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Claiming In-Group Membership in Online Communities

Abstract: The aim of the present article is to show how the members of several Internet communities communicate online in discussion board threads focused on the so-called women's topics, e.g. dieting or mothering, claim in-group membership via the following positive politeness strategies: 1. in-group markers, such as topic-related nicknames, diminutives and personalized address forms, terminology, special jargon related to the context of the forum with a special emphasis on acronyms, generic names and inclusive *we*, 2. stressing/ presupposing common ground and 3. joking. All of these strategies serve to enhance the community spirit and function as a powerful solidarity-building device, and thus serve as what Brown and Levinson refer to "social accelerators".

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1 Introduction

The message in Example 1 below, illustrating a typical message in the online discussions under examination, shows how important it is for the members of online communities to stress the spirit of mutuality and being on board. Due to the lack of co-temporality and physical proximity, which is typical of face-to-face conversation, online communities seem to be built on a shared topic, defined by the topic of the thread in which the individual members discuss their everyday life as well as their problems, often rather intimate. Consequently, we can say that the thread serves as their common ground and the members repeatedly refer to it as an important building stone for their virtual discussions.

- (1) Welcome to the 30's. Always fantastic to see a new face. You'll find that you have a hard time staying away from this forum. The people are so great and there isn't anywhere else I know of where you can receive so much support and so many great ideas from so many different people.

The present article deals with a positive politeness strategy of claiming in-group membership, which is one of the strategies falling under the claiming common ground supra-strategy, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978: 102). In their seminal classification of positive politeness strategies, claiming in-group membership stands beside 'conveying that H is admirable, interesting' and 'claiming common points of view/ opinions/attitudes/ knowledge/ empathy'.

2 Theoretical background

Leech (2014: 99) identifies claiming common ground with solidarity, arguing that it especially serves to reduce the social distance between speakers and promotes what Lakoff (1973) calls "camaraderie". He also states that if the asymmetry between interlocutors is not great, they do not need to apply this strategy as much. However, as will be shown below, the analysis of the

corpus under examination has revealed quite the opposite. Even though the speakers are very close and there is hardly any asymmetry between them, they still find it necessary to repeatedly stress in-group membership and common ground as such.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 103) emphasise that claiming common ground strategies do not necessarily need to be used only to overcome a face-threatening act, but they are also “social accelerators”, where the speaker suggests that he/she wants to be more intimate with the hearer. In their view, the speaker shares common ground with the hearer by showing that they both “belong to some set of persons who share specific wants, including goals and interests” (103), which is true also about the virtual communities formed in the analysed material. They list the following realizations of claiming common ground: using in-group identity markers, using in-group language or dialect, and using contraction or ellipsis.

Common ground is related to involvement. Urbanová (2003: 50-1) speaks of Chafe’s (1986) distinction between involvement and detachment and adds that some conversation genres are more involved than others. Further on, she presents a scale showing a continuum between personality and impersonality in radio interviews. In these interviews, just as in computer-mediated communication, there is distance between interlocutors, which they try to overcome via various techniques, one of them being increased personality.

Watts (2003), too, sees politeness as a social act shaping the interpersonal relationship between interlocutors and distinguishes two types of discourse, confrontational and cooperative. He describes the attributes of the latter as “a friendly attitude towards the caller, which is displayed by being helpful, sympathetic and not argumentative; humour, ...; knowledge about local events, issues and characters, etc.” As will be shown below, all of these features can be found in the discourse under examination.

Spencer-Oatey (2003) also deals with establishing a common ground, or, in her words, rapport, which she defines as “relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people” (530) and refers in this respect to people’s association rights, concerning their belief they have the right to be involved with others.

Finally, let us conclude that women’s language, which is usually associated with positive politeness, “treats the addressee as a member of an in-group...” (Brown 1998: 85). Brown lists the following expressions of interest in the addressee

- exaggerated expressions of approval
- in-group identity markers (slang, code-switching, in-group address forms...)
- seeking of agreement and avoidance of disagreement
- joking
- claiming reflexivity of goals (mutuality of goals)
- giving of goods in the form of goods, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation

3 Material under examination

The analysed material is a corpus consisting of approximately 200,000 words, compiled by the author of this article from various message boards devoted to dieting, life style, mothering and other “women’s topics” (except for the last thread in which the members discussed politics and American presidential elections). For more information on the particular sub-corpora, see Table 1 below.

Corpus	Thread	Message board	Topic
1.	Slimming_world_support	Three Fat Chicks	dieting, special diet

2.	30_Somethings_chat	Three Fat Chicks	dieting, everyday talk-chat
3.	Infertility_forum	Mothering	infertility, trying to conceive
4.	Due_date_October2008	Health & Fitness	pregnancy
5.	Catholic_mammas	Mothering	parenting, religion
6.	Leftist_forum	Mothering	politics, 2004 elections

Table 1. Individual threads, their source and topics

The analysis of the corpus has indicated a frequent use of the subsequent three positive politeness strategies, which will be examined below in depth: in-group markers, presupposing common ground and joking, which will be dealt with only marginally. Let us now look at them one by one and illustrate them on various examples from the corpus.

4 In-group markers

By using in-group markers, interlocutors acknowledge their pertinence to a group. For a newcomer, it is relatively hard to understand everything and it is essential for them to master new skills so that they can communicate efficiently. The analysis of the material under investigation brought to light the following six means of promoting in-group membership: topic-related nicknames, jargon, terminology, generic names, diminutives and the inclusive *we*.

4.1 Topic-related nicknames

Contrary to real life, every message board member is represented by a self-chosen nickname, which very often corresponds with the topic of the thread or, better to say, of the entire discussion board. When studying the individual messages in the examined material, it soon strikes us how omnipresent nicknames are. Traditionally, nicknames were viewed as a mask helping to hide a person's real-life identity (Bechar-Israeli 1995, Crystal 2001, Paolillo 2001). Concealing of real-life identity is especially typical of synchronous CMC where "participant membership is fluid, undergoing constant rotation" (Paolillo 2001: 184). In chatting, individual identities are often fluid as well (*ibid.*), as some users tend to use more than one nickname. However, in the corpus nicknames are only one part of the entire identity, represented by other features as well, and many users do not try to hide their real-life identities at all. As is suggested by Bays (1998), the nickname is "the first sign of individuality when one encounters another participant" (9). It serves as a first impression and shows the aspect of face that the participant wants to present". In this respect, it is important to mention her emphasis on face in the Goffmanian sense, as it proves nicknames are also related to expressing linguistic politeness.

Crystal (2001: 157-9) identifies choosing a nickname, or a "nick", as it is called in the Internet world, as a ritual act. He offers a classification of nicknames, which served as the basis of my own classification, enriched by a few more categories reflecting the nicknames appearing in the corpus. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that many nicknames are not clear-cut and it was rather problematical to classify them or find out what they actually represent or how they initiated. Without discussing their origin with their bearers themselves, it is often impossible to deduce the motivation behind them. Therefore, the intention was not to analyse all of them, but rather to illustrate the most distinct categories with some examples.

Similarly to Crystal's (2001) classification, the most frequent was the first category of *self*. In this category, users make references to where they come from, how old they are, or to their

gender, which may prove the fact that many message board contributors do not try to mask their identity but, on the contrary, stress what they view as their most prominent characteristics. The second most numerous category was category 6 in the classification below; in this category, nickname bearers refer to the message board topics. In this case, it is very likely that they tailored their nickname to the purpose of this board only and that they use other nicknames on other boards.

1. self: e.g. *Welsbtigger*, *Scottie*, *IrishJoan* (referring to the place of origin); *Frenchie72*, *Kar73*, *sheila1971* (referring to the year of birth); *jenniebellie*, *Elaine 12*, *KarenK* (proper names); *Goth_Girl*, *scary mary*, *707Goddess*, (revealing the gender) *GatorgalstuckinGA* (gender and place of origin); *happy2be*
2. names connected with technology and the medium: none
3. names to do with fauna and flora: *Rabbit*, *tleef*
4. names to do with famous characters: *lois lane* (film and comic book character)
5. names to do with sex or provocation: none
6. **topic-related nicknames**: *SlimmingWorldChick*, *SlimmingWorldQueen* (inspired by the name of the diet the participants are on); *veggie* (vegetarian); *cherrycupcake* (food), *walking2lose*, *wannaBsize7*
7. others: *bits*, *sand*, *DolciFiori*, *creaky*, *LBH*, *milleradab*

As this article deals with in-group language, let us now concentrate in more depth on category 6, i.e. topic-related nicks. Rather surprisingly, only 8 nicknames out of 39 participants were related to the topic of dieting; some referred to the special diet of *Slimming World* (*SlimmingWorldChick*, *SlimmingWorldQueen*); others showed their motivation to lose weight (*fightinflab*, *determinedtodiet*, *Melgetinthin* and possibly also *Piglet*).

The situation in the mothering threads is quite different from the dieting boards. Many members stress they are mothers also in their nicknames; participants tend to reveal they either want to be pregnant, or are pregnant (e.g. *Hopefully 01*, *mommy2twins2be*); some nicks are very descriptive, such as *Mich is cooking another due June 4th*, which is actually rather rare and impractical. Furthermore, they constantly stress they are mothers in their nicknames (e.g. *turnipmama*, *starry-mama*, *mum4boys* or inventive *PottyDiva*). Two nicks can be related to another topic of one of the threads, Roman Catholic religion (*Channelofpeace* and *exquisitebones*). However, there is not a single nickname that would refer to politics.

4.2 Jargon

In-group jargon belongs to the group's shared history and is a major part of its identity. If you are not well-acquainted with the language of e.g. pregnant women, you will find it quite difficult to understand their online conversations.

On the whole, there are two groups of abbreviations and especially **acronyms**; those that can be found in any discussion board in general and those that are related just to the topic of the thread. Yet it must be mentioned that most of the topic-related jargon is not restricted only to the threads under examination; they employ abbreviations commonly used in this type of discussion forums (i.e. used by all pregnant women or women undergoing infertility treatment). There are even special dictionaries of these acronyms available on many discussion boards.

Finally, acronyms and abbreviations are used both to save time when typing and to support mutuality in the community, as many of them are known only to the in-group. As opposed to synchronous chatting, it is the latter type that prevails in the data, perhaps also due to the fact that there is no such emphasis on responding as quickly as in chatting).

- general Internet acronyms (some of which have already entered other types of communication): *BBL* (be back later), *ASAP* (as soon as possible) *KWIM* (know what I

mean?) or those used to refer to family members, such as *DH* (dear husband) or *DD* (dear daughter) or *ASF* (as for me; before giving personal update)

- dieting: *STGW* (short term goal weight), *FF* (fat free), *SBD* (South Beach Diet)
- infertility: *AF* (Aunt Flow – euphemism for menstruation), *BFN* (Big Fat Negative – negative pregnancy test), *IUI* (intrauterine insemination). Some can be rather complicated, such as *CCRM* (Colorado Center for Reproductive Medicine) or *ICSI* (Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection).
- pregnancy: *BFP* (Big Fat Positive – positive pregnancy test), *EDD* (estimated due date), *POAS* (pee on a stick – home pregnancy test)
- mothering: *SAH* (schooling at home), *SAHM* (schooling at home mother), *CHC* (Catholic Heritage Curriculum)
- politics: *dems* (democrats), *ObL* (Osama bin Laden)

4.3 Terminology

This category overlaps with jargon, as many of the abbreviations and acronyms refer to special methods used in medicine or special diets. It is used especially in the dieting boards, where it refers to the special diet the participants are on (*Laughing Cow Triangles*, *green day*, *syns/sins*, *Healthy Extra*). Furthermore, there are abundant medical terms in the infertility board, where some participants display quite a deep insight into the issue of fertility treatment, which is illustrated in Example 2.

- (2) AFM: Had my phone consult with the doctor 2 hours away. We would do estrogen priming before I get my period, then a combo of letrozole (femara) followed by gonal-f injections and an antagonist. Probably also vaginal suppositories of estrogen to thicken the lining after I finish taking the femara.

4.4 Generic names

Apart from online nicknames and their derivations, such as *GG* instead of *GatorgalstuckinGA*, there are a great number of generic names and terms of address, e.g. *guys*, *folks* or *honey*, all of them used to convey solidarity and membership in a group of people. In particular, there are two subgroups of such addressing forms: those referring to the whole group (collective address forms) and those used for one person only (individual address forms). There were many instances of individual address forms in the *30_Somethings_chat* thread, which most resembles synchronous communication and represents a very close-knit online community. Thus, it can be assumed that individual address forms are viewed as more intimate, whereas collective address forms are used mainly to enhance mutuality. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), generic names are used to soften face-threatening acts.

1. collective address forms: *(you) ladies, folks, guys, all, everyone, chicks*
2. individual address forms: *girl, guurl, sunshine, babe, my dear*

Furthermore, there are also references to the purpose of the forum, as in *fellow slimmers*, *SW girls* or *mamas*. Last but not least, there are instances of playful and inventive address forms also functioning as face enhancers, such as *lovely muffins and studrockets*, referring both to female and the two male members of the forum.

4.5 Diminutives and personalised address forms

This category overlaps with individual address forms above. As is evident from the examples, most of them are gender specific. They are used to create a friendly atmosphere and promote the community spirit. All of them were used only by women. Apart from the examples listed above, the *30_Somethings_chat* offers very inventive and playful (Example 3 referring to a

user called *Hanna*) and at times rather lengthy forms of address, such as in Example 4. In this example, the poster refers to many board members one by one, coming up with very original terms of address.

(3) **HAPPY BIRTHDAY HANNER NANNERS!**

(4) Joan: How are you my little cinnamon sprinkled deep fried ice cream served on a chocolate dipped waffle cone? How's the house?

Sheila: Hello my favorite phreak in the world of plain vanilla! 🤩

Lisa: How's it goin' sunshine? 😊

4.6 Inclusive *we*

Participants use the personal pronoun *we* to stress they are all in the same situation. It belongs to strategies used to presuppose/assert common ground, which will be dealt with below. It has yet another function apart from the one mentioned before: it serves as a face-threatening act mitigator, shifting responsibility for failure away from the hearer. Example 5 illustrates a response elicited by another user's complaint about putting on weight while on holiday. Interestingly, the speaker starts by a compliment ("it could be even worse") and claims that it can happen to anybody. This is a frequent strategy used when shifting responsibility away from another member, be it failing to persevere with a diet or expressing worries about being pregnant (both in Example 5 below).

(5) I think you did really well to only put on 7 pounds on holiday ... We all are entitled to forget our diets on holiday...

I think we are all really in the 'worry wart' stage as you put it so we're with ya!

There are approximately 40 instances of this strategy occurring across all the six threads. For some more examples, see Example 6.

(6) It happens to us all - I have days when all I can think about is food.

YK, we all have to learn the hard way sometimes to get on with each other.

I'm positive we all will achieve our goals here...

5 Presupposing/asserting common ground

To put it briefly, via this strategy the interlocutors express how happy they are to belong to the community. Therefore, it does not correspond with how it is conceived by Brown and Levinson (1987: 117-24) in their Strategy 7. In their conception, they give the following examples: speaking about unrelated topics (small talk) before performing an act of request and thus showing interest in hearer. Another of their strategies is *point-of-view operations*. In this interesting strategy, the speaker speaks from the point of view of the hearer; for example, if *here* is used, it means the place where the hearer is standing, not the speaker (place switch, time switch). Furthermore, they mention the use of the inclusive *we*; however, contrary to 4.6 above, where it really includes both the speaker and hearer, here it actually just means that when the speaker says to the children: "We have had a nice nap", it was only the baby that has taken the nap. It could be generalised that all of the examples mentioned by Brown and Levinson (1987) under this

strategy are somehow manipulative and are used to make the hearer do what the speaker wants him/her to do. As is emphasised by Brown and Levinson, it can be used both in positive and negative politeness strategies.

However, the conception of asserting common ground in the analysed corpus is rather different; when the speakers assert common ground in the analysed data, they do not intend to make others do them a favour. Actually, they do it just to promote solidarity and mutuality; hence they do so somehow unselfishly, without any ulterior motives.

The analysis has revealed there are several contexts in which this strategy occurs on a regular basis, i.e. welcoming a new member, expressing thankfulness for being a part of the forum, “being on the same bandwagon”, stressing in-group membership, etc. Let us proceed to describe the individual sub-strategies in detail.

First of all, claiming common ground is used when there is a newcomer asking to join the forum; it is reciprocal, as it takes place on both sides. The newbie assures the forum that she would like to join because it is a great place to be (Example 7) and the old-timers make sure the newbie feels welcome (Example 8). They assert common ground by stressing she will enjoy her stay with them as the forum is wonderful. They also point out that the new member can expect to get information (new ideas) and support from others.

(7) Newbie here! Hi! I’m so glad I found this forum.

(8) welcome to the forum ...I think it's a fab place to come along -spill your stuff and get great ideas and support.

If you're *new*, I bid you welcome. You're now part of this wonderful support network.

Secondly, the users show their appreciation and gratefulness to others and point out how much the forum has helped them in their (often difficult) situation. They also mention that this is the only place where they can turn to, as others know how they feel and are able to help them (there are three such cases in Example 9). In the last part of this example, the speaker explains her paradoxical situation: on the one hand, she is sorry she must join an infertility forum; on the other hand, the situation is not that bad since she shares her fate with a group of great women.

(9) just want to say thank you to all of you! You have no idea how much your advice, experiences and support mean to me. Without you I think I would be looney toons by now!

i'm just so grateful for everyone here because it is really my only outlet where i can obsess, panic, cry, rejoice, and compare. i am thankful!

Thanks all, I'm sorry to have to be offically joining you but couldn't wish to do it with a nicer buch of women.

Thirdly, they point to the similarities they share with other board members, as they are “on the same bandwagon”. They find it very important that others find themselves in the same situation and thus are able to understand it (Example 10). In the first utterance, the shared feature is their being pregnant for the first time; in the second case as well but she still keeps it a secret in her real life, hence she is happy to have found somebody to discuss it with.

(10) This is my first pg, too, so I'm in the same boat.

So in any case, I wanted to talk with people who are also going through this, and maybe relieve some of my frustration at not being able to tell every single person I know right now!

i love this thread...it's neat to talk to people who are going through the same thing at almost the same time.

The last context in which this positive politeness strategy is used is stressing in-group membership, often in contrast to another group or others. For instance, they stress the fact they are women, as in Example 11, or define themselves against men, as in Example 12. Finally, in Example 13, the speaker pays a compliment to the entire board and compares it to other boards she attended in the past, with not as many such good listeners as in the present board.

(11) We women know our bodies quite well.

(12) I honestly don't believe men can handle thinking before comments...(Sorry BigJohn and Rx-- except ya'll).


Like a typical man, I have to force him to open up while I am just the opposite.

(13) I tried a lot of other boards before finding this one. They all seemed that people got on and wrote about themselves but never asked about others or answered the question others have posed. I am just so blessed that I found this board! You guys are great!

The last strategy of stressing in-group membership is remarkably manifested in the first part of the board discussing politics, when the community is only being formed and new members keep coming, claiming they want to become part of the leftist community. They are joking about their having controversial ideas, thus being unacceptable for the majority. In doing so, they are both forming their own community and distancing themselves from others.

Example 14 illustrates such an introductory utterance of a newcomer asking to be allowed to join the community; it is evident that the woman even uses swear words to emphasise her political views. Example 15 offers a similar utterance: making fun of the usual way of introducing a new member in *Alcoholics Anonymous* is very funny and at the same time it shows how controversial the forum may be.

(14) Count me in! I'm pissed, I'm liberal, and I VOTE! :LOL

(15) Excuse me.....is this the Satan-worshipping forum? 
Hello, my name is Candice. I am a liberal. I sacrifice animals, drink blood, eat babies and worship the dark lord.
(Everyone: "Hello, Candice!")
I am so happy to have found you all. (Where's the damn pentacle smile when you need it?:)

6 Joking

Joking is delineated as a separate strategy, namely Strategy 8 in Brown and Levinson (1987: 124). They point up it is based on “mutual shared background knowledge and values”; hence it can definitely be included among the claiming common ground strategies, at least briefly, even though it would certainly deserve greater attention, as CMC language as such is regarded as playful and making frequent use of humour (e.g. Danet et al. 1997, Crystal 2001).

Even though Lakoff (1973) claimed that women do not joke as often as men, the corpus proves quite the opposite, as there are numerous funny utterances and remarks. One of the reasons for the frequent occurrence of playful and witty remarks is that humour goes hand in hand with involvement (Norricks 1994: 409). He proceeds claiming that “if the attempt at humour

is understood and accepted, participants in the conversation may enjoy enhanced rapport". However, when the hearer does not enjoy the joke, it can, on the contrary, result in loss of rapport. Likewise, Coates (2007: 29) agrees that "shared laughter nurtures group solidarity". Furthermore, playful conversation needs cooperation of all participants, as conversational humour is a mutual and joint activity, especially humour performed by women (Crawford 2003, Holmes 2006, Coates 2007). Norrick (2003) makes a distinction between telling an "artificial" joke and spontaneous conversational joking. He adds that it is the latter that serves as a rapport-enhancer. Hence it is evident that spontaneous humour is also likely to prevail in my corpora.

Further on, the following illustration of humour shows the rapport-building function of humour in the discussion boards. One of the interlocutors, *Mo*, the board's entertainer, tries to attract other member's attention by giving a "chain order": she asks others to do 10 squats or any other form of physical exercise (Example 16). Basically, it is a funny request for cooperation. She uses persuasive devices (red and purple print, capital letters, setting her own example, imperative). She also adds a hedge (*I know, it's sounds silly...*) in order not to sound too strict or impolite. Of course, in fact it is only a playful attempt at attracting more posts. This message is successful as it elicits 7 responses (Examples 17-21). Thus by this humorous encouragement, *Mo* calls for a joint activity; she is joined by other contributors, one of them being a newcomer (Example 18). The newcomer asserts common ground and, interestingly, gives the group's sense of humour as the reason for her wanting to join the community. When she is welcomed to the board in Example 19, the contributor also stresses that she is about to join their *fun little group*. She goes on to praise *MO* for her initiative (even though she introduces her compliment with a hedge, *I kind of*, perhaps because she is aware it is only meant as a joke. She finishes her contribution with a funny remark, in a similar way to Example 20. Indeed, most of the contributions to *Mo*'s challenge are quite funny as well.

(16) This is a team effort 10 rep chain letter type thang. I'll start. I'm going to get up right here right now and do 10 squats. Ok, done-I did deep squats, weight free, holding for a count of 5 on each one! WHO'S NEXT AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I know, it's sounds silly...but just try it this once everyone, please...
COME ON EVERYBODY! GO GO GO! MO

(17) MO i got up and did 10 jumping jacks at work everyone thought i was crazy LOL

(18) You look like a pretty fun group, so I thought I'd say "hello".

I'll join in with 10 calf raises! 🍌

(19) Welcome to our fun little group Katrina!

Mo I did 10 squats at my computer. I kind of like the 10 rep chain letter. Did it when the kids and hubby were not in the room. Them might think I went off the deep end for sure.

(20) Mo- Seriously you should become a motivational speaker, I did 10 squats.

(21) I did 20 each of arm circles (frontward and backward) while sitting on my big tush.
WOOHOO. Better than nothing!

7 Conclusion

The article has explored the claiming of in-group membership in online communities built upon various threads retrieved from discussion boards devoted to the so-called women's topics, such as dieting, infertility, pregnancy, mothering, but also politics. All the virtual communities formed upon the examined message boards have developed certain routines and traditional

patterns as a part of their in-group language, via which they express their pertinence to the group. They use a number of various in-group markers, such as topic-related nicknames, diminutives and personalised address forms playing a major role in turn-taking and addressivity; terminology and special jargon related to the context of the forum with a special emphasis on acronyms; collective and individual generic names; and the inclusive *we*, which is of special importance in the second part of the article dealing with presupposing/asserting common ground. Finally, the chapter is completed with a short subchapter on joking, which is a frequent positive politeness device helping to consolidate the community spirit. Humour appearing in the corpus is often based upon shared background knowledge, thus pertaining to community values. As opposed to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), whose conception of employing positive politeness strategies is somehow manipulative, as the speaker wants to persuade the hearer to do him/her a favour, the interlocutors in the online communities examined in this article use these strategies to enhance each others' faces and boost the general spirit of mutuality and solidarity.

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