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'Remember the E.D. is talking right now. It's not reality': Using corpora to explore discourse and identity in an online anorexia forum

This paper examines the discursive construction of anorexia nervosa in a specialised corpus of postings to an online eating disorders community forum. As well as providing a rich source of data for illuminating experiences of this often fatal condition, the text-based nature of health fora and the volume of language data they produce make them ideally suited to investigation through corpus techniques. Accommodating analytical concerns from both corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), examination of the corpus is conducted initially through quantitative keyword and frequency calculations. I then offer a qualitative analysis of a selection of these keywords, arguing that collocation analysis offers a riposte to criticisms of methodological inconsistency in CDA research (Wooffitt, 2005) by providing a rigorous means for the identification of particular discursive formations across larger datasets (Baker, 2006; Baker *et al.*, 2008).

The corpus-based discourse analysis of these keywords suggests that the forum users' linguistic choices discursively construct a conception of anorexia that broadly reflects established discourses of pathology and patient-hood in the medical sciences. However, corpus analysis techniques also help uncover a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that this medical discourse is inflected with non-scientific notions of morality and an emergent representation of anorexia as a single object that far exceeds purely medical definitions. This linguistic evidence is used to elucidate a number of wider practices for the forum participants, including establishing a sense of shared group identity with geographically disparate individuals whilst constructing – and sometimes forcefully defending – a medically-validated social position in the face of a widely stigmatised condition. In relating textual data to these broader forum activities, I attempt to demonstrate that corpus linguistics' methodological precepts make it a valuable vehicle for interrogating online health communication, particularly given the climate of evidence based practice in the British NHS. At the same time, I contend that corpus investigation can be fruitfully supplemented with additional relevant frameworks, such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), that further illuminate the textual evidence whilst being less amenable to corpus approaches alone.

Online fora now constitute a significant source of information and emotional support for large numbers of individuals with chronic conditions and their impact on mainstream healthcare practice is increasingly recognised (Bartlett & Coulson, 2011; Cross, 2008). In light of this, and congruent with the interventionist tradition of CDA, I conclude by outlining future directions for this corpus-enabled research and its mediated application in practicing healthcare contexts.

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