Chapter 18
First Person Pronouns in Online Diary Writing

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ABSTRACT

It is well-known that first person pronouns have a particularly important role to play in conversation. “Online diary” style of writing is less well understood and the role of first person pronouns in that style invites further study. In this chapter the authors explore these pronouns in UK and US online diaries, paying particular attention to frequency and collocational relations. In previous corpus-based studies of English genres, first person pronouns have tended to be considered as one larger set without differentiation. The authors find, on the contrary, that the differences between these forms can be very revealing in the way they distinguish online diary style of writing from other genres such as conversation and fiction writing. The findings underline the need to respect inflectional variants of lemmas as objects of study in their own right.

INTRODUCTION

Online diary writing is one of a number of new genres of written language which have emerged with the increasing accessibility of the Internet. The proliferation of websites which encourage such writing means that data from this genre is relatively easy to obtain for the purposes of academic study. Online diaries are, in fact, written and published on the Internet in the expectation that they will be read by an online audience, as opposed to traditional diary writing which typically is intended to remain private. Presumably, online diary writing tends to have a high degree of author involvement which will translate into relatively high frequency of usage of first person pronouns. Consequently, we focus here on the usage of the first person forms of English pronouns in a corpus of online diary writing. In the approach adopted here, we turn attention away from the lemma (e.g., the category of “first person pronoun”) to the individual inflected forms of that category (I, me, etc.), reflecting a new interest among
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linguists in the differential behaviour of the word forms that make up a lemma.

BACKGROUND

Recent case studies of verbs in English have revealed interesting patterning around particular inflected forms, as opposed to lemmas, suggesting that investigating language at the inflectional level is a promising line of inquiry (cf. Newman & Rice, 2004; Newman, in press). Scheibman (2001), in a study of informal conversation, found that first person singular (1SG) and second person singular (2SG) subjects occur with particular verbs of cognition with a relatively high frequency (I guess, I don’t know, you know, I mean) reflecting the particular pragmatic role played by these phrases in conversation. Scheibman (2001, p. 84) also emphasizes the need to examine ‘local’ patterns in grammatical research and cautions against relying just on the superordinate grammatical categories (person, verb type, tense etc.). In a similar way, Tao (2001, 2003) discusses the prominence of the simple present tense forms of the verb REMEMBER, used with a first person singular subject (I remember) or a null subject (remember), again demonstrating the importance of studying particular inflected forms of a verb, rather than just the lemma. The Scheibman and Tao studies both point to the subject form of the 1SG pronoun in English, I, as playing a particularly important role in conversational style.

In light of this previous research, we decided to explore the differential behavior of the first person pronouns in different genres in English. First person pronouns are well known as forms which indicate “an interpersonal focus and a generally involved style” (Biber, 1988, p. 225) and which play an important role in distinguishing spoken and written registers (see, e.g., Biber, 1988, p. 225 for further references). Not surprisingly, Biber (1988) identifies the class of first person pronouns as a “linguistic feature”, worthy of inclusion in the 67 features which form the basis for his corpus-linguistic analysis of stylistic variation in English. This class consists of I, me, we, us, my, mine, our, myself, ourselves, ours. Without disputing the value of grouping these forms together as part of Biber’s (1988) study, we believe that there is much to be gained, too, from investigating properties of the individual “inflected” forms of this class, in addition to studying these forms collectively, as it were, at the level of the lemma. For the purposes of this study we restrict ourselves to I, me, my, we, us, and our.

We chose to make online diary writing a particular focus of this study. Diary writing, generally, has been a relatively neglected kind of writing in corpus studies. It is not a type of writing that is represented in the British National Corpus (BNC), for example. This is perhaps understandable, since it is writing which prototypically would be for the benefit of the writer alone and so not generally accessible to others. Biographies, personal letters, and email, all of which are represented in the BNC, bear similarities to diary writing, though one would expect a number of differences, too, in style, content, and audience. Online diary writing cannot be equated with traditional diary writing intended only to be read by its author. Nor can it be equated with literary outputs which see publication through established presses. Helen Fielding’s 1996 novel Bridget Jones’s Diary, for example, has a complex origin, arising out of newspaper columns written by Fielding, fashioned into a first-person narrative. Additionally, the author herself points to Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice as a source of inspiration for the book. While Bridget Jones’s Diary is of interest in its own right, of course, and may even be, in some ways, a model for particular online diarists, its complex origin makes it rather different from typical online diary writing. McNeill (2003, 2005) provides an illuminating review of online diary writing and how it compares with traditional forms of diary writing. She draws attention to the manner in which “the assertion of identity that the online