Genre norms and variation in online reviews: the dimension of information source

Johanna MIECZNIKOWSKI
Università della Svizzera italiana, Facoltà di scienze della comunicazione
Istituto di studi italiani, Via Giuseppe Buffi 13, 6900 Lugano
johanna.miecznikowskifuenfschilling@usi.ch

Elena MUSI
Columbia University, Center for Computational Learning Systems
em3202@columbia.edu

Abstract:

Based on an Italian corpus of contributions to comment spaces of online reviews in different domains, we argue that some of these contributions are user reviews. We show that users position themselves as legitimate contributors by conforming to genre conventions that are central in official reviews, in particular to the requirement that the reviewer must possess direct knowledge of the reviewed object. Other genre norms are not observed, thus adapting the genre to the context of comment spaces.

Keywords: Discourse genre; online communication; reviews; evidentiality; author credibility; Italian language

1. Introduction

Genres are holistic routines of action that associate communicative purposes with linguistic means and context types. On the cognitive level, knowledge of genre patterns facilitates processing by guiding action planning in production and inferencing in comprehension. On the socio-cultural level, genres constitute relevant categories for a society's members, generate normative expectations, are culture-specific, and are subject to historical change (Miller 1984, Bhatia 1993, Fix 2008, Biber & Conrad 2009). *Genres* as historically and culturally situated patterns differ from *text types*, which are analysts' categories (Mortara Garavelli 1988).

One of the many forces that influence genre is the way social actors adapt communicative practices reacting to technological constraints and opportunities. This article is concerned with recent web-based communication. In the literature on cybergenres, from the 1990s on, linguists and communication scholars have investigated how written genres are influenced by factors related to the internet context (Yates & Sumner 1997, Herring et al. 2004, Giltrow & Stein 2009, Crystal 2011, Yus 2011, Thurlow & Mroczek 2011, Tannen & Trester 2013, Herring et

al. 2013, Berkenkotter & Luginbühl 2014). The question has been raised how traditional genres change when they are transferred to the web; new, "native" internet genres like personal websites or blogs have been described. In 1997, Yates & Sumner concluded their early paper on centrifugal and centripetal forces in the development of Digital genres stating that

> The overall import of genres comes from the role they play in differentiating between documents, which are constructed and delivered through an otherwise undifferentiated Digital medium. (Yates & Sumner 1997)

It appears clear that today, differently from the situation evoked by the cited authors, the "Digital medium" is rather differentiated, including such diverse environments as websites, chat rooms, discussion boards, social networks, online shops, swap meets, auction environments, collaborative work platforms, and so forth, not to speak of mobile phone apps. The functions and the evolution of genres in the contemporary web have to be examined taking into account the technical and socio-interactional characteristics of the diverse web spaces that host web-specific genres. Accordingly, one important trend in more recent research on genres in the Digital age has been to explicitly address questions of "cyberpragmatics" (Yus 2011), discourse and context.

Bearing this requirement in mind, we will discuss a specific genre, the review, which has developed new forms thanks to the technological medium of internet platforms that integrate databases and thanks to the increasing participation of users not only as readers, but also as writers. The goal of our analysis is to describe certain forms of user reviews in a pragmatic perspective, paying special attention to the construction of the writer's role and epistemic entitlement (see Fox 2001 or, for an overview in a philosophical perspective, Altschul 2001).

That a speaker should possess knowledge and resort to information sources is part of the felicity conditions of assertions and the fulfillment of this condition in a given assertive utterance may be underlined by grammatical or lexical evidential markers.[1] The conventions regulating genres in which assertive acts are central - such as the review - include requirements as to the specific kind of knowledge and of sources on which an author is supposed to base his or her discourse; accordingly, grammatical, lexical and textual strategies of displaying knowledge (Miecznikowski 2016) are part of those genres' typical features on the level of linguistic form and discourse structure. Linguistic choices in specific instances of a discourse genre are likely to reveal the more or less strategic ways in which authors match their own epistemic profile - what they know and the information sources they have access to - with the genre's epistemic and evidential requirements. Changes in the communicative situation that affect the epistemic profiles of authors will therefore leave traces in discourse. In the case of reviews, user participation, which gives access to larger groups of authors

---

[1] Grammatical markers of evidentiality are the object of a growing body of research in language typology (e.g. Anderson 1986, Willett 1988, Aikhenvald 2004, Squartini 2001). See Musi (2015) for a detailed discussion of the category of evidentiality and of the corresponding literature.

than the traditional publication of expert reviews in specialized media and mass media, is likely to affect the epistemic profile of authors. The analysis of how expertise is displayed and which information sources authors refer to can therefore be expected to be particularly useful to understand the specific features of user reviews.

We have chosen to consider both objects with a long critical tradition (musical albums, exhibitions and restaurants) and objects with a more recent history of reviews (consumer electronics). Based on a corpus of Italian thematic websites hosting reviews, we will investigate the way users exploit the comment spaces associated with "official reviews", i.e. reviews written by members of the websites' editorial team, to communicate their opinion on the reviewed object (see Miecznikowski 2015, Miecznikowski & Musi 2015). We will argue that users position themselves as legitimate contributors by conforming to certain genre conventions that are central in official reviews - in particular to the key requirement that the reviewer must possess direct knowledge of the reviewed object -, while other genre norms are stretched or neglected.

We will start out by discussing the review genre and its online contexts and forms (section 2). In section 3, we will introduce our text corpus and methods. In section 4, different discourse genres contained in the corpus will be distinguished according to participation-related and sequential criteria. Section 5 is dedicated to the characteristics of the official reviews in our corpus and to meta-talk about reviews and reviewers that is documented in comment spaces. In section 6, we will analyze user reviews in comment spaces, with a special focus on information source. In section 7, we will draw the conclusions of our empirical analyses and reflect upon theoretical consequences and implications for future research.

2. The review genre

The review genre has been closely associated with print media in the past, from the daily press to specialized and academic periodicals (cf. Zillig 1982, Stegert 1997, Köhler 2000, Baud 2003, Römer 2010). In their traditional form, reviews treat a range of culturally relevant artifacts, in particular books, movies, musical albums, concerts, restaurants and exhibitions, and are written by authors with some specific expertise in the field in question. Their main purpose is to help readers form a judgment about the object, a purpose reviewers try to reach by reporting their own experience with the object, providing relevant background information and evaluating the object. Information on the object is given in the form of descriptions or in the form of arguments supporting the main evaluative standpoint put forward. Reviews may, moreover, contain recommendations by the reviewer concerning further actions by the reader, for instance to read or not to read a reviewed book.

In the web, the English term *review* and semantically similar terms in other languages are used to categorize texts published on a great variety not only of topics (the range of reviewed objects has been extended to consumer goods, services and touristic destinations), but of contexts, too. For example, Boot (2011: 7-8), in his analysis of the Dutch "booksphere", distinguishes seventeen different types of websites dedicated to books, many of which publish reviews: author sites, online shops, thematic websites, book news and review sites, periodicals, summary sites targeting high school students, specialized social networking sites, fan fiction sites, blogs etc. Similar lists could probably be created with regard to other types of reviewed objects. Which are the linguistic and textual properties of reviews in the various online environments and how is variation related to technical factors and to the social context?

Online reviewing has been investigated in various discourse analytical perspectives both with regard to objects with a long reviewing tradition, such as books (e.g. Caballero 2005, Domsch 2009, Boot 2011), films (e.g. Bieler et al. 2007, Thet et al. 2010, Taboada 2011) or restaurants (Frumkin 2007, Jurafsky et al. 2014), and with regard to more recent online variants of the genre such as reviews of hotels and travel destinations (e.g. De Ascaniis 2012).

With regard to book reviewing, Domsch (2009) has raised the issue of genre change in relation to digital environments. Particular attention is paid to the Amazon bookshop. Recalling that the traditional monological settings of print media "put the reader exclusively at the receiving end of [...] critical conversation" (Domsch 2009: 227), the author hypothesizes:

> This is about to change drastically in the near future, as critical genres are migrating to the internet, and, after a period of more or less simple mirroring of print forms, new forms emerge that make a complex use of the possibilities of computer mediated communication. (Domsch 2009: 227)

Domsch underlines the innovation potential of non-expert reviewing and of feedback on reviews by users (e.g. the "Was this review helpful to you" function in Amazon), without, however, analyzing any instances of the genre. Similarly, Boot (2011: 3), who provides a useful analysis of web contexts, as we have seen, limits himself to characterizing book reviews in social networking sites summarily as "anything between an exclamation and a traditional review". Caballero (2005) concentrates mainly on theoretical issues, adding a brief consideration about the functions of hyperlinks. The papers on film reviews cited above, on the other hand, are quantitative corpus-based studies that focus on linguistic aspects and text structure and do not consider context. A study that combines empirical text analysis with an analysis of communication contexts is the one presented, in an argumentation-theoretical perspective, by De Ascaniis (2012), who focuses on user reviews published on the TripAdvisor platform.

In the marketing literature, online reviews are generally considered to be computer-mediated forms of word of mouth (WOM), i.e. electronic word of

mouth or e-WOM (e.g. Sen & Lerman 2007). E-WOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39). Accordingly, most marketing studies investigate online reviewing with the goal of understanding how reviews influence consumer decisions.

One of the factors that have been examined is the recipients' perception of author credibility. The attribution of credibility has become all the more decisive because the very influential power of this text genre has caused the rise of fraudulent (also called deceptive) reviews in expanding platforms such as Yelp or TripAdvisor, i.e. texts authored or commissioned by producers aiming at praising their own product or at denigrating competing products.[2] As underlined by López & Sicilia (2014: 31-32), reviewer credibility is a complex concept that in the literature has been associated with a variety of dimensions, such as trustworthiness, expertise/competence, authoritativeness, reputation, objectivity/absence of bias, and goodwill. In a recent experimental study, De Andrea et al. (2015: 2-3) also explicitly refer to the epistemic-evidential requirement that the author should possess direct knowledge of the reviewed object, claiming that "information seekers view online reviewers as objective peers who have experience with the entity they wish to know more about."

As far as reputation and expertise is concerned, marketing research has shown that, similarly as in the case of print media, readers' evaluation of specific websites influences their attribution of expertise to individual authors publishing on that website (Brown, Broderick & Lee 2007, López & Sicilia 2014). Moreover, reviewing platforms sometimes publish author profiles and often categorize individual authors on the basis of the number of reviews published (e.g. Yelp, cf. Luca 2011, or fiction writing and reading platforms such as www.fanfiction.net). Reputation measures can also be based on assessments by other users or even on the presumed broadness of knowledge (TripAdvisor, for example, calculates the percentage of the world a traveler has visited on the basis of the reviews he or she has published).

In a more or less anonymous web environment, dimensions such as impartiality or the possession of direct knowledge are more difficult for websites and readers to assess than the quantitative aspects usually considered in reputation

---

[2] A much-discussed case was that of an investigation conducted in 2011 by the US Advertising Standards Authority, which examined the way user-generated content is presented by TripAdvisor on its reviewing sites. ASA obliged TripAdvisor to remove claims to the trustworthiness of user reviews, arguing that they were not based on procedures enabling to effectively prevent fraudulent reviewing. Recently, more radical legal action was taken against TripAdvisor, such as the € 500'000 fine imposed in December 2014 by Italy's antitrust authority for not having prevented false reviews. Other investigations concerned fraudulent reputation-enhancement companies. A case that became known after the period of data collection in fall 2013, was the sting operation "Clean Turf" conducted by New York's attorney general. As a result of this operation, companies that had published false reviews on sites such as Yelp, Google Local, and CitySearch were fined for a total of $ 350'000.

measures. Marketing scholars have therefore hypothesized that readers partly infer reviewer credibility from the form and content of the review texts. Based on this assumption, several studies have focused on the detection of fraudulent reviews looking at distinctive linguistic clues. Yoo & Gretzel (2009), for example, have compared a set of deceptive hotel reviews written by students in the tourism field with a set of original reviews posted on TripAdvisor. They have found that deceptive reviews are characterized by a more frequent use of first person pronouns, positive sentiment and brand names. Adopting a different method, Anderson & Simester (2014) have examined reviews on a private label retailer's website, comparing reviews written by customers who had made a purchase through the website in the period in question and reviews without a confirmed transaction. From this study, it emerged that fraudulent product reviews were less likely to contain words expressing 'fit' or 'feel': fraudulent reviewers, not having purchased the reviewed object, are not inclined to provide evaluations requiring the object's physical inspection.

Reviewer credibility thus appears to be an important issue for readers of online reviews and can therefore be assumed to be a concern also of the reviewers themselves, thus influencing their linguistic choices. Nevertheless, research taking both a genre approach and considering the various dimensions of credibility seems to be rare. The present paper, which focuses on the way authors discursively construe their role as legitimate and credible reviewers on the epistemic-evidential level, may contribute to filling this gap.

Another innovative aspect of our analysis regards the type of data taken into account. Even if it is acknowledged that e-WOM in general and online reviews in particular (cf. Boot 2011 cited above) can spread through various channels, research about online user reviewing has mainly focused on platforms and shops, a data source that provides clear classifications of texts in terms of genre. Building upon previous research (Miecznikowski & Musi 2015, Miecznikowski 2015, 2016), we will focus on a different context, i.e. user reviews in comment spaces of official reviews on thematic websites. In this context, user reviews are a type of contribution that is relevant to website visitors. However, the simple forum organization of comment spaces implies that contributions are poorly categorized in genre terms. Rather, authors make content choices and employ the linguistic means at their disposal to activate different genre frames within the forum context, among which the user review. It can be expected that, for the sake of clarity, authors make central features of the genre explicit. It is thus particularly interesting to observe which role evidential distinctions play in this setting, in order to determine whether they are salient enough to be considered central features of the review genre.

3. Data and methods

The texts analyzed in this study were downloaded in 2012 from four Italian thematic websites that include sections headed *recensioni* ('reviews').[3] The subject matters covered are art exhibitions (www.mostreinmostra.it), popular music (www.fullsong.it), haute cuisine (www.passionegourmet.it), and consumer electronics (www.digital.it[4]).

Reviews are the main content of Mostreinmostra, whereas the other three websites are more variegated. Passionegourmet combines restaurant reviews with recipes, descriptions of travel destinations, tasting reports and other culinary news. On Fullsong, CD reviews are published along with interviews, musicians' biographies, event announcements, CD label portraits and hit lists. Digital contains, besides reviews, various other news related to consumer electronics and its producers as well as promotional video spots and images.

All reviews have a comment function. The data considered in the present study include both reviews (the most recent texts present at the time of data collection have been selected) and posts associated to these in the corresponding comment spaces (see table 1).

	Mostreinmostra	Passionegourmet	Digital	Fullsong	**Total**
Official reviews	177	12	225	80	**494**
Associated posts	68	92	412	70	**611**

Table 1. Reviews and posts in the corresponding comment spaces gathered from four Italian thematic websites.

Posts in comment spaces were categorized paying attention to sequential properties and the main speech acts expressed. In this task, the corpus annotating software UAM CorpusTool 2.8.14[5] was employed. Both official reviews and posts were then analyzed as to linguistic aspects, sequential relations between texts (cf. Mondada 1999 for an early application of conversation analytical categories to computer mediated communication), and properties of the medium and the situational context (Herring 2007). Posts were also analyzed in an evidential perspective in order to determine the importance of direct experience as an information source in posts categorized as user reviews and in other types of posts. In this phase of the analysis, 1703 assertive utterances in total were annotated using UAM CorpusTool. Treating information source as a pragmatic category, source categorization corresponded to the most likely interpretation of the utterance in context, taking into account grammatical, lexical, textual and content-level evidential strategies on the basis

---

[4] In the meantime, this website has changed its name to www.webnews.it. We will maintain the name "Digital", used at the moment of data collection.
[5] See O'Donnell (2008) for a general presentation of this annotation software.

of a typology of strategies developed in a previous case study (Miecznikowski 2016; cf. section 6.2. for a more detailed presentation of the analytical categories).

4. Categorization of contributions in comment spaces

In three of the four considered websites (Mostreinmostra, Passionegourmet and Fullsong), any user can leave a comment to a review after having indicated his or her name and e-mail address. In Digital, access is mediated by a registration process and users have to wait for acceptance before becoming active participants. The public, open character of the comment spaces favors occasional participation rather than community building. An exception is Passionegourmet, where a small group of users participates regularly.

The comment spaces in question are text-only asynchronous forums that do not impose any space limits on single messages. Three websites allow for one thread only. One website, Passionegourmet, allows for directly responding also to posts (via a "rispondi" button), making hierarchical thread structures possible. The average length of contributions is 39 words in Digital, 42 words in Passionegourmet, 54 words in Fullsong, and 39 words in Mostreinmostra.

As any other asynchronous written message board, comment spaces make quasi-conversational exchanges possible, but (differently from chat rooms[6]) are also compatible with less interactive message sequences.[7] Consequently, some variation can be observed regarding the modes of interaction as well as genre characteristics of single texts.

Variation is favored, moreover, by the fact that in some cases the comment function appears to be the main or only channel chosen by users to participate actively in the website's communicative space and therefore tends to be used to fulfill various purposes. This is the case in Passionegourmet and Mostreinmostra, where no other forums are offered. De facto, the situation is analogous in Fullsong: this website offers registered users the possibility to publish an anonymous review in a section headed "Community", but hardly any users had grasped this opportunity at the moment of data collection.

In Digital, separate well attended forums are offered in a section headed "Discussioni" 'discussions', suggesting a functional division between the reviews section and the discussions section. This functional division is confirmed by the reviews' paratext and action buttons, as illustrated by fig. 1. Users are invited to

---

[6] Cf. Zitzen & Stein (2004), Pistolesi (2004), Maroccia (2004).

[7] Cf. An analysis of asynchronous forums and e-mail interaction in a conversation analytical (CA) perspective was conducted by Mondada (1999), who focuses on adjacency pairs and on citing practices and collaborative formulations. Miecznikowski & Pepin (2003) analyze the degree of interactiveness of a small corpus of asynchronous forums in academic teaching. A recent relevant study is Bolander's (2012) paper dedicated to comment forums associated with personal blog posts, which examines forum interaction with particular attention to the way writers identify the posts they react to (*responsiveness*).

comment on the review by a link button – "Commenti" ('Comments') – which is placed before the review and leads to the review's comment space. Within the review text, another link button leading to the discussions section invites users to post questions on the discussion forum ("Hai domande su [reviewed object]? Scrivi sul forum!" 'Do you have questions about [reviewed object]? Use the forum!'). The distinction is underlined again in the login block that follows the review ("Commenta e partecipa alle discussioni" 'Comment and participate in discussions').
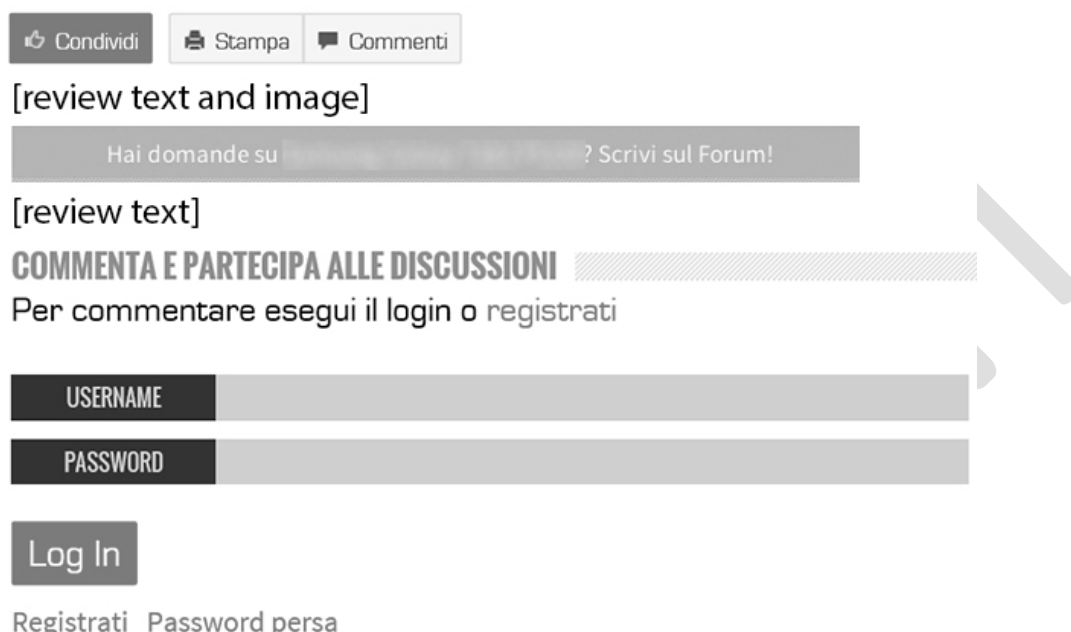

Fig. 1: Paratext and link buttons of reviews on the Digital website.

With regard to genre categorizations and norms, it is interesting to note that one of the cited elements, namely the link button placed within the review text, suggests that questions should be posted in the discussion section. In practice, as we will see, not all users comply with this recommendation, but actually use the comment function to post questions as well.

In order to have a clearer picture of the use of comment spaces in our corpus, we have categorized each post according to its sequential relation with the official review and the dominant speech act expressed (see Miecznikowski & Musi 2015):

- *Comments* directly refer back to the official review, either by expressing agreement or disagreement with it or by means of metacommunicative assessments (Franceschini 1998, Weder 2008);
- *Questions* about the reviewed object have a looser, more vague sequential relation to the official review. The questions mentioned above, which are frequent in Digital, belong to this category.
- *User reviews,* too, have a scarcely determined sequential relation to the official review. They are similar to official reviews in the sense that they contain focal speech acts of this genre, namely assertions about the

reviewed object, evaluations of the object and recommendations directed to other users.

- *Third+ posts* are reactions by users or official reviewers to preceding contributions in the comment space. The functions of third+ posts by users are extremely varied: answering questions, agreement or disagreement on a specific issue and/or formulation of more general standpoints, adding hearsay reports, anecdote telling, gossip, joking, etc. When third+ posts are authored by the official reviewer (only 8 cases in total), the purpose is mostly to answer a criticism.

The distribution of the various categories in the four websites is shown in table 2. 22 posts (about 3.5% of all posts) do not fit any of these categories.[8]

	Mostre-inmostra	Passione-gourmet	Digital	Full-song	**Total**	Number of words	Mean word length
Comments	8	12	35	23	**78**	3178 words	40.7 words
Questions	1	8	154	0	**163**	3922 words	24.1 words
User reviews	56	11	118	37	**222**	12159 words	54.8 words
Third+ posts by users	2	55	85	8	**150**	4176 words	27.8 words
Third+ posts by official reviewers	0	3	3	1	**7**	1048 words	149.7 words
Other	1	3	17	1	**22**	388 words	17.6 words
Total	**68**	**92**	**412**	**70**	**642**	24871 words	38.7 words

Table 2. Types of contributions posted in comment spaces of reviews.

5. Official reviews

5.1 Contextual and textual features of official reviews

The texts named *recensioni* are generally written by collaborators of the websites. Short biographies available on the websites (except in Fullsong) bring out the expertise of these authors, mentioning training in the field of reference, a particular passion for that field and/or journalistic experience. That the websites' official reviews are instances of specialized discourse is also underlined by the fact that, at least in three cases (Fullsong, Passionegourmet and Digital) reviews sections are organized in subsections according to the kind of evaluated object (e.g. music genre in Fullsong), applying categorizations inherent to the relevant fields of knowledge.

The average length of official reviews varies between roughly 860 words (Digital) and 435 words (Fullsong), Mostreinmostra and Passionegourmet[9] occupying an intermediate position (645 and 620 words, respectively). The overall average length in our corpus is 794 words. In most cases, pictures are

---

[8] Some errors have been corrected with respect to the categorization of posts presented in Miecznikowski & Musi (2015).

[9] In the case of Passionegourmet, the average length was calculated on the basis of a larger sample of 80 reviews.

added to the text. The texts themselves generally respect the main genre conventions of reviews described in the literature on non-academic reviews. They contain detailed and exhaustive descriptions, which are based on the reviewer's own experience with the reviewed artifact, but also reveal a schematization (Manzotti 2009) of the object's components and functions that is based on wider expert knowledge. Descriptions are completed by contextual information, evaluations, and recommendations to the reader. The latter acts are justified by largely field-specific arguments from the parts to the whole, from means and ends and from causes (see Miecznikowski 2015: 67-74). The register is quite formal, generally conforming to standard Italian spelling, punctuation and grammar. Authors position themselves as experts not only by means of field-specific descriptions and arguments, but also by using specialized vocabulary and, at least partly, an impersonal style that is common in technical and scientific discourse.

We will illustrate the mentioned properties discussing the following excerpt of an official review of a tablet:

(1)   1   **Subito una buona impressione**
      2   DITTA X dimostra di aver finalmente compreso le molteplici esigenze degli utenti, con il
      3   nuovo Tab X1, un tablet dotato finalmente della nuovissima versione Android 4 X e
      4   dell'interfaccia utente TouchWiz UX leggermente modificata per l'occasione.
      5   Nel Tab X1 ritroviamo un validissimo display capacitivo PLS TFT da 10,1 pollici con Gorilla
      6   Glass e una risoluzione pari a 800x1280 pixel per 16 milioni di colori e un ppi (pixel
      7   density) pari a 149, che gli consentono buonissimi risultati nella resa della leggibilità sia in
      8   quella dei colori e dei neri (con i primi decisamente meglio rispetto alla profondità dei neri).
      9   Stranamente, la sensibilità dello schermo è buona, ma non eccelsa, visto che abbiamo
     10   riscontrato qualche breve impuntamento, comunque nulla di preoccupante.
     11   Il processore Dual-core Cortex-A9 da 1 GHz con 1GB di RAM gli consentono una buona
     12   stabilità e delle buone prestazioni, seppure non eccellenti: abbiamo notato degli
     13   occasionali, piccoli ritardi nell'utilizzo rapido del dispositivo, ma ancora una volta nulla di
     14   particolarmente fastidioso o preoccupante.
     15   Di positivo va evidenziato la scomparsa dell'eccessivo e rapido surriscaldamento che
     16   affliggeva altri tablet DITTA X, e l'accresciuta sensazione di solidità, forse più dovuta alle
     17   dimensioni (meno sottile del Tab Y, coi suoi 9,7 mm) e al peso (587 grammi) accresciuti
     18   che non ai materiali, che restano sostanzialmente plastiche di sufficiente qualità.
     19   **Completo e veloce**
     20   […]
     21   **Versatile ed equilibrato**
     22   […]
      (www.digital.it, review published on the 23rd of April, 2012)

The author explicitly refers to testing manipulations of the tablet by agents including himself ("abbiamo riscontrato" 'we have found', l. 9-10; "abbiamo notato" 'we have noticed', l. 12) as well as to perception ("sensazione di solidità" 'sensation of solidity', l. 16). Self-reference is made using the first person plural pronoun (lines 5, 9, 12) or passivized and reflexive verb forms (e.g. "di positivo va evidenziato [...]" 'a positive aspect that needs to be stressed is [...]', l. 15).

The author repeatedly uses evaluative lexemes, the most explicit of which are *buono/buonissimo* 'good'/'very good', l. 1, 7, 9, 11, 12, *validissimo* 'very useful', l. 5, *meglio* 'better', l. 8, *eccelso* 'excellent', l. 9, *eccellente* 'excellent', l. 12,

fastidioso 'disturbing', l. 14, *preoccupante* 'worrying', l. 14, *positivo* 'positive', l. 15. He justifies his evaluations with arguments. These often take the form of descriptions of the tablet's performance in activities in which the potential buyer presumably wishes to use it (e.g. the display is judged excellent in l. 5 because it ensures good readability, l. 7; processor performance is judged less than excellent in lines 11 to 14 because it does not allow a rapid use of the device). Other arguments concern properties that might be relevant to estimate the life expectancy of the device ("stabilità" 'stability', l. 16). The various section headings in the text (lines 1, 19, 21) can be interpreted as a summary of the main arguments in favor of an overall positive assessment. Linguistic elements such as concessive and contrastive discourse markers (*ma* 'but', l. 9, 13, *comunque* 'anyway', l. 10 or *seppure* 'even if', l. 12) or negation (9, 10, 12, 13), which are recurrent throughout the text, confirm the review's argumentative nature.

Along with the above-mentioned descriptions, evaluations and arguments, the author provides a considerable amount of factual information about technical features and some contextual information (e.g. pointing out improvements in comparison with previous products released by the same company, lines 2-4 and 15-18). The corresponding propositions are not necessarily based on the reviewer's own experience; hearsay evidence or inferences from hearsay may be relevant, too. For example, the generalizing information that previous tablets of the same company tended to overheat ("[il] rapido surriscaldamento che affliggeva altri tablet DITTA X", lines 15-16) is most probably inferred from reports and evaluations by other tablet users, who are, by the way, mentioned at the beginning of the review ("le molteplici esigenze degli utenti" 'the various needs of users').

In the specific medium context of the four websites examined, some of the defining features of reviews are underlined by adding paratextual elements. The most important such element is the rating expressed numerically or by a number of icons. A rating by the reviewer (Digital), an average rating by users (Mostreinmostra) or the indication of both (Fullsong, Passionegourmet) highlight the central act of evaluation and, indirectly, the implicit act of recommendation based on it. On the Digital website, moreover, further paratextual elements draw attention to the argumentative underpinning of evaluations (cf. Fig. 2). On one hand, the final grade ("voto webnews") is calculated on the basis of four component grades ("giudizi") regarding the technical features, the design, the performance and the quality/price ratio, standardizing topoï that are relevant in buyers' decision making. On the other hand, specific arguments are spelled out in a pros and cons section ("pro" and "contro" in Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Visual and paratextual elements of the review reported as example (1).

5.2 Meta-talk about reviews and reviewers in comment spaces

Posts in comment spaces reveal a great deal about their authors' interpretation of the thread-initial review. For example, part of the posts mention or imply the fact that authors are actually considering a purchase or a visit, interpreting official reviews as potential contributions to this process of decision making. In other cases, agreement or disagreement is expressed with regard to the content of the official review, which displays the users' particular attention to evaluations and to the defense of standpoints in official reviews.

More explicit information about the users' interpretation of online reviews and, above all, about their normative expectancies with regard to them can be found in metacommunicative comments. Positive metacommunicative assessments, often accompanied by compliments or thanks, praise properties such as exhaustiveness, persuasiveness, esthetic quality and the reviewer's expertise. The following post, which we have categorized as a comment, contains a positive assessment of the official review's completeness and esthetic quality, followed by a series of congratulations and a greeting:

(2)   Recensione indubbiamente esaustiva. Foto accattivanti e invitanti. Complimenti ai gestori del ristorante e agli autori del blog. Un saluto a tutti i lettori.
Undoubtedly a comprehensive review. Appealing and inviting pictures. Congratulations to the restaurant managers and to the blog authors. Greetings to all readers.
(www.passionegourmet.it, 04.06.2012)

Negative assessments can be formulated explicitly, like in (3), where a user complains about inaccuracy (cf. the first two lines of the example) and lack of specialized knowledge in the field ("forse chi ha scritto l'articolo non conosce […]" 'perhaps whoever has written the article does not know […]'):

(3)   L'articolo in questione è tutto una somma di errori e quantomeno di affermazioni azzardate: Qualità costruttiva: OTTIMA....DA PRIMA DELLA CLASSE, forse l'aggettivo giusto sarebbe stato "Decente", forse chi ha scritto l'articolo non conosce la XX pro e altri apparecchi fotografici ai quali il suddetto aggettivo calza a misura. […]
L'autore menziona un fantomatico "sensore in formato reflex", cosa sia non mi è dato ad intendere, se non vado errato esistono reflex con almeno 8 diverse dimensioni di sensore. […]
The whole article in question is an accumulation of mistakes or at least unfounded statements: Build quality: EXCELLENT…FIRST CLASS, perhaps the right word would have been "Decent", perhaps who has written the article does not know XX pro and other photographic equipment which the above-mentioned adjective fits perfectly. The author mentions some mysterious "sensor in reflex format", I don't understand what this is, if I'm not mistaken there are reflex cameras with at least 8 different sensor sizes.
(www.digital.it, comment on a review published on the 12th of April, 2012)

They can also take the more implicit form of hetero-repairs pointing to problems in the official review which, from the user's point of view, should be solved before interaction can be pursued. This is the case in the following example, whose author raises doubts about the reviewer's possession of direct knowledge:

(4)   Non ho capito se il televisore l'avete provato o no
I don't understand if you have tried that television set out or not

(www.digital.it, comment on a review published on the 15th of May, 2012)

Among the posts we have labeled as comments, 20 negatively assess reviews as texts or reviewers as authors, addressing a series of issues: lack of expertise (5 comments); incompleteness (5 comments); negative evaluation that the user justifies by simply indicating disagreement (4 comments); partiality (2 comments); lack of direct knowledge (2 comments); the overall form of text (1 comment); late publication of the review compared to the introduction of the product on the market (1 comment).

Given the potential interactional costs of negative assessments, complaints are likely to refer to minimal standards official reviews should fulfill according to users. Praise, on the other hand, is likely to regard properties that are desirable, but that users do not take for granted, i.e. properties that exceed normal or "political" behavior (Watts 2003). On these grounds, accuracy, impartiality, direct experience and appropriate publication timing can be interpreted as corresponding to minimal normative requirements, whereas persuasiveness and esthetic quality emerge as not strictly required, but nice-to-have properties of official reviews. Completeness and expertise are both praised and, if lacking, complained about, probably indicating that their judgment is a matter of degree: a certain minimal degree of completeness and of specialized knowledge seems to be required, whereas certain reviews are evaluated positively for exceeding that minimal degree.

6. User reviews in comment spaces

6.1 Textual and sequential properties of user reviews

Even if comment spaces are technically designed to allow considerable variation as to text and interaction types, most interactions they host can be seen as sharing a common goal, which is, ultimately, to contribute in some way to helping participants judge the reviewed object and make decisions about further action. Some of the norms that users occasionally refer to with regard to official reviews are related to this overarching goal and are therefore really valid for all associated posts, too, especially the expectation that writers will not post ads or invent/distort facts.

The posts in comment spaces we have categorized as user reviews are not explicitly categorized as *recensioni* by websites, nor do users employ that term to refer to them, nor do they have graphical characteristics that make them recognizable as reviews. They differ from official reviews with regard to length, since they are about 14 times shorter, on average, than official reviews (55 words vs. 794 words). Nevertheless, these posts should be considered to be a form of online review. They serve the afore-mentioned overall goal in a specific manner, differing neatly from the other main types of posts and sharing important properties with official reviews.

In (5) we provide a first example of a user review. The artist whose album is being discussed is referred to anaphorically by a personal pronoun ("lo" 'him', "il suo disco" 'his album', "la sua musica" 'his music'). Apart from this cohesive link to the official review, the text is characterized by a high degree of autonomy and is similar to official reviews rather than commenting on one: the main speech acts are evaluations supported by argumentation, followed by an act of recommendation ("Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto di questo disco" 'I absolutely recommend buying this album') and even, finally, a numerical rating:

(5)   Finalmente...un po' di cuore nella musica!
       Dopo averlo visto cantare ad *Amici* non ho esitato a comprare il suo disco! Si può tranquillamente affermare che la musica italiana ha guadagnato un nuovo, particolare e sensibilissimo cantautore. Direi che la caratteristica fondamentale e rara di questo disco è un intimismo totale, che parla al cuore senza intermediazioni e orpelli vocali. E' questo il motivo per cui preferisco la sua musica a quella dell'altra finalista, Annalisa. Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto del disco, per me è un 10 stelle!
       At last… a bit of heart in music!
       After having seen him sing at Amici, *I bought his album immediately! It is safe to say that Italian music has gained a new, special and sensitive songwriter. I would say that the main and rare characteristic of this album is that it is totally intimate, speaking to the heart without intermediaries and vocal tinsels. And this is the reason why I prefer his music to that of the other finalist, Annalisa. I absolutely recommend buying this album, for me it's 10 stars!*
       (www.fullsong.it, 14.03.2011)

Here are some more examples:

(6)   Ciao. Io sono solitamente molto selettivo e esigente per quanto riguarda i contenuti delle mostre. Devo ammettere che questa mostra mi ha colpito e stupito per complessità di interessi e di spunti su cui riflettere, specialmente per quanto riguarda il rapporto fra il giovane Raffaello e Giovanni Santi. Approvo le scelte dei curatori.
       Hi there. I am usually very selective and demanding as to the content of exhibitions. I have to admit that I am impressed and astonished by this exhibition because of the complexity of viewpoints and of thought provoking impulses, especially with regard to the relationship between the young Raphael and Giovanni Santi. I agree with the curators' choices.
       (www.mostreinmostra.it, 14th of May, 2009)

(7)   Stupendo il confronto fra le due 'Cene'…così sì che si colgono facilmente gli aspetti di continuità e di cesura all'interno della poetica di un artista. Da vedere!!!
       The comparison between the two 'Dinners' is superb... it really allows you to understand at a glance the continuity and the breaks in the poetry of an artist. Must see it!!!
       (www.mostreinmostra.it, 22nd of March, 2009)

(8)   io l'ho comprato ieri da DITTA X .... 400 euro .... lo trovo valido, ottimo il modulo telefonico .... per ora no problem .... unico neo forse per l'utilizzo "umano" che ne faccio, è un leggero ritardo dello scorrimento schermo
       I bought it yesterday from COMPANY X .... 400 euros .... I find it works well, the telephone module is very good .... so far no problem .... the only blemish, perhaps, for the "human" use I make of it, is a slight lag in screen swiping
       (www.digital.it, comment on a tablet review published on the 23rd of April, 2012).

All cited user reviews contain evaluations and one (example 7) is concluded by a recommendation. They lack any specific sequential relation to the official review or to other forum posts and differ from questions by the absence of interrogative speech acts prompting answers by other users.

6.2 The writer's role and the importance of direct knowledge: preliminary observations

A comparison of official reviews and user reviews at the level of content, in particular of argumentative loci (Miecznikowski 2015), shows a mixed picture, which reveals convergences and differences as to the way authors construe their role as reviewers.

Like official reviewers, users position themselves as disinterested judges and adduce arguments based on field-specific endoxa. For example, they back up evaluations and recommendations by pointing out the usefulness or failure of an exhibition or tool with regard to the typical purposes it is designed for (cf. examples 7 and 8), or by judging the originality or quality of an object, artist or event compared to a known wider set of similar entities (cf. example 5). They also regularly derive overall evaluations from the evaluations of single aspects, arguing from significant parts to the whole. By engaging in these kinds of argumentation, users display field-specific knowledge about the structure of reviewed objects, their purpose, existing similar objects and standards of evaluation.

The display of a certain degree of expertise within the field to which the reviewed object belongs is observable also in the language used, more precisely at the lexical level. Writers often combine informal elements with specialized vocabulary belonging to a formal register. In (8), for instance, field-specific nouns like "modulo telefonico" or "scorrimento schermo" are integrated into a rather informal discourse characterized by non-standard punctuation, coordinating syntax, nominal sentences and a discourse marker in English ("no problem").

Moreover, the display of expertise is combined with a high degree of subjectivity. Users often employ first person singular morphemes, sometimes mixing them with the impersonal and objectifying constructions that are typical of official reviews and of other specialized genres (so we find, in example 5, "non ho esitato" / "direi" / "preferisco" / "consiglio" / "per me" along with the impersonal formula "Si può […] affermare"); expressive lexis, emphasis and exclamations are common as well. Moreover, users happen to frame their expertise as resulting from personal preferences, character traits or habits (e.g. "Io sono solitamente molto selettivo e esigente per quanto riguarda i contenuti delle mostre" 'I am usually very selective and demanding as to the content of exhibitions' in example 6), presenting themselves as passionate amateurs rather than as institutionally or professionally trained experts. Such categorizations as peers of their readers are congruent, on the argumentative level, with certain non-field-specific argument schemes present in user reviews but absent from official reviews. In particular, some users utter recommendations supporting them by a subjective appreciation. We find this scheme in (5), where "per me è un 10 stelle" ('for me it's 10 stars') seems to

justify the recommendation "Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto del disco" ('I absolutely recommend buying this album'). As pointed out by Miecznikowski (2015), this kind of argumentation rests on a prediction warranted by an analogical scheme and on the endoxical assumption that the reader's preferences and habits are similar to those of the writer ('what I like you will like, too'); an assumption that is not rooted in specialized knowledge, but in presumed beliefs about the discourse community to which the users of websites and comment forums belong.

As to the requirement of possessing direct first-hand knowledge about the object, user reviews appear to meet the same requirements as official reviews. A first inspection (Miecznikowski & Musi 2015) revealed a high frequency of explicit reports of direct interactions with the reviewed object (purchase, ownership, manipulation, visit, perception), like in (5) ("dopo averlo visto cantare" 'after having seen him sing'). In other cases, direct experience is evoked more indirectly. These first results suggested that the possession of direct knowledge of the object was a particularly important author-related felicity condition of user reviews. They encouraged us to analyze the dimension of information source more systematically in comment spaces in order to ascertain whether the possession of direct evidence about the object was a general characteristic of all contribution types or a specific characteristic of the text genre of user reviews.

6.3 An analysis of types of information sources in comment spaces

6.3.1. Annotated data and method

As mentioned in section 3, we conducted an analysis of information source as a pragmatic category, taking into account various linguistic and pragmatic means of indicating evidential distinctions.

As evidentiality is a category that applies to assertive speech acts, we considered only this family of speech acts, leaving aside other speech act types occurring in the posts of comment spaces such as questions, recommendations or primarily expressive speech acts. 1703 assertions in total have been annotated. As shown in table 3, all types of posts in comment spaces contain a considerable number of assertions. However, the density of assertions per 100 words varies depending on the type of post. Both in terms of the number of assertions (cf. the third column of the table) and in terms of their length in words (cf. the fifth column of the table), user reviews rank highest. Posts categorized as questions (which obviously contain a high proportion of questions) and unclassified posts rank lowest. The remaining types of posts are situated between the two extremes.

	Total number of words	Number of assertive speech acts	Number of assertions per 100 words	Number of words in assertions	Average number of words in assertions per 100 words
Comments	3178	181	5.7	1902	60

Questions	3922	170	4.3	1645	42
User reviews	12'159	984	8.1	10'086	83
Third+ posts by users	4176	285	6.8	3102	74
Third+ posts by official reviewers	1048	64	6.1	846	80
Other	388	19	4.9	165	43
Total	24'871	1703		17'800	

Table 3. Assertive speech acts in comment spaces.

The information sources of assertive speech acts were categorized using a typology of sources based on Willett's (1988) distinction between direct and indirect knowledge.

Within direct knowledge, we distinguished two categories. The first includes assertions that refer to the author as a participant (mainly as an agent, a patient, a beneficiary, a possessor, a person to which character traits and habits are attributed, or an experiencer of emotions), implying that the author has direct knowledge of the event in which he or she participates or has participated in the past. The second category includes asserted propositions that do not focus on the author as a participant, but which are signaled to be based on direct sensory perception or can be inferred to be so. (8) illustrates both categories. The author reports to have purchased the reviewed tablet, staging himself/herself as an agent. The subsequent series of assertions, in contrast, focuses on the tablet, while it defocuses the author as a participant by not mentioning him/her or by evoking his/her agency in the background (cf. the adverbial "per l'utilizzo 'umano' che ne faccio" 'for the 'human' use I make of it'). These assertions have to be interpreted as being based on the author's direct perception of the tablet in virtue of the fact that, in the immediate co-text, the author has reported to have purchased and used the device.

Within indirect knowledge, we distinguished three cases: inferences starting out from a minor premise based on direct experience (Anderson's 1986: 284 *experiential reasoning*), inferences starting out from a minor premise not based on direct experience and, finally, hearsay information, i.e. the author's having heard or read a discourse containing the asserted proposition.

In order to determine the information source of assertive speech acts, we considered various indicators (cf. also Miecznikowski 2016):

- grammatical and lexical evidential markers;
- propositional content (e.g. the aforementioned reference to the author's participation in an event as an indicator of direct knowledge);
- cohesion and coherence relations between an assertion and a previously mentioned event of knowledge acquisition that functions as an evidential frame, as illustrated by (8) or, in a similar manner, by (9);
- argumentation as an indicator of an inferential source of information.

In the latter regard, it is noteworthy that argument-conclusion relations by which an author invites the reader to engage in a process of reasoning do not necessarily entail that the proposed reasoning is the author's main source of information for the conclusion. However, when no other plausible sources are indicated or implied, argumentation can reasonably be interpreted in that way. Consider the following third[+] post taken from the comment space of a tablet review:

(9)   Non capisco perché vi impuntate tanto sul fatto che non si possa chiamare con questo tab e la memoria non sia espandibile, ma chi se ne frega se non posso chiamare alla fine è un tab e non è st[at]o progettato per fare telefonate
I don't understand why you're insisting that much on the fact that one cannot use this tablet to phone and that the memory is not expandable, who cares, really, if I can't phone, it is a tablet after all and isn't designed to make phone calls
(www.digital.it, comment on a review published on July 27, 2011)

The author of this post asserts that the discussed device is not designed to make phone calls. This assertion is preceded by a brief statement, "alla fine è un tab" ('it is a tablet after all'), which should be interpreted as an argument. Indeed, an argument-conclusion relation based on a reasoning from definition seems to be relevant here: if one assumes, as a socially shared endoxon, that the primary purpose of devices called *tablet* is not to make phone calls but to fulfill the classical functions of a computer, then, knowing that the designers have categorized the device in question as a *tablet* warrants the inference that they did not intend the device to be able to make phone calls. In this example, the persuasive reasoning proposed to the reader is, at the same time, the author's most likely information source for the statement that the device is not designed to make phone calls. No other sources are indicated and, in the context of this user forum, it is improbable that the author should have direct experience of or explicit hearsay information about the designing process. Referring to the evidential categories introduced earlier, definitional reasoning is a type of non-experiential reasoning, for the information that constitutes the minor premise, i.e. that the device is defined a tablet, is an abstract fact and not a percept. The fragment's argumentative structure, the propositional content of the asserted conclusion and reasonable guesses about the context thus warrant the categorization of the examined statement as being based on non-experiential reasoning.

6.3.2. Results

We will now discuss the quantitative results of the analysis, which are presented in table 4.

	Com-ments	Questions	User reviews	Third[+] posts by users	Third[+] posts by official reviewers	Other	Total
Participation	44 (24%)	95 (56%)	287 (29%)	77 (27%)	7 (11%)	6 (32%)	516 (30%)

Perception	34 (19%)	43 (25%)	386 (39%)	49 (17%)	6 (9%)	2 (11%)	520 (31%)
Total direct experience	78 (43%)	138 (81%)	673 (68%)	126 (44%)	13 (20%)	8 (43%)	1036 (61%)
Experiential inference	39 (22%)	8 (5%)	125 (13%)	17 (6%)	7 (11%)	3 (16%)	199 (12%)
Non-experiential inference	25 (14%)	9 (5%)	68 (7%)	54 (19%)	19 (29%)	4 (21%)	179 (10%)
Total inference	64 (36%)	17 (10%)	193 (20%)	71 (25%)	26 (40%)	7 (37%)	378 (22%)
Hearsay	4 (2%)	7 (4%)	9 (1%)	17 (6%)	1 (2%)	1 (5%)	39 (2%)
Indeterminate	35 (19%)	8 (5%)	109 (11%)	71 (25%)	24 (38%)	3 (16%)	250 (15%)
Total	181 (100%)	170 (100%)	984 (100%)	285 (100%)	64 (100%)	19 (100%)	1703 (100%)

Table 4. Information sources of assertions in different types of posts in comment spaces related to reviews.

Considering all indicators in context, it was possible to assign one of the previously distinguished information source types to 1453 assertions, whereas 250 utterances (about 15% of the total number of assertions) were classified as evidentially indeterminate. Evidential indeterminateness was more frequent in third[+] posts by reviewers (38%) and users (25%) than in user reviews (11%) and questions (5%). Comments assessing the official review occupied an intermediate position (19%). Possibly there is a correlation between the sequential properties of posts and their degree of evidential determinacy: in our comment spaces, posts with strong sequential ties to preceding posts seem to be evidentially vaguer than posts that are only loosely connected to preceding contributions. A correlation of this kind, if present, could be mediated by intervening variables such as a higher pressure to claim one's epistemic authority and legitimacy as a participant in sequence-openings than within ongoing sequences or a greater confidence in the existence of a common ground in ongoing sequences than at sequence beginnings.

An example that illustrates evidential indeterminacy is M.'s answer in the following question-answer pair, in which reasoning can be excluded as an information source, whereas it remains unclear whether M.'s source is hearsay/reading or personal experience:

(10)   E.J.: salve, volevo sapere se c'è anche l'hdmi?!!
        M.: Si esiste la base per collegarlo a un TV con ingresso hdmi
        E.J.: hi, I wonder if there's hdmi, too?
        M.: Yes, there is a base that allows to connect it to a TV with hdmi input
        (www.digital.it, comment on a tablet review published on the 22nd of November, 2011).

M. provides a specific piece of information that E.J. is lacking and, by refraining from hedging, claims epistemic certainty, thus indicating a knowledge edge over E.J. In this context, the participants seem to perceive these elements as sufficient to entitle M. to make the statement in question without need of further evidential justification.

We will now discuss those cases in which the considered indicators make it possible to assign a type of information source.

An evidential characteristic shared by all genres present in review comment spaces is a strong preference for first-hand knowledge, which includes direct knowledge and inference, over second-hand knowledge based on others' discourses.[10] Authors remarkably rarely rely on others' discourses, with proportions ranging from 1% in user reviews to 6% in third[+] posts by users.

Differences between post types emerge when considering the relative importance, within first-hand knowledge, of direct experience and of inference. In user-generated posts, the proportion of statements based on direct experience is higher than that of statements based on inference, whereas official reviewers reacting to user comments utter more inferred statements. A plausible explanation for this difference is that official reviewers talk about their experience of the reviewed object in their official review and need not do so in the comment space, whereas the only possibility for users to transmit their personal experience is the comment space.

A closer look at user-generated posts reveals further differences:

a) The prevalence of direct knowledge over inference is clearest in posts classified as questions (81% vs. 10%) and in user reviews (68% vs. 20%).
b) Posts classified as questions contain a particularly high proportion of assertions referring to events in which the author has participated (56% vs. 24-29% in other user-generated posts).
c) User reviews are characterized by a particularly high number of assertions based on direct perception (39% vs. 17-25% in other user-generated posts).
d) The specific role of direct perception in user reviews can be observed within inference-based statements as well. In user reviews, experiential reasoning prevails over non experiential reasoning (13% vs. 7%), a preference that is slightly less pronounced in comments (22% vs. 14%) and altogether absent in the remaining types of posts.

As far as questions are concerned, the overall high frequency of statements based on direct knowledge (finding a) is due to the high number of reports of the speaker's actions and experiences (finding b). Such reports introduce and frame the main information-seeking speech act. In the examined corpus, this pattern is recurrent on the Digital website, where users mainly ask technical questions

---

[10] The first-hand vs. second-hand distinction depends on the role of the speaker in the generation of knowledge. Agency, perception and inference imply that the asserted proposition is created by the speaker on the basis of available data and pre-existing knowledge, whereas hearsay implies that the speaker does not create the asserted proposition him/herself, but adopts a proposition created by others. Willett's (1988) direct-indirect distinction, on the other hand, depends on the relationship between the speaker and the event referred to in the proposition. The two distinctions' theoretical implications and their relevance for language typology – with special attention to Romance – are discussed by Squartini (2001).

about the reviewed electronic device. Reporting actions and experiences with the device has the function of explaining which technical problem the user is facing. Since 154 out of 163 questions in the corpus stem from the Digital website (cf. table 2) the observed pattern may be domain-specific.

Turning to user reviews, the high percentage of assertions based on direct perception (finding c) distinguishes them from all other types of posts. These assertions correspond to the descriptive part of reviews on which evaluations and eventual recommendations rest. Even if the descriptions of the reviewed object in user reviews are much shorter than the detailed descriptions one finds in official reviews, they represent a sufficient text proportion to distinguish user reviews from other types of posts. As to experiential reasoning, it backs up value judgments and certain types of categorizations and comparisons, but it can take the form of causal reasoning as well, e.g. when a creator's intention (a cause) is inferred from directly observable aspects of his or her work (effects). The preference for experiential inference found in user reviews also appears in comments (finding d); it must be noted, though, that in that context, experiential inferences usually do not concern the reviewed object, but the assessed review text. An example in point is the categorization "undoubtedly a comprehensive review" in (2), which results from the comparison of the topics of the published review (whose mentioning can be directly observed) with some ideal set of topics considered complete by the author[11] with some ideal topic set the author considers complete.

The comparative analysis of different types of posts confirm the hypothesis formulated in section 6.2. that direct perception – more precisely, the direct perception of the reviewed object – plays an important role in user reviews as a text genre. The analysis shows that sequential properties, dominant speech acts and evidential properties converge to define text genres in an online context in which no explicit genre categorizations are made or the users' practice partly conflicts with genre categorizations proposed by the website administrators (as in the Digital case, in which administrators attempt in vain to ban questions from comment spaces).

That evidential aspects are part of the bundle of features defining the user review genre is confirmed when information sources in user reviews are compared across websites. Table 5 shows that the relative frequencies of assertions based on the various types of information sources are remarkably similar in the four examined websites: direct knowledge prevails over indirect knowledge (finding a) and, within direct knowledge, perception is invariably the

---

[11] In this example and in many others, metadiscursive references to units and properties of others' discourse, such as lexical choices, mentioned topics, style or text length, but also cited stretches of discourse, require the direct perception of discourse at the locutionary (Austin 1962) level. These metadiscursive references must be distinguished from the recourse to others' discourses as sources of information (hearsay), i.e. as sources of propositions that are weakly or strongly asserted by the speaker.

most frequent source of information (finding c). The preference for experiential inference over non-experiential inference (finding d) characterizes three of the four examined domains (exhibitions, restaurants and music albums), whereas on the Digital website both types of inference are equally frequent. As far as inference types are concerned, a domain-specific effect can thus be observed in our data.

	Mostre-inmostra	Passione-gourmet	Digital	Fullsong	**Total**
Participation	25 (20%)	13 (27%)	199 (32%)	50 (26%)	287 (29%)
Perception	52 (41%)	20 (42%)	250 (41%)	64 (33%)	386 (39%)
Total direct experience	77 (61%)	33 (69%)	449 (73%)	114 (59%)	673 (68%)
Experiential inference	23 (18%)	10 (21%)	37 (6%)	55 (29%)	125 (13%)
Non-experiential inference	10 (8%)	2 (4%)	46 (7%)	10 (5%)	68 (7%)
Total inference	33 (26%)	12 (25%)	83 (13%)	65 (34%)	193 (20%)
Hearsay	2 (1%)	1 (2%)	6 (1%)	0 (0%)	9 (1%)
Indeterminate	15 (12%)	2 (4%)	79 (13%)	13 (7%)	109 (11%)
Total	127 (100%)	48 (100%)	617 (100%)	192 (100%)	984 (100%)

Table 5. Information sources of assertions in user reviews.

7. Conclusions

The approach chosen in this paper, being sensitive to local and global aspects of context (Akman & Bazzanella 2003), has enabled the investigation of reviewing in different fields, in the Italian web, which takes into account linguistic form, the display of entitlement, technical constraints imposed by the medium environment, writers' opportunities for participation, sequential relations between texts, and metacommunicative clues to the writers' orientation towards language and communication norms. In particular, the qualitative analysis of comment spaces has given access to reviewing practices that lie beyond the scope of most existing research on reviews, which concentrates on texts explicitly categorized as reviews.

The analysis of contributions to comment spaces of reviews indeed suggests that there is, among them, a set of contributions that share a sufficient number of distinctive features to be considered a specific subgenre of comment space posts. On the basis of our corpus analysis, we think they are best conceived of as a type of user reviews. They are shorter, less comprehensive, more informal and more subjective than official reviews; but their sequential properties, their main discourse topic, the dominant speech acts, specialized language and

argumentation and the author's possession of direct knowledge about the evaluated object make them similar to official reviews.

Considering genres as dynamic categories, the affinities and differences between official reviews and user reviews in comment spaces can be explained as resulting from genre adaptation. The genre model of the online written review – be it authored by declared experts or published on user platforms – is certainly relevant for the authors of user reviews in our corpus. Examples of official reviews are present in the local context and the corresponding norms are focused on in more or less direct ways in metacommunicative comments. User reviewing is a common practice in the wider internet context and an appropriate contribution within a participation space whose unifying goal is to help form judgments on objects, places or events. It is plausible to assume that contributors to comment spaces orient themselves towards the genre model of the review to express their opinion as an art lover or consumer in a recognizable and legitimate way. That genre model is adapted to the forum context, though. Informality and briefness are characteristics of discourse in discussion boards and social media in general. Non exhaustiveness and subjectivity, on the other hand, are related to the fact that user evaluation in comment spaces is a collective argumentative task. Given the presence of the official review and of possible further opinions, it is not necessary to describe and evaluate the object in all its aspects. The participation of several writers with equivalent roles also scales down the importance of any single point of view. Writers construe their point of view as subjective and leave it to readers to arrive at a synthesis between different opinions expressed on the same forum or elsewhere. This strategy has interactional advantages for writers: on one hand, they diminish their own responsibility for evaluative acts and the corresponding risks; on the other hand, it allows them to stress agency and first-hand experience.

The idea that genre models ultimately rooted in a tradition of expert writing influence user-generated content contrasts, to a certain extent, with the eWOM metaphor proposed in the literature on consumer decision making (cf. section 2). That metaphor suggests that oral practices of information transmission and argumentation constitute relevant models for the expression of opinions about products and cultural objects in comment spaces or forums. The general influence of orality on style and register in chats, SMS text messages, forums and a number of other online situations is indeed uncontroversial (cf. Pistolesi 2004 on Italian). Moreover, specific dialogic or multi-party spoken activity types related to product evaluation and decision making may be relevant for the more conversational exchanges in comment spaces attested in our corpus. However, such activity types can hardly be considered to be the dominant genre models for user reviews, which often are not part of conversational exchanges, have a high degree of autonomy and intra-textual cohesion, integrate elements of specialized and formal discourse and sometimes adopt the specifically written practice of rating. These characteristics suggest that, when it comes to genre

models (rather than register or style), online writing practices are probably even more relevant for our writers than patterns of spoken interaction.

In the process of genre adaptation discussed above, information source emerges as a pragmatic category that is central in the linguistic and rhetorical configuration that characterizes genres. In the case at hand, evidential requirements are part of the core felicity conditions that remain stable over various reviewing contexts and contribute to make user reviews recognizable as such. Beyond the description of user reviews, the part of our analysis dedicated to evidential distinctions opens up some new paths of research in discourse analysis and linguistics. Within discourse analysis, the role of evidential distinctions, evidential vagueness and (inter)subjectivity (Musi, to appear) in texts and text genres could be examined in a broader range of texts and activity types. The indicator set we employed in order to annotate the type of information source in assertions could be applied to this end. Various methods, including annotation experiments and experimental studies of discourse comprehension, may be used to test the salience and adequateness of the typology of sources and of the indicators presented in this article. Finally, further linguistic research about evidentiality at the semantic-pragmatic interface, including interlinguistic comparisons within discourse genres, is needed to obtain a clearer picture of the explicit linguistic marking of evidential distinctions in texts and of its interplay with more implicit strategies.

REFERENCES

Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2004). *Evidentiality*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Akman, V. & Bazzanella, C. (2003). The complexity of context: guest editors' introduction. *Journal of Pragmatics, 35*, 321-329.

Altschul, J. (2011). Epistemic Entitlement. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-en/.

Anderson L. B. (1986). Evidentials, paths of change, and mental maps: typologically regular asymmetries. In W. Chafe and J. Nichols (Eds.), *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology* (p. 273-312). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Anderson, E. T. & Simester, D. I. (2014). Reviews Without a Purchase: Low Ratings, Loyal Customers, and Deception. *Journal of Marketing Research* 51(3), 249-269. DOI: 10.1509/jmr.13.0209

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Baud, D. (2003). Analyse de genre: la critique de cinéma dans la presse quotidienne britannique. *ASp: La Revue du GERA*,*39/40*, 37-45.

Berkenkotter, C. & Luginbühl, M. (2014). Producing genres: pattern variation and genre development. In E.-M. Jakobs & D. Perrin (eds.), *Handbook of writing and text production* (pp.285-304). Berlin: De Gruyter.

Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing genre: language use in professional settings*. London: Longman.

Biber, D. & Conrad, S. (2009). *Register, genre, and style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bieler, H., Dipper, S. & Stede, M. (2007). Identifying formal and functional zones in film reviews. *Proceedings of the 8th SIGdial workshop on discourse and dialogue.* Antwerp, 75-78. http://sigdial.org/workshops/workshop8/proceedings.htm

Bolander, B. (2012). Disagreements and agreements in personal/diary blogs: A closer look at responsiveness. *Journal of Pragmatics, 44*, 1607-1622.

Boot, P. (2011). Towards a genre analysis of online book discussion: socializing, participation and publication in the Dutch booksphere. *Selected papers in internet research, IR 12*.

Brown, J., Broderick, A.J. & Lee, N. (2007). Word of mouth communication within online communities: conceptualizing the online social network. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 21/3*. DOI: 10.1002/dir.20082.

Caballero, R. (2005). The influence of hypertext on genre: exploring online book reviews. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard, M. Toolan & D. C. Freeman (eds.), *The writer's craft, the culture's technology* (pp. 57-70). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet linguistics.* London: Routledge.

De Andrea, D. C., Van Der Heide, B., Vendemia, M. A., & Vang, M. H. (2015). How people evaluate online reviews. *Communication Research*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0093650215573862

De Ascaniis, S. (2012). *Online travel reviews. An argumentative and textual genre perspective*. PHD thesis, Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences.

Domsch, S. (2009). Critical genres: generic changes of literary criticism in computer-mediated communication. In J. Giltrow & D. Stein (eds.), *Genres in the internet. Issues in the theory of genre* (pp.221-238). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Fix, U. (2008). *Texte und Textsorten – sprachliche, kommunikative und kulturelle Phänomene*. Berlin: Frank & Timme.

Fox, B. (2001). Evidentiality: Authority, responsibility, and entitlement in English conversation. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology,* 11(2), 167-192.

Franceschini, R. (1998). *Riflettere sull'interazione. Un'introduzione alla metacomunicazione e all'analisi conversazionale.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Frumkin, P. (2007). Everyone's a critic: Operators adapt to surge in online reviews by patrons. *National Restaurant News*, *41*(2). Source URL: http://nrn.com/archive/everyone-s-critic-operators-adapt-surge-online-reviews-patrons.

Giltrow, J. & Stein, D. (2009). *Genres in the internet. Issues in the theory of genre*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh G. & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet? *Journal of interactive marketing, 18/1*, 38-52.

Herring, S. C. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@ internet, 4/1*, 1-37.

Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S. & Wright, E. (2004). Bridging the gap: a genre analysis of weblogs. *Proceedingsof the 37th Hawai'i international conference on system sciences (HICSS-37)*. Los Alamitos: IEEE Computer Society Press. http://www.computer.org/csdl/proceedings/hicss/2004/2056/00/index.html

Herring, S. C., Stein, D. & Virtanen, T. (eds.) (2013). *Pragmatics of computer-mediated communication*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Jurafsky, D., Chahuneau, V., Routledge, B.R. & Smith N.A. (2014). Narrative framing of consumer sentiment in online restaurant reviews. *First Monday*, *19(4)*. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i4.4944.

Köhler, M. (2000). *Wertung in der Literaturkritik: Bewertungskriterien und sprachliche Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten des Bewertens in journalistischen Rezensionen.* Würzburg: Julius-Maximilians-Universität.

López, M., Sicilia, M. (2014). Determinants of E-WOM influence: the role of consumers' internet experience. *Journal of theoretical and applied electronic commerce research,* 9 (1), 28-43.

Luca, M. (2011). Reviews, reputation, and revenue: the case of yelp.com. *Harvard Business School working papers.*

Manzotti, E. (2009). La descrizione. Un profilo linguistico e concettuale. *Nuova Secondaria*, 27(4), 19-40.

Maroccia, M. (2004). On-line polylogues: conversation structure and participation framework in internet newsgroups. *Journal of Pragmatics, 36*, 115–145.

Miecznikowski, J. (2015). L'argomentazione nelle recensioni on-line. In: B. Gili Fivela, E. Pistolesi e R. Pugliese (a cura di), *Parole, gesti, interpretazioni. Studi linguistici per Carla Bazzanella* (pp. 57-78), Roma, Aracne.

Miecznikowski, J. (2016). "An experience that apparently differs a lot from mine". Evidentials in discourse: the case of gastronomic discussions. In S. Greco, M. Danesi (eds.), *Case studies in Discourse Analysis* (pp. 270-298). München: Lincom Europa.

Miecznikowski, J. & Musi, E. (2015). Genre norms and variation in online reviews. In: J. Miecznikowski et al. (eds.), *Norme linguistiche in contesto / Sprachnormen im Kontext / Normes langagières en contexte / Language Norms in Context. Actes du colloque VALS-ASLA 2014 (Lugano, 12-14 février 2014).* Special issue of *Bulletin Suisse de Linguistique Appliquée*, vol. 2, pp. 141-159.

Miecznikowski, J. & Pepin, N. (2003). L'intégration des forums via internet dans l'enseignement universitaire: un regard réflexif. In L. Mondada S. & S. Pekarek Doehler (eds.), *Plurilinguisme – Mehrsprachigkeit – plurilingualism. Enjeux identitaires, socio-culturels et éducatifs. Festschrift pour Georges Lüdi* (pp. 187-202). Tübingen: Francke.

Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly journal of speech*, *70*, 151-67.

Mondada, L. (1999). Formes de séquentialité dans les courriels et les forums de discussion. Une approche conversationnelle de l'interaction sur internet. *ALSIC* (*Apprentissage des Langues et Systèmes d'Information et de Communication*), *2/1*, 3-25. http://alsic.revues.org/1571?lang=en.

Mortara Garavelli, B. (1988). Italienisch: Textsorten, Tipologia dei testi. In G. Holtus, M. Metzeltin & C. Schmitt (eds.), *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik*, 4 (pp. 157-168). Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Musi E., (2015). *Dalle apparenze alle inferenze: i verbi sembrare e apparire come indicatori argomentativi.* PhD thesis, Università della Svizzera italiana, Facoltà di Scienze della comunicazione.

Musi, E. (to appear). Strategies of objectification in opinion articles. In *Proceedings of the OSSA Conference*, 18-21 May 2016.

O'Donnell, M. (2008). The UAM CorpusTool: Software for corpus annotation and exploration. In C. M. Bretones Callejas, J. F. Fernández Sánchez, J. R. Ibáñez Ibáñez, M. E. García Sánchez, M. E. Cortés de los Ríos, S. S. Ramiro, M. S. Cruz Martínez, N. Perdú Honeyman & B. Cantizano Márquez (eds), *Applied linguistics now: understanding language and mind / La lingüística aplicada hoy: comprendiendo el lenguaje y la mente* (pp. 1433-1447). Almería: Universidad de Almerìa.

Pistolesi, E. (2004). *Il parlar spedito: l'italiano di chat, e-mail e SMS*. Padova: Esedra.

Römer, U. (2010). Establishing the phraseological profile of text type: the construction of meaning in academic book reviews. *English text construction*, 3(1), 95-119.

Sen, S. & Lerman, D. (2007). Why are you telling me this? An examination into negative consumer reviews on the web, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 21(4), 76–94.

Squartini, M. (2001). The Internal Structure of Evidentiality in Romance. *Studies in Language*, 25/2, 297-334.

Stegert, G. (1997). Die Rezension: zur Beschreibung einer komplexen Textsorte. *Beiträge zur Fremdsprachenvermittlung*, 31, 89-110.

Taboada, M. (2011). Stages in an online review genre. *Text & talk: An interdisciplinary journal of language, discourse & communication studies, 31/2*, 247-269.

Tannen, D. & Trester, A. M. (2013). *Discourse 2.0 language and new media*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

Thet, T. T., Na, J. C. & Khoo, C. (2010). Aspect-based sentiment analysis of movie reviews on discussion boards. *Journal of information science, 36/6*, 823-848.

Thurlow, C. & Mroczek, K. (eds.) (2011). *Digital discourse: language in the new media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weder, M. (2008). Form and Function of Metacommunication in CMC. In *Handbook of Research on Computer Mediated Communication* (pp. 1447-1463). Hershey/New York: IGI Global.

Willett T. (1988). A Cross-Linguistic Survey of the Grammaticization of Evidentiality. *Studies in Language: International Journal Sponsored by the Foundation 'Foundations of Language'*, 12/1, 51-97.

Yates, S. J. & Sumner, T. R. (1997). Digital genres and the New Burden of Fixity. In *Proceedings of the thirtieth annual Hawaii international conference on system sciences.*

Yoo, K.-H. & Gretzel, U. (2009). Comparison of Deceptive and Truthful Travel Reviews. In: W. Hopken, U. Gretzel & R. Law (eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism* (pp. 37-47), Vienna, Springer.

Yus, F. (2011). *Cyberpragmatics: internet-mediated communication in context*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Zillig, W. (1982). Textsorte 'Rezension'. In K. Detering, J. Schmidt-Radefeldt & W. Sucharowski (eds.), *Sprache erkennen und verstehen. Akten des 16. linguistischen Kolloquiums Kiel 1981.* (pp. 197-208). Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Zitzen, M. & Stein, D. (2004). Chat and conversation: a case of transmedial stability? *Linguistics: an interdisciplinary journal of the language sciences*, 42/5, 983-1021.