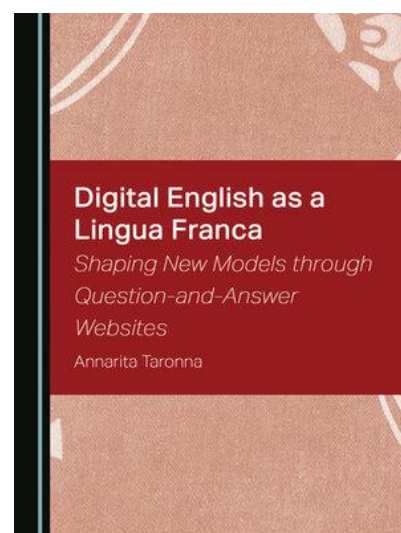


Annarita Taronna

Digital English as a Lingua Franca

Shaping New Models through Question-and-Answer Websites

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Review by Monica Antonello

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In this volume, Annarita Taronna analyses Question-and-Answer (Q&A) websites to investigate how English as a Lingua Franca is used in digital communication. The study presented is the result of a three-year multidisciplinary project focused on the role of emotions in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). The main aim was to examine how emotions and sentiment expression are achieved through language in digital social platforms using sentiment analysis and a multifunctional approach. Studies in CMC have shown how digital communication has opened up “new paths for interaction,” where people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact with each other, especially through platforms where they can share their interests or concerns (3). As the author states, “these new modes of communication are reshaping the spoken and written registers and reflect specific lexico-grammatical, discursive, and pragmatic features” (4). The findings show how positive and negative emotions are associated with certain linguistic features, building up a set of negotiated and flexible practices that, through the web, characterise Digital English as a Lingua Franca (DELF).

In Chapter 1, “Language and Communication in the Digital Age,” the author offers an excursus of the developments of research in CMC and an overview of the changes in genre that digital communication has undertaken. Digital linguistics and CMC have become fundamental areas of study to understand the processes and practices that characterise digital communication and

digital spaces; indeed, due to the flexible and dynamic use of language in web-mediated communication, the concept of genre itself calls for a reformulation, also in relation to synchronicity and formality as traditionally conceived. As the author emphasises, the boundaries between spoken and written language have become blurred in digital spaces; Internet users can write, edit and collect information from a shared (online) knowledge that is continuously updated and changed, creating a more dialogic way of interacting on the web. Focusing on the Q&A website format, Taronna analyses how this genre is hybrid in nature: even though it is characterised by asynchronous answers that the users can upload at their own pace, some exchanges show how contacts can be almost synchronous, showcasing features of interaction in real time. As the author underlines, the distinction between these two ways of communicating is no longer decided by the technology itself, but “it is the users [...] who decide whether to communicate asynchronously, synchronously, or through a mixed type” (26). This fuzzy division is combined with mixed types of formality and informality, linked to written and spoken discourse, resulting in a combination of these modes, aimed at building a more friendly and respectful interaction. Finally, the author analyses Q&A websites as a case study, highlighting how this genre affects the way in which users interact and display their linguistic practices online. Indeed, these digital platforms are usually linked to certain ‘digital communities,’ that is, digital social groupings (or groups of Internet users) which share similar interests, beliefs or values and interact in a common digital space. Taronna states that “the case of Q&A websites [...] constitutes an instance of a digital genre fostering interaction and collaboration within and among international discourse communities that gather digital users together, consequently creating online or virtual communities” (37).

In Chapter 2, “The Language Politics of Digital Communities,” the author analyses the role of English in digital communities, focusing on the concept of DELF and its core features. In CMC, English has always had a favourable position, both as the language of the structure of the systems used (e.g., networking protocols), and as the preferred language of public and academic debates on the Internet. Especially after globalisation, English has been used as a common means of communication in international and intercultural contexts, providing a shared linguistic code for speakers to understand each other on a larger scale, even in virtual spaces. Even though English is not the only language present on the web and users can choose to communicate through other codes (for example their first language), English in its lingua franca (ELF) function offers the opportunity of transnational and mobile communication to people who do not share the same mother tongue (50). Complex and fluid practices thus emerge in web-mediated interactions, showcasing how English is no longer a monolithic system, but rather

embraces different Englishes and is perceived as a ‘common property’ by its users. The author states how the analysis of the use of ELF in digital communication is though still scarce and hence aims at expanding such research analysing the core features of DELF in Q&A websites. After providing a critical overview of the standard language ideology connected to English, Taronna emphasises how English used in digital contexts is “a sort of accessible and democratic language” (59), where variation is the norm. According to the author, “DELF speakers are translingual, cosmopolitan, consensus-oriented, supportive, and open to negotiation, that is, they negotiate meanings with others on equal terms by departing from their own norms in terms of phonetics, lexicon, and morphosyntax due to the contamination of global cultural flows” (60). In order to better define DELF practices, Taronna presents its most prominent microlinguistic features found in two previous studies of the use of ELF in online interactions, Vettorel (2014) and Pascual (2018). Vettorel (2014) discussed how ELF in digital blogs presents processes of regularisation, economy of expression, and redundancy reduction; it also highlighted how speakers aim at explicitness and how they use language creatively, both in terms of morphosyntax and lexicon. Pascual (2018) instead focused on a functional analysis, with particular attention to the lexico-grammatical, syntactic, semiotic, and orthotypographic features of English in travel blogs. These contributions identified elements that coincide with wider research on ELF practices, demonstrating how “DELF use could possibly tend towards what is universal in language by relying on forms and features that can be assumed to be widespread across languages in general” (71). Finally, the author discusses the importance of pragmatic moves and context in online interactions. Context is a dynamic and multi-layered structure, co-constructed by DELF users. From this perspective, pragmatic competence becomes paramount in achieving one’s own communicative goal and in building rapport inside different digital communities: being able to effectively and appropriately negotiate meaning through the use of different communicative strategies in different contexts has been observed to be essential in DELF, in addition to being able to adopt and adapt diverse norms and conventions.

In Chapter 3, “The Aesthetics of Q&A Websites,” the author focuses on the distinctive features of Q&A websites, with particular attention to their structure and emotional style; she also outlines how sentiment analysis and a multifunctional approach could be effective tools to determine how language is used in these digital spaces. The investigation of the most common features of the question-answer structure leads to the understanding of which linguistic practices are embedded in more likely-to-succeed questions. Linguistic factors have proven to be important in making a question successful and several studies have focused on how language is used in successful inquiries. A review of studies on categorisations of question types is

discussed, emphasising how factors such as prior effort, conciseness, politeness, length, and emotions could be predictors of question quality and success. In this light, emotions are observed to play a fundamental role and the author selects sentiment analysis and a multifunctional approach to analyse her data, “where the linguistic expression of emotions and opinions is one of the most distinctive traits” (99). The choice of this method allows for a structured investigation of how emotion and linguistic practices are connected in Q&A websites and which factors lead to successful exchanges. The author defines sentiment analysis as “the task of resorting to a computer program that can automatically determine the emotive quality (the sentiment) of a piece of text by detecting its overall positive/negative polarity” (107). Taronna critically analyses the advantages and limitations of such approach, providing interesting insights on how sentiment analysis could help in examining emotions in Q&A short texts. In order to widen the scope of sentiment analysis, the author combines it with a Systemic Functional Linguistic-based analysis, “according to which the ideational metafunction can be represented by topics, opinions, and emotions” (111), so that not only the topic and meanings expressed, but also the strengthening or weakening of statements through the use of markers of intensity are examined. In order to do so, Taronna adopts two specific tools: SentiStrength and Semantria. Providing insightful examples from her data, the author shows how their combination allows for an investigation of the emotional style and of a multilevel linguistic analysis of short written informal texts such as those present in Q&A websites.

In Chapter 4, “Exploring Stack Exchange,” Taronna presents her study of Q&A websites, focusing on two communities in Stack Exchange, “one of the most well-structured Q&A networks, comprising a very high number of thematic sites” (137). This platform is organised around categories and there are moderators that make sure that users follow the Stack Exchange code of conduct. Taronna focuses on two specific communities in her analysis, English Language & Usage (ELU) and Language Learning (LL). These sites were chosen because the former is the most-visited language community centred on an interest on English, where several professionals exchange knowledge on their language expertise, and the latter because it introduces itself as a more inclusive community in terms of users, comprising also non-professionals interested in language and second language acquisition. Taronna aims at investigating whether these two communities have similar or different linguistic practices, and whether professional and amateur users use the same pragmalinguistic and rhetorical strategies. After a thorough description of the two communities and of their core features, the author presents a detailed dataset analysis and her interpretation and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative findings. The author observes how users in the two communities

rely on DELF to build rapport and express group membership, using English creatively to reach their communicative goal(s). Taronna identifies core features of the use of DELF in the two communities, noticing how there is a similar use of emotional lexicon, but a higher reference to identity in the ELU community, while in the LL community self-narration is more frequent than in the ELU community. She also focuses on sentiment polarity, analysing the linguistic features linked to positive and negative sentiment in Q&A. The analysis showcases how users seem to follow a structure, even though flexible, of how to effectively ask questions and give answers. Processes of regularisation, economy of expression, redundancy reduction, and increased explicitness are confirmed as core features in the dataset.

This volume represents a thorough analysis of DELF in two digital communities of Q&A websites, presenting in detail how linguistic and pragmalinguistic features are employed and their connections to emotion. As Taronna states, this book tries to expand research on DELF, supporting the need to further analyse the models and new genres that are typical of digital communication via English.

Monica Antonello is a PhD in Foreign Literatures, Languages and Linguistics–English at the University of Verona. Her research interests include *English as a Lingua Franca*, *Intercultural Communication*, *Communication Strategies*, *English Language Teaching and Teacher Education*.

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