BLOGS: A RESOURCE OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS TO DEVELOP STANCE-TAKING

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ABSTRACT

Blogs, which are shared online journals that can be written and read by anyone with a computer and an internet connection and allow users to reflect, share opinions and discuss various topics, would seem to develop the possibilities for engagement in public discussions. Certainly, blogs are full of the kind of vocabulary that suggests intense discussion. However, a closer look at the way this vocabulary is used in context suggests that the main concern of writers is self-presentation, positioning themselves in a crowded forum, in what has been called stance-taking. When writers mark their stances, for instance by saying I believe, they signal a relation to others. This is a way of presenting one’s own contribution to a position. The purpose of this study would be the identification of stance-taking. The focus of the study, therefore, would be on those relatively frequent words that mark stance and on the analysis of these markers in context.

Keywords: blogs, stance, public sphere

Introduction

Blogs are the hottest growing medium of communication for businesses and individuals. Based on Technorati research (blog search engine), there are almost 3 million blogs created every month, and bloggers create over 1.6 million posts per day, or over 18 updates a second! Due of the interactive nature and ability for readers to write their reactions and comments, blogs offers a solid platform for writer and readers to interact and develop a mutual understanding of the opinions of the either party. This allows managers in organizations to get a closer look at what their employees feel or for companies to understand what their customers think of their products.

Taking a look at different weblogs, therefore, shows that they are replacing the one-to-many voice of a mass medium with many voices. In other words, since blogs can be considered as sites where users produce as well as consume the content, they have been the focus of a great deal of attention from critical discourse studies. In this regard, it is important to refer to Mills (1956) who introduces the idea of a public.
As He says:

In a public, as we may understand the term, 1) virtually as many people express opinions as receive them. (2) Public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion (3) readily finds an outlet in effective action, even against – if necessary – the prevailing system of authority. And (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is more or less autonomous in its operations (Mills, 1956, pp. 303-4, cited in Biber, 2006)

It can be understood that blogs certainly allow as many people to express opinions as receive them, and almost anyone with an internet connection to read a blog could also write one( Myer, 2009). Therefore, they meet criterion 1. And most blogs make it easy to answer back by posting comments (criterion 2). They also seem to fit some of the demands for a public sphere (see also Fairclough, 2000, cited in Chandrasegaran; Wodak & Wright, 2006).

One of the problems of blogging is the way discussion takes place. Though anyone can express an opinion, a few famous blogs get most of the attention. One factor is the perceived need in the blogosphere to present oneself as an individual with entitlement to an opinion. The bloggers and commenters on blogs, in my sample are constantly concerned with self-presentation and emphasis on individual voice.

Biber (2006) argues that over the last several years, linguists have become increasingly interested in the linguistic mechanisms used by speakers and writers to convey their personal feelings and assessments. Such investigations have been carried out under several different labels, including ‘evaluation’ (Hunston, 1994; Hunston & Thompson, 2000), ‘intensity’ (Labov, 1984), ‘affect’ (Ochs, 1989), ‘evidentiality’ (Chafe, 1986), ‘hedging’ (Hyland, 1996 b), and ‘stance’ (Barton, 1993; Biber & Finegan 1988, 1989; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999).

In this piece, I would like to look in detail at the act of marking that a statement in a blog or comment is an individual perspective. The linguistic features that are particularly focus of attention in this project are those used in stance-taking (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Clift, 2006; DuBois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009). Here is one influential definition of the term stance:

Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects, and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimensions of the sociocultural field (DuBois 2007, pp. 220, cited in Rayson, 2008).
Chandrasegaran and Kong (2006) define the term *stance* as the point of view or position that a writer takes on an issue.

This broad term covers a range of linguistic features that have long been studied separately, such as modality, evaluation, evidentiality, hedging, politeness, or metadiscourse (Crismore, 1990). The advantage of taking them together, following DuBois's definition, is that stance-taking focuses our attention of the 'public act' of taking a point of view rather than on one or another specific grammatical or discourse form. So stance-taking does not just involve having an opinion on a topic; it involves using that opinion to align with or disalign with someone else. This project begins with particular linguistic items, such as cognitive verbs and a specific use of adverbs that stand out in my corpus.

**Data and Methods**

Bloggers argue about many issues, but I have focused here on discussions of what could be considered public issues. I have broadened the discussion to include the on-line comments as well as the original posts. Though the bloggers get the attention, public discussion in the blogosphere is as much in the comments as in the blogs. And comments on the more popular blogs give a wider range of participation than do blogs themselves; anyone can post, and their words will be seen by a much larger number of readers than they would be if each commenter just posted them on their own (mostly ignored) blog. I have chosen three blogs that are current and popular and have many comments:

- **BoingBoing** ([http://www.boingboing.com](http://www.boingboing.com))

  Technorati measures the most popular blogs by counting the unique links in the last six months. Using this standard, the technology oriented weblog BoingBoing.net is currently one of the most popular blog.

- **Alliterative** ([http://alliterative.org](http://alliterative.org))

  English professors have a philosophical approach to both literature and life. This academic blog has several writers, and considerable readers.

- **Details of a global brain** ([http://wrede.interfacedesign.org](http://wrede.interfacedesign.org))

  Professor Oliver Wrede, interactive media designer, offers personal and professional insights on this blog. Wrede currently resides on Cologne, Germany.

In all these three blogs, the bloggers post daily and many commenters respond within that day, sometimes writing about the original entry, sometimes about other blogs, and sometimes with no discernable relevance to anything. For each blog, I started on the same day (4 January 2011) and collected posts and comments until I had more than 1000 words of that blog. Blogs can be seen as a community of practice (Barton & Tusting, 2005). In other words, contributors learn the norms of the community before posting a topic for discussion. So the discussions often have a kind of controlled interplay, even when there...
are fierce and even rude disagreements, and those norms affect the prevailing styles of stance-taking.

I started my analysis with stance markers that occur in the list of keywords. The individual keywords are the basis of this project, but keywords do not tell the whole story, because these words can have several different uses besides stance taking; there are indeed no words or word classes that function solely to mark stance. So the next stage is to take each word marked as a keyword that could be a stance marker. *I think*, for instance, can be used in ways that mark stance:

**I think** this is not a suitable way to motivate learners to take part in class discussions (Taken from *Alliterative*).

This usage marks stance because it is presented as the point of view of the writer. But *I think* can also be used in ways that do not mark stance:

**I think** about the role of literature in our modern life a lot. (Taken from *Details of global brain*)

This is not stance, because *think* here is used in the sense of having something on one's mind. Hence it seems impossible to understand when someone is taking a stance. But stance-taking is, as DuBois reminds us, a public act, not a private cognitive state (DuBois, 2007), so there is evidence in the text of what is being signalled and, often, of how the readers interpret those signals in context.

### Results and Discussion

I focused on the specific words bloggers use to indicate they are taking a stance in a discussion, especially cognitive verbs, stance adverbs, and conversational particles, because they can tell us what sort of discussion these writers signal that they are entering.

**Cognitive verbs**

Perhaps the clearest way to mark that a stance is a stance is with a verb of cognition (*I think*), affect (*I feel*), or appearance (*it seems*), followed by a clause complement (Rayson, 2008).

**I guess** he intends that we do not demotivate learners in this way. (Taken from *Details of a global brain*)

The underlined part is a statement about the world. 'I guess' marks a stance, and shows something the writer is not entirely certain about.

It should be mentioned that some cognitive verbs are much more common in the sample of blogs. *Realize*, for instance, occurs frequently in the corpus, so it is listed as a key word. Another verb that is most salient, both in terms of frequency and in terms of keyness, is *think*. But as it was noted above, *think* is used in many kinds of discourse acts, and not all these occurrences mark stance. Therefore, we should be careful in distinguishing stance-taking from other uses. Table 1 shows how stance making occurs alongside other uses.
Table 1.

Frequency and percent of the use of cognitive verb “think” in one blog.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stance-taking</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other uses</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirteen of the twenty five instances shown in this figure are straightforwardly marking the writer’s stance:

I don’t think all these resources would be helpful (Taken from Alliterative).

Four of the instances attribute a stance to someone else:

They think they know what the world is like (Taken from Alliterative).

And eight are not, by the definition used here, marking stance at all; they are describing or demanding an act of cognition:

Think before you make any comments (Taken from BoingBoing).

This proportion is typical of the list as a whole; that is, more than half of the uses of cognitive verbs are marking the stance of the writer or attributing a stance to someone else.

But what are bloggers and commenters doing by marking stance? As one might expect, some uses soften advice or disagreement:

Sometimes I think a huge part of literature is learning to live with feeling. (Taken from Alliterative).

Peter, I think the point isn’t that the curiosity itself is everything. (Taken from BoingBoing)

In the first example, a commenter says that this view is one she has, and frames it with a cognitive verb so that the general advice is just her opinion. In the second example, I think suggests a clarification, with the implicit suggestion that Peter, another commenter, has missed the point of the post.

There are many other verbs to express cognitive processes, but variations like I guess and I believe tend to be used more frequently across the corpus.

Conclusion 1: Cognitive verbs are used mainly to signal a relation to another person or persons.

Stance Adverbs
It is worth noting that many of the keywords can function as boosters: totally, really, definitely, absolutely, and completely. Hyland (2004) defines boosters as devices which express certainty. One might expect that boosters are used in the polemical atmosphere of blog discussions, as in this post:

I would really, really like to see how you prove it. (Taken from Details of a global brain)

But these adverbs have other functions besides boosting. They can be used in one-word phrases, usually before a comma, full stop, or question mark, to suggest a skeptical response to something said earlier (Jaffe, 2009):

For example, can anyone follow these steps and be successful?!!

Of course. Really. (Taken from Alliterative)

Here the commenter responds 'of course'. The 'Really' marks this response as a stance. This kind of response to others accounts for frequent use of really with a question mark, to express doubt or surprise about what was just said:

Really? Name one of those great resources you know. (Taken from Details of a global brain)

One particularly over-used adverb, actually, nearly always functions to position a statement as a contrast to some other statement or expectation, particularly when it occurs at the beginning of the sentence (and the comment):

Actually, I have to disagree. This could be pretty useful. (Taken from Alliterative)

In the example above, the commenter is marking a contrast with what was said in an earlier post. The contrastive use of actually is a useful device in rhetoric of blog commenters. Like I think, it is apparently and conventionally polite, mitigating possible disagreement. But it also implies the groundlessness of the view to which one is responding. The contrast suggests that what one as to say is worth attention, because one is adding something new and unexpected to the discussion.

Conclusion 2: Adverbs, especially when used at the beginning of a comment, can signal a contrastive relation to previous comments.

Conversational particles

It is often observed that various on-line genres use features more associated with speech than writing (Crystal, 2006). But this does not mean that bloggers and others are just following the conventions of an on-line register. They could be choosing features appropriate to the interpersonal rhetoric of this genre, and thus using features that are also more likely to be associated with face-to-face communication. The bloggers are not trying
to imitate the sound of speech, but use, for instance, *I think* for the interpersonal functions it often has in speech (Myer, 2009).

While blogs are not necessarily like conversation, one set of keywords clearly is drawn from the conversational register: the use of particles such as *ok, hey, oh,* and in particular blogs *wow* and *uhh.* Take a look at the examples below:

**Hey,** have you ever heard of Johan Sebastian? (Taken from *BoingBoing*)

*“Oh, fuzzy*" is not racism. (Taken from *Details of a global brain*)

These uses are stance-markers in that they shift the voice from that of the writer as principal to that of a particular or person in a conversational setting. Most often conversational particles are used to mark a response to another comment. They come first in the sentence, in the same position as most cognitive verbs and most adverbs, signaling that there is a stance coming even before we know what it is a stance on.

**uhm;** we know. (Taken from *BoingBoing*)

The *uhm* suggests an oral response to that person that starts with the kind of pause one makes before (Rayson, 2008). On the other hand sometimes the commenter is talking to all other readers about a previous comment, but the *um* also suggests a hesitation, and thus potential disagreement with a previous turn or comment. A particle can also suggest surprise (ibid):

*Yes, we were improving after the recession and about to hit another recession, but it still wasn’t great. Huh? We weren’t improving “after the recession.”* (Taken from *BoingBoing*)

**Conclusion 3:** Conversational particles can be used to enact disagreement (even disagreement with oneself) by showing hesitation, surprise, or self-interruption as if played out in real-time interaction.

**Conclusion**

Blogs broaden the terrain of public discussion, potentially allowing anyone with an internet connection to speak to a wider audience, while previously this audience could only be reached by the owners and employees of mass media outlets. And they introduce two ways of communication, from commenter back to blogger, and from blogger linking to blogger, where before the recipient of a mass media message could only write to the editor, or a Member of Congress or other authority (Thelen, 1996). What was perhaps not so well understood, in the early years of enthusiasm for blogs, is how crowded this terrain could become. Bloggers have to compete for any kind of attention, because there are so many other bloggers. Bloggers spend a great deal of rhetorical effort on placing themselves in relation to other bloggers and other possible posts, aligning themselves with some while signaling their own distinctiveness from all. Analysis of some of the most salient keywords in the corpus of blogs shows some of the processes at work in stance-taking:
✓ Conclusion 1: Cognitive verbs are used mainly to signal a relation to another person or persons.
✓ Conclusion 2: Adverbs, especially when used at the beginning of a comment, can signal a contrastive relation to previous comments.
✓ Conclusion 3: Conversational particles can be used to enact disagreement (even disagreement with oneself) by showing hesitation, surprise, or self-interruption as if played out in real-time interaction.

One problem with regard to blogging is that blogs quickly slip from the shared argument to saying 'I'm here'. That assertion can itself be a political act, for instance when the blogger is criticizing an authoritarian regime, or bringing to public notice the views of a marginalized group or a buried topic (Jaffe, 2009). And the personalization does bring down to earth, and to everyday lives, some of the issues that in the mass media may become abstract and formulaic. But the reminder that 'I'm here' does not lead by itself to exploration of differences, critique of accepted ideas, or broadening the range of voices any one citizen encounters. It has often been noted that the self-reinforcing links in blogs lead readers into narrower and narrower views in the great public issues (Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006). The emphasis on stance-taking could be similarly limiting, because of its focus on the rhetoric of placing oneself in the field. Argument gives way to a kind of social networking.

References


