinforces or weakens the speaker's illocutionary strength. In the specific case of this research, the semantic analysis solicited by the questions in which first-person pronouns and adjectives occur shows an increase in the addressee's negative emotional response, as in the following excerpts:

Question 8:

hi **me** and **my** friends were lookin for a good way to end out time at school next year and were thinking of goin abroad to an irish golf club can anyone reccomend a resort in ireland which is quite cheap bt stil has a good golfcourse aswell as good facilities :D

Answer 1:

Doesn't exist mane! You can't put cheap and good Irish resort in the same sentence. If you want to play over there, you're going to have to ante up!

Answer 2:

A cheap golf course. I am mystified. I don't think they exist, certainly not in Ireland, where everything is expensive.

Answer 3:

⁶¹ See Althoff, "How to Ask a Favor".

⁶² Moira Burke et al., "Introductions and Questions: Rhetorical Strategies That Elicit Response in Online Communities," in Charles Steinfield et al., eds., *Communities and Technologies* (London: Springer, 2007), 21–39.

yes - no such thing and even the expensive ones are crap and they won't let you on the signature courses in case you hurt them.\$1000 for a fourball per round

Question 9:

BallyKisteen Hotel and Golf Resort?

has anyone been to this hotel? because...i have stayed in it, the staff was absolutely fantastic! They were always cleaning up or checking up on people to make sure they were okay. i was reading the reviews and such on them and people were saying it was horrible "the worst hotel I've ever stayed in" I have to strongly disagree.

There was one staff member in particular his name was Thomas...wish I knew his last name :/ so I could tell the front desk that he was lovely and very helpful. The food was delicious, absolutely fantastic!!

The rooms were clean and big and had everything you needed basically. (I stayed in one of the apartments)

I just wanted your feedback.

Answer 1:

No, I have never stayed there. You said:"how could i own it and not know who my workers are?" thats every hotel owneri think you own it.. You said:"how could i own it and not know who my workers are?"

Answer 2:

Honestly, I live 2 minutes up the road from it and I never have heard any bad feedback from it. I have used the public swimming pool and gym there many times and I agree that the staff there are really nice and down-to-earth. It seems really nice from the outside and a lot of my male friends are actually members of the golf course there. My manager got married there recently and he told me he had a wonderful time and the reception was excellent. Its nice to see that you had a great stay so I'd recommend that you put your feedback up at some Irish hotel website. I know that they would appreciate that back at the hotel :)

Answer 3:

I haven't been, I'm quite jealous it sounds wonderful. You should email the Hotel Manager and let them know what a fantastic time you had, people are quick to complain but you should give credit where credit is due. Just mention "Thomas" there can't be that many helpful people called Thomas working there, I'm sure they will know who he is. I'm not going on holiday this year we've had a green house instead, sighs

Answer 4:

There is no pleasing some people. I have looked at the reviews in Tripadvisor and in general, it appears to have pleased most people. I can see why you are annoyed, having had such a good time yourself. Why don't you e mail them and let them know about your satisfaction and give Thomas a mention.

Answer 5:

Do you own the place? Edit: It could be part of your cunning plan to get some free publicity for the hotel ;-)

Moreover, an emotional negative answer is usually made more explicit by such specific linguistic strategies as the use of negatives ("Doesn't exist mane!"; "You can't put cheap and good Irish resort in the same sentence. If you want to play over there, you're going to have to ante up!"; "No, I have never stayed there") reinforced by graphic devices (i.e., exclamation marks, ellipsis points) and emotional negative markers like some adjectives ("I am mystified"; "There is no pleasing some people"; "I can see why you are annoyed"; "It could be part of your cunning plan to get some free

publicity for the hotel ;- ”) or adverbs also known as *flow shifters* (e.g., *however, but*). In order to investigate the emotional charge of a statement, the variation in the use of subject and object personal pronouns and adjectives can contribute to accounting for the existence of possible relations between linguistic forms and contents, the elicited emotions, and the number of solicited answers within the communicative context of contemporary digital communities.

Differently, the use of second-personal pronouns and their related possessive adjectives in the questions tends to increase the (positive and negative) emotional content of the sentiment in their respective answers, but without influencing their polarity or increasing their number, as shown by the following excerpts:

Question 10:

Hi, I was just wondering if anyone has been to the gloria golf resort in turkey. please could **you** give your opinions/what to expect and tips for going. please could **you** also state when **you** went and at what time of year. Thanks in advance!

Answer 1:

its a great hotel very luxury and theres everything for everyone. i went there and am going again tomorrow ...best food best sea best everything

Answer 2:

It is one of the best resort hotels in Turkey. As a matter of fact all the hotels in Belek are good. Famous people from all around the world, like Maria Sharapova chooses Antalya Belek for their holiday destination. So you are lucky :)

Question 15:

What are the best things to see and/do in the resort of Golf de Sur in Tenerife? Also are there any recommended restaurants, shops, attractions, beaches e.t.c. that **you** can tell me about?

Answer 1:

fabulous resort ,mainly golf,plenty of very good restaurants and tapas bars ,the square in the centre has every kind of shops and bars,you are only ten minutes by taxi from the airport and another ten minutes to all the night life you could ever want ,higher a car,,enjoy !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Answer 2:

Check out the link below for different views and experiences....

Answer 3:

Have a look through these lot.

We may assume that this result is a direct implication of the experiential value that the pronoun “*you*” conveys when formulating the question. This is also confirmed by the high degree of sentiment which is present in the answer. By feeling particularly solicited and honored for sharing his/her own experiences concerning specific places or luxury golf resorts, the “*you*”/the addressee resorts to a narration marked by a sequence of highly emotional adjectives (“*its a great hotel very luxury*”; “*fabulous resort, plenty of very good restaurants*”). All these features are used to encourage the questioner to trust the expert addressee, to repeat the successful experience (“*best food best sea best everything*”, “*enjoy !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*”) or to avoid it if the expectation was frustrated.

Drawing on the framework of mitigation,⁶³ the present research also reveals that an increase in the use of modals in questions can engender an increase in the number of answers (positive or negative) and can serve as mitigators/a mitigation function in the specialised domain of golf as a luxury sport.

⁶³ Claudia Caffi, “On Mitigation”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31 (1999), 881–909; Id., *Mitigation* (Amsterdam and Tokyo: Elsevier, 2007).

As the following excerpts from the dataset show, the use of modals in asking questions and giving answers can be considered a mitigating strategy since they generally indicate prediction (*predictive modals: shall/will, would*), possibility (*possibility modals: can; may, might, could*), or necessity (*necessity modals: ought, should, must, need*), as well as introduce a polite request with a degree of certainty which varies according to the interlocutor's reply (Leech 1983, 71).

Question^[SEP]1:

What golf course **would** you recommend playing on the Algarve? There will be 3 of us, handicaps between 14 and 18...

Answer^[SEP]1:

You'll find everything you **need** to know here. Just click on one of the venues and it **will** list all the courses local to it. You **may** want to consider Italy or Czech Republic in the future. Unheralded world class golf but with better scenery and nightlife. But I **shouldn't** be telling you about the latter, it's a secret! Enjoy Portugal

Question 34:

I am looking at buying a 5 day Disney ticket. My dad and brother **wouldnt** be interested in going to the parks but **would** like the golf. If myself and mam got 5 day tickets **would** my dad and brother be able to use the same tickets for golf? I heard the parks check the tickets by finger prints, is this true, and **would** it be the same for the golf?

Answer 1:

If you want to access the golf course, make sure you add the "Water Park Fun & More Option." Base ticket alone will only give you access to one Theme Park. Here's what Disney states: "Include the Water Park Fun & More Option* to enjoy admission to other exciting attractions at the Walt Disney World® Resort: Select from two fabulous Water Parks, DisneyQuest® Indoor Interactive Theme Park, Disney's Wide World of Sports® Complex or a round of golf at Disney's Oak Trail Golf Course, a relaxed, nine-hole walking course designed for the entire family." Same tickets for different persons? Bad news: no you can't. Once the tickets have been used for entry into the park, they are non-transferable; they can only be used by the original person. You're right about the finger scan. It measures the length and gaps between your fingers. If the tickets are used, the scan won't match up to the original ticket holder. As a result, your ticket will get rejected. Good news: you can transfer them as long as the tickets have not been used before.

Answer 2:

Disney's Oak Trail Golf Course is a beautiful 9-hole course with rolling greens and exciting challenges. Certified by Audubon International as a Cooperative Wildlife Sanctuary, Disney's Oak Trail Golf Course lets you test your skills with holes ranging from 132 to 517 yards from the white tees; holes 5, 6 and 7 are routed around a deep canal and a picturesque pond. Operated by Arnold Palmer Golf Management and featuring junior tees for younger golfers, this walking course is fun for the whole family.

Answer 3:

No you can't sorry but you can buy separate tickets for the Golf Courses. It would be best to stay on Disney property to take advantage of discounts on both tickets, transportation, and golfing. 5 day Magic Your Way ticket for two people is \$485.64 (lol...if you're wondering...you probably already know that)

Answer 4:

If they want to play any serious golf, that will have to be booked separately. It cannot be added to your park ticket. There is only one mild 9-hole course that can be an option on your ticket. Yes, park tickets are checked, and two people cannot share a ticket.

Answer 5:

At Fantasia Fairways the fellow made turf has been flattened down. The ball will in simple terms roll throughout which makes aiming pictures pointless. Scoring would be pointless additionally that would upset aggressive kinds. Your superb shot at a hollow in a single is with the Earl's French Dip into the au jus. Earl is humorous at lunch while Disney casting shows up they appear like Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*. At night go turn on the tennis court lights nextdoor that are on a timer. Disney might have blacklight tennis like blacklight bowling yet which would be imagineering. Is it halftime in u . s . or the Eiger Sanction?

In the excerpts selected here, as well as in many others collected in the corpus, the use of modals implies a variation not only of the certainty degree, but also of the degrees concerning affectivity, politeness, and proximity, since they seem to create a sense of solidarity and expectation among the users while discussing some topics which can be controversial or can divide the users' opinions.⁶⁴

The investigation into the use and the functioning of personal pronouns and adjectives, as well as modals, has contributed to determining which communicative practices and pragmalinguistic strategies are enabled—more or less consciously—by the speakers when the latter formulate questions to ask for specific advice (*altruistic requests*) in specialised domains like golf. Among them, we have also detected additional pragmalinguistic devices which make English as a Lingua Franca in the digital community of golf a creative language characterised by these distinctive features: negotiation, mediation, accommodation strategies between the sender and the addressee/the questioner and the answerer; use of story-telling structure in answers; and evidentiality. They all will constitute the object of our future investigation.

5. Conclusions

This study has attempted to provide a discussion of informal text-based computer-mediated communication like Q&A websites conceived of as a distinctive medium of communication based on cosmopolitan *brand communities* that share the same field of expertise and a common interest in a particular topic. Focusing on the premise that the majority of online communities are text-based, an analysis of the concept of genre related to the particular environment of CMC has been provided to demonstrate the potential dynamism of these digital communities in terms of language use, discursive resources, and narrative practices. This analysis has led to the emergence of a new textual aesthetics characterised by distinctive textual features and conventions which help to attract the attention of an audience and index some type of connection or interaction within digital communities.

As a result, the genre of Q&A websites can be understood as a system of interrelated and interdependent communicative genres founded upon norms of everyday interaction adapted to the online setting and upon a multilayered shared repertoire comprising both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. As suggested by the discussion offered in this study, a relevant role within this community's "shared repertoire" is played by the use of English as a Lingua Franca which helps digital interlocutors successfully engage in their interactional and interpretive work in order to sustain the appearance of normality.⁶⁵ ELF is used by vibrant virtual communities of online users not only to introduce, present, and connect themselves on different social networking sites, but also to negotiate and adapt their knowledge and resources to their communicative interactions. All this has inevitably entailed a consideration of the way ELF is used for communication, particularly in online experiences, as an

⁶⁴ See Milica Savic, "Politeness through the Prism of Requests, Apologies and Refusals", in Id., ed., *Politeness through the Prism of Requests, Apologies and Refusals: A Case of Advanced Serbian EFL Learners* (NewCastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁶⁵ See Cogo and House, "The pragmatics of ELF," in Jenkins, *Handbook of English*, 211.

ideal setting to observe the situational characteristics of digital interactions in terms of discourse markers and pragmalinguistic features.

To this end, the research approach adopted has been predominantly qualitative because of the lack of consolidated investigations into the pragmatic niceties of the interactional and networked textual fabric of Q&A websites. By reporting the results of an empirical study involving the Yahoo! Answers website related to golf, our study has attempted to provide evidence that pragmatic competence is necessary if one wants to communicate effectively in a language, since words in use can only be understood in terms of what we do with them. This includes mastering certain linguistic strategies such as the use of specific lexical items, syntactic patterns, and distinctive pragmatic expressions which may reveal that more effective questions can make people more willing to help. Among them, we have briefly discussed how the high presence of lexical cues of gratitude and appreciation, as well as the pragmatic categories of personal pronouns and adjectives, as well as modal verbs, work at many levels and on many dimensions in emotive terms by engendering great impact on the quality and on the success of questions and answers. As it stands here, pragmatics has offered the theoretical space where psychological, sociological, and (micro-)linguistic dimensions can be integrated, thus proving the empirical reasons which explain why Q&A websites have gradually become one of the major sources of information today, surpassing corporate websites in terms of influence on purchasing decisions.