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The rhetoric of online support groups: A sociopragmatic analysis English-Spanish

Abstract

The study draws on a diverse sample of adult users of online support groups to investigate how men and women engage in written conversations, and how these interactions are carried out in English and in Spanish contrastively. We will see to what extent female and male communicators in online support groups display similar power behaviours since some authors believe that these fora seem to provide a context where factors such as power and status are neutralised. In general, the detailed quantitative analysis suggests that women use powerless markers far more frequently than men. Therefore the findings support the contention that gender-based differences persist on the Internet, an arena which was initially believed to be free of built-in bias. On the other hand, the inter- and cross-cultural comparison indicates that the discourse practices in English include more powerless markers than those in Spanish. Interestingly, the abundant use of occurrences of formal addresses and polite forms displayed by men in Spanish may suggest that, in online support groups, men may be adopting communicative strategies traditionally associated with women's discourse.

Keywords: Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), gender studies, sociopragmatics, powerful/powerless language.

Resumen

El estudio se basa en una muestra diversa de usuarios adultos de grupos de ayuda online que sirve de base para investigar cómo hombres y mujeres entablan conversaciones escritas, y cómo estas interacciones se llevan a cabo en español e inglés contrastivamente. Veremos en qué medida las comunicaciones de hombres y mujeres presentan estrategias de poder similares, dado que algunos autores afirman que estos foros ofrecen un contexto en el que factores como el estatus y el poder están neutralizados. El análisis cuantitativo detallado del corpus sugiere que, en general, las mujeres usan estos marcadores de atenuación de poder mucho más frecuentemente que los hombres. Así pues, los resultados darían pie a afirmar que las diferencias de género existen en la comunicación por Internet, un campo que inicialmente estaba considerado libre de prejuicios de sexo. Por otra parte, el análisis intercultural indica que las prácticas discursivas en inglés incluyen más marcadores de atenuación que en español. Resultado sorprendente es el hecho de que en español los hombres utilizan muchos marcadores de cortesía, lo que podría indicar que hay ciertos indicios de que los hombres adoptan estrategias de comunicación tradicionalmente femeninas en grupos online de ayuda.

Palabras clave: comunicación electrónica, grupos de ayuda, sociopragmática, atenuadores discursivos, estudios de género.

1. INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, the relationship between power and gender has been analysed in great depth over the last 30 years. Lakoff (1995) suggested that women speak ‘women’s language’, a language variety that has some specific characteristics. A few years later, this women’s language was renamed ‘powerless language’ since, in O’Barr’s and Atkins’ (1980) opinion, it is not determined by gender but by the social status of the user. In their view, women frequently tend to occupy low social positions in society and therefore they frequently use powerless language. This initial research gave rise to a range of studies that have demonstrated the importance of powerless markers as a pragmatic resource. However, we still know little about how they function or are typically realised in specific Computer-mediated Communication (CMC henceforth); even less has been said about powerless language in Spanish CMC. Many studies on pragmatic markers have been about English or in English. Authors like Mendiluce Cabrera and Hernández Bartolomé (2005) have identified a need to carrying out contrastive studies as not many empirical studies on hedging in written Spanish or English-Spanish have been published to date¹. These articles have mainly approached specific academic contexts such as architecture or biomedical research (see three recent approaches in: Mendiluce Cabrera & Hernández Bartolomé, 2005; Poveda Cabanes, 2007). These examples confirm that cross-cultural variation in the power variable in non-mediated written discourse has received some attention; nevertheless, it has received very little consideration in CMC contexts, hence the relevance of the research published in this article.

When Internet studies were in their infancy, the press and some scholars welcomed the Information Age as an ideal arena free of built-in bias (Carstarphen & Lambiase, 1998;

¹ For empirical studies on powerless markers in conversational Spanish see the publications of the research group Val.Es.Co (e.g., Briz & Albelda, 2013).

Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan & Crawford, 2007). Research on this so called “barrier-free terrain” has revealed that far from being an ultimate egalitarian gathering place, the Internet emulates “the power structures and hierarchies of the dominant discourse of the outernet” (Carstarphen & Lambiase, 1998: 121) in terms of race, gender or class.

With regards to gender, in spite of the potential of the medium to neutralise gender differences, online communication research has emphasised that the relation between gender and power is similar to that found in other communication modes. For example, Carstarphen and Lambiase (1998) contended that the rhetoric of cyberspace reflects a male-dominated sphere (see other more recent studies such as, Sussman & Tyson, 2000; Herring & Stoerger, 2014).

In this field, the study of the discourse practices of online support groups is especially relevant with regard to the social power variable. This is scholarly significant since online support groups are fora where social power and status are believed to be neutralised (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Hence, the research value of observing language use in contexts where the power variable is thought not to be at play.

The purpose of this study is twofold. On the one hand, we will see to what extent men and women differ in their language use in online support groups, a specific context where factors like power and status are neutralised according to Barak et al. (2008). To this end, we will draw on the parameters established in O’Barr’s and Atkins’ (1980) seminal study on women’s language or powerless language and on other recent, meaningful research in the field. Within the framework of intercultural rhetoric, cross-cultural research or contrastive rhetoric (Connor et al., 2008), this study will also focus on cross-cultural conventions of use in online support groups in order to observe the effect of culture on textual constructions in English and Peninsular Spanish. The need to carry out studies on

inter- and cross-cultural variation in CMC contexts has been highlighted by researchers such as Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013); whereas the need to fill the research gap in the area of gender and online discourse has been posited by academics like Bou-Franch (2013).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Powerless language*

Sociopragmatics, the social dimension of pragmatics, studies the values of social power, social distance, and degree of imposition, and their role in the selection of politeness strategies in different cultures. As Blum-Kulka (1997: 53) suggests, social variables may affect “not only the choice of politeness strategies, but also the sequential structure of the discourse”. One social variable that has received a great deal of attention is power. Specifically, much research has been dedicated to social power language contexts, such as the courtroom, where the language style may vary according to the social power of speakers (e.g., O’Barr, 1982).

Social power and gender have been analysed in depth over the last three decades. Past research has consistently revealed that “gender differences in communication are mediated by power and status” (Sussman & Tyson, 2000: 391). Most of the studies on language and gender have stemmed from the seminal book by Lakoff (1975), who claimed that women’s speech varies significantly from men’s and forms what she called women’s language. O’Barr and Atkins (1980) selected some of the features which Lakoff said are present in women’s language in order to evaluate if these features occurred frequently in women’s speech in contexts such as the courtroom. The features examined were the following:

- 1) Hedges
- 2) (Super)polite forms
- 3) Tag questions
- 4) Speaking in italics (intonational emphasis)
- 5) Empty adjectives
- 6) Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation
- 7) Lack of sense of humour
- 8) Direct quotation
- 9) Special lexicon
- 10) Question intonation in declarative contexts

Their empirical study on language and social power in the courtroom concluded that powerless markers were indeed used by women in court, but also by men. They posited that, although women tended to include them more frequently, as they are more likely to occupy powerless social positions, the use of these features could result more from their social powerlessness than their gender, since women in higher social positions presented relatively low numbers of the characteristics described by Lakoff (1975). In contrast, since men tend to occupy higher social positions than women in society, they have a greater preference for the powerful language style. Consequently, what Lakoff originally termed women's language was renamed by O'Barr and Atkins (1980) as powerless language, a denomination related to the population who use these features rather than to the gender of the speaker. The implication that the use of powerless language parallels an inferior social situation, whether by women or men, was one of their main conclusions. Two decades later, in a revisited edition of Lakoff's book, however, it is claimed that power is the fundamental

issue, gender and power are indeed inseparable concepts (Bucholtz, 2004). Other recent further empirical studies on Lakoff's (1975) characteristics of women's language view it in a more positive light. Women's language is not a speech style that always denotes weakness but rather a supportive, collaborative and emphatic speech style; hence, the distinction between cooperative women and competitive men, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) contend.

In general, powerless style consists in the use of what Fraser (1980) calls mitigating devices such as indirectness, distancing techniques or disclaimers. Scholars have identified some linguistic markers characterizing powerless style. The relative absence of these markers will indicate a powerful style, which is more direct, categorical and assertive. For this study, a selection of the most signifying powerless markers defined by O'Barr and Atkins (1980), Ng and Bradac (1993), Bucholtz (2004) and Fragale (2006) has resulted in the following list of linguistic markers used to characterise powerless styles:

- 1) Hedges or validity qualifiers (sort of; kind of); words that "make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1972: 195). For example: It's only me; just me; I sort of did.
- 2) Tag questions (isn't it?); a usual resource to bring the hearer into the discussion (Coates, 1988), and ask for his/her opinion.
- 3) Inessential intensifiers. For example: really happy; so beautiful.
- 4) Formal addresses and polite forms (yes, sir; thank you very much); strategies which imply the use of good manners or etiquette.

- 5) Distancing techniques (e.g. passive instead of active, as in the example: I was given the opportunity to carry out that task) suppress the direct involvement of an agent in an action (Chafe, 1982).
- 6) Disclaimers (if I'm not wrong; I hate to do this; I am not an expert, but...) are used to limit the certainty of a statement.
- 7) Parenthetical verbs (I guess/suppose/reckon/think/believe/know); linguistic markers that indicate the speaker's commitment to the proposition expressed, a category first defined by Urmson (1952).
- 8) Personalised epistemic modals (it seems to me; it looks like; it looks as if) are used as a rhetorical technique to convey personal evaluation and to render the utterance less threatening.
- 9) Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation, that is, the use of formal and prestige language varieties; for instance, a higher level of politeness is expected from inferiors to superiors as contended in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013).
- 10) In addition to these markers, this contrastive analysis necessitates the inclusion of diminutives, a distinctive attenuator in Spanish, in accordance with Albelda and Cestero (2011) and Briz (2012).

Other powerless markers such as hesitations and word repetitions have been discarded since they rarely occur in written discourse.

Fraser (2010) includes some of these categories in what he calls “English hedges”. Functions such as politeness, indetermination, indirectness, vagueness, and modality are

closely related to hedging. Hence, the various names scholars have given to this rhetorical mitigating strategy: adaptors, attenuators, deintensifiers, diminishers, down-toners or minimizers (Fraser, 2010). For the purpose of this study, we distinguish between the 10 linguistic markers described above. The cover term powerless markers will be used throughout this research, as there is not a clear-cut list of hedges and a generic hedging term for these markers has yet to be unanimously adopted by scholars. Another important consideration is that these linguistic markers should only be studied from a pragmatic point of view and considered in the context in which they are produced, as recommended by Mendiluce Cabrera and Hernández Bartolomé (2005). Likewise, Lakoff (2004) pointed out that the micro context of the occurrences analysed are of crucial importance since, for instance, not all the uses of hedges can be considered as a sign of submissive behaviour, there are “legitimate” cases of hedges like in the case of uncertainty and in the case of mitigation of possible unfriendliness. These are the powerless markers analysed, however, we agree with Albelda and Cestero (2011) that this list can never be a closed paradigm since languages are continuously finding new mechanism to attenuate.

A final remark must be made concerning the role of powerless pragmatic markers in cross-cultural pragmatics. Cultures vary greatly in their interactional styles. Concerning this, García Vizcaíno (1988) posited that in societies in which men and women play different roles, this difference is clearly reflected on the way they use and interpret the language. Studies on cultural variation have underlined that in Mediterranean cultures request acts are more direct, although not necessarily impolite (Blum-Kulka, 1997). This may have a clear effect on non-natives’ speech acts, especially in requests, which may be straightforward, assertive, categorical and display a substantial lack of powerless style; this is a kind of speech that may sound impolite to native speakers of English (Pérez-Sabater

and Montero-Fleta, 2014). In this regard, Briz (2012) concludes that the social and cultural code of politeness in Spanish does not coincide with that of other languages like English since speakers of Peninsular Spanish generally tend to reduce the social gap between interlocutors and there is a substantial lack of powerless style in their discourse practices (see also Albelda, 2004; Haverkate, 2004). This statement needs to be nuanced slightly since the frequency of powerless markers in Spanish off-line discourse practices may vary depending on certain variables. Briz (2012) contends that sociological variables such as gender, age and educational factors have an influence on the number of attenuators employed: for example, people over 55 and women use more powerless language than young people.

2.2. Online support groups

The aim of support groups is to provide comfort to participants and make them feel better. They may operate without a leader or manager because they are mainly based on the premise that people who share similar problems can understand each other better than those who do not “and offer mutual emotional and pragmatic support” (Barak et al., 2008: 1868). Specifically, online support groups offer specific added value: anonymity and invisibility. Anonymity allows participants to feel less vulnerable and to open up more easily because what they say in the forum stays in the forum; it cannot be linked to the rest of their lives. Meanwhile invisibility further disinhibits participant behaviour because posters do not have to worry about how they look or sound, especially in groups that address physical or speech problems, as Barak et al. (2008) indicated. Interestingly, in the opinion of Davison et al. (2000), online support groups are a milieu where potent social factors are neutralised. Among these factors, power and status are particularly relevant because in these fora, “ ...

everyone, regardless of status, wealth, race, or gender, starts off on a level playing field” (Barak et al., 2008: 1872). Therefore, these online support groups could be the perfect arena to observe the use of power in language since participants do not experience the trappings of status and power.

Linguistically, these fora have some common and relevant characteristics. Among these we should highlight the fact that participants must use less complex language to increase the likelihood of receiving a response. According to Arguello, Butler, Joyce, Kraut, Ling, Rosé, and Wang (2006), receiving a response is a crucial factor in determining the engagement of participants in Internet support groups in online communities. The importance of using less complex sentences means that participants should avoid writing long posts and long sentences. Another interesting factor is the important role of word choice in this online genre, since words clearly reflect the writer’s attitudes towards the online community. For instance, first person pronouns like ‘we’ and ‘us’ express solidarity with the group, while third person pronouns may distinguish between in-group and out-group participation (Arguello et al., 2006).

Receiving a response has other interesting implications. Arguello et al. (2006) suggest that it enhances community membership, an important factor in health support groups because newcomers are more likely to engage in the online community if their questions are answered. To receive a response, members include testimonials or requests, self-references with first person pronouns, descriptions of cognitive states and processes, and expressions of positive or negative emotions (Arguello et al., 2006). These rhetorical strategies may serve to allow users to benefit from and contribute to online communities.

Regarding the comparison of online support groups for men and women, academics have consistently analysed interactions in support groups for cancer. For instance, in their

literature review of online health-related support groups, Mo, Malik, and Coulson (2009) found that there were sex differences in males' and females' only online support groups, whereas in mixed-gender communities, these differences were not so evident. They found that females generally prefer support groups that discuss emotional issues while males prefer information oriented support groups. Seale, Ziebland, and Charteris-Black (2006) discovered that there is evidence of gender differences in language use in online support groups. In their findings, women in breast cancer communities used more words associated with support, feelings, people and superlative forms that indicate greater emotional expressivity. By contrast, men's keywords in prostate cancer support groups denoted awareness, information and choice, they used more words concerning the disease and its progression.

In spite of the studies already carried out, Mo et al. (2009) urge the need to systematically analyse more online support groups in order to develop effective online support group interventions, in their case, by health care professionals. On the other hand, there is hardly any systematic research published about online research group interactions in Spanish or in the field of contrastive studies English-Spanish, hence the need to fill in this research gap in.

3. AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

As we have seen above, most research on gender difference in online support groups has examined communities for breast and prostate cancer. As a novelty, the research undertaken examines a corpus of electronic fora devoted to menopause and erectile

dysfunction problems, online support groups for physical changes and sufferings that are closely interconnected with gender and sexuality. In this article, we will investigate to what extent there are differences between genders in their use of power in language; in other words, whether men and women employ similar or dissimilar speech patterns in online support groups for gender-related issues. In the case of women-only contexts, such as menopause support groups, women may experience a greater degree of comfort and their discourse may lack powerless markers since power communication constraints may not be in effect. These results will be compared with those obtained in men-only contexts such as support groups for erectile dysfunction. The features of powerless language outlined above are the 10 parameters used to examine these interactions.

Alongside the study of the perceived differences between sexes, we will conduct a comparative examination of the use of these speech style markers in English and Spanish. This inter- and cross-cultural research on the role of powerless discourse markers is carried out to “describe ways in which written texts operate in large cultural contexts” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 179).

4. METHOD

4.1. *Corpus studied*

The corpus will be analysed following the Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach described by Herring (2004). Therefore, this CMDA’s main issue is power, along with other issues such as contrastive English-Spanish analysis. The phenomena are the linguistic expressions of low status, which are examined by means of a

quantitative method of research together with some detailed descriptions of exemplary texts.

With regard to the sample examined, it is necessary to note that it was very difficult to select fora because only those that were dynamic, with highly active and recent interaction, and also serious, in other words, with no hidden commercial purposes, were considered to be of scholarly interest. Another problem was that the Spanish National Health system does not host any platform like the British National Health System (NHS), thus we had to find comparable fora hosted by institutional, professional websites with similar aims to the fora in English. Moreover, for ethical reasons, only those fora which are publicly displayed were selected. Further considerations were that these fora had to be hosted on websites with links to other communication platforms such as Facebook and Twitter since future research may involve messages posted on these platforms.

4.1.1. Corpora in English

A) Corpus by men:

- 1) 8,000 words posted to a forum hosted by the NHS on erectile dysfunction. In this forum, men can share their worries and support is provided either by other participants or by medical staff: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/erectile-dysfunction/pages/introduction.aspx>

B) Corpus by women:

- 1) 8,000 words from a formal forum hosted by the NHS on menopause that tries to help women cope with it. On this website, women can express their worries by leaving a comment which can be answered by a professional or by any participant in the thread: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause>.

4.1.2. Corpora in Spanish

Some previous considerations need to be addressed concerning the formation of the corpus in Spanish. Only comments posted by writers using Peninsular Spanish were downloaded. The inclusion of different varieties of Spanish would mean that additional variables would have to be included in the study, especially the geographical variation in social deixis in Latin America.

A) Corpus by men:

- 1) 8,000 words from comments posted to an online help website that deals with sexual problems. It has several threads where participants can ask for the help of a professional on different topics. This website provides free online help or face-to-face professional advice in their clinic:
http://www.consultasexologo.com/asesoramiento_gratuito.

B) Corpus by women:

- 1) 8,000 words from comments posted to the Spanish Association for the Study of Menopause, a non-profit organization of professionals whose members work in different specialist areas such as gynaecology, rheumatology, endocrinology, primary attention and nursing. It was founded by doctors in order to study the menopause. It includes several tools such as Twitter, Facebook and an online forum where doctors answer questions posed by women:
<http://www.aeem.es/responde.asp>

The rules or conventions of use of both groups of corpora are similar: they are based on official institutions where advice from a professional is the principal objective of participating in the thread. In all the groups, the webmaster, administrator or moderators have an active presence, supervising the fair exchange of messages and removing any offensive content.

Finally, some further considerations should be detailed. First, the sample includes no more than 1 comment from the same participant in order to provide a wider representation of the population interacting online. Also, the selection criteria did not consider whether the posters were newcomers to the thread or not, since it is sometimes difficult to tell.

Table 1 summarises the corpus analysed:

	English	Spanish
Erectile dysfunction	NHS	Consultas sexólogo
Menopause	NHS	Asociación menopausia

Table 1: Corpus analysed

4.2. Procedure

Public commentaries posted in the four fora described above were downloaded. Then a balanced number of words were randomly selected from each corpus with the aim of obtaining as many full samples as possible. The dataset size is 32,000 words, 16,000 in English and 16,000 in Spanish.

To establish reliability, two raters independently coded each corpus according to the parameters chosen, considering the pragmatics of the context where they are produced, since, for example, hedging is achieved through context according to Markkanen and Schröder (1997). After reading and coding the corpus, agreement had to be reached on some points, specifically in coding intensifiers, a powerless marker which is not uniformly perceived as powerless; in some contexts they may even imply certainty or control and have powerful connotations (Parton et al., 2002). Thus, a narrower list of inessential intensifiers conveying powerlessness was agreed on and the rating was carried out again. At

the end of the process, the reliability value was $r = 97$ (Pearson r). When the coding task was completed, another reliability test was carried out. This involved native speakers of English and Spanish who graded and checked the power relations implied in some posts. Their grading did not differ significantly from that of the first raters'.

The results are shown in the next section as follows: adopting Hasselgreen's (2004) method of quantitative analysis, the frequencies of the variables coded manually were converted into the proportion of occurrence per 1,000 words of written text, shown in Tables 2 and 3. In this respect, it is important to say that, although some of the features do not occur as single words, this method is adopted because they occur comparably in English and in Spanish, that is, "thank you" and "muchas gracias" are both expressed with two words in these languages. Some examples will give broader empirical support to this quantitative analysis and to the conclusions reached.

5. RESULTS

The results show some revealing differences between the groups that form the corpus. On the one hand, the comparison between men and women suggests that, in general, women use more powerless markers than men. On the other hand, the comparison between languages indicates that the use of powerless markers is much lower in Spanish in all the groups. These data are compiled in Tables 2 and 3.

	English	Spanish
	NHS	Consultas sexólogo
Parameters		
Hedges	15	7
Tag questions	0	0

Inessential intensifiers	4	0
Formal addresses and polite forms	2	7
Passive voice	0	3
Disclaimers	0	0
Parenthetical verbs	4	3
Personalised epistemic modals	0	0
Hypercorrect grammar and punctuation	0	0
Diminutives	1	1

Table 3: Markers per 1,000 words in men's fora

Parameters	English	Spanish
	NHS	Asociación menopausia
Hedges	22	13
Tag questions	0	0
Inessential intensifiers	6	6
Formal addresses and polite forms	4	8
Passive voice	3	5
Disclaimers	0	0
Parenthetical verbs	5	3
Personalised epistemic modals	1	0
Hypercorrect grammar and punctuation	0	1
Diminutives	1	2

Table 4: Markers per 1,000 words in women's fora

Before we discuss these results and compare them with other studies in the field, some relevant examples are given in order to demonstrate the most interesting characteristics of each forum. Excerpts from forum interactions are reproduced exactly as they appeared on screen, including any grammatical or orthographical errors. In each example, the powerless markers are highlighted in bold. The examples in Spanish are

translated into English but the powerless markers are in bold in the original Spanish comment.

5.1. *Hedges*

This analysis demonstrates that the English speakers in these fora hedge more than Spanish speakers: the number of hedges per 1,000 words in English is nearly twice the number used in Spanish. Moreover, it is important to highlight the fact that women hedge much more than men in the groups studied.

Examples of hedging are as follows:

In men's fora:

- (1) "I **just** need to know **if** there is anything that can be done to help" NHS.
- (2) "I also realise that I have **probably** not handled it in the best way, **though** I still feel pretty helpless and frustrated at it all **I guess**" NHS.
- (3) "...**unas** 12-16 pastillas me habré tomado en año y pico. Esto me ha ido bien **casi** siempre (**mas o menos** mejora siempre la erección)" [I may have taken around 12-16 pills in a year and a bit. This has nearly always been fine (it always improves my erection more or less)] *Consultas sexólogo*.

In women's fora:

- (4) "Hi I'm new to this site today - **just** wanted to ask **if** anyone else..." NHS.
- (5) "**If** all our friends **were** going through it too, they'd be more understanding, we'd be able to support each other - **even probably** have a laugh about it over a coffee..they **wouldn't** think I'm an unhinged wreck who's **actually** not worth the effort anymore 😊." NHS.

(7) “Hola, tengo 37 años y hace unos cuantos meses (**cosa de** 10) que no veo la regla” [Hi, I am 37 and I haven’t had a period for several months (sort of 10 months)] *Asociación menopausia*.

5.2. Inessential intensifiers

While the absence of intensifiers in men’s fora in Spanish is significant, in the women’s fora the findings show that the different corpora present practically the same level of frequency. These are some of the most significant examples:

In men’s fora:

(8) “It **very** nearly paralised me” *NHS*.

(9) “I still feel **pretty** helpless” *NHS*.

In women’s fora:

(10) “I also find myself feeling **very** down and flat even though I have no reason to be” *NHS*.

(11) “...ya que siempre me ha hecho ilusión el haber tenido **algun** hijo” [since, I have always hoped I had a child] *Asociación menopausia*.

5.3. Formal address and polite forms

The findings demonstrate that women in English are more polite than men and that Spanish speakers use this rhetorical strategy more than the English participants. One salient feature is the frequent use of thank you farewells in Spanish by both genders. In the English fora, conversely, comments are only finished with a thank you farewell occasionally.

Examples of these rhetorical strategies are:

In men’s fora:

(12) “Saludos y **mil gracias**” [Greetings and thanks a million] *Consultas sexólogo*.

- (13) “...si **puediera ayudarme, le estaría agradecido”** [if you could help me I would be very grateful] *Consultas sexólogo.*

In women’s fora:

- (14) “...please help with you replies **thank you”** *NHS.*
- (15) “So much for sisterhood!” *NHS.*
- (16) “**Mil gracias de todo corazón”** [My most sincere thanks] *Asociación menopausia.*

5.4. *Passive voice*

The use of the passive voice is more common in Spanish since the reflexive passive is the normal verb construction when the subject is not semantically relevant:

- (17) “Hola tengo 37 años y hace poco se **me ha detectado** menopausia precoz” [Hello I am 37 and I was recently diagnosed with early menopause] *Asociación menopausia.*

5.5. *Parenthetical verbs*

As for these verbs, their use is more common in women’s fora, particularly in the informal fora, both in English and in Spanish.

In men’s fora:

- (18) “I **believe** my testosterone has risen into the normal range” *NHS.*
- (19) “No **sé qué hacer”** [I don’t know what to do] *Consultas sexólogo.*

In women’s fora:

- (20) “I **know** I do a good job!” *NHS.*
- (21) “I **don’t know** if they think that about me, but I **think** that they think that” *NHS.*

(22) “...**se** que mi vida sexual va a cambiar irremediablemente” [I know that my sexual life is going to change inevitably] *Asociación menopausia*.

5.6. Diminutives

Their use is very scarce in the corpus with a similar number of occurrences in all the groups.

In men's fora:

(23) “I feel “**less** of a man”” *NHS*.

(24) “Tengo un **problemilla** a la hora de tener relaciones con mi pareja” [I have a little problem when I have sex with my partner] *Consultas sexólogo*.

In women's fora:

(25) “Hi there. I'm just thinking about setting up a **little** group for us poor ladies going through premature menopause” *NHS*.

6. DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results in detail, it is necessary to comment upon a very interesting fact drawn by the results: the fact that four of the categories are simply not used in the communities studied, tag questions, disclaimers, personalized epistemic modals, hypercorrect grammar and punctuation. These mitigating devices are not deployed at all or in remarkably few cases, which is a surprising fact because, for instance, the lack of tag questions seems contradictory to the cultural practice of the online support groups in which responses and inclusion is valued highly. Alongside tag questions, the scarce use of hypercorrect grammar and punctuation is unexpected because the fora under study are particularly more formal than other online interactions due to their institutional and

professional scope. The absence of hypercorrect grammar and punctuation will corroborate traditional CMC claims about the pervasive informal style of online communication (Yus, 2011; Pérez-Sabater, 2011, among others). Further studies on the use of these devices like, for example, tag questions, would be needed to provide more revealing data on this issue.

In general, the findings indicate that in comparable, specific online contexts, where power and status are believed to be neutralised, women and men have not exhibited a similar speech style. Unlike Barak et al.'s (2008) view, in these fora, women and men do not start off on a level playing field. The results show that women's discourse practices exhibit far more powerless markers than men's in all the groups studied despite the suggested capacity of online support groups to neutralise power and status.

The findings support the premise outlined by Guiller and Durnbell (2006). In their study of educational discussion groups, they found that women posted messages that were more attenuated and contained more intensifiers than men's postings, they made emotional and more personal contributions to the group; males, on the other hand were more likely to use authoritative language and to respond negatively in interactions, than women. These finding are in accordance with those obtained by Sussman and Tyson (2000) who suggested that gender differences and power displays in online communication persist and are similar to other communication modes; in other words, they reflect an androcentric means of representing reality. This androcentric perspective is observed in today's online interactions in spite of the fact that, in the second half of the twentieth century, the crisis of patriarchy postulated by Hobsbawm (1994) brought into play a change of strategy, and so a change of social practices, among which we can set changes in discourse practices. Yet, research on power and communication in general has consistently posited that social power is reflected in men's language as a function of their dominance in our patriarchal system (see Sussman

and Tyson for a detailed overview). Similar conclusions have been drawn in non-Anglophone contexts. Briz (2012), for example, concludes that, in spoken Spanish, educated women and women above 55 attenuate their discourse more than men, especially young men, which is in line with the significant difference found between the genders in the online fora studied.

Regarding the inter- and cross-cultural comparison between English and Spanish use of powerless markers, the findings are in accordance with the fact that speakers from Mediterranean cultures do not resort to these rhetorical strategies as frequently as English speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1997). English writers online hedge more than Spanish speakers to lessen the power involved in their discourse, as another study carried out by the author demonstrates (Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). A possible explanation for this phenomenon is suggested by Briz (2012) who explains that Peninsular Spanish speakers tend to create relations of proximity and solidarity by reducing the social gap among interactants. In his view, a culture of proximity or one that usually tries to build this proximity promotes a less frequent use of powerless markers since nobody, in principle, is socially menaced. The inferior number of powerless markers in the discursive practices in Spanish does not imply, however, that Spanish writers online are regarded as impolite by the other participants because politeness is expressed more frequently than in English by means of formal addresses such as the formal you and very formal salutations and greetings. In general, women actually thank more than men in all the fora studied, a result that has been consistently drawn by studies on gender and language (see, for example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013), although in the Spanish fora analysed, this difference is not significant. Besides, in Spanish, it is particularly interesting to note that some thank you farewells written by men give more strength to the polite farewell and follow what we

could dare term “a very feminine” style using “gracias mil” [thanks a million or thanks ever so much]. This is only a personal opinion that needs to be studied further in other contexts since there has been no research carried out on the frequent use of this politeness strategy in women’ discourse in Spanish. This may lend weight to the hypothesis that there are sociopragmatic variations according to the language used. The differences observed by academia in the linguistic style of the interactions written by men and women in English commented above seem somehow blurred in these fora in Spanish, at least as far as politeness strategies are concerned.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This empirical piece of research has attempted to respond to the call, within the field of CMC, for socioculturally sensitive studies within a multilingual Internet, following the line of thought of Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013). While no attempt can be made to generalise findings from one case study, the results drawn seem to contradict those yielded by O’Barr and Atkins (1980), who suggested that powerless language was not dependent on the gender of the population who used powerless speech style markers but on the social situation of the subjects. In the empirical research carried out, both groups of subjects, men and women, suffer from similar health problems and are in need of advice and comfort. However, despite this similarity, the use of powerless markers by women is much more frequent than in men’s comments. Thus, in this corpus, the use of powerless language appears to be clearly related to the sex of the forum participants. The findings, therefore, support the contention that gender-based differences persist online, in an arena which was initially thought to be free of such built-in bias. Despite this, certain phenomena have surfaced in the study that had not been foreseen: the fact that in Spanish some men

adopt a more feminine style than expected, for example, in the use of polite forms. These results need to be contrasted with further examples to be able to fully understand how men and women interact in online support communities in Spanish.

On balance, as a final conclusion, the results emphasize that what Lakoff (1975) initially called women's language and O'Barr and Atkins termed powerless language could be viewed as a supportive, collaborative and emphatic speech style (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). In fact, this is what users of online support groups demand from their online communities. In these specific communities of practice, women undoubtedly make more use of this language, whether we call it powerless, supportive, or collaborative, than their male counterparts.

Further empirical studies into online support groups composed of men and women may shed some light on the role of powerful/powerless language in the group context, and whether it functions differently in these mixed gender groups to how it functions in segregated online groups, since some scholars have emphasised the fact that the gender of the partner is a crucial factor in determining the communicator's style among online participants (see, for example, Fox et al., 2007). Additional studies may involve the analysis of the other channels provided by the websites such as blogs, Facebook or Twitter. It could be interesting to distinguish between newcomers to the thread and experienced users, a distinction of crucial interest to Arguello et al. (2006). Again, the inclusion of online communication produced by members of non-Anglophone fora may bring new and interesting results to the study of Internet discourse practices.

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