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"We are all in this together" – Balancing Virtual Proximity and Distance in Online Care Partner Discussions

1. Introduction

Text-based online communication has often been attested a 'speech-like' character (Danet 2010, 146) which manifests in communicative constellations and linguistic features typically associated with private, spontaneous face-to-face conversations and the semiotic compensation of kinesic and paralinguistic cues (cf. Androutsopoulos 2011, 149). Crystal's famous term 'Netspeak' (2001; 2006) foregrounds this idea of 'conceptual orality' (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985; 1985/2012). While the notion of Netspeak was criticized for implying the existence of a distinct, homogeneous language variety (e.g. Dürscheid 2004), research of the early 2000s already indicated that 'speech-like' and 'writing-like uses' of language in digital communication have to be conceived of as scalar phenomena (Danet 2001, 16; see also Crystal 2001, 42f.) and are clearly not just technologically determined (cf. Androutsopoulos 2011, 146). Meanwhile, studies on a range of social media contexts have further contributed to a more differentiated picture (e.g. Hoffmann 2012; Sindoni 2013; and the contributions in Bublitz and Hoffmann 2017).

Viewing digital environments as social spaces which give rise to particular communicative practices, we aim to show that next to mode- or genre-specific variation, we need to consider potentially different user orientations as interactive phenomena in their local discourse contexts (see also Androutsopoulos 2007, 80, 91). For that purpose, we have investigated data from the discussion forum of a Facebook support group for care partners¹ of people living with dementia of the Alzheimer type (PWD). This study asserts that even on one particular social media platform, within one sociotechnical mode and one particular virtual community of practice (CofP), users' linguistic choices vary in the act of balancing virtual proximity and distance.

This paper starts out from a definition of the core concepts (section 2), followed by a description of the methods and data of the study (section 3). The realizations of the three dimensions of virtual proximity and distance in the corpus will be presented in more detail in section 4, before we focus on the linguistic dimension in section 5. Section 6 will explore the interplay of linguistic patterns of immediacy/distance with the other two dimensions in the complex communicative practices of balancing virtual proximity and distance, and section 7 will round off our discussion.

1 While *caregiver* and *carer* are still more widespread terms, we prefer to use the term *care partner*, as it emphasises the dyadic nature and acknowledges the active role of PWD in this relationship (cf. Bennet et al. 2017 and Wray's discussion of the terms, 2020, 269).

2. Defining the Core Notions: Virtual Proximity and Distance

Our core notion of 'virtual proximity' and its scalar counterpoint 'virtual distance'² are conceptualized as multidimensional constructs, drawing on Koch and Oesterreicher's (1985/2012) seminal work, which is described in detail in Buschfeld and Leuckert's introduction to this special issue, and the enriched communicative models based on their approach.

Koch and Oesterreicher's two-dimensional model was extended to a three-dimensional framework by Landert and Jucker (2011, 1427). They systematically distinguished characteristics of the communicative situation (here: accessibility, i.e. publicness/non-publicness), content-related aspects (private/non-private contents), and linguistic realization (language of immediacy/distance), which were originally conceptualized together in Koch and Oesterreicher's notions of conceptual orality and literacy (1985, 23; 1985/2012, 450).

Landert (2014; 2017) then further adapted this three-dimensional framework. Her model replaced the axis of accessibility, first by a scale capturing different degrees of involvement (2014, 29-30, in a study on online news), and later by a scale capturing different degrees of interaction, accounting for participation practices in social media and turning the framework into a three-dimensional model of involvement (2017, 45). It is this latter version which proves particularly useful for our purposes and informs our conceptualization of virtual proximity/distance. Thus, we consider virtual proximity/distance as being shaped by the degree of actual user interaction, the (non-)private contents of posts, and features of linguistic immediacy/distance in the users' contributions. Adapting Landert's coordinate system (2017, 45), Figure 1 visualizes these components in the three-dimensional space of a cube, with Dimension 1 (interactivity) on the horizontal axis (grey), Dimension 2 (language) on the vertical axis (orange), and Dimension 3 (content) pointing towards the observer on the z-axis (blue).

Prototypically, cases with the highest degree of virtual proximity would be located in the bottom left front corner, where the poles of high interactivity, language of immediacy and most private contents meet. In contrast, the virtually distant cases featuring a low degree of interaction, language of distance and non-private contents would be found in the top right back corner. In section 4, these dimensions are outlined in more detail with regard to the dataset and in section 6, the interplay of the dimensions will be illustrated by selected examples.

2 The term 'virtual proximity' has originally been used in the field of management studies as relating "to the level of emotional closeness between individuals, as developed through the use of information and communications technologies" (Coughlan 2014, 17). In the same contexts, 'virtual distance' has been problematized as a sense of psychological detachment in remote team work resulting from the physical and emotional separation in IT-based interaction (Sobel Lojeski and Reilly 2008, 10).

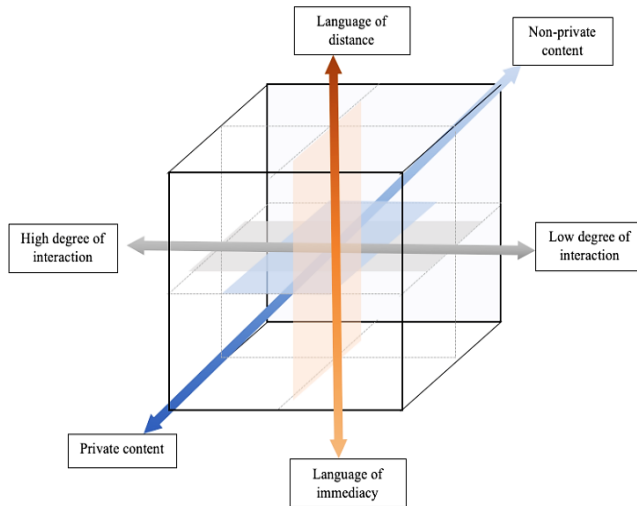


Figure 1: The three dimensions of virtual proximity and distance (based on Landert 2017, 45)

3. Methods and Data

This study is based on a dataset of 16 threads which are part of a larger corpus of Facebook posts and their respective comments discussing aspects of language and interaction under the conditions of dementia.³ This subcorpus comprises a total of 443 contributions and 13,798 words. For quantitative and qualitative analyses, the data were fed into MaxQDA⁴ and coded partly automatically and partly manually. Manual tagging of functional categories was first performed individually by both researchers, borderline cases were then discussed and categorized jointly. Detailed, illustrated lists of the features of linguistic immediacy/distance considered can be found in section 5.1.

3.1 Data Compilation

The compilation of our dataset was directed by careful considerations of the complex ethical challenges of social media research, adopting a case-based, context-sensitive approach (cf. e.g. Eysenbach and Till 2001; Giaxoglou 2017; Kantanen and Manninen 2016; Mackenzie 2017; Page et al. 2014, ch.4; Rosenberg 2010).

That, in the digital sphere, the boundaries between public and private are blurred is widely acknowledged (see Bös and Kleinke 2017 for a comprehensive discussion). In the case of our dataset, the Facebook group in question requires registration. We identified ourselves as researchers when registering and were given consent to join the

3 An overview of the threads, their thematic foci, the number of comments and participants is provided in appendix A.

4 The analysis makes use of the lemmata list originally provided by Michal Boleslav *Měchura* <<http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl/1.0/>> [accessed 4 May 2021].

group by the moderators, yet did not engage in interaction with the group members. As the group has a high number of members (28,578 at the time of data collection⁵), it might potentially be perceived as less private than a small group (cf. Eysenbach and Till 2001, 1104). Indeed, it can be considered a 'space of sociality,' i.e. one of the hybrid spaces in social media, which are "neither conventionally public nor entirely private" (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011, 75).

As this is an online support group for care partners of PWD centered around the challenges of dealing with the effects of a severe disease, there is a certain degree of vulnerability which needs to be accounted for to prevent potential harm for the users and also the other parties referred to (cf. Eysenbach and Till 2001, 1105; Mackenzie 2017, 294). While the users widely discussed activities of daily living, care concerns, and also issues of caregiver fatigue and burnout, we decided to focus on 'language' as a keyword, selecting threads where participants focussed on issues of language change and communicative practices in the context of dementia. User information was protected by pseudonymizing and removing time stamps, references to location, and the technical devices used.

3.2 Characteristics of the Dataset

The construction of virtual proximity and distance in our dataset is influenced by various technological and situational factors (cf. e.g. Biber and Conrad 2019; Herring 2007). General characteristics of Facebook as a social networking site have been described in many publications (cf. e.g. Eisenlauer 2017; Pérez Sabater 2012; Yus 2011 for pragmatic perspectives). Here, we will focus on those aspects that are particularly relevant with regard to the notions of orality and literacy central to this volume.

One of the significant technological framing conditions of the communicative space under investigation is the asynchronicity of the system (Eisenlauer 2017, 228; Herring 2007, 13f.). The "trans-spatial and trans-temporal possibilities" of the platform (Yus 2011, 29), i.e. that participants do not have to be at one particular place or logged in at the same time, can be considered a major advantage of such online support groups, as users can join and contribute to the discussions whenever their time as (often full-time) care partners of PWD allows. However, it is not uncommon for the peer-to-peer interactions to take place in a quasi-synchronous format (cf. Dürscheid 2003; Jucker and Dürscheid 2012, 43), generating a constellation of copresence prototypical of the communicative conditions of immediacy (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 23; 1985/2012, 450, see also Androutsopoulos 2007, 88).

Another important aspect relates to the 'channels of communication' (Herring 2007, 15). As quite typical of social network sites in general (Eisenlauer 2017, 229), multimodal production is possible and very common in the group examined. In this paper, we focus mainly on the (medially) written contributions, which are frequently

5 The dataset was compiled in spring 2018, before the European Data Protection Regulation was set in place on 25 May 2018.

combined with emojis⁶, a semiotic resource of increasing complexity that plays a vital role in the construction of virtual proximity. Further multimodal elements that are not considered here (but would certainly deserve further attention) are images, videos, and links to external sources.

Turning to the participants themselves, the uniting element of this support group is that its members are care partners of PWD, usually relatives, though there are also some professional caregivers and a few users who identified as PWD. We argue that shared experiences and knowledge, common goals, and regular participation tie the members of this support group together as a virtual CofP where specific linguistic practices emerge and are negotiated (cf. e.g. Eckert 2006; Kosonen 2009, 144f.; Leuckert and Leuckert 2020; Rheingold 1993; Yus 2011, 26ff.). This is also made explicit in some comments by the group members (cf. example (1)).

(1) P19/R12: We are all together in this journey. We may be strangers and will never meet but we all go through the same daily heartache. We are only a hug away.

Asynchronous virtual communities with a persistence of transcript (Herring 2007, 15) such as the one investigated here "build up an archive of interactions and hence an increasingly complex form of community where stronger communal ties can be fostered" and can be considered as "rhetorical entities [...] whose collective meaning arises from an experience and history constructed from the users' contributions" (Yus 2011, 28). As our corpus illustrates, shared sense making in this virtual CofP is realized via intertwined practices such as storytelling, giving advice, commiserating, providing support, and negotiating offline and online coping strategies which help care partners to deal with the challenges of interacting with PWD.

4. The Three Dimensions of Virtual Proximity and Distance in the Corpus

As pointed out in section 2, virtual proximity and distance are defined here as three-dimensional constructs based on Landert's model of involvement (2017, 45), covering interactive patterns, content- and language-related aspects, which – as we will show below – are closely intertwined.

4.1 Dimension 1: Degree of User Interaction

Dimension 1 relates to the user interaction in the group. Generally, social media offer a great potential for participation and interaction (Hoffmann 2017, 2; Landert 2017, 31). Given the socio-technical affordances outlined above, the social media environment investigated here clearly encourages interactivity, and uptake expectations (Jucker and Dürscheid 2012, 47) can be considered as comparatively high in this horizontal peer communication format (cf. Landert 2017, 38f.). This is also indicated in users' comments such as example (2), where the choice of the verb "listen" evokes associations with face-to-face conversations, i.e. a communicative setting prototypically located at the highly interactive pole of the continuum.

6 In our analysis, we only considered emojis embedded in user comments, neglecting the pre-set reaction emojis on Facebook which can be activated as one-click options.

(2) P3/R9: [...] Hang in there and stay with us, we will always listen and try to help.

The threads in our dataset display varying degrees and patterns of interactivity, as illustrated by the two sample threads represented in Figures 2 and 3. These figures visualize hierarchical structures and reactive patterns, as, for example, indexed by referring to and addressing fellow users (in some threads even within the same comment, e.g. P20/R2: "I agree with P20/R1, [...] and yes P20 [...]").

Thread 19 in Figure 2 displays a rather flat hierarchy. The interaction takes place exclusively between the user who started the thread (P19) and the various commenters who all relate to this initial post. The number of individual contributions (provided in brackets next to the user's pseudonym) gives evidence of the active role of P19, who contributed more than one-third of the comments (16). This is symbolized by the larger blue circle representing P19. The interactions between users are shown by lines of varying width, which indicate the frequency of contacts (complemented by the numbers next to the lines). Figure 2 thus visualizes the focal role of P19 and the lack of interaction between the other participants in this particular thread.

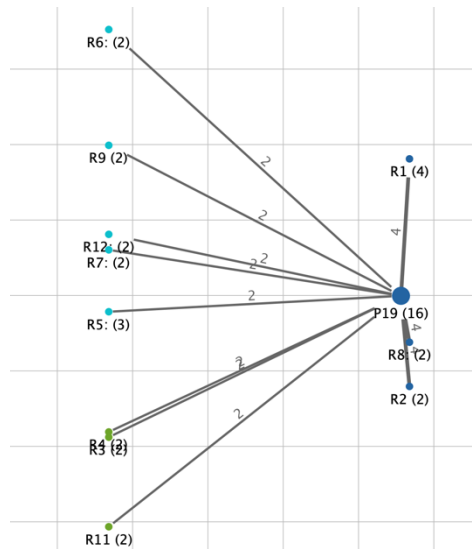


Figure 2: Interactivity pattern of thread 19 (total no. of contributions: 46, participants: 13)

In contrast, thread 23 in Figure 3 displays a much denser and more multiplex interactivity pattern. Again, P23 who started the thread and contributed 11 comments in total is certainly a central user, as indicated by the bigger green circle. However, P23's share is substantially lower than in the case of the key user in thread 19, and there are further participants (e.g. R40, R41) with a comparatively high input.

Figure 3 also demonstrates the high interactivity among the 49 participants of the thread, which contains several branches and levels of sub-comments, and it displays various interactivity clusters. Due to the basic temporal constellation, which is

asynchronous, but offers potential for quasi-synchronous exchange, these clusters tend to evolve at different points in the thread. Users frequently focus on the comments most recently published (and shown on top of the user's display) and engage in quasi-synchronous interaction (see clusters with users represented by circles of similar colours).

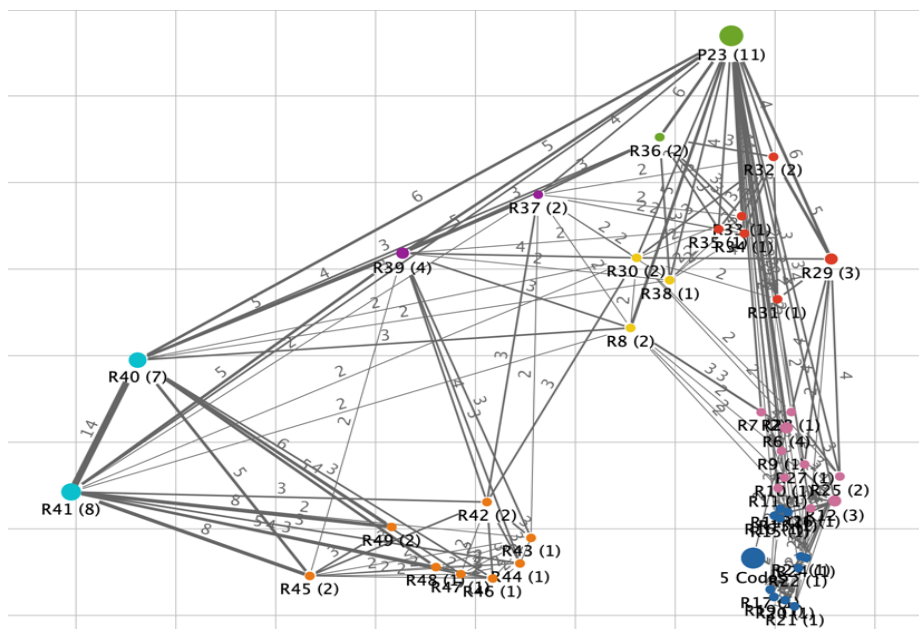


Figure 3: Interactivity pattern of thread 23 (total no. of contributions: 76, participants: 49)

The sample threads illustrate that locating examples of social media communication on a scale of high vs low interaction is a challenging, complex task, and interactivity patterns may vary quite substantially even within one group. Also, it is important to take a qualitative perspective on these patterns, as, for example, even in a thread where participants mostly contribute just one comment each, users' joint sequential construction of a coherent line of discourse can create interactivity.

4.2 Dimension 2: Private/Non-private Topics

Dimension 2 covers the content level, ranging from the pole of private to that of non-private topics. As Landert points out, "[a] focus on private topics and personal stories tends to create more involvement than abstract and generalised topics" (2017, 43). This ties in with Dürscheid's notion of 'secondary intimacy' (2007, 30-31), i.e. the spreading of "topics perceived as intimate in a culture [...] into the public realm" (Bös and Kleinke 2017, 96), a concept certainly relevant in the context of our support group.

However, even though the overall topic – coping with the challenges of being a care partner for PWD – is set, we still need to keep in mind that users have the possibility to "redact performances of the self online, so as to navigate public and private boundaries fluently" (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011, 76, original emphasis). Among the participants of the group investigated, there is an awareness of the choices users generally have in social media, as indicated by various user comments.

Still, the amount and depth of self-disclosure in the group are considerable. They involve different layers of disclosure, ranging from peripheral (e.g. revealing name, age, and gender of user) and intermediate levels (e.g. voicing religious views) to core disclosure (e.g. commenting on emotions, feelings, values, etc.), which is a particularly strong component in our dataset (cf. Bateman et al. 2010, 90).

As a component of "impression management" (Walther 2011, 7), the appropriate degree of self-disclosure and the semiotic means employed are metapragmatically negotiated by the users, and a perceived inappropriateness has repercussions on the authenticity and credibility of participants (cf. Androutsopoulos 2015, 76; Hower 2018; Kytölä and Westinen 2015). This is illustrated by example (3), which displays selected comments negotiating the integrity of user P9/R4 (who actually joins the discussion) based on evaluations of the information shared in his Facebook profile. As indicated by P9 in the opening post of the thread, there were "several people who felt that he [user P9/R4] was trying to scam or mislead the members of this group."

- (3) P9/R12: [...] as I read his post I was curious about his FB profile - which mentions nothing about his dad and the miracle drugs [...]
 P9/R4: There's no obligations to share my personal details on fb lady [...] So pls lady stop your hate toward me I didn't do anything to be scalted for..
 P9/R8: People keep mentioning about this guy's FB profile. I don't know why that makes a difference. [...] Just because he doesn't have a picture of his dad doesn't make him a bad person.

Clearly, perceptions of online authenticity are also closely related to the linguistic make-up of the contributions. In the case of example (3), the continuing discussion in the thread reveals that it might have been P9/R4's non-native background and a lack of experience regarding the communicative norms of the group that rendered his original post flagged and raised disapproval and doubts regarding his authenticity. Anyway, the inappropriateness of harshly criticizing members of the group is pointed out in much-approved metapragmatic comments as well, which remind fellow users of the main aim of the group: "Let's support one another, in whatever framework you need support" (P9).

4.3 Dimension 3: Language of Immediacy/Distance

Dimension 3 focusses on the language level, more specifically on the scale ranging from language of immediacy to language of distance (Landert 2017, 43). Linguistic elements prototypically found in private face-to-face interaction have long been associated with a high degree of involvement (cf. Biber 1988; Chafe 1982; Koch and

Oesterreicher 1985; Tannen 1982). They have also been employed (and critically discussed) as means of 'conversationalization' (Fairclough 1994) and 'synthetic personalization' (Fairclough 1995; 2001) creating 'pseudo-communities' (Beniger 1987) in classic mass-media communication such as news discourse (see also Bös 2015; Landert 2014).

Social media research has provided further evidence of the impact of linguistic features of immediacy on involvement (and thus virtual proximity) and also on the perceived authenticity of users. The association of language of immediacy with the spontaneity, unfilteredness and closeness of prototypical personal conversations seems to hold strong in a range of social media contexts (e.g. Leppänen et al. 2015; Trepte and Reinecke 2011). Yet, as our more detailed discussion of this dimension in section 5 will show, the use of features of linguistic immediacy/distance in social media discourse is clearly not homogeneous and can vary considerably even within one particular communicative setting.

5. Between the Poles of Linguistic Immediacy and Distance

This section outlines major features of language of immediacy/distance observed in the corpus as well as their functions and effects, which are backed up by some quantitative findings, but considered mainly from a qualitative perspective, as a precise quantification of these complex phenomena is difficult for various reasons.

First, some obstacles result from the very nature of our social media data, which are typically unedited. Accordingly, there is a considerable number of typos and spelling mistakes, which make it difficult to automatically identify and reliably quantify relevant tokens or calculate type/token ratios, as suggested in seminal quantitative approaches like that by Biber (1988). Also, it is often difficult to distinguish between 'mistakes' and 'emulations of speech-like forms,' e.g. in cases of non-standard grammar. Though the former may, of course, have their share in the perception of the digital text as unplanned and 'speech-like,' they need to be distinguished from the users' active linguistic choices to account for the negotiation of virtual proximity and distance in this social media context.

Second, there are also some more general methodological problems in operationalizing and quantifying linguistic features of immediacy/distance. Biber's (1988) multidimensional multifeature approach has been ground-breaking, but also criticized, e.g. for neglecting the processual nature of texts and focussing too strongly on grammatical categories of English in the compilation of feature clusters (cf. Ghadessy 2003, 148f.).

In the German context, Ágel and Hennig (2006; 2007) suggested an elaborate hierarchical classification system, which is meticulous and fine-grained, but difficult from the perspective of practicability and comparability. Another problematic aspect, also pointed out by Landert, is that all the features considered have equal weight, though some might actually contribute more to the impression of immediacy than others. Landert concludes: "It is questionable whether such a degree of precision is adequate for representing a phenomenon like linguistic immediacy" (2014, 23). While

the salience of features still awaits further investigation, we will relate to some trends in the distribution of selected features here.

5.1 Major Features of Language of Immediacy/Distance in the Corpus

Early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) like that by Crystal (2001) and Danet (2001) started out from the prototypical features of (conceptually) spoken and written language, applying them in the description of the new digital modes. Their characterizations, together with further elaborations on relevant linguistic features from various fields (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2007, 81f; Biber 1988; Bieswanger 2013, 473f.; Bös 2015, 127; Pérez Sabater 2012; Pérez Sabater et al. 2008; Sindoni 2013, 98;) and corpus-based observations, have informed our two sets of features, which are presented and illustrated in Tables 1 and 2.

Level	Features of immediacy	Corpus examples (extracts)
orthographic/ graphological	non-standard orthography	P23/R40: "its sad n serious but u gotta inject some humor into it..."
	reduplication of graphemes	P23/ R40: " Yaaaassssss yes yes yes that lasted about a year.."
	reduplication of punctuation marks (esp.: ...)	P3/R8: "I get you... my dad was deaf!!!"
	capitalization	P3/R13: "[...] They are NOT GODS"
lexical	colloquial lexis	P23/R40: "[...] And her fave was M\$#%F%\$^\$ this and that [...]"
	repetition of words	P23/R40: "Oh, one more thing she would check her purse over n over throughout the day to make sure her money was still in there..... Patience. Patience. Patience. "
morphosyntactic	simple, often fragmentary syntactic patterns, ellipsis	P2/R11: "So hate that word."
	non-standard grammar	P12/R3: " I been cna & caregivers all together 17 yrs. One thing I learn I took a class yrs back wit people who has dementia & Alizhmer patient [...]"
	contractions	P20/R22: "Yea thats the stage my dads in."
pragmatic/discourse organization	deixis (esp.: person deixis by 1 st and 2 nd ps pronouns; also time and place deixis)	P9/R3: " We all need a little hope" P5/R44: "Yes same here " P4: "How is she doing now ?"
	terms of address	P2/R9: " P2/R1 , big hug for you" P6/R2: "Hang in there, sweetie. " P5/R14: "Hi, y'all "
	colloquial terms of reference (esp. kinship terms)	P23/R6: "My mom " P16/R2: "My hubby "

	discourse markers, interjections	P18: "So my dad has had Epilepsy" P4: "Wow, that's a handful indeed!" P23/R40: "Oh, one more thing"
	directive and expressive speech acts	P2/R9: "Be strong and may you find the strength to continue with love. 🥰🥰🙏" P5: "I'm so sorry 💜" P5/R39: "Thanks, rough for everyone involved with dementia"
	direct speech presentation	P5/R41: "my poor mom used to say out load... I GOTTA PISS"
	metapragmatic comments	P5: "(Sorry for the language if it offends anyone)"
non-verbal	verbalization of vocal elements, onomatopoeia	P5/R19: "Haha, my Mom has always been a potty mouth. And now having Alzheimers, she is worse...lol"
	verbalization of nonverbal communication (physical contact, near emojis)	P2/R9: "P2/R1, big hug for you"
	emojis	P5/R33: "Hard not to chuckle. My mom is the exact same way and she NEVER used that language before! 🥰🥰"

Table 1: Selected features creating linguistic immediacy

It is the pole of language of immediacy that has received most attention in the respective studies on CMC. Indeed, many of the features in Table 1 can be considered as "Internet language evergreens" (Androutsopoulos 2011, 150). As shown by their arrangement in Table 1, they can be located on all levels of language, representing vernacular and colloquial forms, and verbalizing or visualizing paralinguistic and kinesic elements, which often contribute to the expression of emphasis and affect.

Overall, the density of these features in the dataset is quite high and, as the examples in Table 1 illustrate, they tend to co-occur in many postings. Particularly contractions, fragmentary syntactic patterns and person deixis are frequent and found in most contributions in our dataset. Though these might not be the most salient features, they create a moderate degree of linguistic immediacy that can be considered the unmarked norm in this discussion group (cf. Figure 4).

In combination, the use of the three features ranges from 14.00 to 26.55 per hundred words (phw), with an average of 21.87 phw per thread (cf. appendix B for a complete overview). Their quite consistent presence throughout the corpus is complemented by the more or less pronounced usage of further elements of immediacy, as shown in section 5.2. Overall, our data can, in large parts, be considered a quite prototypical case of 'digital networked writing,' characterized by Androutsopoulos as vernacular, interpersonal, spontaneous and interaction-oriented (2011, 145).

Yet, we also have to account for the distance pole of the language continuum, which has received considerably less attention, especially in research on digital communication. As pointed out by Ágel and Hennig (2006, 34), language of distance has often been characterized negatively, i.e. by the absence of features of immediacy.

Given our observations outlined above, the formal written standard (and thus the lack of features of immediacy) can indeed be considered as marked in many online contexts including the one investigated here.

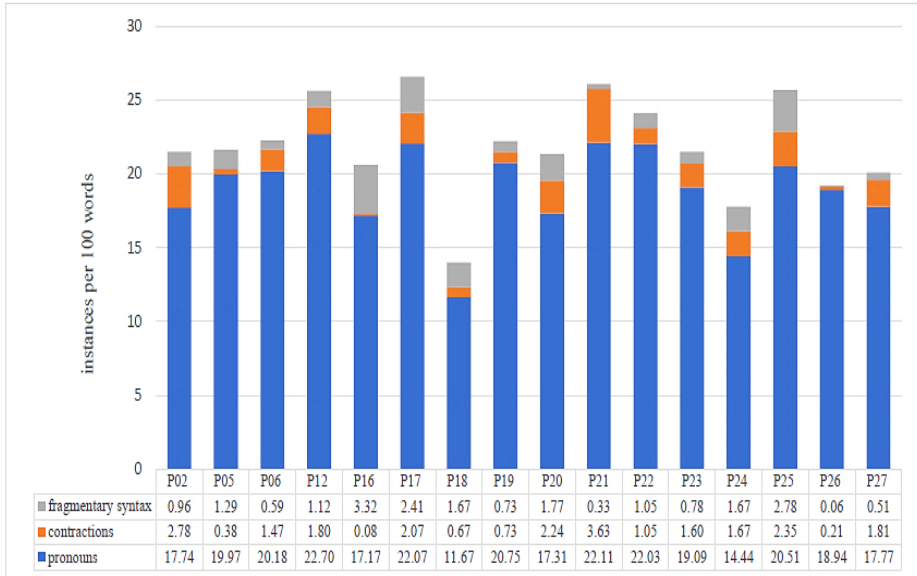


Figure 4: Distribution of selected features of linguistic immediacy in the corpus

While we refrain from a comprehensive description of the more general features of standard language here, Table 2 lists and exemplifies some of the elements in our corpus which stand out as deviating from the vernacular forms of digital networked writing just described. They include, but are not limited to, lexical choices (especially technical terms and abbreviations), the use of complex syntactic patterns, often marked by highly formalized punctuation, agentless constructions, generic person reference and the use of assertive, informative speech acts, especially (lay-)medical definitions and explanations, all of which contribute to a more information-oriented and less interpersonal focus.

The co-occurrence of these features can contribute to a pronounced degree of linguistic distance. This is the case in 20 of the 443 contributions in our corpus, which contain a combination of at least three of the features described in Table 2. However, there are also many more moderate or hybrid cases. Particularly, medical terms can also be found in environments of linguistic immediacy. Their use is certainly not surprising, given the overarching context of dementia in this CofP.

Level	Features of distance	Examples (extracts)
orthographic/ graphological	formalized punctuation, quotation marking	P21: "Their language can often be violent, describing theft and frustration at what is happening – 'it's robbed me;' 'I'm attacked;' 'catch tongue.' Words can hint at defeat and failure – 'It's taking my breath away this stupidity;' 'I'm nothing;' 'ridiculous.' "
lexical	technical terms and abbreviations	P16/R04: "Really the issue is whether the chemical messengers are getting through and whether they are connecting with the correct receptors " P18: "He did have another CT no new strokes.... seizure meds are OK, VNS is working properly"
	formal lexis	P21: "Some with dementia cease speaking altogether"
morphosyntactic	complex syntactic patterns	P06/R06: "When I questioned a neurologist about my mother, who, after 2 days in the hospital lost all of the basic functions (walking, eating, toileting, dressing) that she had always had prior to hospitalization. He told me that studies have proven that elderly people, particularly with dementia, lose 2% of their capabilities every day they are in hospital."
	agentless constructions	P20/R17: " It's very sad to see. " P27/R17 " Having observed this it is oftentimes thoughtless folks that subject the LO to the overstimulation resulting in a negative outcome"
pragmatic/discourse organization	generic person reference	P21: " Many individuals I have worked with" P25: "So sad seeing somebody they used to talk to alot and now they're just being too quiet"
	assertive, informative speech acts (esp.: (lay-)medical definitions and explanations)	P06/R14: "A bladder infection causes confusion and a big deterioration in mental capacity in the elderly."

Table 2: Selected features creating linguistic distance

5.2 Variations of Linguistic Immediacy and Distance, Their Reasons and Effects

Many of the communicative practices observed in the corpus are indicative of vernacular digital writing. Still, there is variation with regard to the degree of linguistic immediacy/distance, which we have found to be linked to idiosyncratic styles, the tone of the initial post, the topics discussed and the preferred coping strategies of the users, as they position themselves as professional experts, lay experts or loving relatives.

Starting with idiosyncratic styles, some users seem to prefer the use of (written) standard language even in an environment where most comments display a moderate to pronounced degree of linguistic immediacy. This is illustrated by example (4). Here, user P12/R7 composes their comment with standard orthography, punctuation and

syntax (just as they do elsewhere in the corpus), whereas the surrounding comments (P12/R6, P12) display various features of linguistic immediacy (such as the affirmative answer to a previous comment, colloquial kinship terms, contractions, lack of standard punctuation, reduplicated punctuation marks, and emojis). Note, however, that overall, P12/R7's comment only displays a moderate degree of linguistic distance. The sentence structure is comparatively simple, the comment contains four first-person pronouns and determiners, and it is obviously unedited, as its first sentence contains a typo and an anacoluthon.

(4) P12/R6: Yes mom has started doing it. :(

P12/R7: My wife has been doing this fir 6 months ago. I sometimes ask her what she said to try to stimulate her conversation. I also go along with the conversation as if I completely understand. I reply yes or no to every question.

P12: Yes I reply to my mum all the time too...sometimes I repeat the weird words she uses and she looks at me and laughs....I do wonder if sometimes it's just a game she plays on me 😊😂 bless her

In contrast, some participants consistently make ample use of features associated with linguistic immediacy, as in the case of user P23/R40 (example (5)). This contribution displays a very loose, fragmentary syntactic structure accentuated by an excessive use of reduplicated punctuation (...). Non-standard spelling (e.g. "gotta") and colloquial lexis ("weed seller") present vernacular language. Reduplication of graphemes ("sooooo"), frequent repetition of words ("True true true"), discourse markers and interjections ("oh my gosh"), and the CMC-typical abbreviation/acronym "lol" add emphasis and express emotional involvement.

(5) P23/R40: True true true. .I can relate.....oh my gosh...patience patience patience....the chicken wing..lol....its sad n serious but u gotta inject some humor into it...otherwise things can become sooooo toxic...my siblings, the other 4, silence...crickets.... ..no breaks for me....I used to commute between my house and moms home34 miles round trip.....many a day I drove by the local weed seller who happens to be 93 or 94 years old herself...lol

Obviously, what exactly shapes individual styles depends on a complex interplay of a broad range of variables which have an impact on the users' attitudes about language and their aesthetic preferences (cf. Biber and Conrad 2019, 18). Factors such as age and communicative experience in social media contexts in general and this CofP in particular might play an important role here. However, as our corpus does not provide any information regarding the background of the users, this hypothesis has to remain untested here.

What could be observed in our dataset is that in the environment of comments like example (5), the comments of other users also tend to include more features of linguistic immediacy. Thus, certain comment clusters show traces of accommodation, i.e. of the process of modifying language in order to match or minimize differences with the interlocutor universally attested for spoken discourse (cf. Giles et al. 1991). In the social

media environment investigated here, this helps to reinforce ingroup solidarity and contributes to the creation of virtual proximity.

Similar accommodation phenomena can be observed with regard to the posts opening a thread, which provide a specific kind of framing and also have an impact on the linguistic realizations of the subsequent comments. Examples (6a) and (7a) show the initial posts of two threads dealing with the same topic: the increasing use of swearwords by PWD as the disease progresses. Examples (6b) and (7b) provide some of the comments reacting to these initial posts.

- (6a) P2: *Explicit language warning* My mom yelled "Cunt!" (in my native language) three times to me tonight. I was hugging her to wake her up before dinner time when all of a sudden she yelled that to me. It's getting more frequent now. There're a few other words she said but that seems to be her favourite. She's late stage dementia & Alzheimer's, doesn't talk much anymore, stutters her words and has very limited vocabulary, so I really don't understand why of all the words she's able to remember THAT one and could say it clearly. She wasn't the type who swear or use foul language when she was still well so where does it come from? Does anyone experience this with their LO?
Thank you for reading. Praying for patience for everyone in here ❤️

- (6b) P2/R5: My wife does the same. Used words I've never heard her say and always at me. It's this horrific disease. God bless and give you the strength to do what's needed.
P2/R9: P2, big hug for you. If your Mom uses that word, remember - Dementia is a sickness from hell and it is not her speaking. Be strong and may you find the strength to continue with love. 😊😊🙏

The post by P2 in example (6a) features a narrative, which is moderately linguistically immediate, a question regarding similar experiences, thanks and prayer. The post triggers a few rather information-oriented comments. However, most users share similar experiences, offer moral support, and frequently take up the religious element. Indeed, sending prayers is a common practice realized by different semiotic resources, and constitutes an important coping strategy in this CofP (e.g. P2/R5: "God bless and give you the strength to do what's needed, P2/R9: 🙏"). Most of the comments also display a moderate level of linguistic immediacy similar to that of the initial post.

In contrast, the initial post P5 in example (7a) displays a high degree of linguistic immediacy (including nonstandard spelling, reduplicated punctuation, contractions, fragmentary syntactic patterns, colloquial kinship term, expressive speech act, metapragmatic comment and emoji). It establishes a humorous tone ("So hard not to laugh 😂"), which is taken up by most (though not all) contributions in this thread. Thus, many reactions also feature a pronounced language of immediacy and foreground humorous aspects in coping with the communicative challenges posed by an increasing use of swearwords by PWD (cf. example (7b)). This thread displays the highest density of "LOL" or "Haha" (0.83 phw) in our corpus and a variety of laughing emojis, often reinforced by reduplication.

- (7a) Moms new favorite thing to say: "mother fucker".....She hated swearing....maybe it was pent-up for so many years that she's just gotta let them all out now. **So hard not to laugh** 😂 (sorry for the language if it offends anyone)

(7b) P5/R8: Oh yes!! My mom and dad both used words that shocked me as well. Once they got under some good meds etc I have not heard them utter them since. **So hard not to laugh tho.**

P5/R33: **Hard not to chuckle.** My mom is the exact same way and she NEVER used that language before! 🤔 😊

P5/R37: Gotta love when filters take a hike!! 😊 😊 😊

P5/R52: Mine too. This morning it was her sock....she was having trouble getting one of them on. **It was really hard not to laugh.**

The expressions of humor also provide an illustration of linguistic mirroring, another common practice among group members. The pattern "So hard not to laugh" is taken up (with slight variations) by 14 users (see passages in bold type in the extracts in 7b). Mirroring is also displayed in the choice of emojis, as the emoji crying tears of laughter "😂" is used nine times in the 58 comments of the thread.

Our examples already indicate that both the coping strategies suggested in the initial post as well as the communicative practices employed there are often taken up and reinforced in the comments, creating common ground and ingroup solidarity in this CofP. As shown, humour and religious practices are among the important coping strategies co-constructed in this online environment. However, some users clearly favor other coping strategies, like rationalizing, which are reflected on the language level, but are also related to the other two dimensions of virtual proximity/distance. This is discussed in more detail in section 6.

6. The Interplay of the Three Dimensions

As observed in the previous sections, the participants of the support group investigated have developed shared communicative practices which tie them together as a virtual CofP. Yet, the data also show that there is variation with regard to the linguistic realization, which, together with the specific content focus of the contributions, reflects different positioning and coping strategies of individual users and has an impact on the degree of interactivity. Figure 5 brings the three dimensions of virtual proximity and distance together again (see section 2, Figure 1). Three examples (8)-(10) from the corpus help to illustrate their interplay.

- (8) **P23/R40:** True true true. .I can relate.....oh my gosh...patience patience patience....the chicken wing..lol....its sad n serious but u gotta inject some humor into it...otherwise things can become sooooo toxic...
- (9) **P23/48:** The brain is damaged... it causes people with dementia/Alzheimer's to say and do things that are inappropriate... Family members who become caregivers take on a role reversal... they become the parent... Just as a child says hurtful things when their world becomes difficult, the adult with Alzheimer's will act out... Do not take it personally... My sincere best wishes to you on your journey...
- (10)**P27/R17:** White matter in the brain oversees communication, judgment, apathy and numerous other aspects that once lost the LO no longer possesses the ability to respond as they did in the past. Love and respect them where they are now, it's not by choice.

Stimulation of loud people, screaming toddlers is too much for many without brain disease. Having observed this it is oftentimes thoughtless folks that subject the LO to the overstimulation resulting in a negative outcome.

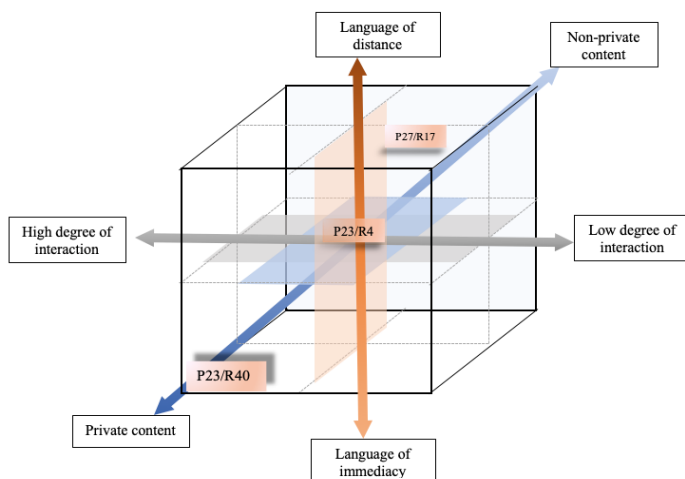


Figure 5: An exemplification of three-dimensional interplay in virtual proximity and distance

Of the three examples used for illustration, example (8) (P23/R40, already discussed previously in example (5)) is clearly the one which displays the highest degree of linguistic immediacy. It sports a personal, emotional perspective and invites quick reactions of a similar kind, generating much interactivity in this way, as is quite typical of these cases (see also the quite prominent position of P23/R40 illustrated in Figure 3 above). Thus, it is located in the bottom left front corner of the cube.

Example (9) (P23/R48) shows a more moderate degree of linguistic immediacy (e.g. relatively simple sentence patterns, reduplicated punctuation marks, directive and expressive speech acts). On the content level, P23/R48 refrains from core disclosure and in describing the relationship of the care partners, relates to more generalized, quite widespread views on PWD and dementia. However, interactivity is fostered by giving advice and well-wishes ("Do not take it personally... My sincere best wishes [...]"). As shown in Figure 3, P23/R48 is involved in one of the local interactivity clusters (marked in orange), in this case one that negotiates the role reversal also described in this comment. The contribution can therefore roughly be located in a relatively central position in the cube.

Example (10) (P27/R17) tends towards the pole of language of distance, as, for example, manifesting in the (lay-)medical explanations featuring a number of technical terms and agentless constructions, which render the comment rather informational. Still, there is an interactive element ("Love and respect them [...])" which adds an interpersonal component. With this comment, P27/R17 contributes to a string of some more information-oriented posts which do not trigger much further interaction among the participants. Example (10) thus tends towards the top right back corner the cube.

As illustrated by examples (8)-(10), the three dimensions are often related quite systematically in our dataset, with more private topics typically being presented in more linguistically immediate ways and triggering more interactivity than information-oriented comments with more features of linguistic distance. While comments of the former kind create virtual proximity, boosting ingroup solidarity and emotional support, the latter typically rationalize the disease and its effects, presenting it in (lay-)medical, analytical terms. This matter-of-factness certainly is an effective strategy of positioning oneself as an expert and distancing oneself from the disease and the challenging offline situation. However, it also has the effect of distancing oneself from the collective online 'we' ("we are all in this together"), blocking emotional ties and creating virtual distance.

Although matter-of-fact contributions are not commented on in a negative way in our dataset, they trigger fewer reactions by the other group members when they lack any interpersonal element. This contrasts with the typically more interactive patterns in the group and hints at a rejection of this communicative practice. Thus, in the virtual CofP investigated here, the sharing of impersonal knowledge seems a less valued activity than sharing personal experiences and providing mutual support. As quite typical of CofP in general, there is a strong focus on relational capital that is lacking in electronic networks focused on knowledge contribution (cf. Kosonen 2009).

7. Conclusion

This study has explored how the members of an online support group for care partners of PWD construct virtual proximity/distance. The three-dimensional model adapted from Landert (2017) has proved fruitful in shedding light on the complex interplay of linguistic features of immediacy/distance with the nature of topics discussed and patterns of user interaction. In the 16 threads investigated, the more private contributions typically contain more features of linguistic immediacy and trigger more interactivity among users than the more information-oriented, linguistically distant ones.

Overall, the virtual CofP investigated shows a clear preference for communicative practices which establish a high degree of virtual proximity, which is probably not surprising, given the main aim of the group to provide support in coping with the challenges of being a care partner of PWD.

With regard to the linguistic realization, a moderate degree of linguistic immediacy quite prototypical of vernacular, digital networked writing can be considered the unmarked norm in this CofP. However, there is also variation. We found that users' choices depend on their individual styles, the framing provided by the initial posts, and users' preferred coping strategies. Accordingly, some contributions are markedly more linguistically immediate, while others adhere to the standard norms of written English and feature a (more or less) pronounced degree of linguistic distance.

The contributions located more towards the pole of linguistic immediacy usually display a considerable amount of self-disclosure, there is a preference for knowledge sharing via personal narratives, and humor and religious practices are among the favored coping strategies. Especially in environments of high linguistic immediacy,

there is evidence of accommodation and semiotic mirroring, which further strengthen ingroup solidarity and virtual proximity.

In contrast, information-oriented, linguistically distant contributions which implant rationalizing, depersonalizing coping strategies by focusing on impersonal (lay-)medical definitions and explanations are less valued by the group, as indicated by the low degree of interactivity these comments trigger. With comments like these, users can position themselves as (lay-)experts and distance themselves from dementia and living with/caring for PWD. Yet, they also tend to create virtual distance from the group, which might or might not be intended.

Our study has thus shown that communicative practices in social media and even within one virtual CofP are less homogeneous than commonly assumed, as variations of linguistic immediacy and distance play an important role in co-constructing and negotiating virtual proximity and distance. Future research on different social media environments and virtual CofP could further contribute to our understanding of the heterogeneous nature and interpersonal effects of these communicative practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Composition of the dataset

Thread no./thematic keywords of initial posts	Words per thread	Contributions per thread	Primary comments*	Sub-comments**	Participants
P02 Foul Language	936	25	23	1	18
P05 Promiscuous and foul language	1322	57	56	0	52
P06 Language loss	1021	46	30	15	14
P12 Mom has own language	445	11	9	1	9
P16 Problems using the correct terms	361	19	14	4	14
P17 Word swapping	290	14	8	5	8
P18 Losing language	300	10	6	3	3
P19 Baby language	689	46	12	33	13
P20 Loss of language	849	37	29	7	29
P21 Why PWD stop talking	303	3	2	0	2
P22 Talkative mom	286	17	13	3	14
P23 Hurtful language	4499	76	48	27	49
P24 Understanding through spelling	180	7	5	1	5
P25 Becoming quiet	468	30	22	7	21
P26 Cussing	470	9	6	2	5
P27 No talking	1379	36	26	9	29
TOTAL	13,798	443	309	118	-

* primary comments: reacting to the initial post

** subcomments: reacting to any of the primary comments, thus forming sub-threads

Appendix B: Frequency of selected features of linguistic immediacy

Thread no./ thematic keywords	Personal pronouns	Contra- ctions	Fragmentary syntax	Selected features total
P02 Foul Language	17.74	2.78	0.96	21.47
P05 Promiscuous and foul language	19.97	0.38	1.29	21.63
P06 Language loss	20.18	1.47	0.59	22.23
P12 Mom has own language	22.70	1.80	1.12	25.62
P16 Problems using the correct terms	17.17	0.08	3.32	20.50
P17 Word swapping	22.07	2.07	2.41	26.55
P18 Losing language	11.67	0.67	1.67	14.00
P19 Baby language	20.75	0.73	0.73	22.21
P20 Loss of language	17.31	2.24	1.77	21.32
P21 Why PWD stop talking	22.11	3.63	0.33	26.07
P22 Talkative mom	22.03	1.05	1.05	24.13
P23 Hurtful language	19.09	1.60	0.78	21.47
P24 Understanding through spelling	14.44	1.67	1.67	17.78
P25 Becoming quiet	20.51	2.35	2.78	25.64
P26 Cussing	18.94	0.21	0.06	19.15
P27 No talking	17.77	1.81	0.51	20.09
Average per 100 words	19.03	1.53	1.31	21.87

