

“I DON’T ACTUALLY KNOW WHO I AM AND WHERE I AM FROM”: CULTURAL TEXTURE OF Q&A WEBSITE AS DIALOGICAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract: *New media connect people with the world, allow them to transcend temporal and spatial distances in communication and provide a sphere for self-presentation. The users of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) may feel enjoyment presenting their social image and building up social interaction with other online fellows. In the last years, the large use of social ‘question and answer’ websites (Q&A) has changed the sphere of inter-cultural exchanges, promoting enjoyment. Specifically, we conjecture that online self-disclosure may increase opportunities to present social identity and redefine intercultural exchange boundaries. Focused on Quora.com website, the main objectives of the present study are: a) to investigate how the use of self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies on Q&A website facilitate cross-cultural communication; b) to detect the role of modulation expressions in the intercultural mediated interactions and in the acculturation processes. These goals can be achieved through Critical Discourse Analysis and Dia-textual analysis to analyse websites’ texts, phrases, strengths, idioms, and lexical forms. The results of present study show that Q&A websites promote sense-making processes and weave intercultural communication based on the respect.*

Keywords: *dialogue; Q&A websites; integration; discourse analysis; (inter)culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

“*Nosce te ipsum*” is the best wish Socrates could address of all those who have dedicated their life to the pursuit of happiness. Changes are crucial in the life of an individual and they could give rise a terrible identity crisis, presenting an obstacle to meet personal objectives. In the era of globalisation and digitalisation, we have to consider ourselves a European citizen and children of the world, as well as Italian, it is necessary to start asking ‘Who I am?’, ‘Where did I come from?’, ‘Where I am here?’ and ‘Where I am going?’. This identity formation process takes place by Communication Mediated by Computer (CMC). The splice between real life and virtual life, where the first is the extension of second one, represents the hub of intercultural exchange process that becomes on web 2.0 and causes his effects on ordinary life.

2. Q&A WEBSITE: A NEW FACE OF INTERNET

To understand adequately CMC practices, and especially those who are activated by the

interactions on “Question and Answer” (Q&A) websites analyzed in this article, it is useful to be examined them from a discursive cultural psychology angle (Mininni, 2013). It is focused on the research of sense-making dynamics based on the subjectivity of ‘other-than-self’ relationships. According to its nature, CMC has many faces, depending on the virtual environment that it is in. One of this takes features by the services that ‘Wide Web’ makes available on Q&A websites, virtual spaces that provide many different types of support. The users logging in get really important information and, asking something, they shall register in a virtual self-help community.

According to Shahet *al.* (2009), social Q&A website refer to web services that provides: a) an interface for users to post their questions and answers; b) it provides a search engine that helps people find related questions in the online community; c) users can participate in discussions in its online community. Q&A websites link between social networks (like Facebook and Twitter) and common functionalities websites (like You Tube or Flickr). Q&A websites allow users to share the importance to be part of a specific community, on

one side and then to seek services such as wikis, blogs and other new media products. The double nature of Q&A websites, constituted by open-mindedness and social support, produces the opportunity to frame the analysis into social meaning of “gratification”, in accord with media’s “Uses and Gratifications” theory (Katz *et al.*, 1974).

The intercultural dialogue, even if mediated by computer, becomes a form of representation and a practice that it connects Self with Others. This meeting determines the construction of new meanings and, at same time, links Self with a different culture. While social networks are useful to social support and communication (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012), social Q&A websites are not only designed to support activities related to asking and answering questions (Shah *et al.*, 2009), but also as new and essential meeting boundary that ‘provide opportunities for the satisfaction of social needs, perceived self-efficacy, positive self-presentation and identity management’ (Reinecke *et al.*, 2014:421).

3. Q&A WEBSITES: A NEW ADDICTION?

In virtue of large diffusion of the Q&A’s use, it is necessary to consider if users are developed a form of dependence by Q&A websites, like Quora.com, during a crucial period of their life, like a transfer or a temporary movement from home Country to a different one. In a new reality, the possibilities of dialogue ‘*vis à vis*’ suffer the consequences caused by the reduction of social life and immigrants are forced to bear a change of identity and a gradual construction of ‘new history of knowledge’: these assumptions increase the social interaction, but also the dependence from virtual system.

According to the Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1976; 1989), that supports our study, the relationships between users and mass-media is based on three dimensions, that support virtual consumption: comprehension, orientation and entertainment. Specifically, comprehension is divided in: a) self-comprehension, when people explain their personal values, patterns and behaviors; b) other comprehension, when users receive information useful to interpret events, other people and world’s view. The dimension of orientation includes: c) orientation to action, directed to research specifics information or guidelines for different activities; d) orientation to interaction, useful to obtain information to undertake individual or social relationships. The dimension of entertainment is structured in: e) individual entertainment, when media are useful to relax or have good time; f) social entertainment, direct to interact with other people, creating

important or superficial exchanges. Taking into account argumentative traits, analyzed with diatextual method, like the *enjeu* in the communicative exchanges, our first objective is to analyze new opportunities of self-presentation or social identity construction, evaluating the relationships between self-disclosure and intercultural communication on Quora.com, considering different consumers that use Q&A websites to orient their activities during the transfer in a foreign Country.

4. INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE ON Q&A WEBSITE

In the last years, psychology has increased its own interest for the cultural phenomena, thanks to a great intercultural meeting across immigrants. Researchers have focused their attention on individual cognitive process, analyzing them in terms of relational and social dynamics where people feel an integral part. Cultural psychology becomes interested to one of the most remarkable themes of psychological and social processes like the phenomenon of immigration. The concept of acculturation is employed to refer to

those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield *et al.*, 1936:149).

According to Redfield *et al.* (1936), we can talk about acculturation and cultural adaptation, when different subjects are related with very different cultures and they own cause huge changes in the groups’ identity. Therefore, the concept of acculturation may refer to the cultural changes resulting from these group encounters, while the concepts of psychological acculturation and adaptation are employed to refer to the psychological changes and eventual outcomes that occur as a result of individuals experiencing acculturation from a psychological, socio-cultural, and economic perspective (Berry 1974; 1992; 1997; 2001). Today, we have virtual contexts, like Q&A websites, where people could test real changes in their life.

Graves (1967) highlights that the relationships between very different cultural groups could cause very important exchanges in the original relational context. This exchange could be: a) collective, when it interests the sense making process of entire group; b) individual, when the exchange concerns psychological sphere of the single subject and what it changes is the individual identity, values and behavior. All changes coincide with some changes in

discursive practices, because these organize the cycles of cultural production. We can get one of this production cycle through the construction of world view, “that becomes cultural experience thanks to the discourses about the values that people are to hear” (Mininni, 2007:92).

Berry (1980) introduced the “Bidimensional Model of Acculturation” that the differing level of engagement in the two axes of cultural orientations generates four types of acculturation: (1) Integration: occurs when individuals maintain a positive relation to a new culture as well as to their original culture, this tends to implementing values, laws, rules, meanings, languages of the host country; (2) Assimilation: refers to the relinquishment of original cultural identity and complete absorption in a new culture; (3) Separation: occurs when individuals retain their original culture while rejecting the new culture, the subject can’t become familiar with new culture; 4. Marginalization: involves non-adherence to either cultures, the individual can’t learn the host country’s new culture and loses own traditions. So, the person feels loneliness. These entertainment appraisal frameworks provided intuitive guidance for our current investigation of the role of discursive modulation used on Q&A websites during intercultural exchanges, detected through self-disclosure of users on Quora.com. To test our hypothesis, we focused our study on subjectivity traits, and through dia-textual analysis, we have studied the result of users’ acculturation process. Specifically, we have analyzed the corpora of questions and answers, that argue about self and other Comprehension, with dia-textual method, focused our attention on *embranchage/debranchage* techniques (Mininni, 2013).

5. THE STUDY

5.1 Aim and Method. Our research analyzes the texts of questions and answers in Q/A websites according to the psychosemiotic markers proposed by the dia-textual analysis (Mininni, 2005), as well as by identifying the “socio-epistemic rhetoric” (Berlin, 1993): these tools emphasize the role of the discursive construction of contextualized forms of knowledge emphasizing the relations among positions, discursive practices and particular points of view on themes. The term “diatext” recalls the dialectics of sense construction (Bachtin, 1979:87) and describes “the ‘context’ seen by the enunciators of the text as they represent and demonstrate to take it into account” (Mininni, 1992:63). The texts analyzed were selected from the topic ‘Immigrant’ of the Quora.com platform. This one belongs to the category of Q&A sites, as defined in literature.

Although there are mostly informational questions that, according to Theory of Dependence on Media, fall into the classification of “Orientation to Action and Interaction”, questions have also been found for the purpose of understanding Self or society, and in addition questions used to share fun (and individual or social entertainment) with other users, that have proved to be most important to our analysis.

The first aim of this study is to investigate both the discursive construction of identity and the social presentation of users that live or mean to move to a new Country in Quora.com site. In particular, we divided the several “talks” – composed by questions and answers – in accordance with the dimensions the Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects. Looking at the argumentation, these dimensions outline the *enjeu* that makes the intra-locutor an inter-locutor and that activates original relations between self-disclosure and intercultural communication.

Referring to this aim, dia-textual analysis – with a special emphasis on linguistic-pragmatic features and rhetoric strategies – was applied on 48 talks, composed by questions and answers and classified in accordance with their declared focus.

5.2 Main results. When questions deal with “orientation to action”, answers are articulated taking advantage of the “modals”. In view of questions on how to act or to proceed in relation to specific domains, we found two kinds of answers:

a) when internet users prefer either third person or interpersonal verbs rather than first person ones, the favorite modal is “should”:

1. «You need to consider below conditions in your travel policy: Emergency sickness and accident medical expenses Limits payable in USD should be commensurate with the location you want to visit. Travel to U.S should have higher limits».

In this extract, the use of conditional can “mitigate” the illocutionary strength of the imperative verb. Actually, this last one is also diminished from the meaning of the verb ‘to need’, that testifies care for the questioner;

b) When the answerers write in first person, the modals used are “to can/not to can” and “to must/to have to”, emphasizing reduced manoeuvre margins. In other words, argumentation is focused on the “necessity” to perform some actions as preparatory activities.

2. «My husband is American, I am not. We had to apply for the fiancé visa before I was allowed to come over and marry my husband. The process took about 5 or so months but I couldn’t legally enter or stay in the US without it. After we married we then had to

upgrade it to a spousal visa where I received a green card».

Contrary to the first extract, in this example personal experience acts as a powerful tool to testify the effectiveness of his position. As a consequence, there is no need to “mitigate”. The orientation is discursively constructed through an invitation to act either as something “should” go or as something “has to” go in a certain way, emphasizing different levels of (un)certainty.

When the *enjeu* is focused on “self-comprehension”, we found a wider disposition to narrate, by emphasizing the emotional side through a variety of rhetorical/discursive tools. First, answers exhibit the importance of “dialogical” perspective (Hermans, 2001) in facing with this task. In particular, the several positioning emphasize:

a) The intrapersonal dialogue:

3. «That's the thought that saved me. Or, to be more precise, the thought that allowed me to save myself... "Just one more day..." ».

4. «I heard something funny and I laughed. I remember thinking "How can I be laughing? If everything is so bad, I shouldn't be laughing..."».

In the above examples, the variety of positioning is acted by the presence of the “savior” and of the “saved” self, of the “smiling” and of the “skeptical” self, and so on;

b) The interpersonal level, with the reference to “I-you-we-they”, as in following extract:

5. «He taught me that we have the power to Untwist those thoughts. to straighten out our patterns of thought. You have to keep at it, though, you don't just spot the flaw in your thoughts and say ‘There we go, I'm Fine now’».

Further rhetoric-argumentative strategies deal with the narrative weave: the importance of the time plot is emphasized through both the rhetoric of the “step by step” – meaning the possible evolution by little changes – and the use of the gerund verbal form – that evokes the “duration” and the “forward orientation”. In the extract 6, the source of temporality is accompanied by linguistic index supporting “simplicity” (“that’s all”, “that’s up”, “just”), contrasting the heavy complexity offered by the topic.

6. «And little by little, the days added up to weeks, the weeks to months, and so on.

That's all it takes, just deciding to stay for a few minutes, an hour, a day... and when that's up, deciding again, just another day».

The leave and the moral emphasize the “possibility” as an anchorage and a motivational incentive. In such a scenario, uncertainty paradoxically represents a positive element, contrary to the certainty that there is no way to change the situation in the case of “no live” – core of the question.

7. «And although I'm sure it's been said, the reason you should go on is because things can get better. I won't promise you that they will, but just the chance that it COULD is worth the pain of staying. If you make the other choice... there is no chance that anything will improve».

The relational dimension par excellence – the dense “I-you” interaction, even if in the mediated domain – represents the main source to cultivate “hope”.

8. «If I were you, I'd start there. [...] I may never meet you, or laugh with you, or cry with you, but I will say to you the most powerful thing I think anyone has ever said to me.

You Are Not Alone.

I have hope for you, you must have an incredible well of strength within you to have come so far, suffering so much. That strength can sustain you, if you choose to let it. I wish you well».

The second aim concerns the possibility to evaluate the role of modulation in the dynamics of acculturation, that come to light also through the self-disclosure acted by users writing questions and answers on the websites, through discourse analysis. To this end, a special relevance is acted by social comprehension and entertainment.

The focus on “social comprehension” emphasizes the possibility to make the several experiences of acculturation clear. In the case of an intercultural meeting characterized by “integration”, the numerous discursive and textual markers are directed and converge towards the rhetoric of a warm “welcome”, proposed by the yet “integrated” users. Such a rhetoric is structured through:

a) References to relevant and contextualized contents in the various life domain;

b) Meta-discursive markers, aimed to support the comprehension of the text. In the same direction worked the dotted list

9. «Well, if you are moving [...] here are a few suggestions [...] In short [...] So».

c) Employ of both physical and cognitive imperative (Kong, 2009), as well as of exhortative verbal forms, such as the repetition of the expression ‘you may’. Most of the physical imperatives are set

in a dotted list, taking the form of a real “*vademecum*”.

10. «- Get ready for [...]
- Be more disciplined and polite [...]
- Make comprehensive efforts to find [...]
- Seek the help of [...].»

In the other part of the answer, both the imperatives and the modals are less directing and act as summarizers and companions. Anyway, the perception of “asymmetry” are related to the condition of “integration” that can be experienced by the answerers. The *enjeu* of personal and social comprehension mainly leads participants to narrate and explain their pathways of acculturation. Indeed, alongside to declared “happy” experiences, users can talk about stories of “separation”, that are usually “given”. This experience is discursively constructed by the means of an “enunciative struggle” between “I” and “they”. So, we found these kinds of verbs attributed to the Self:

11. «I started [...] but I improved [...] I experienced [...] but I managed [...] but I resisted [...] I thought [...] so I protested [...] and demanded [...] but I told [...]».

On the contrary, the expressions attributed to the “others” are:

12. «Some people here mentioned that [...] they wouldn’t let you [...] they wanted to put me [...] Everybody all warned me [...]».

At the end of this struggle, the enunciator can announce his own victory:

13. «By the end of high school, I was winning».

The emphasis on agentivity is also empowered through the comparison with other actors, such as the protagonist’s mother. This comparison represents an opportunity to depict the variety of possible positioning as well as to encourage the new life opportunities in an “other” contexts, if supported by responsible and brave choices, attitudes and behaviors. In this story, where the search for social inclusion passes through efforts and struggles, the final sentence looks like a “battle cry”:

14. «So my most heartfelt advice to any newcomer to this country is: don’t lose hope, be courageous and work hard. Also, be your own strong advocate! When others don’t know what you are capable of, show them».

It’s a direct message, constructed by the means of both cognitive and physical imperatives. It seems to

be claimed by a “veteran” whose story, carefully told, represents a grounded base for his reliability.

When users focus on “entertainment”, they show different levels of anchorage/commitment to the “arrival” cultures. Sometimes, the need to keep stable on the origin values can represent a so radical message to be transferred, that it appears as natural as the air that one breaths.

15. «Don’t assimilate to those drunkards. Remember your heritage. Stick to your own. We have morals. We have tradition. All they care about is horse races and booze anyway».

A so firm rigidity, acted through the proposal of a list of imperatives similar to law tables, can represent the prelude of an experience of exclusion/marginalization.

In other cases, one can feel free to breath a new air as well as to more consciously reflect on the various life domains. The possibility to answer, to comment, to debate comes from the personal willingness to really experience a different reality: this availability works, from the users’ point of view, as a valid justification of their positions.

16. «Having lived in both Finland and Sweden (and moving back to Finland shortly), I think I can make a few generalizations that may be relevant».

In this extract, even if in the foreword this kind of “competence” is emphasized, the answerer makes use of mitigation markers, such as the subjective verb ‘I think’, the modals ‘I can’ and ‘may’, the adverb ‘a few’. In addition, the personal position is constructed by subjective verbs:

17. «I’d like to point out that [...] I’ve had more trouble [...] I’ve also lived [...] I think [...] But I do understand»

Alongside his own experience, the answerer tries to empower his discursive proposal through the use of third person verbs. These last ones, conjugated at the present indicative, give greater certainty and solidity to the claims.

- 18: «Sweden is very good at marketing itself [...] Finland is a slightly different story».

The combination of these discursive options allows the answerer to close his discourse making use of first singular person expressions that, anyway, summarize in a plausible way what is previously said, even if “mitigated”.

19. «As a result, I think that Sweden seems like a nicer place to live».

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Among the several kinds of support offered by the World Wide Web, Q&A websites represent a special “open-minded” opportunity for self-disclosure as well as to share the importance to be part of a specific community. The three main dimensions that animate the interaction between users and mass-media in accordance with the Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects – comprehension, orientation and entertainment – assume a “survival” value when intercultural meeting is at stake: this complex process of connection between Self with Others can lead toward new meanings, attitudes and practices.

In this background, the cultural discursive approach acts as an interpretative lens to catch the rhetoric and discursive construction of reality. In particular, the psycho-semiotic markers of dia-textual analysis helped us to find out specific socio-epistemic rhetoric, that is rhetoric devices that construct specific forms of knowledge in particular groups. Indeed, the data we gathered can be organized on different socio-epistemic rhetoric in relation to their different *enjeu*. The rhetoric of “necessity”, that can be an useful lens when the orientation to action is at stake, shifts into the rhetoric of “possibility” when users deal with personal and social comprehension: the “step by step” efforts to overcome difficulties and the topic of “welcome” offer new spaces for hope for persons facing with the acculturation experience. Finally, the rhetoric of “openness-closeness” accompanies the possibilities to experience a full and positive entertainment.

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