Linguistic Marking of Interactionality of Stance in the English Blog Discourse

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Abstract. The present article approaches the notion of stance as an interactive and dynamic discursive phenomenon that is constructed in the process of communication through a sequence of contributions by stance-takers. The linguistic resources (lexical, grammatical and stylistic) which the speakers have at their disposal for articulating their stances have been examined and classified according to their social and pragmatic potential. The material of the research is based on the online written messages taken from the popular American blogs.

Keywords: stance, stancetaking, interactionality, blog, discourse.

Introduction. Nowadays the World Wide Web plays a big part in the life of a modern society. People rely on the Internet for their business, education, entertainment, socialization and many other important aspect of human life. Evidently, day by day, the global web keeps gaining in popularity, because it provides a continuous access to information and allows communication between people all over the world.

There are different methods of interaction over the Internet (blogs, forums, e-mails, chat rooms), which enable networking, collaboration and information exchange. Blogs are the fastest-growing forms of online communication in which people publicly reflect upon and discuss various topics by means of self-generated personal stories. Thus, a blogger, engaging in virtual communication, manifests his / her own opinions, beliefs and emotions or, in other words, positions himself / herself through various linguistic and semiotic means.

Brief Review of the Previous Research. Today scholars state that "positioning theory opens up a new dimension of interpersonal encounters" [7, p.1]. Consequently, a great deal of linguistic research is dedicated to the phenomenon of stance [3; 8; 9; 13; 17; 28; 29] and its types [17; 18; 28; 29], interactive nature of positioning [19; 18; 24], social [16; 17] and sociocognitive [28; 29] stance aspects, specificity of stancetaking over the Internet [22; 23; 26] etc.

The present article focuses on the notion of stance as a discursive and intersubjective phenomenon that expresses the speaker's attitude towards the object of conversation, his / her own stances and the stances of his / her interlocutors. **The objective** of this study is to investigate various linguistic resources (lexical, grammatical and stylistic) which may act as markers of interactionality of stancetaking in the English personal blog.

Materials and Methods. The material for the analysis was taken from the online written messages in the popular American blogs. The applied methods of discourse analysis, conversational and stylistic analysis revealed structural, lexical, grammatical and stylistic stance markers in the English blog discourse and helped to explain their pragmatic, communicative and sociolinguistic potential.

Results and Discussion. Blogs have not been with Internet users for long, but have made a huge impact on society as they "…allow as many people to express opinions as receive them, since almost anyone with an internet connection to read a blog could also write one" [22, p. 2].

C. R. Hoffmann in his study of personal weblogs distinguishes three patterns of interaction in the Internet blog, namely 1) one-to-many pattern (the blogger establishes and maintains interaction); 2) many-to-one pattern (communication between readers and a blogger); 3) reader-reader interaction [11, p. 211-212]. Thus, blogging is not simply the information transmission; moreover, it is tightly connected with interpersonal exchange.

Interaction on the terrain of the virtual space always involves expressing of the writer's personal thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and evaluations toward the topic of the message and his / her interlocutors (readers, other bloggers). All these attitudes and evaluations are treated here under the term of stance, which covers and unites a range of linguistic features such as modality [12; 13], evidentiality [3], evaluation [14], attitude [10] that have been studied separately. In this article the preference is given to the term "stance" that, in general, can be approached as "linguistically articulated form of a social action" [8, p.139].

There is no unanimity among scholars in terms of their approaches to the investigation of stance in the linguistic literature. Some of them focus their attention on the individual perspective of stance-taking [4; 15; 17] and do not take into consideration the interactive specificity of this multifaceted phenomenon. However, many researchers have traced the interactional character of stance [14; 26]. For example, R. Englebretson [9] concludes that "stance, regardless of whether it refers to physical action, personal attitude / belief, evaluation and social morality, is public, perceivable, interpretable and available for inspection by others, in such a way that cannot be reduced to a matter of private opinion or attitude. Stance is, in addition, interactional in nature, both because it is collaboratively constructed by the participants, and also because it is interactively constructed with respect to other stances" [9, p. 6]. Another famous scholar John W. Du Bois defines stance as "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" [8, p. 163].

Our view of stance here is close to that of V. Ushchyna, who investigates stances (subject positions) from the sociocognitive vantage point [29]. She determines stance as "a dynamic phenomenon constructed interactively in communication through a sequence of

stance-takers' contributions realized in a multimodal manner" [28]. The scholar proves that stances have epistemic and affective dimensions, the expression of which strongly depends upon the previous contributions of other communicants [28].

Subject positions are constructed in discourse. Today, there is no longer any doubt about the existence of the so-called "computer (electronic) discourse", which, in general, is understood as language used to communicate in cyberspace. Internet blog as a genre of E-discourse, has a very specific purpose: "… the individuals are positioned, position others, define audiences and the attitude they have before them" [25].

Personal blogs or author blogs, which are in focus of our attention, belong to individual writers who share their experiences, feelings, thoughts and ideas with their readers. A blog is focused on the regular creation and distribution of content – authors' posts or, in other words, personal narratives. According to Ch. Linde, "narrative is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity. Narrative is a significant resource for creating our internal, private sense of self and is a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others" [20]. In this regard, author's narrative in the virtual space immediately invites an audience to the discussion and gives them a possibility to participate in the story created by the blogger. Thus, blogging is the process of creating a blog, and if a blog is created through the interactions among bloggers and readers, then not only is the interaction important, but moreover, the interaction itself is what constitutes blogging [2]. Therefore, a blog is a discussion, a conversation, an exchange between bloggers and readers (respondents) [2] who construct their stances through commenting on different topics under the communicative conditions of the Internet blog.

In our attempt to trace the interactive nature of stancetaking in personal blogs, we have analyzed 40 authors' narratives taken from 4 different weblogs (average length approximately 12300 words). We have also found out that nevertheless writers' posts are written texts that are monologically organized, they "… too have the dialogical properties of responsivity, addressivity, belongingness to genres, and sometimes also multivoicedness" [1]. Creating their post, bloggers not only express their personal viewpoints on a particular topic or adopt a position, on the contrary, they tend to discussion, as their narratives are full of questions and various forms of address. Writers also often show uncertainty in their posts or vice versa try to prove that they are right. Let us have a look at an excerpt taken from Britt Reints' personal blog "In Pursuit of Happiness" [5]:

(1)... My friends, please don't give up – on yourselves or the issues you care about. I am sure there is a you-shaped place out there. Keep looking. And one day you'll find it [5].

As we see in the example (1), the author of the post tries to involve her readers in the discussion addressing them as *"my friends"* and giving them instructions how to behave in a particular situation with the help of directives (*"don't give up", "keep looking"*). The fragment under analysis is also marked by the usage of the personal pronoun *"you"* and reflexive pronoun *"yourselves"*. Direc-

tives and personal pronouns such as you / we and their corresponding cases are defined by K. Hyland as interactional devices used to bring the potential readers into the text, focus their attention and guide them to a particular interpretation [12; 13]. Besides, the blogger tends to express her epistemic stance (conviction in her claim) using the phrase *"I am sure"* and a modal verb *"will"*, that, according to G. Lakoff, [19] marks the highest degree of certainty.

Thus, as it can be seen from the previous example, authors write their posts not only because they want to express their personal views, they also wish to show their attitude towards the propositional content and their readers. In this regard, we state that stance is an interactional phenomenon constructed by language users in the process of communication with the help of appropriate interactional elements, which are used by stancetakers to make their speech convincing and, at the same time, encouraging discussion.

Having analysed authors' narratives in the personal blogs we came to the conclusion that in the process of creating their "discoursal self", writers use various linguistic resources that allow them to open a space for discussions, where readers can dispute their interpretations. These recourses, which can also be termed as "metadiscourse markers" [13], pragmatic persuasive devices [12] help to build write-reader relations and express the amount of their commitment to the propositional information. Taking into consideration the fact that bloggers write their post because they want to be heard and understood, we singled out the following linguistic devices, which they apply in order to "…balance objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation" [13]: a) address terms; b) questions; c) epistemic stance markers; d) directives; e) reader pronouns; f) conversational particles. We offer to trace the functioning of the markers of interactionality of stance in the English authors' blogs.

a) Address terms – are words or expressions used as the correct polite way of speaking or writing to someone [21]. For example:

(2) ...so thank you, people, who don't know me and have nothing to gain by being kind to me [27];

(3) ...Guys! I totally finished the rewrite! [27]

In the example above, the blogger tries to attract attention to the issues he discusses in his posts by referring to his potential readers using a neutral term *"people"* and a friendly term *"guys"*. The analysis of the online messages in the personal blogs has also shown that address forms applied by bloggers are quite various: from neutral terms (*Will, Jane, people, friends [5; 6; 24; 27]* etc.), friendly terms (*buddy, guys, pal, brother, bro [5; 27]* etc.), terms of endearment (*sweetie, dear, baby [5; 27]* etc.) to titles (*Mr. Wheaton, Mrs. Reints [5; 27]* etc.) and disrespectful terms (*You idiot! [27]*).

b) Questions are defined by K. Hyland as the strategy of dialogic involvement par excellence, inviting engagement and bringing the interlocutor into an arena where they can be led to the writer's viewpoint [13, p. 285]:

(4) Do you remember how happy it made you feel? Do you remember the first time you saw a satellite flare and convinced yourself you'd seen a flying saucer? Does anyone else remember that? [27]

In cue (4) the potential interlocutor is involved in conversation with the author of the post by means of general questions, which are used with the aim "…to arouse interest and encourage the reader to explore an unresolved issue with the writer as an equal, a conversational partner, sharing his or her curiosity and following where the argument leads [13, p. 185].

c) Epistemic stance markers correspond to the linguistic expression of knowledge or to the degree of its validation. In other words, they refer to the way speakers communicate their doubts, certainties, and guesses. Ken Hyland in his study "Stance and Engagement: a Model of Interaction in Academic Discourse" [13] calls the devices like *possible, might, perhaps* as **hedges** and states that they are used to indicate the writer's uncertainty about some facts [13]. The researcher in his work also describes **boosters** – words like *clearly, obviously, demonstrate*, which allow writers to express conviction and assert a proposition with confidence [13, p. 2]. Let us have a look at the following examples:

(5) Maybe he was right. Maybe faith really is the substance of things not seen. Maybe you have to believe something before you can become it. Maybe activity follows identity [24].

(6) I believe I'm the most qualified candidate for President… I want to be elected on the merits—and I am sure that one of the merits is that I'm a woman… I've spent my whole life fighting for women and families because I believe that they matter to our nation and world – and because their struggles speak to my heart. I think it's time for a President like that [6].

In cue (5) blogger clearly marks his uncertainty about some facts with the help of the hedge *"maybe"*, which he repeats several times in the fragment under analysis. Thus, anaphora repetition, used in this excerpt possesses a considerable emotive force, represents a weakening of the blogger's statement, shows doubt and indicates that information is presented as a personal opinion rather than a generally accepted fact.

The next example (6) illustrates the author's conviction in her idea. Blogger, with the help of boosters *"believe"*, *"sure"*, *"think"*, marks her epistemic stance and presents her claim with assurance, "…stressing group membership, and engagement with readers" [13, p. 179]. The writer of the post clearly marks her certainty in the presented information. Thus, hedges and boosters, according to K. Hyland, contribute to an appropriate rhetorical and interactive tenor, conveying both epistemic and affective meanings. That is, they not only carry the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude to the audience [13]

d) Directives are fundamentally interpersonal features that foster the dialogic dimension of written discourse. They emphasize the explicit presence of both writer and reader, and demonstrate how reader's attention is being directly captured and focused [13]. Let us have a look at the functioning of this interactive device in the personal blog:

(7) And, please, consider this: you have choices all day long about how you treat people. … Make a choice that

you'll feel good about. [27].

Directives used in this fragment are based on the imperative constructions *("consider this", "make a choice")* and demonstrate the wish of the blogger to communicate with the audience. It is obvious that the author wants to make his readers perform certain actions in a way determined by him.

e) Reader pronouns (you and its corresponding cases, we and its corresponding cases) are also defined as linguistic markers of interactionality of stancetaking [13]. Researchers claim that they are "…perhaps the most explicit way that readers are brought into a discourse. You and your are actually the clearest way a writer can acknowledge the reader's presence [13, p. 182], for example:

(8) What we are witnessing now is a fight for not just the future of America, but for her present… Every election matters and every election helps decide what our country is going to look like not just for us, but for our children and for the future… This election is powerfully and unambiguously clear: you are with us, or you are against us. You are with Trump and his hateful, violent, paranoid, racist values, or you are against him. This is the reality in which we are living, and you have to choose a side [27].

The author of the post uses inclusive pronouns *"we / our / us"* in order to align with his readers and disalign with the supporters of Donald Trump at the presidential elections. Using the personal pronoun *"you"*, the blogger not only invites his potential followers to the discussion of the issue that is important for him, but also clearly shows his recognition of the readers' participation in online communication.

f) Conversational particles (ok, hey, oh, huh, wow etc.) function in bloggers' narratives as triggers of attention. They are used by writers to express hesitation, surprise, puzzlement or disagreement with the previous statement [22].

(9) Wow, guys, I wrote a novel [24].

(10) Hey, stop this shit, or you will be banned from posting comments on this blog [27].

As we see in the examples above conversational particles *"wow"* and *"hey"* help bloggers to approximate online interaction to the sound of a conversational register. The particle *"wow"* is used by the author to express his surprise, while the function of the particle *"hey"* is to attract readers' attention to the blogger's statement.

Conclusions. Thus, our research shows that the main concern of bloggers is creating a "discoursal self", positioning themselves and others on the terrain of the virtual space or, in other words, taking a stance, which is interactional in nature as it is dialogically constructed by both – bloggers and readers. When writers mark their stances, they use various linguistic resources, such as address terms, questions, epistemic stance markers, directives, reader pronouns and conversational particles in order to show their relations to others, express certainty or uncertainty, enact surprise or ironicise previous contributions. Further research involves elaboration of the various types of subject positions in the English blog discourse.

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