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MIRIAM A. LOCHER, *Advice online: Advice-giving in an American Internet health column. Pragmatics and Beyond*, New Series 149. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2006. Pp. xv, 277. Hb \$155.00.

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This monograph is an extended study of the speech act of advice, choosing as examples those strategies employed in seeking and giving advice in “Lucy Answers,” a Dear-Abby-like forum on health issues. From archives of this online advice column (run by professional health educators at an American university), Locher collected a corpus of 2,286 pairs of question-and-response letters posted between 2002 and 2004. Chapters 2 and 10 describe the “Lucy Answers” site, delineate the selection of the data available in the archive, and explain the selection, compilation, and coding of letters in the corpus.

Though carefully compared to research examining face-to-face encounters of advice giving, the “Lucy Answers” exchanges typify advice offered in written format. The material is of special interest for being at the intersection of several genres: advice columns, patient–health care provider interactions, American institutional outreach projects, and anonymous, public, and archived Internet exchanges. The latter features, for example, enable an intriguing intertextual loop such that the “existence of previously published response letters [in the archive] influences the way in which the new answers . . . may be expanded or shortened as a consequence. The history of the site, present and available in the response letters already published, thus influences the manner in which the old response letters are updated and . . . the new responses are composed” (p. 251).

Locher’s choice of epistolary data allows for discussion of both how the identity of the expert advice giver is constructed (e.g., through Lucy’s use of self-reference and choice of address terms, through the level of vocabulary, and through her expressing of opinion) and an examination of positioning by the anonymous advice seekers. One unique trait of the genre is the constraint imposed on the letter pairs whereby each is limited to a single conversational turn.

Locher provides clear descriptions of the syntactic form of the advice. For example, she found, in descending frequency of use, declarative sentences, imperatives, and interrogatives; the many non-imperative forms together with the use of conditionals suggested that Lucy prefers to give advice by offering options rather than positioning directives (108–9). More crucially, Locher examines the function of the discursive moves on display in “Lucy Answers,” examining the effect on the reader–writer relationship brought about by hedging, empathizing, bonding, praising, boosting, criticizing, and humor. Her analysis of the responses showed that first moves typically created a personal link by assessing the questioner’s situation, while final moves were most often referral, advice, and farewell.

Four of the chapters, making up the heart of the study, look at the answers given by Lucy, though chapter 9 also looks at the initiating questions that writers sent in, which are distinguished by a higher use of questioning, thanking, and requesting advice. Locher also discusses the pseudonym types used by writers. The entire project presents a careful description and clearly explained interpretation of a prevalent contemporary genre.

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