Abstract

Based on a corpus of internet discussions on medical topics, this study examines the social dimension of the genre, focusing particularly on the strategies through which a distinct ingroup community is created and maintained. Drawing on concepts of face and relational work, the analysis shows how participants typically position themselves as holders of shared ingroup values, altercast their opponents as members of an outgroup, and enact recurring patterns of interaction indicating the existence of a distinct and coherent community of practice. The study then examines the main relational work strategies through which ingroup members establish, maintain and strengthen social bonds within the online community.

Key words

altercasting, computer-mediated communication, discourse community, face, facework, ingroup, online discussions, rapport management, relational work, verbal antagonism

1 Introduction

As a new and still developing genre of computer-mediated communication, internet discussion forums have attracted considerable attention from linguists in recent years, with approaches ranging from conversation analysis to interpersonal pragmatics. Most studies of online discussions have tended to focus either on the individual dimension of the interaction (analyzing dyadic exchanges between individual participants) or on its polylogic dimension (exploring how multi-party conversations emerge and develop). However, researchers have recently begun to examine the social dimension of online discussions – the ways in which polylogic interaction leads to the formation of discourse communities, and the ways in which these communities are shaped and maintained (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010, Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2011, Perelmutter 2013, Upadhyay 2010). It is this social dimension of the genre that I explore in the present paper.

This paper reports the results of a qualitative corpus-based study of internet discussions on topics related to one specific field (medical science and health). The paper is divided into three main sections (numbered 2–4). In Section 2, I present the corpus and briefly situate it within its communicative context, placing particular emphasis on the social dimension of the interaction (the existence