Self-praise online and offline
The hallmark speech act of social media?

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In contrast to the assumptions of linguistic research on face-to-face interaction, CMC studies have shown that self-promotion is acceptable and even desired in certain online contexts. However, investigations of self-praise online repeatedly refer to the specific features of internet environment or internet communities that cause a temporary suspension of the constraint against self-praise. The constraint itself is treated as somewhat of an axiom. The assumption is, therefore, that the speech act of self-praise is face-threatening and disruptive and can only occur when certain conditions prevail, for example, when a disclaimer #humblebrag is provided. In the present study, I look at self-praise in private WhatsApp chats. Until now, self-praise has been investigated in broadcasting contexts of Twitter and Instagram. On the basis of the existing description of these naturally occurring episodes of self-praise, a retrieval strategy is developed to identify self-praise in a corpus through queries for collocations of lexical markers. An analysis of the episodes of self-praise retrieved from the WhatsApp corpus and some preliminary results from the corpus of spoken American English support the tentative hypothesis that self-praise is an unmarked speech behaviour that is a part of an everyday speech act repertoire. The existing claim about its special status could be explained through a combination of intuitive assumptions carried over from the influential studies of the pre-corpus era, and the retrieval methods that targeted the modified self-praise.

Keywords: self-praise, self-enhancement, bragging, self-presentation, speech acts, computer-mediated communication, WhatsApp
1. Introduction

The example below is taken from a chat on WhatsApp, a messaging app that offers users single- and group-chat functionality and that has acquired the status of a key means of communication via smartphone in the recent years. This conversation is an excerpt from a one-on-one chat between a married couple who regularly use WhatsApp:

(1) 1. 19/12/2016, 18:58 – Dan: Ok
2. 19/12/2016, 18:58 – Dan: See you soon sexy lady
3. 20/12/2016, 17:04 – Lynn: I think I’ll need wine.
4. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Dan: Heh. Got an interview in person now
5. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Lynn: Woah
6. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Lynn: U banking legend u.
7. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Dan: Hahahaha so funny
8. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Dan: I even said I hate banks
10. 20/12/2016, 17:05 – Dan: Haha
11. 20/12/2016, 17:06 – Dan: Potato leek soup for dinner?

This short exchange contains several points of interest for the present paper. From the conversation analytical point of view, it exemplifies the shift in the interactional organization of text messaging with the advent of flat-rate rather than pay-per-message tariffs. Most prominently, this shift has come about with the spread of smartphone messenger software that uses the internet to send the message. Lack of cost per unit, together with the ubiquity of smartphones, led to users’ continuous presence on the communication channel. In terms of interactional organization, this phenomenon results in fragmentary, unbounded conversations that overlap with other communication channels, including face-to-face, and lack traditional elements such as opening and closing sequences.

After the conclusion of the conversation on 19 December, the next day in message 3 Lynn leads with an apparent non-sequitur about wine, which Dan does not challenge and which can therefore be understood in the context of a different conversation on another channel. Dan then continues with another apparent non-sequitur, and Lynn readily picks up this thread. In message 11 Dan again abruptly changes the topic without pre-shift tokens or topical pivots that normally accompany topic shift in conversation (Sidnell 2010). This continuous dipping in and out of conversation is characteristic of the WhatsApp data and reflects some non-propositional effects of the interface pointed out by Yus (2017): the feeling of connectedness, the feeling of increased social presence, and the feeling of narrowed gap between the physical and the virtual. The structural changes, however, her-
ald – or bring on, depending on the theoretical perspective – other relaxed communicative norms.

From a pragmatic perspective, the example contains an instance of self-praise. Self-praise (or bragging, boasting, self-enhancement) is a speech act that explicitly or implicitly gives credit to the speaker for some attribute or possession which is positively valued by the speaker and the potential audience (Dayter 2016:65). In message 4, Dan volunteers an unsolicited piece of information about the success of his preliminary job interview. Despite the fact that no explicit positive evaluation is present to mark the turn as self-praise, Lynn immediately recognizes it as such and supplies an enthusiastic and supportive response. This behaviour runs contrary to what several earlier studies have claimed as an interactional norm, namely, that self-praise, especially not following a warrant, is conversationally risky and invites censure (Pomerantz 1978; Speer 2012). A host of papers in psychology and sociology report experiments and questionnaire studies according to which self-praise – or bragging/boasting, as it is referred to in the literature to emphasize the negative connotation – is judged as undesirable in interpersonal communication. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of the paper, however, there is evidence that the constraint on self-praise is relaxed in one-to-many as well as one-to-one CMC, in conversations among intimates, within communities of practice, etc. In fact, this phenomenon is present in so many different contexts as to question the existence of a universal constraint against self-praise.

2. Incidence of self-praise, its acceptability and effects

2.1 Strategic impression management: Nobody likes a bragger

Although etiquette manuals universally condemn bragging, a survey of psychological literature reveals a spectrum of attitudes towards what is a far from homogenous behaviour. To begin with, speakers frame self-praise differently. Positive disclosure, or neutral positive statements, are different from brags (which contain superlatives, comparisons with others, less surprise, and less emphasis on hard work) (Miller et al. 1992)). Both can be successfully used to manage the impressions that others form of the speaker, but the exact effect of each appears to be a contradictory matter. A series of studies primarily relying on self-reported attitudes measured via formalised questionnaires of Likert-scale type established that people who make positive evaluations appear likeable (Folkes and Sears 1977; Inman, McDonald and Ruch 2004) and that comparing oneself to others positively may have a positive effect (Merten 1991), but also that two-sided comparisons (admitting own flaws along with self-praise) and self-effacement after
brags is perceived as more credible and therefore positive (Schlenker and Leary 1982; Roger and Williams 1989). Understating one’s real achievements (Baumeister et al. 1989; Giacalone and Riordan 1990) might have a negative effect on the speaker’s perception by the audience, but so does overstating them (Jones and Pittman 1982; Miller et al. 1992), since the audience is likely to feel manipulated (Schlenker 1980). In general, however, disclosing oneself to others leads to higher attractiveness and is beneficial to relationship formation (Jourard 1959; Newcomb 1961; Gilbert and Horenstein 1975).

In whichever manner self-praise is realised, it is an effective vehicle of self-presentation – “the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people” (Leary 1995:2). To cast self in a favourable light, a speaker may resort to two types of activity: self-promotion and ingratiation. Ingratiation, done via opinion conformity or other-enhancement, means that “people try to be perceived as likable by demonstrating their similarity to the evaluator or by elevating him or her (Tal-Or 2008:202). In the course of self-promotion, on the contrary, people point out their own personal achievements and unique characteristics (Giacalone and Rosenfeld 1986). On the whole, indirect self-promotion appears to be more successful if the purpose of the speaker is to be perceived as more likeable (unless the aim is attention seeking at any cost). This gives rise to several “basking in reflected glory” communicative strategies (Carter and Sanna 2006): boasting (associating with successful others), burnishing (trying to magnify the characteristics of others with whom the speaker is already associated), and burying (dissociating from unsuccessful others) (Cialdini et al. 1976).

Under the umbrella of self-promotion, a distinction can be made between acquisitive and protective varieties of positive self-presentation (Arkin 1981). Acquisitive self-presentation has “seeking approval” as its purpose, “so presenters emphasize attractive aspects of themselves and construct desirable images. However, protective self-presentation is aimed at avoiding disapproval” (Rui and Stefanone 2013:111). The former subsumes verbal self-praise and is common across offline and online communicative contexts. The latter is especially pronounced in social media environments where users may engage in protective self-presentation “under the radar”, e.g. surreptitiously untagging themselves in Facebook photos or deleting posts and comments from their Walls (Rui and Stefanone 2013).

2.2 Self-presentation online

Impression management plays a prominent role in the online environment: as Valkenburg and Peter (2009: 3) remark, “the finding that online communication enhances self-disclosure is one of the most consistent outcomes in CMC research”. One’s life online may appear happier and more exciting than in reality (Turkle
1995; Qiu et al. 2012), thanks in part to the affordances of selective self-presentation. Anonymity online enables creative self-presentation: users are free to invent a better version of themselves because there are no constraints placed on them by those who know them in “real life” (Bargh et al. 2002: 35). In line with Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation, other people’s impressions of us are formed from two sources of information about self: that given consciously, and that “given off” unconsciously. Text-based asynchronous communication allows users greater control over cues given off, for instance, via self-censorship (Walther 1996).

Selective self-presentation online has been documented on a variety of one-to-many broadcasting platforms: Facebook, online dating profiles, personal websites, Couchsurfing profiles (Dominick 1999; Ellison et al. 2006; Bolander and Locher 2010; Dayter and Rüdiger 2014). On Twitter and Instagram users engage in self-praise extensively, although pragmatic modification through “humblebragging” (Matley 2018) or speech act set self-praise+complaint (Dayter 2014; 2016) was observed for both platforms, indicating that users on some level are conscious of the risky nature of the act.

The fact that this research focussed on one-to-many, or broadcasting, outputs is significant. The size of the audience has been shown to have a positive correlation with the intensity of acquisitive self-presentation (Kivran-Swaine and Naaman 2011; Rui and Stefanone 2013). It is unclear whether these posited effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) hold for one-on-one contexts where people interact with those whom they know well offline. Private messaging research is still in its infancy due to the difficulty of obtaining data. WhatsApp is a promising data source in this regard and may uncover patterns of self-presentation that diverge from those established for social networking services. Palmer et al. (2016), for instance, found that the propensity to mass-share positive events in one’s life is not in itself a subcategory of self-praising behaviour: people do not mass-share predominantly or exclusively, but rather in combination with private sharing in order to capitalise on their close relationships. This may imply that self-praise would be present in private chats as well but could be communicated differently.

2.3 Linguistic realisation of self-praise

There is little evidence that the speech act of self-praise corresponds to a predictable surface form. Existing studies made some assumptions in this regard, usually related to the personally disclosive nature of self-praise. Positive self-disclosure in psychology studies tends to be sweepingly defined as “I statements” (Derlega et al. 1993: 90–91) or “I form” (in contrast to “he/she form”) (Inman, McDonald and Ruch 2004: 61). Bazarova et al. (2013) rely on a number of stylistic
indicators in the LIWC tool\(^1\) (such as “positive emotion words, e.g. glad, good, love”, first person singular pronouns, present tense verbs, “discrepancies, e.g. could, would, should”) to identify the “personal and immediate language style” in the instances of positive self-presentation. Although it would be of great methodological benefit to identify a surface form corresponding to the act of self-praise – this would enable the extraction of self-praise from large representative corpora, and consequently, more generalizable studies – it seems there is no unambiguous self-praise indicator. Dayter (2016) analysed a large collection of self-praising acts in CMC (about a third of a 1,000 tweets dataset) and concluded that there exist no syntactic or lexical IFIDs (illocutionary force indicating devices) intrinsic to this speech act. Frequency-based analysis suggested that positive self-disclosure is closely tied to the here-and-now and is heavy on the interpersonal dimension (Dayter 2016:212): “I”, “my”, “me”, “just”, “now”, “day” and “today” are very common.

Pragmaticians have approached self-praise from the vantage point of strategies used in relationship management. A uniform premise has been the conversational undesirability of self-praise, codified in Pomerantz’s (1978) constraint against self-praise or Leech’s (1983) Modesty Maxim. According to Pomerantz, who studied compliment response patterns, a compliment recipient is faced with two conflicting conversational guidelines: agreement as a preferred response vs. constraint against self-elevation. This conflict can be handled through a number of “solutions”, such as scaled-down agreement, qualifying praise, shifting credit away from the speaker, returning the compliment, or saying nothing (to avoid self-praise altogether).

The few existing investigations of naturally occurring self-praise do not support the strong version of the self-praise constraint, which claims that self-praise in conversation is to be avoided at all costs. Recorded conversational data from very different contexts: German politicians, Mandarin family members, and Irish close friends – all demonstrated presence of self-praise (Schütz 1998; Underwood 2011; Wu 2011). Dayter (2014, 2016) built on the compliment response research in relation to self-praise in her corpus of Twitter communication within a community of practice. She demonstrated that although speakers indeed made use of similar strategies for rendering self-praise appropriate, self-praising moves were often performed bald-on record, without mitigation and did not provoke censure. She

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1. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), https://liwc.wpengine.com/, a proprietary tool that performs superficial corpus analysis of text relying primarily on frequency counts and preloaded dictionaries and wordlists. LIWC has spawned other research on language and liking, e.g. Ireland et al. 2011 on correlation between language similarity and positive relationship outcomes.
concluded that positive self-disclosure is a crucial tool in claiming belonging to a
community and similarity with other members, and thus falls under ingratiation
tactic rather than the condemnable self-promotion.

As noted above, CMC research highlighted the incidence of indirect self-
praise. One type of indirectness is a “humblebrag” or self-praise+complaint, pre-
senting the laudable attribute as something to complain about (see Example (2)).
Although interviews suggest that humblebragging is less effective than sincerity
when it comes to creating a positive image of the speaker (Sezer, Gino and Norton
2015), social network users readily resort to it in their non-solicited self-praise
(Dayter 2016; Matley 2018). This subtype of self-praise has a convenient surface
indicator, a hashtag #humblebrag and its variants, which is vastly popular on
social media and lends itself well to harvesting and linguistic study.

(2) Being the know-how person at work is so exhausting. People come to me first.
(from Sezer et al. 2015: 20)
The other variety of indirect self-praise involves a “proxy brag” (Dayter and Rüdi-
ger 2017), also termed third party compliment (see Example (3), Speer 2012). The
speaker quotes a third-party evaluation of their goods or quality, thus endorsing
the epistemic constraint on self-praise which states that the type 2 knowable (“an
assertion hearable as repeated”) should be delivered by a party external to the
evaluated trait (Pomerantz 1980). In this scenario, acquisitive self-presentation is
accomplished via other-provided information which is less subject to manipula-
tion and is therefore perceived as more credible (Walther and Parks 2002; Rui and
Stefanone 2012).

(3) Umm the woman who took the bloods actually said “you’re about the most
convincing one I’ve seen”
(from Speer 2012: 62)
To sum up, the existing research on self-praise is contradictory in many aspects.
The contradictions can likely be explained by the study design, as the main bulk
of research from psychology relies on self-report attitude studies involving a Lik-
ert-scale questionnaire about a hypothetical situation (with the notable excep-
tion of Schütz 1998 who qualitatively analyses naturally occurring data). It is a
well-known adage that what language users do and what they think they do can
differ greatly. Nevertheless, there are some common factors that contribute to
our understanding of what functions self-praise fulfils, where it occurs, and what
influences its perception.

- Self-praise is a subtype of self-disclosure and is therefore key to relationship
  inception and development
- Positive sharing is better for the speaker’s image than negative, unless it is felt
to be manipulative
Self-praise can be achieved directly by stating one’s own accomplishments and laudable attributes
Self-praise can be achieved indirectly by claiming association with successful others, dissociating from unsuccessful others, humblebragging, or retelling third-party compliment to self
Understatement and self-effacing comments contribute to kindly reception of self-praise
Self-praise is common on social networks and is positively related to the size of the audience
People who self-praise online do so offline as well
Research on self-praising behaviour using naturally occurring data or real-world stimuli is rare.

I propose that more such research is needed to test the theoretical claims about the acceptability of self-praise, especially with the advent of Web 2.0 which gives an analyst access to previously unavailable private conversational data unaffected by the observer’s paradox.

3. **Self-praise in computer-mediated communication: First analysis**

3.1 Operational definition and search criteria

As noted in the previous section, the speech act of self-praise does not have a set of stable surface forms unambiguously associated with it (for example, for expressions of gratitude or complaints a large proportion of speech acts can be automatically extracted from a corpus with the search queries “thank*”, “sorry”, “apologiz*” etc.). Based on the findings cited above, especially Dayter (2016) which references a corpus of interpersonal communication manually coded for the instances of self-praise, I would like to propose a more constricting definition of self-praise with a focus on structural properties. Such a definition may be helpful in automatic identification of stretches of discourse that are likely to contain self-praise, and can optimise the work of human coders who subsequently handle the data.

First of all, self-praise inevitably refers to *self*, or the speaker. Even in the instances of indirect self-praise the speaker is likely to produce a first-person utterance retelling the compliment (the exception being non-verbal bragging, e.g. a flattering photo, but these are outside the scope of the present paper). In formal terms, and in line with hypotheses put forward in psychological studies (Inman et al. 2004, Bazarova et al. 2013), self-praise episodes will contain minimal deictic anchoring to the speaker’s perspective: pronouns *I, me, my, mine, we, our, ours, myself, ourselves, adverbials here, today, and now.*
Secondly, self-praise involves positive evaluation of some possession or attribute. As Dayter (2016) has shown, the presence of such positive evaluation characterises not only the act itself, but also the uptake. Example (1) in the beginning of this paper demonstrates an instance of such supportive uptake. This means that even for indirect self-praise or humblebrags, which do not contain explicit self-enhancement by the speaker, a search for adjectives that positively evaluate achievements and possessions will help identify adjacent stretches of discourse.

Finally, several studies suggested the usefulness of self-effacement or disclaimers in rendering self-praise more interactionally acceptable. In such cases, the speaker preventively admits to transgression and requests leniency from his/her audience, often in humorous form or claiming hard work. As a result, an explicit reference to the act of self-praise will be present in discourse.

This description was applied to a corpus of authentic WhatsApp discourse collected in 2016 from seven individuals who agreed to participate in the study and donate their archived chats to the author. Appropriate consent was obtained from all chat participants, and chats were fully anonymised. The resulting corpus amounts to approx. 230,000 words, 5399 messages, and contains five one-on-one chats and four group chats. All subjects are proficient English speakers: five subjects are native British or Australian, and the remaining two use English as their primary language of everyday communication and WhatsApp messaging.

From this corpus, potential instances of self-praise were extracted using queries formulated on the basis of the description above:

- To identify positive evaluation, I searched for proud, win*, awesome, amaz*, celebrat*, you did it, congrat*/grats, wow
- To identify meta-reference to self-praise, I searched for brag* and boast*
- The deictic links to the speaker had to be present within 5 words left or right of the node

Below, I take a look at the self-praising episodes identified with this method in order to assess its usefulness, and to form the first impressions of the status of self-praise in personal friendly conversation.

a. Is it okay to brag on WhatsApp?

The formal search query was overall a success in identifying self-praise episodes, although there are many creatively phrased instances of self-praise that slipped through the net. Searching the WhatsApp corpus with the AntConc concordancer software and scrolling through the KWIC view allowed to identify 52 episodes. Further 26 episodes were identified through manual coding, resulting in a self-praise subcorpus of 78 episodes, 286 messages. The success rate of 67% demon-
strategizes that although the approach has potential for improvement, it can be productively applied in self-praise studies of larger existing corpora.

Self-praising episodes make up about 5% of the corpus messages. Average length of an episode is 48 words (SD = 31.8), with the longest episode well above the average with 135 words. Keyword analysis of the self-praise subcorpus naturally indicates a relatively high occurrence of the words used in the search queries (wow, proud, awesome, win, done, celebrate), but no other meaningful keywords that could point to lexical or topical preferences in self-praise acts. This confirms the earlier observation that self-praise cannot be associated with any IFIDs. Incidentally, the fact that no first person pronouns appear in high keyness positions (myself in rank 38 and then me in rank 378) contradicts the assumption in Bazarova et al. (2013) that they are a marker of self-enhancing discourse.

One common feature of the episodes (found in 66 episodes, or 85%) is that self-praise is delivered without warrant, i.e. without an invitation or contextualising remarks by the conversational partner. In this constellation the speaker, according to Holtgraves and Srull (1989), runs the risk of being perceived as inconsiderate and egotistical. Based on conversational cues, this does not appear to be the case in the data. Example (4) comes from a one-on-one chat between two friends:

(4) 10.11.12, 16:15:49: Aria: I’m at my bother’s place, will be back on Monday…
10.11.12, 16:16:14: Cathy: Ah ok
10.11.12, 16:16:16: Cathy: Visa?
10.11.12, 16:16:18: Aria: just went running outside :) 
10.11.12, 16:16:25: Aria: For one hour
10.11.12, 16:16:38: Cathy: :) good job. Zombies make it better!
10.11.12, 16:16:40: Aria: Proud of myself :)

Aria offers a self-praising turn “just went running outside for one hour” not only without the corresponding warrant from Cathy (e.g. “What have you been up to?”, “Doing any sports?”), but further ignoring the question in Cathy’s previous turn. Cathy, however, does not censor Aria’s self-praise or non-cooperativeness. Self-praise is treated as a conversational norm and not a transgression, as suggested by Pomerantz (1978) and Speer (2012).

Enthusiastic and supportive uptake is another characteristic of self-praise episodes in the corpus that raises questions about the strength of the notorious constraint (found in 59 episodes, 75%). In Example (5), Cathy offers unconditionally positive evaluation and a smiley, which in computer-mediated contexts fulfills the function of the illocutionary force indicator (Dresner and Herring 2010) or a paralinguistic sign akin to a facial expression (Baron 2009). Although part of the data was extracted on the basis of positive uptake and would therefore be unus-
able for the illustration of this phenomenon, Example (5) as well as several other instances extracted differently (below, search query matched “I’m proud”) did not contain a single case of censure or negative feedback. The interactional function of silence is not always clear, especially in CMC contexts where lack of feedback may be due to connectivity issues or the user being distracted in the primary plane of communication; therefore, no judgement can be made in respect to no-uptake cases.

(5) 18.11.13, 17:20:04: Aria: Presentation done, got bonus points for showing up so sick
18.11.13, 17:20:40: Cathy: Good job:) how did it go?
18.11.13, 17:22:49: Aria: I’m proud I presented at all
18.11.13, 17:22:56: Aria: Haha

The WhatsApp data yielded some examples of indirect self-praise, both in the form of humblebrags (21 episodes, 27%) and proxy-brags (8 episodes, 10%). Example (6) is taken from a group chat of three friends and demonstrates one type of proxy-brag: self-provided information about a third party compliment to self that serves to establish a factual statement (“I had a crack at creme brulee”) as self-praise.

(6) 02/04/2016, 01:27 – Ann: Heya ladies have a lovely weekend! So i could always cook whatever u gave me but i have never been able to bake or do desserts i had a crack at creme brulee and my husband dear who is the fussiest person when it comes to dessert gave it a 9/10!!! I even had bought a cooking torch 😆🙂

In this instance, Ann engages in acquisitive self-presentation by citing her husband’s assessment “gave it 9/10”. Such other-provided information has been shown to have higher impact on the speaker’s positive image (Rui and Stefanone 2012:111). Besides, Ann evaluates the husband as “the fussiest person”, i.e. a strict judge of her achievement, in an effort to avoid the negative effects of closeness. With a high incidence of non-warranted, non-censored self-praise the group chat among three friends supports the hypothesis that self-praise is an important type of self-disclosure that fosters connections among intimates.

Example (7) contains both a complaint and a self-effacement accompanying the brag (“I am the sole breadwinner for the family”). Lynn sandwiches her claim

2. This effort needs not be conscious. However, studies have shown that the praiser is perceived the more positively the more distant s/he is from the target person, since praise from intimates has suspect credibility (Tal–or 2008); this is related to the “halo error” (Inman et al. 2004) which causes a rater to positively evaluate unrelated qualities of a person whom s/he likes overall.
to the proud status of the higher paid spouse between the reference to missing Dan and an admission of her character flaws.

(7) 16/07/2016, 09:38 – Lynn: I have 2 weeks holiday end of Aug, so I’m really looking forward to that. And spending more time with Dan. He’s playing some chess now, which means a few weeks away from home which makes me sad. But it makes him happy and now he is unemployed, he had the opportunity! I am the sole breadwinner for the family 😊 I thought it would be good to experience, if in the future it is the other way around. A learning opportunity for me not to be so selfish 😊

Matley (2018) interprets such speech acts sets (self-praise+complaint) as a politeness strategy aimed at mitigating face-threat. Since self-praise is inherently a face-threatening speech act that attacks the positive face of the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987), self-denigration attenuates the threat by taking away the implication of competitiveness. A similar attenuation is achieved with an explicit disclaimer, for instance in Example (8):

(8) 17.04.13, 18:40:04: Aria: It was sooooo awesome
    17.04.13, 18:40:30: Cathy: Presentation?
    17.04.13, 18:40:36: Aria: Yah :) 
    17.04.13, 18:40:47: Aria: Couldn’t have been better 
    17.04.13, 18:40:55: Cathy: Good ) people liked it?
    17.04.13, 18:41:02: Aria: The important people really liked out
    17.04.13, 18:41:18: Cathy: Now you’re a star )
    17.04.13, 18:41:31: Aria: I’m the <nation> lady
    17.04.13, 18:41:44: Cathy: We’ll celebrate when you come back!
    17.04.13, 18:41:55: Cathy: Till then reap the benefits))
    17.04.13, 18:41:56: Aria: Got a private meeting with <academic> tomorrow
    17.04.13, 18:42:10: Cathy: Get publication offers and so on!
    17.04.13, 18:42:11: Aria: Yes we will celebrate!
    17.04.13, 18:42:26: Aria: Sorry for bragging
    17.04.13, 18:42:36: Cathy: I understand ))
    17.04.13, 18:42:40: Aria: You’re one of the few people who understands
    17.04.13, 18:42:45: Aria: Lol

In this exchange, Aria repeatedly self-praises and adds evaluations and elaborations: an extreme case formulation “couldn’t have been better”, a third party compliment “the important people really liked it”, and factual evidence of her success “got a private meeting with <academic> tomorrow”. At the end of the episode, an unqualified apology for bragging marks the exchange unambiguously as a brag
and at the same time endorses Cathy’s expertise as “one of the few people who understand”.

Example (8) is the only one retrieved from the corpus with a boast*/brag* search query; therefore, the query does not appear to be very productive for data collection. One reason might be that both lexical items have sufficient negative connotations to discourage speakers from using them, even when self-praise is admitted in other ways and an apology is supplied.

To conclude the preliminary description of WhatsApp self-praise, it is worthwhile to look at the topics. Dayter (2016) has demonstrated that self-praise in the community of practice of ballet students, having a much higher incidence rate of 31%, occurred predominantly on the topic of ballet which served as a default warrant. Consequently, topical distribution of self-praise in the conversational data may serve as further evidence of relaxation, or absence, of the self-praise constraint, if it does not focus on specialised topics constitutive to a community.

Table 1. Self-praise topics on WhatsApp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>N episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work/study achievements</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport and health</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and holidays</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills and expertise</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money and possessions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 1, subjects self-praise on neutral topics likely to be shared by the general population: professional successes, happy life events, expertise, possessions. Although sports are quite commonly discussed, these are not community-specific achievements but rather mainstream activities such as jogging or hiking (see Example (9)).

(9) 11/10/2016, 12:09 – Dan: Just went for a run. 2km but better than nothing.
11/10/2016, 12:18 – Lynn: Grats on the run! 2km is great. It’s 20% of your race.

Finally, it is important to remark on the function of humour and transcribed laughter in the corpus. Petitjean and Morel (2017) observe that laughter in WhatsApp is “a powerful resource in that it allows participants to orient to interactional moments that are particularly delicate to manage.” Praising oneself is undoubtedly one of such delicate moments. The speakers commonly resort to humour both to moderate their self-praise and to reassure the self-praiser. Humour can be per-
formed as transcribed laughter (Example (5)), an emoticon (Example (4)), CMC abbreviations (see “lol” in Example (8)), or a joke (see Example (10) below) The self-deprecating character of humour often contributes to construct the episode as a humblebrag.

(10) 31/05/2016, 23:24 – Lynn: Exciting financial news, I’ve just paid off my Hecs! So now I am debt free to the Aus government. Hope they spend all my cash wisely. Education is getting way too expensive. Our kids are gonna be f*cked.

b. Is it okay to brag face-to-face?

Although the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of self-praise in every context, it is a worthwhile exercise to test the retrieval method on a different corpus. Below, some of the self-praise episodes extracted from the spoken part of the OANC are considered with reference to the aspects of self-praise discussed earlier: no warrant, supportive uptake, humblebrags, and proxy-brags.

(11) Uh, but one of the things that I am proud of in the U2’s I was the life support man ( ) uh. […] Well of, of course, needless to say, we had a, we could not make a mistake. So, uh, I skip a lot of things here that I could say, but they chose me and one more guy. (OANC, FrancisClem)

Example (11) is an extract from an interview with a veteran recalling his experiences in the Korean War. The interview, which is 4400 words long, is introduced by a short lead-in “Today he is going to talk to us about the Third SS, the U2 Quick and the Blackbird. Go ahead Mr. Francis” and is after that monologual. This kind of personal narrative provides an ideal setting for impression management, and the speaker frequently engages in positive self-presentation with elaborate detailing of his laudable attributes. With its complete lack of prompting, this episode is a prime example of non-solicited self-praise in natural, offline conversation.

In the conversation between a reminiscing mother and her grown-up daughter, personal narrative has dialogic structure which illustrates unconditionally supportive uptake offered by the listener to the self-praiser:
And I was practicing the piano, doing all that sort of thing, and my teacher entered me into the competition for Classical Music for 16 and under.

B: Wow!
A: For the whole, for the state of NC.
B: What an honor!
A: And the competition was down in Wilmington and it was on the 17th of March, The Ides of March, and so, uh, she drove me down there, and, at that point Mother had had a stroke and was back in the hospital. So I went down and I played. And I won.
B: Wow. (OANC, WorthingstonFrances)

In the next episode, the speaker appeals to the authority of her former colleagues for credibility on her expertise statement. Direct quotations add veracity to an account, even in the circumstances when the correctness of the quote cannot be verified (Dayter and Rüdiger 2014). The positive statement about self at the same time functions as indirect self-praise – the face-to-face counterpart of a proxy-brag. Other varieties of proxy-brags in the OANC data included self-promotion via association with a successful other, namely claiming acquaintance with the Queen or the president of the United States:

They said, “You got it on your own. You remembered things real well.”

(OANC, MillerFlora)

Humblebrags have proven to be much harder to locate in the OANC spoken material which is minimally interactive. The main marker for automatic retrieval of humblebrags is appreciative uptake by the listeners, and in the predominantly monologual format of the OANC backchannel is provided too seldom to be very useful for this purpose. This highlights a challenge in self-praise research: although humblebrags have received comparatively generous attention from CMC linguists thanks to the corresponding hashtags which make them easily identifiable in social media, offline interaction requires painstaking manual coding. Potential search terms to highlight the areas of discourse that may contain humblebrags could include complaint IFIDs. However, the data retrieved in such a manner will require extensive post-processing.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide the first operational definition of self-praise that is more formal and grounded in surface features than the traditional pragmatic view. The purpose behind this definition was to enable automatic data
harvesting from large existing corpora. The speech act of self-praise has to date received little scholarly attention, perhaps as a combined result of its perceived rareness in discourse and the difficulty of data collection. It was my intent to demonstrate that by applying automatic retrieval strategies, however imperfect they might be, self-praise emerges as a fully legitimate member of everyday speech act repertoire.

Earlier conversation analytic literature claimed the existence of a constraint against self-praise (Pomerantz 1978; Speer 2012), grounded in the politeness principles of linguistic behaviour (Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987). The ubiquity of self-praise in social media demonstrated in this paper and elsewhere (Dayter 2014, 2016 for Twitter; Matley 2018 for Instagram), as well as the first hints at the similar situation in offline talk, call into question the gravity of such a constraint. Complete absence of conversational censure in the WhatsApp corpus further supports this conclusion. Considering the linguistic behaviour surrounding self-praise – humour, humblebragging, disclaimers – the suggestion is that it enjoys the status of a risky interactional undertaking with a corresponding reward, in the same way as apologizing does. The reward is the contribution to relationship inception and development that a self-disclosure brings, combined with the effect that positive sharing has on the overall liking.

Returning to Example (1), we can trace the main characteristics of self-praise discussed throughout the paper. Slightly teasing humorous reaction “u banking legend u”, transcribed laughter, and emoticons testify to the untroubled conversational waters. A self-deprecating admission of a faux-pas “I even said I hate banks” aims to restore social equilibrium by ensuring that the speaker does not intend to raise himself above the interactional partner. The self-praising turn is unsolicited and uncensored: it is taken in stride by both participants and not treated as an exceptional occurrence. All of these are typical features of self-praise in the corpus, which leads me to believe that self-praise is an established discursive norm.

The limitation of the study is its small scope, necessarily a consequence of the first preliminary analysis. Further research is needed to find out with any degree of certainty how acceptable self-praise is in offline and online contexts, including across genres, platforms, genders, cultural backgrounds etc. One might argue that the special organisation of WhatsApp chats – the continuous dipping in and out of conversations that overlap with other communicative channels – is accompanied by an overall loosening of norms. In relation to Twitter and Instagram, loosening inhibitions have been cited to cause greater self-disclosure on one-to-many media (Rui and Stefanone 2012 for Facebook). No quantification or systematic analysis of the OANC data was conducted, and therefore any claims about offline interaction are purely speculative.
However, putting self-praise on the research map is the first step in the right direction. The richness of data made available to a pragmatician in collecting CMC interactions post-factum makes it an invaluable resource for investigating interactionally risky behaviour, which perforce had remained outside of the analytical scope so far. This paper has highlighted some characteristics and features of self-praise online on which future research may elaborate.

References


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