The emergence of the identity of a fictional expert advice-giver in an American Internet advice column*

MIRIAM A. LOCHER and SEBASTIAN HOFFMANN

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to research on the expression of expert advice-giving (e.g., Heritage and Sefi 1992; Silverman et al. 1992). We present a linguistic analysis of the ways in which the identity of the fictional expert advisor Lucy *emerges in an Internet advice column run by professional health educators as part of a university health service. In discourse-analytical close readings of 280 question–answer records, we identify and discuss seven recurring strategies (the advisor's name, self-reference and use of address terms; expert information-giving; giving options and making readers think; the choice of vocabulary; offering opinions; the use of empathy; the display of humor), which together contribute to* Lucy*'s voice as an expert advice-giver if the readers repeatedly access the question–answer exchanges. This emerging identity is in line with the site's mission to provide information designed to facilitate independent and responsible decision processes and corresponds to an ideal of nondirectiveness, as also identified in the literature on other advisory settings (He 1994; Sarangi and Clarke 2002; Vehviläinen 2003). The constructed identity of* Lucy *thus makes 'Lucy Answers' an attractive site to (re)turn to for advice and complements the other services provided by the health educators.*

Keywords: advice; identity; expertise; directives; mitigation; humor; Internet language.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we present a linguistic analysis of the ways in which the identity of a fictional expert advisor emerges in a particular Internet advice column. We will focus on 'Lucy Answers' (LA; the name is anonymized), a Web-based forum that gives its users the opportunity to

anonymously ask questions about sensitive issues such as relationship problems, sexuality, sexual health, (illegal) drugs, or general health concerns.[1] Although originally designed for students of an American Educational Institution (henceforth AEI), the site is in principle open to all members of the Internet community. Young American college students are, however, still its main target audience. Run by a team of anonymous health educators who write under the pseudonym *Lucy*,[2] 'Lucy Answers' is a professional page designed to provide its readers with quality health information. It is thus the site's ultimate goal to educate and to enlighten by answering questions for the Internet audience. Information transfer, however, is not the only function of *Lucy*'s answers: she provides *advice*. She is therefore much more than an electronically stored source of information. Rather, we argue, she has the identity of an expert *advice-giver*, who tries to have a positive effect on the attitudes and actions of the reader. We are, of course, aware that the character of *Lucy* is an artificial construct that reflects the strategies chosen for advice-giving by a team of advisors. We consider this fact to be of special interest because it allows us to take what emerges as *Lucy*'s identity in our analysis to be the consensus of more than just one individual person.

This paper is part of a larger research undertaking on advice-giving in 'Lucy Answers' (Locher forthcoming). Here, we will report on only one aspect of advice, namely on how *Lucy* emerges as having an expert advice-giving identity. This means that we will concentrate on the answers provided by *Lucy*. It is our aim to show how the central concern in the discourse of 'Lucy Answers', which is the negotiation of its professional expert advice in a way that is optimally acceptable and relevant to its intended audience, results in a particular advice-giving identity for *Lucy*. In Section 2, we will focus on the notions of *advice* and *identity*. Then we will introduce the data gathered from 'Lucy Answers' (Section 3) and outline our research aim in more detail (Section 4). This will be followed by the presentation and discussion of our findings (Section 5).

2.   Advice and identity construction

Let us start with some definitions and general comments on advice. According to Searle (1969: 67), who contrasts advising with the speech act of requesting, advice 'is not a species of requesting . . . . Advising you is not trying to get you to do something in the sense that requesting is. Advising is more like telling you what is best for you.' Advice has thus a weaker directive force than requests. Advice is also closely linked to the speech act type of assessments and judgments. However, advice-giving

contains an additional element: a future action is recommended by the advice-giver. It is this combination of assessing, judging, and directing that characterizes advice-giving. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines advice as '[o]pinion given or offered as to action; counsel' (1989, sense 5), the *Collins Concise Dictionary Plus* defines it as 'recommendation as to appropriate choice of action' (1989: 17), and the *American Heritage Dictionary* as '[o]pinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem; counsel' (2000, online). The advice-giver offers an opinion on how to solve a particular problem and by doing so implies that the suggested way of action is beneficial to the advice-seeker.

Advice can be solicited or unsolicited. This means that someone in need of advice can actively look for it. Conversely, an advice-giver can offer advice without a specific request on the part of the person who is perceived to be in need of advice. In both cases, the act of giving advice typically entails asymmetry with respect to authority and expertise. Hutchby (1995: 221) maintains that giving advice 'involves a speaker assuming some deficit in the knowledge state of a recipient, advice-giving is an activity which assumes or establishes an asymmetry between the participants'. This asymmetry is also part of DeCapua and Dunham's (1993: 519) definition of advice. They maintain that advice consists of 'opinions or counsel given by people who perceive themselves as knowledgeable, and/or who the advice seeker may think are credible, trustworthy and reliable'. In some cultures, advice-giving can be a rapport-building strategy and a sign of solidarity or interest. For this finding, Hinkel (1994, 1997) reports on studies for Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Indonesian speakers as well as for speakers from Arabic countries.[3] Conversely, within an Anglo-Western context, giving and seeking advice is generally considered to be face-threatening, because it challenges 'the hearer's identity as a competent and autonomous social actor' (Goldsmith and MacGeorge 2000: 235). The asymmetry between the interactants is thus perceived as threatening and, depending on the context in which the advice-giving takes place, it will require mitigation rather than a straightforward realization. Such mitigation may, for example, occur in the form of humor and empathy or lexical hedges such as *maybe* or *perhaps*. This is not to say, however, that advice is linked to mitigation by definition. In some contexts, advice in the form of an unmitigated imperative may be more appropriate than an indirect and/or down-toned rendition of the same content. The appropriate level of relational work accompanying advice will be negotiated on the spot in the interaction in question, and may depend on such varied factors as closeness of the interactants or the urgency and the degree of delicacy of the advice requested. We thus stress that the realization of advice can be manifold and is

neither limited to the performative verb *advise*, nor to any other particular linguistic realization.

Giving advice is a common activity in daily life. It can occur on a private and personal level among friends, but it occurs also in institutional settings and often in institutionalized ways. Most studies of advice-giving have been conducted in such institutionalized contexts. This emphasis is at least partly motivated by the fact that a better understanding of the communicative strategies at work can also contribute to an optimization of conversational encounters that have potentially far-reaching consequences for the advice-seeker (e.g., doctor–patient interaction). Furthermore, the literature on advice has mainly concentrated on spoken, face-to-face settings. Examples are studies dealing with advice in visits by health-care nurses to first-time mothers (Heritage and Sefi 1992), HIV-counseling sessions (Silverman 1997; among others), medical encounters more generally (e.g., Leppänen 1998; Pilnick 1999, 2001; Sarangi and Clarke 2002), student and career counseling (Bresnahan 1992; Erickson and Shultz 1982; He 1994, 1996; Vehviläinen 2001, 2003), or advice on call-in radio programs (Gaik 1992; Hudson 1990; Hutchby 1995). Because advice is not limited to a particular linguistic realization, every particular practice merits to be looked at in its own right. Leppänen (1998: 210) maintains that 'the study of advice should both carefully explicate the details of the production of advice and show how these details are systematic products of the interactants' orientations to specific features of the institutions'. How advice is valued and what function it is assigned in everyday interaction is also bound to differ from culture to culture (Hinkel 1997). Wierzbicka (1985), for example, reports different realizations, functions, and perceptions of advice-giving for English and Polish interactants.

Several scholars have also dedicated their research efforts to advice columns, which constitute a specific type of *written* advice that consists of the exchange of a personal problem letter and its corresponding reply. Some investigate the societal norms and values that are propagated by means of advice columns (e.g., Currie 2001; Gough and Talbot 1996; Mutongi 2000; Talbot 1992, 1995). Others study the linguistic realization of advice in newspaper advice columns (e.g., Mininni 1991; Franke 1996; Gough and Talbot 1996; Thibault 1988, 2002), or focus on the question rather than the advice given (Kreuz and Graesser 1993). The exchanges in these advice columns are presented as dyadic with only one turn for each participant. This means that the genre of advice columns contains a considerable constraint in that the advice-seeker and advisor cannot jointly develop a topic. In contrast to face-to-face interaction, the advisors thus cannot ask for clarification and have to make do with the—at

times scarce—background information revealed by the advice-seeker. The advice-seeker, conversely, has no possibility to react directly to the advice given in the response letter.

Answers are presented as if they were directed to one particular person. The choice of this dialogue format serves one main function: such advisory texts aim at giving an incentive for the reader to identify with the advice-seeker.[4] In other words, they are an invitation to the reader to take on the role of advisee (Franke 1997: 226). General knowledge about action sequences (the content of the piece of advice) is thus imparted with the help of a concrete and individualized problem case (Franke 1997: 230). While this exchange is presented as private, the advice is intended to reach a larger readership. Its main function is thus public (e.g., De-Capua and Huber 1995; Franke 1996).

Advisory texts in general are characterized by the fact that authors assume a deficit in knowledge in the anonymous audience. The text then aims at reducing this deficit (Franke 1996: 268). This leads us to the issue of power. Thibault (1988: 219, 221) argues that the formal asymmetry between question and reply in advice columns mirrors interactional control in that the response text redefines and interprets the questioner's text. This is because the advice-giver can direct the addressee to some form of social action and because '[t]he basic asymmetry of the writing/publishing situation does not permit this power asymmetry to be reversed' (1988: 221). It is also important to stress that an advice column cannot be free of ideology.[5] We will discuss this below when we talk about the mission of 'Lucy Answers', which reflects the fact that this site belongs to a health-care service and thus constitutes an institutionalized form of advice-giving.

A further characteristic of advice columns is that the answers represent solicited advice. DeCapua and Huber (1995) point out that in unsolicited advice, the advisor presumes authority, while in solicited advice authority is granted to the advisor by the advisee. Questioners who turn to an advice column for help thus assume that the advisors addressed will have the necessary knowledge or competence to help.

In sum, advice columns can be seen as a particular written text type with rigid formal characteristics: a letter to an expert advisor receives a response in the form of a personalized letter. This response, however, is intended to reach a larger readership and thereby serves the institutional goals of the advice column. These characteristics represent important constraints and thus influence how advice is given.

Let us now look more closely at the concept of identity and in particular at what might constitute an advisor identity. Identity is a difficult concept to define because it is 'neither categorical nor fixed' (Schiffrin 1996:

199) and 'people adhere to multiple and shifting identities' that 'are displayed in and negotiated through interaction' (Adelswärd and Nilholm 2000: 545). Davies and Harré (1990: 46) put it as follows:

An individual emerges through the process of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate.

It is thus important to look carefully at the specific discursive practice under investigation. De Fina (2003: 220), in her study on identity in narratives of immigrant discourse, points out that

[i]dentities emerge through the narrators' manipulation of linguistic choices that construct specific relationships with aspects of the story worlds depicted, of the interactional world in which the stories are told, and of the social context that frames the more local context.

An analysis of linguistic strategies will thus have to be seen and discussed in connection with the discursive practice as a whole, and in particular with the ideologies determining this practice.

We mentioned above that solicited advice entails that the advice-seeker grants the advice-giver a position of authority or expertise. However, there is more to an advisor identity than just possessing and sharing knowledge. DeCapua and Dunham (1993: 519) point out that meaningful advice also depends on credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. Thus advice is most likely to be elicited and taken from an expert figure whose opinion is valued and trusted. Such a person has the ability to influence the conduct or attitudes of others. An insensitive person who chastises others for being ignorant may issue directions but will generally not be consulted for genuine advice—nor would his or her advice be read.[6] However, while advising is clearly linked to trust, competence, and knowledge, it does not necessarily involve a hierarchical status difference between the interactants. DeCapua and Huber (1995) report that the 26 subjects questioned in their study in fact preferred to turn to family and friends for advice. An important aspect of advice is thus not only transfer of information, but also the creation of an atmosphere in which the interactional partner feels s/he has been taken seriously.

The notion of identity that we will adhere to in this paper is one that sees identity as a construct that emerges interactively, i.e., in the case of 'Lucy Answers', when readers engage in reading the advisory texts. In this institutional health-care service, advice-giving will ideally be designed in such a way that it serves its institutional goals best. The texts are thus likely to be carefully constructed by the advisor team. Readers will not only be confronted with the actual factual content of the advice given

(that will be indicative of the advisors' understanding and evaluation of the problem at hand), but also with the way in which this advice is designed. According to Joseph (2004: 21), people's identity 'inheres in their *voice*, spoken, written or signed' (emphasis in original), which we take to mean that both the action of advice-giving itself, and the relational and interpersonal level that accompanies it, will have to be investigated when looking at the construction of an expert advisor identity. In Section 3, we will now turn to a description of the material that we have chosen for analysis. This will then be followed by a more precise description of our research aim.

3.   'Lucy Answers': Information and data

'Lucy Answers' is run by the health education program of an American Educational Institution and was established in the early 1990s. The team running this health education program is also responsible for other health-related services at AEI such as 'focused workshops and limited publications, . . . comprehensive education and skill-building via psycho-educational groups, events and campaigns, major on-line and print publications . . . other special projects' ('Lucy Answers' 2004). The Web-based question-and-answer service is an addition to these more traditional services and reaches out to its main target group, young American university students, by means of the Internet, a communication channel that is much used by this group of people. The declared mission of 'Lucy Answers' is

to increase access to, and use of, health information by providing factual, in-depth, straight-forward, and nonjudgmental information to assist readers' decision-making about their physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual health. ('Lucy Answers' 2004)

'Lucy Answers' thus propagates a counseling ideal of nondirectiveness. A similar orientation has been reported for the student counselors in He's (1994) data, the experts in Sarangi and Clarke's (2002) data of genetics risk communication, and the career counselors in Vehviläinen's (2003) study.

   Since advice-seekers enjoy full anonymity, no information about their sociodemographic background is available. However, it is our impression that the majority of questions still originate from the initial target group of young American university students. According to the fact sheet, 'Lucy Answers' receives more than 2,000 inquiries a week. While all of these are read, only five are answered every week. For this reason, *Lucy*'s regularly

updated and constantly growing archive is an integral part of the site, as an advice-seeker is much more likely to find information in previous responses to similar questions than to receive a personalized reply. 'Lucy Answers' also offers a service that sends the questions of the week directly to your e-mail account. Finally, there is an option for readers to respond to *Lucy*'s answers. In order to accomplish the site's aim of providing quality information '[r]esponses undergo a standardized review process to insure high quality and accuracy, and announcements of updated content are posted' ('Lucy Answers' 2004). Example (1) is a typical specimen of a problem and response letter:

(1) (LA, relationships)
     TROUBLED BY ATTRACTION TO TALL WOMEN

     Lucy,

     I'm a seventeen-year-old man and my problem is that I only like tall girls and I don't feel anything about shorter beautiful girls. It's something that troubleshoots me and I would like to take an advice. Thanks!

     ───────────────────────────────

     Dear Reader,

     If you're 6′3″ or 6′4″ (approximately 192 or 195 centimeters), then your pool of possible mates will be a bit shallow. But, assuming that you stand somewhere under that mark, the news is good. There are plenty of 'tall' women in the world—and at least a portion of them either get a rise out of 'shorter' guys, or don't care at all about the heights of their mates. What makes your particular attraction a problem? Is it due to the fact that we almost always see men romantically involved with women who are shorter than they are? Or, is it because it can seem strange to come upon the opposite? Taller boy with shorter girl may be the norm, but this doesn't mean that anything is wrong with you, or that you shouldn't enjoy and pursue your higher interests.

     Lucy

'Lucy Answers' is organized into seven different topic categories of advice: 'alcohol, nicotine and other drugs' ('drugs' for short), 'emotional health', 'fitness and nutrition', 'general health', 'relationships', 'sexual health', and 'sexuality'. These topics contain further subcategories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Topic categories in 'Lucy Answers'*

Category	Subcategories
Drugs	'alcohol', 'nicotine', 'marijuana', 'club drugs', 'hard drugs', 'inhalants', 'prescription and over-the-counter drugs', 'caffeine and energy-boosting drugs', 'helping and getting help', 'miscellaneous'
Emotional health	'stress and anxiety', 'blues and depression', 'communication concerns', 'obsessive and compulsive behavior', 'child abuse', 'grief and loss', 'counseling', 'medications', 'miscellaneous'
Fitness and nutrition	'fitness', 'optimal nutrition', 'weight gain and loss', 'food choices and health', 'eating disorders', 'body image', 'miscellaneous'
General health	'body maintenance', 'colds, aches, pains, and other ailments', 'stomach and other gastrointestinal grumblings', 'cancer', 'injuries', 'complementary medicine', 'skin conditions', 'hair', 'oral health', 'eyes', 'sleep', 'body decoration', 'miscellaneous'
Relationships	'relationship stuff', 'gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning', 'nonconsensual relationships', 'talking with parents', 'friendship', 'roommate rumblings', 'miscellaneous'
Sexuality	'genital wonderings', 'sexual questions', 'masturbation', 'orgasms', 'kissing', 'sexual secretions', 'tools and toys', 'fetishes and philias', 'erotica and pornography', 'sexual permutations', 'miscellaneous'
Sexual health	'reproduction', 'contraception', 'sexually transmitted diseases', 'men's sexual health', 'women's sexual health', 'miscellaneous'

Our database comprises 2,286 pairs of problem and response letters that were posted on 'Lucy Answers' during a time span of ten years. In order to study the emergence of *Lucy*'s identity as an expert advice-giver, we conducted an in-depth analysis of 40 question–answer exchanges per category ($N = 280$).

4. Research aim and caveat

We have chosen 'Lucy Answers' for our analysis as one example of the specific discursive practice of Internet advice columns. We are interested in the linguistic choices made by the 'Lucy Answers' team to give expert advice to its target audience, which, as we argue, also result in giving the fictional advisor persona *Lucy* a specific voice. We have seen that it is the site's declared mission to provide easily accessible quality health information that facilitates the readers' decision-making. For the time being, we take this to represent the ideology of 'Lucy Answers'.[7] Next to expertise, however, meaningful advice is also linked to credibility, trustworthiness,

and reliability. For this reason, the 'Lucy Answers' team must be interested in creating a voice for *Lucy* that the readers of the site can relate to. This can for example be achieved by constructing her persona as somebody who is neither too sociable nor too distant. In our paper, we will investigate a whole range of strategies that are employed to ensure that the team behind *Lucy* can reach out to its target audience.

Although 'Lucy Answers' uses a format of written question–answer sequences that is not interactive in the sense that face-to-face communication is, it is important to point out that the emergence of *Lucy*'s identity needs the interaction with the readership. We also need to stress that *Lucy*'s identity does not emerge in the reading of one single record, but over time in the reading of the weekly publications of new exchanges of questions and answers or in using the archives, which are an integral part of 'Lucy Answers'. It is not guaranteed, however, that the identity that emerges through the exposure to *Lucy* is the same for every reader. While we would therefore not want to have our analysis understood as the last word on *Lucy*'s identity, our aim is to point to linguistic patterns that we deem to *contribute* to the emergence of this identity. We therefore want to identify a particular voice that belongs to *Lucy* by analyzing the way in which the response letters are designed.

5.   Results and discussion

In order to discover the distinctive features of *Lucy*'s voice, the 280 response letters in the subcorpus were analyzed in close readings.[8] This allowed us to isolate seven general strategies that we consider to contribute toward the creation of an expert advisor identity.

1. *Lucy*'s name, self-reference, and address terms.
2. *Lucy* presents herself as a competent and knowledgeable source of accurate information.
3. *Lucy* makes readers think and gives options in her realization of advice.
4. *Lucy* chooses an easily accessible, informal, and nonoffensive range of vocabulary.
5. *Lucy* has an opinion (positive and negative criticism).
6. *Lucy* shows awareness of difficult situations (empathy).
7. *Lucy* has a sense of humor.

These seven general strategies contribute to *Lucy*'s particular voice on different levels. Point one is related to identity because an individual's name and the way he or she positions him- or herself with respect to others is

revealing about the way in which one's own image is portrayed. Point two deals with the aspect of an *expert identity*, which plays an important role in the discourse of health-related issues and was argued to be crucial in advice-giving situations. Points three and four are concerned with aspects of how advice is realized linguistically, which have an impact on the advisor identity. Points five to seven represent interpersonal strategies that are of importance when considering advisor qualities. In what follows, we will illustrate and discuss the seven strategies.

5.1. Lucy*'s name, self-reference, and address terms*

Since the names of the advice column and the fictitious advisor have been changed for this study, we cannot discuss in detail the connotations that the original name may evoke in the readership. We have, however, taken care to choose as name a pseudonym that may carry some of the original implications. First of all, it is important to stress that the advisor is portrayed as a woman. The choice of a female name ties in with a longstanding tradition in the United States to have women in the role of advice columnists. A fictional example can be found in Nathanael West's novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* from 1933. Well-established, if not to say institutionalized, columns were run over decades by *Dear Abby* or *Anne Landers* for an American readership. The choice of first name is also not uncommon and links to such popular advice authorities as *Dr. Ruth* or *Dear Abby*. The name *Lucy* thus places our advice-giver in a tradition for female advisors in the genre of advice columns.

De Fina (2003: 52) points out that '[t]he investigation of the use of pronouns as a window into the analysis of identity has a long-standing tradition in linguistics.' In addition to their referential function, which links the text to its specific context, the choice and manipulation of pronouns can 'also convey subtle social meanings that relate to [the speakers'] social identities or to their positions with respect to other interlocutors, both present and absent, and to the experiences and topics that are being discussed' (De Fina 2003: 52). We thus asked ourselves how *Lucy* refers to herself and how she addresses the questioner and other readers. Apart from the signature *Lucy*, she refers to herself a total of 215 times in the 280 records analyzed. The first-person pronoun *I* is avoided and appears only in five instances. In all the other cases *Lucy* refers to herself in the third person. Consider (2) and (3) as examples of typical uses:

(2) (LA, drugs)
　　Lucy assumes that this is what you mean by contamination.

(3)   (LA, sexuality)
    Lucy noticed that you signed your letter 'argh' and wondered about
    that.

Referring to herself in the 3rd person is a strongly marked feature. We ar-
gue that this strategy simultaneously serves two functions. First, it is a
way to point to the team of health educators that stand behind the pseud-
onym *Lucy*. This reinforces her identity as an authoritative *expert*. At the
same time, it is also an honest way of reminding the reader that *Lucy* is
not real. Secondly, the frequent mention of her name talks *Lucy* into be-
ing, so to speak. This happens only over time, when readers access the site
repeatedly. The few instances of the first-person pronoun would be imme-
diately noticeable to a reader familiar with 'Lucy Answers'. They should
thus perhaps better be interpreted as a slip in tone or register, especially
because two of the five cases even co-occur with a reference to *Lucy* in
the 3rd person.

   Lucy addresses the questioner either with 'Dear Reader', as in Example
(1), or with the pseudonym chosen by the questioner as a signature (e.g.,
'Dear Sleepyhead', as in Example [15] below). In the body of the answer,
Lucy typically addresses the questioner with 'you'. Since the site's aim is
to reach a larger readership than just the questioner, the quality of the
English pronoun *you* to refer both to the singular as well as to the plural
is advantageous. The reader can thus either identify him- or herself with
the questioner or consider being part of the plural *you*. In some cases,
Lucy also addresses the readership directly by saying 'those of you' or 'ev-
eryone else'. We will see later that *Lucy* uses different strategies to ac-
count for the needs of the larger audience. In general, however, *Lucy*
adheres to the format of a 'reply to a personal question'.

5.2.   Lucy *presents herself as a competent and knowledgeable source of*
       accurate information

Lucy's replies consist of several different elements. Since an analysis of
the full catalogue of the discursive moves is beyond the scope of the pres-
ent discussion (cf. Locher forthcoming), we will here only focus on a few
important aspects. Advice, in the sense of giving a counsel, is only one
part of *Lucy*'s answer. (We will comment on the linguistic form of this
advice below.) There are also address and farewell sections, parts in
which *Lucy* assesses the questioner's particular situation, or in which she
gives general information on the topic raised. *Lucy* may also include an
entire record that was published earlier on 'Lucy Answers', refer to other
sources for help, and use summarizing remarks before closing. A typical

answer minimally consists of the address form, an assessment or general information section, and an advice section, followed by the signature. While the address form and signature occur only once per record, all other sections may occur several times.

We found that the sections on general information and the sections in which *Lucy* refers to other sources of help contribute to an important degree to her identity construction: *Lucy* presents herself as an expert, i.e., as a competent and knowledgeable source of accurate information. It is in these sections that *Lucy* displays her encyclopedic knowledge: she presents facts, describes symptoms, enumerates side effects (in the case of drug-related questions), etc. Consider Example (4) in which *Lucy* answers a question by somebody who is worried about his/her partner's panic attacks and asks how s/he can support her.

(4) (LA, emotional health)
     PANIC ATTACKS

Dear Lucy,

I need some information about panic attacks. My partner moved with me to NY and, at the time of moving, experienced several attacks of extreme fear.

This has paralyzed her to the extent that she no longer goes to work, her career is on hold, and she requires help traveling, if she travels at all. As well as being incredibly distressing for her, it's not helping our relationship either.

My question relates to my role in helping her recover from this. At present I frequently 'overlook' the problem by going everywhere with her and being as supportive as possible. Am I an 'enabler'? Should I make her 'tough it out,' or will she just get better?

Dear Reader,

Panic attacks are periods of heightened anxiety often coupled with an extreme fear of being in crowded or closed places. At first, these attacks are sudden and unexpected, but, if they continue, are often triggered by environment, like going through tunnels, traveling across bridges, or being in crowded elevators. Accompanying symptoms include a sense of chest pain, shallow breathing, lightheadedness, dizziness, sweating, a pounding heart, chills or flushes, nausea, and even tingling or numbness in the hands. A sense of impending doom is usually part of the experience.

Panic attacks are common, frequently linked to feelings of loss. Panic attacks vary in intensity and tend to be exacerbated by stressful periods. Psychotherapy, with and without medication, is effective for as many as 90 percent of people affected with panic attacks. Cutting back on caffeine may make a difference, too.

While your support may be comforting to your partner, it would be wise for her to get professional counseling, especially since her panic is affecting your relationship. With counseling for yourself as well, you may be better able to help your partner. If you are at AEI, call Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) at ⟨phone number⟩.

Lucy

The first two paragraphs of the answer give general information about panic attacks in the form of a concise summary and listing of symptoms. *Lucy* thus displays that she has researched the topic (notice the percentage figure in the second paragraph) and is knowledgeable about the ins and outs of this problem. *Lucy* offers advice only in the third paragraph, in which she suggests that the questioner and the person who suffers from the panic attacks should seek professional counseling. *Lucy* also provides a phone number and thus displays knowledge of where to direct the questioner for further help. Records such as Example (4) contribute to *Lucy*'s identity as an informed advice-giver.

This dedication to provide well-researched information, which is of course part of the agenda of 'Lucy Answers', can also be seen in *Lucy*'s attempts to answer comprehensively. *Lucy* may broaden the scope of the answer by giving more information than is requested in the question, by asking follow-up questions and answering them herself, and by referring the readers to other sources of information such as book titles, other Web sites, addresses, or links to previous *Lucy* records. To enhance her credibility, *Lucy* also often gives the sources of her information. In her study of postings to asynchronous newsgroups on the Internet about risks related to the use of cell phones, Richardson (2003: 172) points out that credibility and trust are at the core of whether an individual's contribution is accepted or not. In her data, newsgroups users therefore engaged in 'warranting strategies', i.e., in strategies 'designed to give fellow participants reasons to take the information seriously', for example by referring to (presumably reputable) sources (2003: 172). Even though her expertise is less likely to be called into question by virtue of her role as institutional helper, the use of such strategies can also be observed in the case of *Lucy*. The team behind *Lucy* thus works on the creation of her identity as a trustworthy source of well-researched, quality advice.

5.3. *The realization of advice:* Lucy *makes readers think and gives options*

We have seen in the previous section that *Lucy* provides background information. Let us now look at the sections in her answers in which she gives advice. We found that *Lucy* realizes advice by making use of all three principle syntactic methods: declarative statements, imperatives, and questions. A qualitative analysis is thus necessary in order to decide whether a linguistic form functions as advice. We will first turn our attention to questions. The reader may recall that *Lucy* used questions in the introductory example, in which a questioner is troubled by his attraction to tall women. They are reproduced in Example (5).

(5)   What makes your particular attraction a problem? Is it due to the fact that we almost always see men romantically involved with women who are shorter than they are? Or, is it because it can seem strange to come upon the opposite?

We argue that these questions are the core piece of advice in this record. They act as an invitation to the reader to reconsider the problem and to look at it from a different angle. The solution to the problem, *Lucy* indirectly suggests, lies in this change of view. The questions are thus intended to make the questioner and the other readers think.

   In another record from the category 'sexuality' with the topic of postponing male orgasm, *Lucy* assesses the questioner's situation, provides general information, as well as clear instructions on prolongation techniques in the form of imperatives. She ends her explorations, however, with two questions aimed at making the questioner think. They are reproduced in Example (6).

(6)   (LA, sexuality)
Lucy wonders ... have you spoken with her about what you want? Have you asked her about what she wants?

Lucy places the ball back in the reader's court by asking questions herself. In this way, *Lucy* emerges as involving her readership actively. However, *Lucy* also uses questions differently. Consider Examples (7)–(9):

(7)   (LA, drugs)
In the meantime, why not work on staying straight for awhile and rationally looking at the positive and negative effects of your tripping.

(8)   (LA, emotional health)
On the behavior modification front, how about seeking the comfort and privacy of a stall instead of a urinal (for urinating, that is)?

(9)   (LA, relationships)
Do you have friends/family with whom you feel okay sharing your feelings? Do you have the wherewithal to make it through the rest of the semester? And yes, here it comes: would you consider moving this conversation from on- to off-line with someone at CPS (Counseling and Psychological Services—⟨phone number⟩)?

We argue that the questions in Examples (7)–(9) all act as suggestions for future *action*, while the questions in Examples (5) and (6) invite *introspection*. *Lucy* thus uses questions with different functions when realizing advice. However, some of the questions in the corpus can also be read as fulfilling both functions of suggesting a future action and inviting introspection at the same time. Multiple labeling is thus possible for analysis.

   Lucy's use of declarative statements to realize advice can best be described as suggestions. Often they appear with the verb *suggest* itself, as in Example (10), or they appear in combination with modals, as in Examples (11)–(13).

(10)   (LA, sexual health)
Lucy *suggests* that a nurse practitioner or doctor take a look and give you advice if the bumps are still around by the time you read this.

(11)   (LA, drugs)
In the meantime, you *can learn* ways to be his friend without enabling his drinking.

(12)   (LA, emotional health)
Lucy *would wholeheartedly recommend* that you talk to someone about this grief you're having in more detail, so as to help you get through the crisis and be able to continue a healthy life.

(13)   (LA, emotional health)
You *might look* at other stress outlets. Exercise *might make* a difference physically. Psychologically, there *might be* something you could do to become more available or more receptive to a potential partner.

Imperatives, finally, can appear in sections in which *Lucy* suggests that the advice-seekers approach another source for help. Example (14), for instance, follows directly after Example (12) and gives a specific recommendation to the questioner.

(14)   (LA, emotional health)
Make an appointment at Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) at ⟨phone number⟩.

Imperatives are also used in cases where clear instructions are appropriate to achieve a solution of a problem. Consider Example (15) as a case in point. The question is from a student who has problems getting up in the morning. *Lucy* offers two explanations for the sleeplessness described and both times gives instructions on how to deal with them.

(15) (LA, emotional health; emphasis added, abbreviated)

> Dear Sleepyhead,
>
> The only model Lucy has for sleeping more in the winter is the bear, which goes into hibernation. As far as humans are concerned, there's seasonal affective disorder (SAD), [description and symptoms of SAD].
>
> If this sounds like you, you may want to see someone in Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). *Call* ⟨phone number⟩ for an appointment.
>
> If this doesn't sound like you, and you're just having trouble getting up in the morning, here's some basic information about sleep [general information about sleep].
>
> Here are some suggestions for creating healthful sleeping habits for yourself:
>
> - *Establish* a regular sleep time. *Try* going to sleep the same time each night, and waking up the same time each day, within an hour, more or less. *Make* an effort to keep the same sleep times on the weekends in order to set your body's rhythm.
> - *Create* a personal sleep environment—dark, quiet, free of distractions, and not too warm. *Use* an autotimer to shut the radio or TV off after you have fallen asleep.
> - *Give* yourself time to wind down before going to bed. This gives you a transition from your energetic life to sleeping.
> - *Exercise* regularly—twenty to thirty minutes, three or four times a week—it can enhance your ability to sleep.
>
> Sweet dreams!
>
> *Lucy*

Again, we can also make a distinction between the use of imperatives for inviting a future action (as in Examples [14] and [15] above) and for inviting introspection. The latter is exemplified in Examples (16) and (17).

(16) (LA, sexuality)
Remember, sex is not inherent—it's learned.

(17)   (LA, emotional health)
        Think about the pros and cons of your religion.

Which sequences were identified as advice depended on a close reading of every individual record. We should stress, therefore, that no linguistic form in itself can be unambiguously equated with the realization of advice in general. In the records analyzed, it is especially also the interplay of the different sections, their sequence and internal composition that together create the meaning of each of *Lucy*'s individual answers.

Giving advice, as pointed out in Section 2, is potentially very face-threatening in Western cultures. The way you give advice thus says something about whether you are a considerate advisor. We found that *Lucy* alternates in her realization of advice between questions, suggestions, and imperatives. This means that she plays with the level of indirectness. Questions and statements are less straightforward in their directive force, leaving open the opportunity for the reader to interpret the utterances as options. Even sections with imperatives were often embedded in sections softening the directive force of these imperatives. A case in point is Example (15) above in which the list of imperatives is preceded by a statement marking the instructions as suggestions ('Here are some suggestions for creating healthful sleeping habits for yourself').

An explanation for *Lucy*'s preference to display optionality can be found in the aim of 'Lucy Answers' to provide information 'to assist readers' decision-making' ('Lucy Answers' 2004), which reflects the ideal of nondirectiveness in some counseling contexts as reported by He (1994), Sarangi and Clarke (2002), and Vehviläinen (2003). This implies that the team of health educators aims at *facilitating a decision process* in the minds of the readers, rather than at giving straightforward directions. This stance is nicely exemplified in one reply where *Lucy* finishes her explorations on risks of being infected with HIV by saying 'You now have the information—let each student make good, intelligent, informed decisions for themselves'. *Lucy* is thus constructed as someone who gives options and not directions and who considers the questioners to be responsible for their own decisions.

5.4.   Lucy *chooses an easily accessible, informal, and nonoffensive range of vocabulary*

As mentioned above, the original target readership of 'Lucy Answers' consisted of the students at AEI. However, as the site is accessible worldwide by means of the Internet, the range of possible advice-seekers has been vastly expanded. Nevertheless, it is still the site's primary aim to

reach young adults and particularly the students of the university that hosts the Web site 'Lucy Answers'. We were therefore interested to see whether this is reflected in the kind of vocabulary used.

First of all, it is striking that the question–answer pairs found on 'Lucy Answers' largely conform to the conventions of standard written American English. This is in stark contrast to the type of language use found on many other sites with a comparable target audience. As a case in point, consider Example (18), which is a typical question–answer pair found on the 'Studentcenter' (SC), a forum where teenagers can seek advice from peers in the same age group:[9]

(18) (SC 2002)
[question letter]
I have a million friends. But there is one that NO one can get along with ... we say we can never be her friend but always are ... seh has called us brats and snobs and preps and almost everything imagainable. She has even gone as far as to get her mom on the phone and her mom even called us that.We dont know what to do becuase one moment she is all nice and then next she is evil kenevil ... We would like to be her friend but cnat WHat do we do?'

[answer letter]
If you have a million friends and shes being a bitch then dont be friends with her. If shes so mean then you shouldnt have to put up with her evilness. Youll be much happier without that problem in your life. Hope this helps, [name]

This extract has clearly not been edited and it contains a whole range of nonstandard spellings (*shes, dont, youll, shouldnt*) as well as obvious typing errors (e.g., *becuase, cnat* instead of *because* and *can't*). More importantly, however, Example (18) also differs considerably from a typical entry on 'Lucy Answers' in its degree of orality. Rather than being a carefully constructed written text, it exhibits features typically found in spontaneous spoken interaction (simple sentence structure, relatively restricted range of vocabulary, etc.).

While an exchange of the type shown in Example (18) may indeed be adequate for some purposes, it is clearly incompatible with *Lucy*'s mission of providing quality health-care information. Instead, by adhering to standard spelling rules and conventions and by presenting her well-structured answers in fully grammatical English, *Lucy* underscores the impression of being competent and trustworthy. Her choice of vocabulary, however, has more complex implications. On the one hand, ample use of specific technical terminology would show readers that *Lucy* has

the required level of knowledge for giving competent answers. On the other hand, overuse of such terminology may increase the distance between *Lucy* and the reader and thereby reduce the impact of her identity as an advice-giver. A more detailed look at the type of vocabulary used is thus necessary.

We therefore created word frequency lists for *Lucy*'s answers in the entire corpus (2,286 records). In addition to a general frequency list, individual word-class-based lists were also compiled.[10] Frequency lists offer the researcher an opportunity to quantitatively assess some aspects of language use that would necessarily escape attention in the course of a purely qualitative analysis. Such lists can also be used to compare language use across several text collections, for example in order to isolate particular stylistic features that are typical of an individual text domain or discourse context. In order to find out which aspects are most characteristic of *Lucy*'s vocabulary, we made use of corresponding frequency lists compiled on the basis of the written component of the British National Corpus (BNC), a large and representative corpus of Present-day English (cf. Aston and Burnard 1998).[11] Rather than comparing normalized frequency counts, however, it is necessary to assess the probability that the observed differences are due to chance. For this purpose, a particularly useful measure of distinctiveness is given by the log-likelihood ratio—also known as G^2.[12] The higher the log-likelihood value, the more statistically significant is the difference between the observed raw frequencies. For reasons of economy, we will restrict our discussion to *Lucy*'s use of nouns.

Table 2 displays the 20 nouns that were calculated to be most distinctive of 'Lucy Answers'. The second column lists the total number of occurrences in *Lucy*'s answers, while the third column shows their corresponding frequency in the BNC. The ranking of items is based on the log-likelihood value. The nouns on this list obviously reflect the relatively limited range of topics discussed on 'Lucy Answers' and it can come as no surprise that health- and relationship-related nouns such as *sex*, *condom*, and *infection* have a very high G^2 value.[14] The list is nevertheless instructive with regard to the more specific question about the nature of the vocabulary employed. Thus, none of the nouns shown in Table 2 can be said to be particularly scientific or technical and no special knowledge would therefore be required to understand them.[15] This finding is all the more striking since our frequency lists are based on the whole set of 2,286 records and the data consequently includes the topic categories of 'general health', 'fitness and nutrition', and 'sexual health', which may have been expected to particularly invite scientific vocabulary. While *Lucy* certainly makes use of such vocabulary when necessary (e.g., *hirsutism,*

Table 2. *The 20 most distinctive nouns in the answers on 'Lucy Answers'; ranked by log-likelihood ratio*[13]

Noun	*n* in 'Lucy Answers'	*n* in BNC (written)	G^2
Health	2,625	22,806	8,557
Provider	1,001	387	7,920
Sex	1,462	7,679	6,052
Herpes	453	115	3,754
Reader	833	3,587	3,735
Penis	500	479	3,425
Condom	446	222	3,412
Symptoms	735	3,033	3,350
Blood	1,013	9,227	3,218
Orgasm	398	166	3,119
Body	1,399	23,089	3,023
Condoms	393	250	2,897
Care	1,225	19,344	2,737
Skin	769	6,340	2,577
Percent	400	515	2,574
Intercourse	429	891	2,446
Foods	517	2,030	2,400
Infection	541	2,636	2,310
Vagina	326	264	2,305
Pregnancy	449	1,525	2,196

mammography, mescaline, serotonin, endometriosis), these items feature much lower on the list of distinctive nouns and can thus not be considered typical elements of *Lucy*'s language.[16]

The lists of most distinctive verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in *Lucy*'s vocabulary confirm the picture presented by our more detailed look at nouns. In all cases, the items determined to be most characteristic of 'Lucy Answers' belong to fairly unspectacular everyday language. We interpret this quantitative finding as being clear evidence for the claim that the makers of 'Lucy Answers' are fully aware of the implications of using special types of vocabulary.

While we have shown that frequency lists can offer useful information about the type of vocabulary used, a qualitative analysis must necessarily follow in order to provide a comprehensive picture. In this connection, we would like to concentrate briefly on *Lucy*'s use of slang. Since slang items are typically polysemous, frequency lists are unlikely to capture the true extent of their use. Given their expressive nature, however, the use of slang expressions may have a strong influence on the way *Lucy* comes across to her readers.

This is confirmed by Example (19), in which a reader complains about *Lucy*'s use of two different slang expressions.

(19)   (LA, general health; reader response)
       GET SERIOUS—LOSE THE SLANG! [Reader's Response]

Dear Lucy,

This is more of a comment, actually: Why do you feel you have to be vulgar and use unoriginal slang words when you answer questions (for example, calling a penis a 'hot dog' and using the phrase, 'whacking off')? Wouldn't you agree that most readers would take you more seriously if you used technical terms and answered questions in a more professional manner? People that write to you are looking for guidance, not comedy. However, most of your answers are competent, and you seem to be knowledgeable—just restrain yourself from being so vulgar.

—JUST TRYING TO HELP

Hot dog, for example, cannot be recognized in a frequency list as a slang expression. The other slang expression the reader complained about in Example (19) is used only once in the entire corpus. In our qualitative analysis of the 280 chosen records, we found that *Lucy* uses informal language, puns, and humor (see our discussion below) but avoids slang that might be offensive to readers. To strike an acceptable level of informality for the target audience is of course difficult. In our reading, *Lucy*'s style is characterized by a tendency to aim at a fairly neutral but accessible and informal style for young people.

We found several records in the reader response section that show that the choice of appropriate vocabulary is also a topic among the readership. In Example (19) above, we saw a reader who does not share our view that *Lucy* hardly uses any slang. His criticism triggers three more responses by readers, shown in Examples (20) and (21), who defend *Lucy*'s use of vocabulary.

(20)   (LA, general health; reader response)

(1)
Dear 'JUST TRYING TO HELP,'

I believe this site is aimed at young people and, believe it or not, young people do not use expressions such as, 'Would you like me to indulge in a spot of cunnilingus?' or, 'I feel my penis extending with blood and feel that the release of semen may be imminent.'

Young people need clear, honest, and relevant information and I recommend this site to all my clients in a British, male-only, sexual

health session (the SPACEMAN). So lighten up, reader, and keep up the good work, Lucy.

Felicitations for the season.
JH

(2)
Lucy,

In response to 'Just trying to help's suggestion, he/she should note that *Lucy* is meant to be informative but not intimidating or peda-gogical; the intention here to is to be more like an informed friend than a sex ed teacher or a doctor. Using slang adds a human ele-ment to the response without detracting from its credibility. *Lucy* doesn't use slang to be silly, or because she doesn't know better. *Lucy* uses slang to connect with the kids, dude. :)

(21)   (LA, general health)
       VULGAR, SCHMULGAR!

Dear Lucy,

About that reader's response about the slang—Get serious—Lose the slang! [Reader's Response]:

Lucy, you rock. Everyone knows that you are a smart gal and a de-pendable source. You also happen to make your information very readable and light, although you broach some very heavy topics. Bravo on a great job, Lucy. You are not vulgar, so don't listen to that shmuck. No one in the world agrees with a shmuch [*sic*]. Everyone loves you just the way you are.

Love,
Your #1 Fan

All three commentators share the view that *Lucy* uses language appro-priately to connect with young people. While we agree with their judg-ment, we would label the language used as informal rather than slang. The last reader's comment is the only one that received an answer from *Lucy*. The reason for this is the reader's use of the Yiddish word *shmuck*, which in its original translation is a taboo word for 'penis'. The reader is probably not aware of this ambiguity and s/he may in-deed have aimed at the more commonly known meaning as a reference to a 'contemptible or objectionable person, an idiot' (*OED* 1989). *Lucy* takes the opportunity to mention this and to point out that 'the pur-pose of this response to your response is not to wash out your mouse

[sic.] with soap. It's more of an example of the importance of word choices and effective communication for everything from persuasiveness to one's feelings about sex' (LA, general health). In the same answer, *Lucy* also admits that 'it just ain't true that everyone loves Lucy just the way she is'. She thus comments on the difficulty in striking the right tone for the target audience.

In sum, *Lucy*'s answers are carefully constructed texts. We can assume that the choice of vocabulary is one of the elements that give rise to discussion in the 'Lucy Answers' team. Both our quantitative as well as our qualitative analysis of the responses show that they make *Lucy* speak in an easily accessible, informal, and nonoffensive manner. On the one hand, language that may come across as too scientific is therefore avoided. On the other hand, the process of 'conversationalisation' (Fairclough and Mauranen 1997) in this public discourse does not go as far as to produce language similar to the one employed by the peer advisors in the Studentcenter above. This careful balance between colloquial and formal language use adds to the image of an expert who fulfills a professional task but is aware of the needs of the target audience.

5.5.   Lucy *has an opinion (positive and negative criticism)*

In Section 2, the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of advice was quoted, which links advice to offering an opinion (as opposed to giving directions). Indeed, it can be argued that giving advice is a fundamentally opinionated process. In the previous sections, we have shown that *Lucy* certainly takes care not to be too directive in her realization of advice. In this section, we will demonstrate that the construction of her expert-advisor identity is supported by the fact that *Lucy* comes across to the reader as someone who also has 'personal' views on some of the issues under consideration. Rather than always offering advice in a neutral way, *Lucy* repeatedly shows emotions and takes a 'personal' stand. This manifests itself for example in explicit evaluations of the questioner's attitudes and actions. Both negative and positive evaluations give *Lucy* a chance to indirectly address the larger audience and to display what kind of behavior *Lucy* considers commendable or objectionable. In her role as knowledgeable health educator, *Lucy* uses these evaluations to make her readers think—a strategy she was already shown to pursue by using questions.

In our set of data, *Lucy* criticizes her questioners 51 times, and 65 times she uses positive evaluations. In Example (22), *Lucy* comments on a questioner's willingness to abandon his or her habit of smoking marijuana.

(22) (LA, drugs)
You've mentioned that you find yourself continuing to use marijuana despite the fact that it no longer brings you pleasure. Recognizing this and looking for help quitting are two very important steps—which you've already taken.

Lucy identifies two steps in the process of quitting that she considers important ('recognizing this and looking for help quitting'). While this could be read as a neutral summarizing comment, we argue that the relative clause introduced with the em-dash makes it a marked statement. The use of the adjective *important* then points in the direction that the comment is meant as a compliment to the questioner on having taken the identified steps. The message for the wider readership is, in other words, that the questioner has taken the (desired) steps already, while many other readers who are in a similar situation might still have to do so. *Lucy* here emerges as having a positive opinion about the questioner's actions. This opinion is, of course, in line with the aim of 'Lucy Answers' to provide quality health-care information and thus reflects this particular Web site's ideology. Further examples are Example (23), in which *Lucy* applauds a reader who seeks information on which brands of condoms to buy, and Example (24), in which *Lucy* thanks a reader twice: once for the positive feedback that he gave her on the site, and the second time for the fact that this reader carefully studied previous responses on the topic in question. The latter instance represents a compliment to the reader.

(23) (LA, sexual health)
Kudos to you for applying your 'smart shopper' standards to your future condom purchase.

(24) (LA, sexual health)
Thanks for the compliments, and thanks for reading with a fine-toothed comb!

Lucy can also choose to voice a critical opinion, thus showing the readership what kind of behavior is deemed objectionable. In Example (25), *Lucy* answers straightforwardly to a reader who wonders whether her jogging and smoking habits go together:

(25) (LA, drugs)
To begin, although what you're suggesting may seem logical, the positive health effects of exercise will not negate the negative health consequences of smoking. It isn't good to smoke no matter what else you do.

Consider also Example (26) from the category 'relationships', in which *Lucy* answers a questioner who worries that her boyfriend may be gay because they do not have any sexual intercourse, despite him teasing her.[17]

(26)   (LA, relationships)
Lucy does not know whether or not your boyfriend is gay, but wonders why you are with someone who teases you—whatever his sexuality. Why are you with someone who suggests sex but won't follow through?

Lucy makes clear that she does not endorse the behavior of the questioner's boyfriend nor the questioner's acceptance of his teasing. By offering her own opinion—in this case even addressing an aspect not directly stated as a problem in the question—she positions herself with respect to her audience as someone who is involved and caring and does not hold back with criticism when considered necessary.

   In the mission statement of 'Lucy Answers', the word *nonjudgmental* is used (see Section 3 above). At first sight, it might therefore seem to be contradictory to let *Lucy* offer her own opinions. However, when the content of these opinions is investigated more closely, it becomes clear that *Lucy*'s evaluations remain in line with the site's ideology in that *Lucy* tries to provide information and advice that will facilitate the questioners' decision processes (and ultimately their well-being), regardless of their beliefs and practices.

5.6.   Lucy *shows awareness of difficult situations (empathy)*

Lucy is not only a provider of information and advice, but also displays awareness of the questioner's individual situation by offering empathy. According to Jessner (1996: 89), '[f]rom a psychological perspective, empathy is described as a cognitive awareness and understanding of the emotions and feelings of another person, i.e. an intellectual or conceptual grasping of the affect of another'. In our analysis, we labeled comments as empathetic when they were displaying awareness of the questioner's particular (emotional) situation. Two examples have been chosen to illustrate this. In Example (27), *Lucy* reassures the questioner who has a problem with being shy that s/he is not alone with this feeling and that it is quite common to feel this way. At the same time, *Lucy* acknowledges that shyness is a problem ('although it probably feels that way') and thus indicates to the questioner (and to the larger readership) that his/her concern has been recognized.

(27) (LA, emotional health)
Dear Want to break out of the shell!, You are not alone in feeling shy although it probably feels that way. Shyness is a difficult concept to define, but rest assured that millions of people are feeling it, all around the world.

In Example (28), *Lucy* comments on the questioner's family situation (s/he has a brother who is addicted to heroin) and especially takes up the questioner's tone of distress by acknowledging that the situation is 'difficult and stressful'.

(28) (LA, drugs)
Dear Heroin Hater, Living with an addict in the family is difficult and stressful, regardless of whether or not you live under the same roof with that person.

In our analysis, we found that if empathy is present, it is mainly expressed in the assessment sections. This is where *Lucy* creates a connection with the advice-seeker and the public readership. By giving such empathetic views, *Lucy* is shown to have emotions and emerges as a caring and understanding advice-giver.

5.7. Lucy *has a sense of humor*

In her study on functions of humor in the conversation of men and women, Hay (2000: 716) maintains that the general function of humor is as follows: 'every attempt at humor is an attempt to both express solidarity with the audience and construct a position of respect and status within the group'. She then goes on to classify instances of humor into the three areas of 'solidarity', 'psychological' (i.e., defend and cope), and 'power'. Hay's (2000: 215) method of identifying humor is to 'regard humor as being anything the speaker intends to be funny'. By analyzing audience reactions and with the help of detailed background knowledge, Hay labeled them accordingly as humorous. In the case of 'Lucy Answers', we cannot rely on audience reactions to establish what is funny and what is not. However, we discussed instances we considered humorous and aimed at a consensus. What we found was that humor was mainly used either as a hedging device within the advice sections or as a supportive bonding device in the assessment sections. The reader may recall Example (1), in which there is humor aimed at bonding with the reader (the uptake of the lexical field of height by using the adjective *shallow*; a sexual pun: 'at least a portion of [women] either get a rise out of "shorter" guys'). In the

same record, there is also humor used as a means to hedge the advice with an ironic metaphor in the farewell section ('but this doesn't mean that anything is wrong with you, or that you shouldn't enjoy and pursue your higher interests'). Consider also Example (29), in which *Lucy* reacts to the stenographic style of the questioner by answering in an almost poetic style, thus outdoing the questioner, which suggests that *Lucy* is not only knowledgeable but also clever and funny.

(29)   (LA, relationships)
       GIRLFRIEND, BOSSY, DUMP?

       Lucy,

       I'll keep it simple:
       Girlfriend, bossy, dump?

       Smile

       _____

       Smile,

       Talk, better, stay?
       Controlling, reason, understand?
       You, problem, change?
       Learn, compromise, fixed?
       Feelings, ignored, b-bye.
       New, better, happier?

       Sentences, easier, later,

       Lucy

Humor is also used in the titles to trigger the reader's interest as shown in Examples (30) and (31). The majority of titles, however, is rendered in a neutral and informative tone.

(30)   (LA, relationships)
       Should I cash in on hot banker?

(31)   (LA, relationships)
       Hey baby, got any good pick-up lines?

Humor is a stylistic means that adds very much to the tone of a particular answer. Overall, it is used quite sparingly. That this is intentional can be seen in Example (32) in which *Lucy* explains her strategy by responding to a reader's complaint that *Lucy* has been lacking humor lately:

(32)   (LA, general health)
       YO, LUCY, LIGHTEN UP

Lucy,

I love the information you provide! But it seems as if things are getting a little boring? I recall that you used to be wittier, funnier, and more entertaining. And now, although you answer questions thoroughly, I feel like the Lucy personality has been lost! Lucy, please don't let down your loyal readers!

Dear Reader,

Yes, it's true that, overall, the guffaw factor in site pages is lower lately, but certainly not gone altogether.

Lucy Answers' goal is to increase access to accurate health info on a variety of issues while respecting the askers' situation and the emotion that can accompany it. Sometimes there can be humor, and sometimes the health issue is not a laughing matter. This poses a challenge for writers who believe that laughter, where appropriate, is pretty good medicine, and to readers who get off on a good giggle. Take nutrition, for example: 'Is that a partly-ripened banana in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?' Well, that may be amusing, but *Lucy Answers* replies are based on real queries.

Talking about serious subjects is just as important as maintaining funny bone density.

Thanks for your thoughts,

Lucy

The first comment we should make about Example (32) is, of course, that we here have an instance of an audience reaction that implies that the questioner shares our judgment that *Lucy* possesses a sense of humor.[18] Apparently, the 'Lucy Answers' team considered the comment by this reader to be important enough to be published and answered in one of the general categories of the site and not in the reader response section, which is reserved for 'comments and corrections'. This in itself points to the importance of humor for *Lucy*.

   With respect to identity construction, two more things can be observed in Example (32). In the first paragraph, *Lucy* acknowledges that her answers have been less humorous lately, but she still maintains that she has

not lost her sense of humor ('but certainly not gone altogether'). This means that she is explicitly presented to the readers as an identity possessing a sense of humor. In the second and third paragraphs, *Lucy* then explains that humor may not be appropriate in all cases and presents herself as an advice-giver who takes the questioners' situation and fears into consideration. *Lucy* is therefore portrayed as someone who does not use humor at the expense of others and who is considerate toward other people's feelings.

6.   Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have explored the question of how the advisory texts created by a group of health educators have the effect of creating a particular voice for the fictional female advisor persona *Lucy*. This voice is created with the help of several strategies. We first discussed *Lucy*'s name, her self-reference and address terms. We then focused on the way in which she presents herself as an expert and investigated how she makes readers think and gives options when giving advice. We found that *Lucy* uses an easily accessible, informal, and nonoffensive range of vocabulary. *Lucy* also displays qualities such as having an opinion of her own and showing awareness of difficult situations by offering empathy and support. Finally, she was shown to have a sense of humor. In our opinion, all of these strategies combined contribute to the creation of a well-informed, trustworthy, and reliable advisor identity who takes the problems of her readers seriously. *Lucy*'s authority clearly stems from her status as expert in her role as a knowledgeable source of accurate information and as an institutional helper. The other strategies identified, however, make her an attractive advice-giver, who people can trust and turn to, as evidenced by the large weekly intake of questions.

The voice identified for *Lucy* shows interesting differences to that of other agony aunts who have received scholarly attention. For example, Mutongi (2000: 4) reports that the predominantly male editors of the advice column 'Dear Dolly' in *Drum* (South Africa, 1960–1980) created the fictional advisor *Dolly* as an older female relative, aunt, or bigger sister. In addition, *Dolly* was crafted as a sensational and intriguing personality, who could flirt with her male advice-seekers (but did not do so with her female readership). The picture of an older sister is also evoked in McRobbie's (1978) and Talbot's (1992, 1995) work on the discourse strategies employed in *Jackie*, a magazine for teenage girls. In her investigation of the advice columnists *Cathy* and *Claire*, McRobbie (1978) critically evaluates how feminine knowledge is passed on to the target

audience. She claims that a 'false sisterhood' is established (in the sense that [potentially] useful feminine knowledge is passed on like an older sister might do), which is charged with ideological assumptions of how female teenagers ought to be. As is the case in 'Lucy Answers', ideology and linguistic realization are thus closely interrelated, albeit with different underlying motivations. The issue of false or synthetic sisterhood is again taken up by Talbot's analysis of a 'consumer feature' on lipstick in the same magazine. She reports that 'writer and reader ... are synthesized in a friendly relationship' in the text (1992: 193), which is achieved by 'claiming common ground ..., by "speaking the same language" and by showing that [the editor] knows what the reader is like, what she thinks' (1992: 180). If we compare *Dolly* and the advisors in *Jackie* to *Lucy*, it has to be stressed that the target readerships as well as the general purposes of the advice columns differ from each other. This explains why the identities created differ as well. *Lucy* clearly does not flirt with her readership (male or female) as *Dolly* does and she also does not seek to establish common ground with her female readership only, as is the case in *Jackie*. Neither strategy would be in line with the mission of 'Lucy Answers'. While some of the strategies discussed in the present paper certainly point to a strong element of bonding in 'Lucy Answers', the sisterly element is not present to a degree that would justify a reading of *Lucy* as an older sister. *Lucy*'s role as a professional—albeit approachable and down-to-earth—health expert never quite fades into the background.

As we have repeatedly mentioned in our paper, the mission of 'Lucy Answers' is to provide information to facilitate independent and responsible decision processes, rather than to be directive. It is by no means self-evident that this mission is also reflected in the actual linguistic realizations of the response letters on such a site. In our view, however, this is the case in 'Lucy Answers'. With the strategies we have discussed, the team creates an advisor identity for *Lucy* which is in accordance with the overall aim 'to increase access to, and use of, health information by providing factual, in-depth, straight-forward, and nonjudgmental information' ('Lucy Answers' 2004). This view is apparently also shared by many readers who compliment the site in their contributions to the reader response section.

'Lucy Answers' belongs to the genre of written advice columns and to an expert health-care advisory discourse, which means that there are certain constraints that influence how advice is given. The first constraint is given by the site's declared ideal of nondirectiveness in counseling. As we have shown, this results in linguistic realizations of advice that give the reader the freedom to decide for themselves whether—or to what extent—they wish to take action on the suggestions given. This ideal is

also followed in other advisory contexts, such as student or health care risks counseling. He (1994), Sarangi and Clarke (2002), and Vehviläinen (2001, 2003) especially focus on the dilemma of counselors who are held to be nondirective by their institutions, while at the same time they are asked by their counselees to display (personal) opinions. In 'Lucy Answers', this dilemma is less pronounced since the format of 'only one turn each', i.e., one problem and answer letter, means that issues cannot be jointly developed as in face-to-face advisory contexts, in which questions may come up that the counselors have to fend off. Since the response text is created asynchronically, there is time to carefully construct and design it in such a way as to guide the readership in a nondirective manner. This nondirective manner, however, does not mean that the content of advice is vague or ambiguous. The messages of the individual responses are in fact quite direct, but they are packaged in such a way that the readers can feel free to choose for themselves whether or not to follow the advice given.

Expert discourse in an institutional health setting is also central to the studies by Heritage and Sefi (1992), Pilnick (1999, 2001), Leppänen (1998), and Silverman (1997), among others. Since 'Lucy Answers' is a written genre and constrained to only one problem and response letter, interactional sequences, such as a stepwise entry into advice as witnessed by Heritage and Sefi (1992) for health visitors and first-time mothers, are absent from our data. It is, however, possible to state that *Lucy* rarely starts her responses directly with advice, but often precedes it with either assessments of an advice-seeker's situation or sequences containing general information. The importance of information-giving in advisory contexts has been pointed out by Silverman et al. (1992). In one of the general types of counseling found in their data, the professional HIV counselors can be observed to focus on the transfer of factual information. In doing so, they manage to deal with sensitive issues in a neutral manner and thereby avoid appearing directive. At the same time information-giving stresses the expert status of the advisors. The same is true for *Lucy*, especially when she gives general information and refers the reader to further resources of help.

The fact that there is only 'one turn' for the advice-seekers and the advisors represents a constraint in itself. The responses are often created on the basis of little background information revealed by the advice-seeker, which means that the 'Lucy Answers' team has to account for this lack when composing their answers by providing interpretations of the advice-seeker's situation. If it is in the interest of the wider readership, the focus of an answer will be broadened. Contacting advice-seekers is not possible since they are entirely anonymous. This anonymity may be

one of the reasons for the success of 'Lucy Answers': the site is an addition to the existing health-care services offered at AEI that the target students may not dare to use because they are embarrassed about their concerns. This may be especially true for delicate taboo issues in the categories 'sexuality' and 'sexual health', but also for difficult emotional and relationship problems, or dilemmas in the category 'drugs', for which insecurities about legality and dangerous side effects may play a role. The attractiveness of anonymity was also pointed out by Alexander (2003: 548), who investigates an advice column in the magazine *Men's Health*. She makes the point that fears and embarrassment about health issues are the reason why men write to the anonymous advice column. Van Roosmalen (2000: 205), who studies the experience of adolescent women in their letters to an advice column in *Teen Magazine*, also points out that problem pages are 'forums for the unspeakable'. In a similar way, the anonymity guaranteed by 'Lucy Answers' will make it easier for its readers to submit questions about touchy issues. The Web service thus offers health information that is made attractive by means of a medium that is easily accessible and familiar to students. Furthermore, this information is conveyed in the voice of an advisor who, while being an expert, uses an easily accessible language, is sympathetic about the concerns of the advice-seekers, and displays a sense of humor.

Apart from establishing rapport with her readers, aspects such as humor and wittiness further increase the 'entertainment factor' of advice columns such as 'Lucy Answers'. Hendley (1977: 345) maintains that already the first English advice columns, which he traces back to the beginnings of newspaper culture,[19] were immediately successful because this format is 'naturally appealing' for two reasons: people need advice and are curious and nosy by nature. The entertainment factor may thus be an incentive for readers to read the problem and response letters in 'Lucy Answers' even if they believe they do not have a particular problem themselves. 'Lucy Answers' is thus a valuable addition to the existing health-care services at AEI in that it reaches out to members of the target audience who may otherwise not have actively sought advice.

Finally, we would like to stress that not all of the seven strategies discussed in this paper need to (co-)occur in every response letter. Rather, it is the sum of these strategies within the discursive practice of 'Lucy Answers' that form *Lucy*'s identity like in a puzzle or in a mosaic, to use De Fina's metaphor (2003: 224). We thus also want to emphasize that *Lucy*'s identity emerges in the readers' minds when they use the site repeatedly. This view allows for the possibility that every reader will create a slightly different identity for *Lucy*. We maintain, however, that the strategies that we have identified will contribute to this identity.

Notes

* The authors wish to thank Iman Makeba Laversuch and the three anonymous referees whose constructive criticism and helpful comments allowed us to strengthen our line of argumentation.

1. At the request of the Internet site in question, both the site's name and the pseudonym for the team of advisors have been changed. (The questioners who write to 'Lucy Answers' are already anonymized.) Any correspondence to possible Internet sites that may happen to be called 'Lucy Answers' or that sound similar is unintentional.

2. We will refer to *Lucy* in italics so as not to lose sight of her fictionality.

3. Hinkel (1994, 1997) also maintains that the topics on which it is appropriate to give advice differ from culture to culture.

4. In some advice columns, this dialogue may be fictitious. In the case of 'Lucy Answers', the questions are claimed to be genuine questions posed by real people. Fleischhacker (1987) stresses that the questioner's letter and the expert's answer should be interpreted as a singular unit, the content of which is aimed at the general public (paraphrased from Franke 1997: 84–85). Otherwise, a private letter to the questioner would have sufficed.

5. It can, of course, be argued that no discourse is free of ideology.

6. This statement appears not to be valid for some current television and radio shows where the hosts take on the role of a 'relentless tormentor' of their guests. It is safe to assume that these shows do not represent genuine advice exchanges. Instead, the conventional format is diverted from its intended function to satisfy the voyeuristic demands of the audience.

7. It is of course possible that the officially communicated mission of a site does not correspond to the ideologies that later transpire in the actual discursive practice.

8. As stated in the introduction, this paper is part of a larger research undertaking on advice-giving in 'Lucy Answers', in which the problem and response letters are analyzed with respect to their linguistic realizations and content structures within a discourse-analytical framework (Locher forthcoming). It is beyond the scope of the current paper to discuss the insights gained from these close readings, and the focus will thus exclusively be on the effect of the identified strategies with respect to identity construction.

9. The Studentcenter in its 'Teenadvice' section offers informal nonprofessional peer counseling and claims to have no official mission other than to offer help to fellow teenagers. This makes this site very different from 'Lucy Answers', which strives to provide quality information.

10. In order to be able to compile these lists, we used the EngCG tagger to automatically annotate our corpus of 'Lucy Answers' with part-of-speech tags. See Voutilainen (2004) for further information on the EngCG tagger.

11. Since the BNC contains almost exclusively British English, a direct comparison with 'Lucy Answers' raises some methodological problems. However, apart from having to account for obvious differences in spelling, the impact of comparing data from two different varieties of English was deemed to be negligible for the present purposes.

12. See Dunning (1993) for further information about the log-likelihood ratio and Leech et al. (2001) for its application on the basis of data from the BNC.

13. The nouns *Lucy* and *AEI* were removed from this list because they are names.

14. The high G^2 value for *reader* stems from the fact that *Lucy* often begins her replies with 'Dear reader'.

15. It could be argued that *herpes* represents an exception to this general impression.

16. Furthermore, the advisor team is fully aware of the need to explain such terminology whenever the situation requires their use.

17. The question for Example (26) is: 'I'm worried about my boyfriend. A lot of people have told me that he is probably gay, because he looks good and most guys who look real good are. I didn't believe any of it at all because he doesn't act or talk gay. The ones telling me this are also guys. Could it be that they are jealous? Because I'm getting ready to believe it. I say that because every time we are alone, he knows how to get me really turned on, he gets me turned on, and then refuses to "DO" anything. What's going on? Is he or is he not?'

18. In the unlikely case that the 'Lucy Answers' team invented this question to make its point, it is even more striking evidence that *Lucy* is designed to possess a sense of humor, as well as a sense of appropriateness for its application.

19. Hendley (1977: 348) reports that in 1691 John Dunton published an advice column with immediate success in *The Athenian Mercury*, which was later followed by *The Athenian Oracle* (1703) and others; the next important publisher to use an advice column to answer reader questions was Daniel Defoe, whose publication was entitled *Review* (1704), and later *The Little Review*.

References

Adelswärd, V. and Nilholm, C. (2000). Who is Cindy? Aspects of identity work in a teacher–parent–pupil talk at a special school. *Text* 20 (4): 545–568.

Alexander, S. M. (2003). Stylish hard bodies: Branded masculinity in *Men's Health* magazine. *Sociological Perspectives* 46 (4): 535–554.

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000). 4th ed., URL: ⟨http://www.bartleby.com/61/⟩ [accessed on 3 November 2005].

Aston, G. and Burnard, L. (1998). *The BNC Handbook. Exploring the British National Corpus with SARA*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bresnahan, M. (1992). The effects of advisor style on overcoming client resistance in the advising interview. *Discourse Processes* 15 (2): 229–247.

Collins Concise Dictionary Plus (1989). London and Glasgow: Bath Press.

Currie, D. (2001). Dear Abby: Advice pages as a site for the operation of power. *Feminist Theory* 2 (3): 259–281.

Davies, B. and Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The social construction of self. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 20: 43–63.

DeCapua, A. and Dunham, J. F. (1993). Strategies in the discourse of advice. *Journal of Pragmatics* 20 (6): 519–531.

DeCapua, A. and Huber, L. (1995). 'If I were you . . .': Advice in American English. *Multilingua* 14 (2): 117–132.

De Fina, A. (2003). *Identity in Narrative. A Study of Immigrant Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Dunning, T. (1993). Accurate methods for the statistics of surprise and coincidence. *Computational Linguistics* 19 (1): 61–74.

Erickson, F. and Shultz, J. (1982). *The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews*. New York: Academic Press.

Fairclough, N. and Mauranen, A. (1997). The conversationalisation of political discourse. A comparative view. In *Political Linguistics*, J. Blommaert and C. Bulcaen (eds.), 89–119. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Fleischhacker, A. M. (1987). Zeitschriftenberatung in 'Lebensfragen'. Textanalyse unter pragmatischen Gesichtspunkten. Unpublished Magisterarbeit, University of Münster, Münster.

Franke, W. (1996). Ratgebende Aufklärungstexte. Überlegungen zur linguistischen Beschreibung ratgebender Beiträge der Massenmedien. *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik* 24 (3): 249–272.

—(1997). *Massenmediale Aufklärung. Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu ratgebenden Beiträgen von elektronischen und Printmedien.* Bern: Lang.

Gaik, F. (1992). Radio talk-show therapy and the pragmatics of possible worlds. In *Rethinking Context. Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds.), 271–290. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goldsmith, D. J. and MacGeorge, E. L. (2000). The impact of politeness and relationship on perceived quality of advice about a problem. *Human Communication Research* 26 (2): 234–263.

Gough, V. and Talbot, M. (1996). 'Guilt over games boys play': Coherence as a focus for examining the constitution of heterosexual subjectivity on a problem page. In *Texts and Practices. Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, C. R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds.), 214–230. London: Routledge.

Hay, J. (2000). Functions of humor in the conversations of men and women. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32: 709–742.

He, A. W. (1994). Withholding academic advice: Institutional context and academic practice. *Discourse Processes* 18 (3): 297–316.

—(1996). Stories as academic counseling resources. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 6 (2): 107–121.

Hendley, W. C. (1977). Dear Abby, Miss Lonelyhearts, and the Eighteenth Century: The origins of the newspaper advice column. *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (2): 345–352.

Heritage, J. and Sefi, S. (1992). Dilemmas of advice: Aspects of the delivery and reception of advice in interactions between health visitors and first-time mothers. In *Talk at Work. Interaction in Institutional Settings*, P. D. Drew and J. Heritage (eds.), 359–417. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hinkel, E. (1994). Appropriateness of advice as L2 solidarity strategy. *RELC Journal* 25 (2): 71–93.

—(1997). Appropriateness of advice: DCT and multiple choice data. *Applied Linguistics* 18 (1): 1–26.

Hudson, T. (1990). The discourse of advice giving in English—I wouldn't feed until spring no matter what you do. *Language and Communication* 10 (4): 285–297.

Hutchby, I. (1995). Aspects of recipient design in expert advice-giving on call-in radio. *Discourse Processes* 19 (2): 219–238.

Jessner, U. (1996). Female empathy: Linguistic implications of a 'restricted code'? In *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, G. Grabher and U. Jessner (eds.), 89–98. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter.

Joseph, J. E. (2004). *Language and Identity. National, Ethnic, Religious.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kreuz, R. J. and Graesser, A. C. (1993). The assumptions between questions in letters to advice columnists. *Text* 13 (1): 65–89.

Leech, G., Rayson, P., and Wilson, A. (2001). *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English: Based on the British National Corpus.* London: Longman.

Leppänen, V. (1998). The straightforwardness of advice: Advice-giving in interactions between Swedish district nurses and patients. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 31 (2): 209–239.

Locher, M. A. (forthcoming). *Advice Online. Advice-giving in an American Internet Health Column*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

McRobbie, A. (1978). *Jackie: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity*. Birmingham: The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

Mininni, G. (1991). Diatextual analysis of the advice column. *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* 23: 73–81.

Mutongi, K. (2000). 'Dear Dolly's' advice: Representations of youth, courtship, and sexualities in Africa, 1960–1980. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33 (1): 1–24.

Oxford English Dictionary (1989). 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pilnick, A. (1999). 'Patient counseling' by pharmacists: Advice, information, or instruction? *Sociological Quarterly* 40 (4): 613–622.

—(2001). The interactional organization of pharmacist consultations in a hospital setting: A putative structure. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33 (12): 1927–1945.

Richardson, K. P. (2003). Health risks on the internet: Establishing credibility on line. *Health, Risk and Society* 5 (2): 171–184.

Sarangi, S. and Clarke, A. (2002). Zones of expertise and the management of uncertainty in genetics risk communication. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 35 (2): 139–171.

Schiffrin, D. (1996). Narrative as self-portrait. Sociolinguistic constructions of identity. *Language in Society* 25 (2): 167–203.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silverman, D. (1997). *Discourses of Counselling: HIV Counselling as Social Interaction*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D., Bor, R., Miller, R., and Goldman, E. (1992). 'Obviously the advice is then to keep to safer sex'—advice-giving and advice reception in AIDS counselling. In *AIDS: Rights, Risk and Reason*, P. Aggleton, P. Davies, and G. Hart (eds.), 174–191. London: Falmer Press.

Studentcenter (2002). URL: ⟨http://teenadvice.studentcenter.org/⟩ [accessed 13 October 2002].

Talbot, M. (1992). The construction of gender in a teenage magazine. In *Critical Language Awareness*, N. Fairclough (ed.), 174–199. London: Longman.

—(1995). A synthetic sisterhood. False friends in a teenage magazine. In *Gender Articulated*, K. Hall and M. Bucholtz (eds.), 144–165. New York: Routledge.

Thibault, P. (1988). Knowing what you're told by the agony aunts: Language function, gender difference and the structure of knowledge and belief in personal columns. In *Functions of Style*, D. Birch and M. O'Toole (eds.), 205–233. London: Pinter.

—(2002). Interpersonal meaning and the discursive construction of action, attitudes and values: The Global Modal Program of one text. In *Relations and Functions within and around Language*, P. H. Fries, M. Cummings, and D. Lockwood (eds.), 56–116. London: Continuum.

Van Roosmalen, E. (2000). Forces of patriarchy: Adolescent experiences of sexuality and conceptions of relationships. *Youth & Society* 32 (2): 202–227.

Vehviläinen, S. (2001). Evaluative advice in educational counselling: The use of disagreement in the 'stepwise entry' to advice. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 34 (3): 371–398.

—(2003). Avoiding providing solutions: Orienting to the ideal of students' self-directedness in counselling interaction. *Discourse Studies* 5 (3): 389–414.

Voutilainen, A. (2004). *The EngCG-2 tagger*. URL: ⟨http://www.ling.helsinki.fi/~avoutila/cg/index.html⟩ [accessed 2 November 2004].

West, N. (1933). *Miss Lonelyhearts*. New York: J. Laughlin.

Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics* 9 (2–3): 145–178.

Miriam A. Locher is Senior Assistant of English linguistics at the University of Berne. Her work has been in the field of linguistic politeness and the exercise of power in oral communication. She currently works on advice in Internet advice columns. Her latest publications are *Power and Politeness in Action: Disagreements in Oral Communication* (Mouton de Gruyter, 2004) and 'Politeness theory and relational work' (*Journal of Politeness Research*, 2005, together with R. J. Watts). Address for correspondence: English Department, Länggass Str. 49, 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland ⟨locher@ens.unibe.ch⟩.

Sebastian Hoffmann is a Lecturer at the University of Zurich. His research focuses on syntactic change, aspects of fixedness (e.g., collocations) and the interplay between corpus data and language theory. A second major area of his research is corpus linguistic methodology. His latest publication is entitled *Grammaticalization and English Complex Prepositions. A Corpus-Based Study* (Routledge, 2005). Address for correspondence: English Department, Platten Str. 47, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland ⟨sebhoff@es.unizh.ch⟩.