Online Peer Advice: Giving Advice on Chinese Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

This study investigates advice-giving in peer-to-peer comment sections on Chinese social networking sites. The results show that advice, explanation, experience, and assessment are the four most frequent discursive moves in Chinese advice given by peers on social networking sites. Involvement, mitigation, and face-threatening strategies are also utilized frequently by those peers to give directives and express empathy and solidarity on Chinese online sites, thereby building supportive relationships among them in online communities. The online peer advice-giving in this study is influenced by multiple aspects of the platform, participants, and language use, presenting distinctive characteristics that differ from other studies.

Keywords

Online Peer Advice, Chinese, Discursive Moves, Relational Work

1. Introduction

When people are in a problematic situation or facing a dilemma, they usually seek advice from those around them, who in turn will help them get out of the situation or make the right choice by giving some advice. According to Searle, the speech act of advising is a directive of "telling you what is best for you" [1], which recommends a particular future action that the advice-giver believes is the best option for the hearer. As a frequent speech act in daily communication, advice-giving has attracted wide attention and has been widely studied by many scholars. For example, Locher studied solicited expert advice-giving in an online health counseling column in the United States [2]. And there is also research on advice-giving in a debating column with public participation in China [3].

With the popularity and prosperity of online communication, people who are strangers to each other worldwide can seek or provide advice to online friends

on social networking sites. A great deal of research has been conducted to investigate advice messages in cyberspace. Most of the research focused on English advice both in professional contexts and in peer-to-peer communication forums [2] [4] and [5]. Peer advice refers to advice that people give to each other as equals in a community of peers, as opposed to advice in a professional context, where people can only seek help or advice from a particular expert. Research on online advice in Chinese has focused more on different areas of advice, with little attention paid to the advice given in the professional or peer context. In addition, there has been little research on online peer-to-peer advice in Chinese. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate peer advice-giving on Chinese social networking sites, on which research is far from adequate.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have looked into the offers of advice on the Internet in different areas, including advice about therapeutic practices, health issues, medical counseling, relationships, and traveling [2] [6] [7] and [8]. Most studies have found that in addition to the function of information transfer, advice-giving fulfills the need for relational bonds between the advice-givers and the advice-receivers. Locher not only explored the relational work used in responses and the personal versus public dimension of advice-giving, but also came up with an analytical framework for analyzing online advice messages [2]. Experts utilize strategies like hedging, praising, and use of humor to maintain relationships with readers when they are giving professional advice in the context of Internet health sites. Morrow analyzed advice messages related to depression on an Internet discussion forum (*NetDoctor.co.uk*) in the United Kingdom and identified the discourse features of advice [9]. By expressing positive regard and solidarity, advice-givers could shorten the distance and maintain positive relationships with advice seekers.

Moreover, soliciting and giving advice is considered a common type of social interaction in an online community of peers in Kouper's study investigating the patterns and structures of peer advice interactions among members of an online motherhood community *onLiveJournal.com* [5]. He also reported that direct advice and personal experiences are used more frequently than indirect and hedged advice due to the complex situation and the amount of face-threat. Placencia investigated the peer-to-peer on the Spanish website *Yahoo*! *Respuestas* [10]. In this study, the linguistic realizations of the different moves were examined, and the strategies used by advice-givers to convey affiliation and disaffiliation were also identified, including seeking closeness, conveying warm feelings and empathy, offering reassurance and encouragement, and expressing their humor employed to convey affiliation and disaffiliation.

Much research has been conducted on online advice-giving in English and some other European languages like Spanish, with relatively few studies on advice-giving in non-Western languages like Chinese or Japanese [11] and [12]. Morrow examined the content structure and discursive moves of advice-giving

on divorce in a Japanese discussion forum and noted the cultural differences in the framework of relational work [11]. Mao and Huang suggested that online advising in Chinese is mostly realized by multiple means, and the distribution pattern is completely different from that of English advice-giving [3]. Ren also stressed the particularity of various aspects of Chinese computer-mediated communication, such as linguistic features, speech acts, politeness, and identity construction [12]. It is, therefore, necessary to explore online advice-giving in Chinese.

Although one of the studies mentioned above has investigated the realization patterns of online advising acts on Chinese social networking sites, no research has yet been conducted on online peer advice in Chinese from the perspective of relational work. The present study attempts to investigate Chinese advice messages collected from Weibo, a Twitter-like blogging platform, by describing the discursive moves and exploring how advice-givers establish relationships with advice seekers in an online peer-to-peer context. The research questions are as follows.

1) What are the discursive moves of advice-giving on Chinese networking sites?

2) What strategies do advice-givers adopt to establish relationships with advice receivers from the perspective of relational work?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

With a massive and broad user base, Weibo is one of the most frequently used social networking platforms in China. In order to explore online peer advice-giving in Chinese, the data for analysis is extracted from the advice-giving interactions on a Weibo account called "英专生发言bot". The followers are mainly English majors in Chinese universities, facing common problems in their study, life, and work. They can ask questions related to the topic "English major" through the web platform and receive comments responding to the problem messages written by other non-expert peers with nicknames or pseudonyms. Although all the users of Weibo have access to the posted questions and comments, generally, only those who share a common interest in the topic will read the problem messages and make some comments. Since no celebrities or experts are involved in advice-giving activities in this context, it can be viewed as a peer-to-peer column where communication is informal and direct.

First, ten problem messages posted by the "bot" manager from April 1, 2022, to April 3, 2022, were found on Weibo. Problem messages are questions that the advice-seekers raise to seek advice regarding school choice, job search, internship, etc. It usually contains a clear description of the problem and a direct request for advice. Second, the comments on problem messages were extracted and treated as advice messages for analysis as they directly responded to the advice solicitation. Because of space constraints, people posting comments would

divide them into several paragraphs and post them separately under the problem message. Several paragraphs posted by one user are unified into a single advice message. Direct comments in the form of "emoji" were excluded because the present study focused on linguistic realizations. In addition, other users' responses to thank the advice-giver or seek more information can be categorized under response messages, thus being excluded from the current data. A total of 213 advice messages were collected according to the above criteria. The length of the advice messages for analysis ranged from 1 to 347 Chinese characters, which varies widely. Distinctive features of advice messages are the presence of grammar and spelling mistakes, which is caused by the casual nature of online communication and does not cause misunderstanding.

3.2. Data Analysis

The concept "discursive move" is described as the "kind of contribution that the entry made to the ongoing interchange" [6]. The adapted categories of discursive moves in Table 1 were borrowed to qualitatively analyze the content of the advice messages in the current data. Morrow claimed that the discursive move methodology is versatile as a tool that can be applied to the analysis of quite different types of advice texts, and researchers have applied this framework to the analysis of online advice-giving in Japanese and Spanish [10] and [11].

The concept "relational work" refers to the process of building and co-constructing relationships during the course of interaction [2]. The relational work emphasizes the involvement of at least two interactants in the communicative process, including advisors, who make comments under problem messages, as well as the general readership. It also covers the whole continuum from polite and appropriate to impolite and inappropriate behavior, as those behaviors contain implications regarding the definition of relationships. Advice-givers often make extensive use of a wide range of strategies to build relationships in which advice can be given and received.

This part of the analysis follows the categories put forward by Locher. In Locher's study, involvement strategies (e.g., bonding, empathizing, and praising), mitigation strategies (e.g., hedging), and face-threatening strategies (e.g., boosting and criticism) are observed as manifestations of relational work [2]. Following the category, different realization patterns of relational work will be explored in order to determine what role relational work plays in online Chinese advice-giving. Table 2 shows a detailed explanation of each category under different relational work strategies.

4. Results

The frequency of discursive moves in the 213 advice messages is shown in Table 3. There are a total of 388 discursive moves in the collected data, with an average of 1.82 discursive moves per advice message. It can be seen that the four most frequently occurring discursive moves account for about 87% of the total occurrences.

Table 1. Discursive moves with modifications.

Discursive Move	Explanation
Advice/Guidance	Telling someone what they should do: declarative sentences, interrogatives and imperatives
Referral	The reader is encouraged to seek personal and professional help elsewhere, and/or is given addresses, phone numbers or Internet links to find more information about the topic at hand.
Assessment	The questioner's particular situation is mentioned and evaluated (e.g. voicing support)
Disclaimer	A special kind of assessment as it is pointed out that the answer will be incomplete or cannot match expectations due to the site's limitations or to insufficient knowledge of the questioner's situation
Explanation	Explanation of a point just made, a type-tag indicates which element is being further explained
Experience	Own or known person's experience
Open Category	Category for moves that do not fit any other category

Table 2. Relational work strategy.

Category	Explanation
Bonding	bonding with the questioner or the readership
Empathizing	display of understanding of a questioner's situation, reassurance
Praising	the questioner's attitudes and actions are highlighted as good
Hedging	a word or phrase used to downplay the weight of an imposition
Boosting	a word or phrase used to give a point more weight
Criticizing	criticizing of the questioner's attitudes and actions
humor-bonding	humor which aims at bonding with the questioner or the readership

Table 3. The frequency of 388 discursive moves.

Discursive Move	Frequency	Percentage
Advice	194	50%
Explanation	62	16%
Experience	55	14%
Assessment	27	7%
Open	25	6%
Disclaimer	12	3%
Referral	7	2%
Address	4	1%
Farewell	2	1%
Total	388	100%

This study also identified 57 cases of involvement strategies, 68 cases of mitigation strategies, and 69 cases of face-threatening strategies. As Locher claims that relational work is not quantifiable, these figures only demonstrate tendencies rather than absolute values [2]. Therefore, these strategies used frequently or particularly are considered distinctive characteristics of online Chinese peer advice. The two research questions will be discussed in detail below.

4.1. The Four Most Frequent Discursive Moves

Of the 213 advice messages, the advice-givers made a total of 194 advisory moves, which tops the list, accounting for 50%. The advisory moves were realized as imperatives, interrogatives, or declarative sentences, thus being classified into three categories [2] and [4]. The current study also adopts this classification to further categorize the sentence types of these advisory moves, as shown in Table 4.

Declarative sentences are the most frequent type of advisory moves, taking up 59%. A declarative sentence is a form of sentence that makes a statement, states facts, and expresses opinions or thoughts. A combination of a modal in Chinese "可以" and the actual advice is a typical example of a declarative sentence. Since advice is offered in online communication, the sentences are usually incomplete. Although in Example 1, the one seeking advice is not directly mentioned, the implicit acting subject "you" is indicated in the meaning. Example 2 uses a sentence that is well known and believed to be an accepted fact. Example 3 expresses the advice-giver's opinions. Advice-giving in declarative sentences is more indirect, thus offering more optionality [2].

Example 1
可以去干托管老师

Example 2
宇宙尽头是编制

Example 3
个人觉得上海对外经贸好一点

The straightforward way of advice-giving is to give a directive as an imperative, accounting for 32% in the total occurrences of the three sentence types. Chinese imperative sentences usually carry a strong tone and end with an exclamation mark. Some imperative sentences have a weaker tone and can end

Table 4. The sentence types of advisory moves.

Sentence Type	Occurrence	Percentage
Declaratives	119	59%
Imperatives	64	32%
Interrogatives	18	9%
Total	201	100%

with a period or the intonation words such as "吧" and "啊". The subject is often omitted. Imperative sentences in this study tend to contain negative words such as "别", "不要", "不建议", and expressions that are directly related to advice such as "建议", "劝", "一定要" in Example 4, 5 and 6.

Example 4
千万别在家家里真的时时刻刻都是事儿

Example 5
历史学好像是本专业都不好考…不建议跨考…你不然看看体育吧

Example 6
教师。你不要担心第三条，教师你来了就知道你比你想象中的更优秀！面试一定要！！超级努力的表现！！！

Interrogative forms were also used to give advice, as in Example 7 and 8 below. The use of interrogatives was more euphemistic, indicating a deliberative tone.

Example 7
如果考试内容差不多不可以都试试吗还是你们那里统考啊

Example 8
或者考虑先就业攒攒钱？体感身边有社会阅历的朋友读研会更有方向更有冲劲(仅代表个人观点)

The move Explanation ranks second with about 16%. This discursive move functions as a detailed analysis of the information involved in the question and indirect presentation of advice-givers' suggestion. Example 9 shows that the Explanation move is embedded in the statement of personal experience. In Example 10, the advice-giver provides an explanation of the reason for using this app, that is, getting more responses.

Example 9
我和你情况差不多世另我了本来我也准备考历史相关但是一片空白对我来说真的太焦虑了虽然不太喜欢英语但是毕竟学了这么久再差也稍微有点底子另外我考虑到我考研的目的也是为了赚钱历史真的比英语就业还窄最后还是决定卷英语；而且退一万步来说就算没考上研继续学英语还能考各种证对提升自己来讲我个人觉得性价比稍高一些

Example 10
51job 投投回音多

The discursive move Experience ranks third, with more than 14%. It is about sharing personal experiences or the experiences of their friends. As shown in Example 11 and 12, the provided experience demonstrates the advice-giver's qualifications to give advice on the premise of similar experience, thus serving to establish his or her "credibility" [11]. In some advice contexts, the person seeking advice will usually be aware of the professional knowledge or personal expe-

rience that qualifies the person giving advice. However, on non-expert peer advice sites such as Weibo, in which the commenters are strangers and they know nothing about each other. Since the writers of the messages in question and general readers have no prior knowledge of the advice-givers, recounting their relevant experiences is essential for an advice-giver to establish credibility.

In addition, some advice-givers describe their own similar experiences in order to show their sympathy or achieve the purpose of seeking the same advice. In Example 13 of answering the question of how to find a job, the advice-giver complains about his or her own difficult situation. By doing so, the advice-giver can create certain solidarity with those receiving this piece of advice.

Example 11
银行的话说是朝九晚六，实际上银行关门了你也不能下班，你要在里面整理。整理的这段时间的话是不算加班费的，我有朋友在银行上班最迟是做到了十点

Example 12
本人教师，想辞职

Example 13
我一个 211 双一流的研究生投简历也都大部分没回音

The fourth discursive move Assessment refers to an evaluation of the problem message writer's situation or the writer himself/herself as derived from the information, as in the following two cases. In Example 14, the advice-giver was shocked at the high level of difficulty the advice-seeker has in pursuing higher education as an English major student. In Example 15, the advice-giver evaluated the ability of the advice-seeker. The two examples show typical two kinds of assessment. On the one hand, there is a negative assessment of the external environment in which the advice-seeker is in, expressing feelings of empathy. On the other hand, there is a positive assessment of the advice-seeker himself or herself to express encouragement.

Example 14
985 英专也这么难吗这什么破专业啊(暴言)

Example 15
我觉得你还是有实力的，如果想清楚还是考研，就全职备考

4.2. Cases of Relational Work Strategies

The total number of involvement strategies observed in this study is 57, which includes bonding, empathizing and praising. Empathizing and praising are mainly expressed by the discursive move of assessment in advice messages, which contain awareness or understanding of an advice-seeker's particular situation or encouragement to the advice-seeker.

The most frequently used involvement strategy is bonding. According to Locher, the supportive relational work strategy bonding is an attempt to estab-

lish a connection with the advice-seeker and/or the readership, thus creating positive rapport [2]. Without giving any advice, commentators just use expressions like "世另我" and "蹲" to indicate that the respondent's situation is similar to the questioner's in that they both want to wait for more advice on the problem, thus strengthening their connection. Some advice-givers use vocatives or kinship terms like "姐妹" and "家人们" and personal pronouns "咱" with the effect of strengthening emotional ties, as shown in Example 16.

The strategy of using humor is usually combined with other strategies. The use of humor is found to be associated with bonding in the present study. Example 17 is an expression from a picture showing that a student majoring in English is doing a job of selling fried rice and noodles and translation. It is self-deprecating humor about English major students' difficulties in finding jobs. Understanding the humor of the sentence requires the receivers to know about the story behind it, which relies on a kind of shared knowledge within the online community.

Example 16
家人们，不是真正热爱专业咱别去跨了，试错成本你担不起，本人想跨马克思、法硕、汉语言，之前资料全部准备好了，后来考虑到现实因素，老老实实继续准备翻硕

Example 17
炒面炒饭汉译英英译汉

There are 68 cases of "Hedging" strategy, which aims at mitigating a face-threatening act. Mitigation can be achieved in various ways at different levels, for example, the syntactic realizations of advisory moves. Some declarative and interrogative sentences show a certain degree of optionality to the advice receivers compared to the imperative sentences that directly ask them to do something. Thus, such sentences can be identified as hedged, as shown in the above analysis of advisory moves.

In addition to identifying suggestions in the form of declaratives and interrogatives as hedged, there are also some lexical hedges and their variants to mitigate a face-threatening act. At the lexical level, the lexical hedges including "我感觉", "我觉得", "有点", "可能" are prevalent in current study, as in Example 18.

One unique mitigation strategy in Chinese online advice is using three or more dots, indicating ellipsis, which is named CMC cues by Ren [13]. In Example 19, when readers read a sentence with an ellipsis, it creates a buffering effect, giving the suggestion a sense of hesitation.

Example 18
有点好奇考上外的都是什么水平了我感觉投稿人本身实力是有的

Example 19
上海对外经贸比海事好很多……上师大不如海事……二战还是求稳比较好

There are various realization patterns of 69 face-threatening strategies. When giving advice, advice-givers are likely to use boosters to emphasize a certain aspect of advice they are given or the importance of a point they are making [2]. When giving advice, advice-givers tend to use words like "真的", "绝对", and "肯定" to stress the reliability and credibility of the expressed opinions. Advice-givers also use personal experiences to show that they have experienced the situation the advice-seeker is facing. In Example 20, personal experience serves to qualify the offered advice.

Example 20
感觉港校生活成本太高了学费倒是能接受至少我之前考虑港校的时候绝对不止 18 w。或许港中深那些能考虑吗？

A rhetorical question is a questioning sentence with a strong rising tone expressing an affirmative point of view. The syntactic form is a question, but the actual meaning is already apparent. There is no need to answer the question because it is asked for effect or emphasis. Examples 21 and 22 below illustrate the use of rhetorical questions. And the two examples also demonstrate the typical "要不是" or "我要是" sentence in Chinese, which expresses disapproval of some of the questioner's actions. Therefore, such examples are also categorized as face-threatening strategies.

Example 21
用 985 本找工作不香吗？英语专业现在越来越卷了，我当时考研时情况和你差不多，专四 80+，三笔啥的，要不是我是专升本，我肯定不考研

Example 22
考研不就是为了找工作吗，我本科毕业要是找得到稳定的工作就不考研了

5. Discussion

Similar to previous studies, the advice or guidance was identified as the core discursive move in the analysis of the frequency of the discursive moves which comprised Chinese online advice messages [2] [8] and [10]. However, unlike other studies in which the assessment and general information account for a large proportion of the discursive moves [8] and [11], the occurrences of explanation and experience moves are more frequent in this study. The differences may be explained by the nature and composition of the online community. The account followers were mainly students who could only use explanations and personal experiences to make their advice more convincing. It is also because they were students studying the same subject, they could have much to tell about their experiences that other readers could refer to. In Mao and Huang's study, the explanation move even ranks first in Chinese online advice-giving [3]. As a result, linguistic features of the Chinese language may explain the high frequency of explanatory moves.

Regarding the form of advice moves, Harrison and Barlow found that declara-

tives took up 64%, imperatives 21%, and interrogatives 15% in their study [4]. Similarly, declaratives, imperatives, and interrogatives are ranked by frequency, occupying 59%, 32%, and 32%, respectively, in the current study. However, there were studies in which no instances of imperative or interrogative forms were used for giving advice [8] and [11]. Japanese speakers were found to be more indirect in interaction, especially on sensitive topics. The linguistic realizations of advisory moves are more varied and direct in Chinese online advice-giving, especially regarding some common topics.

Concerning how advice-givers manage their relationships with advice-receivers, the current data analysis revealed a wide range of relational work strategies in use. Unlike other studies, this study found that involvement, mitigation, and face-threatening strategies all occupied equal importance. The online platform provides a space for all the participants to speak freely, and advice-givers do not have to pay much attention to building good relationships. However, their behaviors indicate the tendency to take the initiative to maintain good relationships in such an equal and harmonious environment. In addition, different languages have their specific features, so the adopted strategies are reflected in distinctive linguistic patterns. For example, bonding was achieved through the use of interactional particles, like *ne* in Japanese [11]. In this study, bonding was achieved by using address terms and humor.

Moreover, the two parts of analysis also indicate that the relational work strategies primarily occur in specific discursive moves. Similar to Locher's study [2], involvement strategies are likely to occur in assessment moves. And face-threatening strategies are more likely to occur in advice moves.

6. Conclusion

Since there are very few studies on peer advice-giving on Chinese social networking sites, the present study aims to explore the features of online peer advice in Chinese. Data for analysis were collected from a social network microblog platform, and the messages were analyzed from two aspects: the discursive moves and the role of relational work in advice messages. This study found that advice, explanation, experience, and assessment are the four most frequent discursive moves of advice messages given by Chinese peers in cyberspace. Advice-givers use involvement, mitigation, and face-threatening strategies equally to give advice directly on Chinese networking sites and express empathy and solidarity, thus establishing supportive relationships among peers in the online community. Advice-giving online is a complex process involving both the advice-givers and the receivers. The process of giving advice is not only about conveying meanings, but also about maintaining relationships and building a good platform for discussion. Giving advice in different languages also reflects the distinctive features of the languages. Future research is suggested to expand the scope of the data to examine peer advice in Chinese in other social networking platforms or communities, and also to compare linguistic and cultural differences of advice in different languages. In addition, the analysis of online peer advice in

Chinese with the help of different analytical frameworks can enrich the study of the pragmatic and cultural connotations of Chinese language.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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