

Personal Weblogs and Knowledge Dissemination: A Diachronic Perspective

1. Introduction

- Weblogs have been researched for over a decade now. Usually weblogs are divided into several similar subtypes. On the slide, you see a recent typology proposed by Cornelius Puschmann:
 - Puschmann postulates a topic-centred type which is aimed at a wide audience and deals with certain external topics (e.g. religion, politics and others) usually in an argumentative or expository way; these weblogs are supposed to be used for knowledge dissemination and increasing the author's reputation as an expert in their field. This type probably also comprises *knowledge blogs* as described by Röhl (2004), Herring (e.g. 2004; 2006) and Efimova (2009) as well as *research blogs* (Fritz 2013; Mauranen 2013).
 - Ego-centred weblogs, on the other hand, are claimed to be centred on the author's inner life, recording their experiences and being aimed (if at all) at a narrow audience of friends and family. Quite often these ego-centred weblogs are contrasted with topic-centred specimens in that they do not play a role in knowledge dissemination (cf. also Fraas 2009: 368).
- In the next 20 minutes, I would like to show that ego-centred weblogs also play their part in the production and dissemination of knowledge – an aspect which to my knowledge has been researched only marginally. As the title of my talk promises, I will suggest a diachronic dimension to the issue.
- In order to do so, I will proceed as follows: I will briefly introduce my diachronic corpus of Personal Weblogs as the data basis of my talk and make some remarks concerning my methodology. I will then have a look at the diachronic roots of knowledge dissemination in Weblogs, before moving on to the ethno-genre *Personal Weblog*. Here, I will focus only on exemplars (or postings) that could be classified as ego-centred. Finally I will draw conclusions in the light of the *lay theory* concept.

2. Data Basis and Method

- The research I present here is mainly based on a diachronic corpus of Personal Weblogs with the German acronym DIABLOK. For the collection of corpus texts I relied on the Internet Archive. I applied an ethno-category-based approach along the lines of “If authors label their Blog *Personal Weblog*, they express their belief that their text represents this specific genre.”

- As the slide illustrates, the corpus consists of two parts. Part I contains specimens of the very few earliest *Weblogs* (1997-2000). They form the root for the subsequent differentiation of several weblog genres. In this group we find Dave Winer's *Scripting News* next to Cameron Barretts *Camworld* and others. Part II assembles members of the more specific category *Personal Weblog* (2002-2012). These texts were collected from the oldest blog directory *The Globe of Blogs*, which was founded in 2002. The gap of one year between period I and II is therefore due to the availability of sources.
- I conducted a qualitative analysis which was based on both the *Grounded Theory* Framework and current text linguistic approaches. Apart from the corpus, my research draws – among others – on ethnographic studies and insider reflections by weblog authors. The categories generated by the qualitative stage of my research were then used for a quantitative investigation.
- Some results of this statistic research stage are presented in the diagram on the slide: It shows the percentage of Personal Weblogs in which different functional patterns could be detected. Usually one Personal Weblog exhibits 2 to 3 of these functional categories, which means that the percentages exceed 100%.
- The diagram shows that there is a shift from one central function – the filter function – in period I to another one in period II, which is dominantly labelled *Sharing Experience* by Blog-authors. It is exactly the first category (the filter function) which has mainly been described in terms of knowledge dissemination for the first Weblogs.
- Let us have a brief look at the first generation Weblogs in a bit more detail:

3. Knowledge Dissemination in First-Generation Weblogs

3.1. Authors as Experts: Providing Gateways and Accumulating Knowledge

- Period I-authors such as Dave Winer – the slide presents a snapshot of his famous weblog *Scripting News* – collect links which are of interest to them. The commentary these authors provide is often highly crafted in order to capture the essence of a filtered link in a concise way. It is postings like this one from *Scripting News* which are typical of the filter category. The excerpt on the slide contains a high frequency of technical terms and acronyms (*e.g. ISP, MAE West, Frontier*); apparently, Winer is an IT expert and expects a similarly educated audience.
- Other authors, for instance Raphael Carter, present themselves as experts in a certain field. Raphael Carter mainly collects links dealing with natural science topics. As in *Scripting*

News, *Honey Guide*'s comments include a high amount of specialised lexis (*plasmids*, *bacillus cells*). *Honeyguide* is also one of the first Weblogs to categorize the accumulated knowledge in certain fields such as *biology – neurology or miscellaneous – agriculture*. The categorisation reflects the Weblog's focus on natural science.

- Weblogs filtering the Web do not only provide a gateway to knowledge sources. By summarizing and evaluating the contents of sources as well as categorising entries, they accumulate and disseminate expert knowledge. They obviously address audiences with a nearly equal expert status.

3.2. Disseminating Lay Knowledge: The Roots of the Category *Sharing Experience*

- It is already among the lists of links in some period I-Weblogs where we find scattered postings (or sections of postings) of the diary-like category *Sharing Experience*. The example on the slide is taken from Brigitte Eaton's *EatonWeb*. It deals in an elaborate way with recent experiences of the author.
- The passage is introduced by *Some more musings about living online*, which sets a topical focus beyond the narration of a subjectively important event.
- In the next section, the event is narrated: An everyday conversation at the hairdresser's about the weather. Apparently we are dealing with a posting of the kind which are the reason that "[f]rom their earliest days, blogs were dismissed as a mundane form in which people told us, pointlessly, what they had for lunch," as Scott Rosenberg puts it in 2010.
- The last section, however, serves as a reflection of this every-day experience on two levels: Firstly, the experience is evaluated on a personal level, notable by the use of 1st person pronouns: *it hit me that other people tune in... I just walk out my door...* Secondly, there is a more general level: *The weather doesn't matter online*. This sentence connects introduction and conclusion of the passage.
- I think we can agree that the passage from *EatonWeb* is an instance of the ego-centred type of blogging. Still, and especially on the second level of reflection, it presents generally applicable knowledge about differences between people spending much time online and people who do not.
- To sum up, in this period I-example, we can observe the construction of knowledge in an ego-centred posting type. As this knowledge arises directly from experience and is not generated by scientific methodology, we can call it *lay knowledge* according to a consensus in social sciences and applied linguistics (cf. e.g. Antos 1996: 29; Dewe 1988; Busch 2005; Kruglanski et al. 2010).

- In the next section, we will see how this way of constructing lay knowledge is further elaborated in period II of the DIABLOK.

4. Knowledge Dissemination in Personal Weblogs (2002-2012)

4.1. Sharing Experience and Giving Advice

- As the diagram shows (presented on this slide again), the diary-like, ego-centred functional pattern *Sharing Experience* exhibits a considerable quantitative increase in period II.A and stabilizes between 60 and 65 % in periods II.B and II.C.
- Of course, not all the postings which were coded with this category show an elaborated reflection section. Some only hint at a reflection of the experiences narrated, others only exhibit reflections on an individual and not on a more general level.
- There are, however, considerable numbers of postings which work along similar lines as the example taken from *EatonWeb*. This posting (slide) from the Personal Weblog *Mysteries of M*, for instance, also begins with a topical introduction (*Looking for a place to live*) followed by a narrative and a reflection section. The reflection is introduced by *I've realized...* The use of the pronoun *you* in its generic reading supports the assumption that the reflection is carried out on a general level, not an individual one. The announcement of “the real truth” also points in this direction, stressing the relevance of the knowledge beyond the individual author-centred level.
- In some cases (especially in period II.C of my corpus), this tendency is developed even further. Consider this example taken from the Personal Weblog *Always Writing* (II.C): The author narrates (or almost confesses) that he posted promotional links by accident on an Amazon readers' forum, receiving countless vicious replies in return. Again, the actual narration of the event is followed by a general reflection passage. Instead of formulating assertive statements as the essence of his experience, the author explicitly warns *all authors*. The warning to stay away from Amazon forums is then supported by some arguments which are based on the narrated event.
- Additionally, the warning shows very clearly how the reflection is connected to the narrated experience by an IF-THEN-relation. This relation also implicitly connects the passages in the examples analysed earlier; here, however, it becomes very obvious.
- What we have here is probably a borderline case between ego- and topic centred blogging. What happens in this posting, however, is similar to what we have seen before: A subjectively important event is used to draw conclusions on a general level. These conclusions form pieces of lay knowledge, or rudimentary lay theories as we will see later

on. This knowledge, in turn, is intentionally disseminated – in the case of *Always Writing* even as an explicit warning issued to other authors. In this, a particular quality often claimed for lay knowledge can be observed, namely its relevance for every-day decisions.

- Before drawing more general conclusions in the light of the lay theory concept, I would like to move on to a singular Personal Weblog in my corpus which I assume to be aimed at the formation (and dissemination) of a complex lay theory explaining fundamental aspects of life.

4.2. Producing and Disseminating Lay Theories: The Case of *Compassionate Council*

- The Personal Weblog *Compassionate Council* was launched in July 2007. The author describes himself as “a teacher teaching myself the meaning of learning.”
- The Personal Weblog contains postings such as the one shown on the slide, which is entitled *Accumulation is the Movement of Becoming: Part 9*. The title suggests that the posting is part of a series dealing with a particular topic. Indeed the Personal Weblog contains some other series, for instance *Thought Creates Time* and *The Root of all Suffering*. The series are frequently interrupted by independent posts such as *The Individual is a Complex Movement of Mind*. These titles are formulated as hypotheses. I am still at the beginning of investigating if and how the several threads are connected.
- The beginning of the posting *We have been taking a brief look at...* obviously serves as connector to earlier postings of the series. The use of the pronoun *we* and expressions such as *we have been taking a brief look, now let us turn our attention to...* establish a stylistic similarity to academic lectures or philosophical treatises. The recurrence of the key terms *language*, *accumulating movement* and *duality* creates a dense network of cohesive ties. The sentence-initial causal junction *for* suggests both an argumentative way of treating the topic and the fact that relations and dependences between concepts are elaborated on. Indeed, the short passage introduces numerous key concepts of linguistics, philosophy and psychology, obviously trying to establish relations between them as part of *one indivisible movement*. As we will see later on, it is highly doubtful that these terms are used with meanings established in their scientific disciplines.
- The central term *accumulation*, or *accumulating movement*, respectively, is used like a scientific term. Its meaning has been defined in the context of the series as something like an activity of the mind aiming at gathering knowledge and experience. This suggests that we can observe the formation of a theory defining its own axioms and central concepts. Other terms receive their meaning in relation to these central concepts. *Language*, for

instance, is partly defined by its function to give a “sense of permanence” to the accumulating movement of mind.

- The label cloud, a part of which you can see on the slide, indicates that the entire Personal Weblog serves the purpose of creating such a theoretical building: It contains central concepts such as consciousness, conditioning, awareness, thought, mind and others. The label cloud also serves the purpose of categorising the generated knowledge.
- As I have already pointed out, these concepts are all familiar from various scientific disciplines. However, in a disclaimer posting published in September 2007 (and some later ones, too), the author sets the following frame for his Personal Weblog:
 - The Personal Weblog will only share reflections which stem from direct *observation* (and thus, the author’s everyday experience). These reflections form the basis of *personal knowledge*. Reflections are guided by an ideal of truth.
 - Therefore, the author will not present the knowledge accumulated by any spiritual (or philosophical) school.
 - In general, the author does not assume the role of an expert with some kind of exclusive authority. The observations his theories are based on are also accessible to his readers.
- We can conclude that *Compassionate Council* is aimed at building a complex theoretical construction explicitly competing with established scientific (or expert) theories. This leads us to the final section of this talk.

5. Conclusions

- At the beginning of the talk we had a short look at the filter function, which dominated in the earliest Weblogs. I described this function as a traditional way of collecting and disseminating knowledge by Weblogs.
- We then went on to test the central thesis of this talk: Knowledge is generated and disseminated also by predominantly ego-centred weblogs.
- Period I I of my diachronic corpus contained already instances of the diary-like, ego-centred category *Sharing Experience*, which captures the narration and reflection of every-day events. I have shown that events are reflected not only on an individual but also on a more general level. In line with current research, I have assumed these reflections to be instances of lay knowledge. I would like to get a bit more precise in this respect.
- In applied linguistics and social sciences, some part of the knowledge lay people possess is captured by the concept of *lay theories* (or *subjective, naive, intuitive theories*). Even

though *Lay theories* are believed to show striking analogies to scientific expert theories, their characteristics are usually defined in contrast to expert theories.

- Lay theories are believed to
 - arise directly from every-day observations and therefore
 - lack a formalised methodology.
 - They aggregate concepts and establish relations between them by (implicit) argumentation and
 - are aimed at explanation and prediction (as scientific theories) but also at guiding actions in specific situations.
 - They tend to be resistant to falsification.
- *Compassionate Council* assumedly represents a typical case of a fully-fledged lay theory competing with expert theories. In contrast, the *Sharing Experience* postings we have analyzed can be characterised as representing rudimentary (or simple) lay theories.
 - In all the postings we have seen, knowledge is constructed from every-day experience. *Sharing Experience* postings have a more elaborate narrative section, while the postings in *Compassionate Council* focus more on reflection.
 - The author of *Compassionate Council* sets himself apart from experts of scientific disciplines and explicitly rejects a methodology.
 - *Sharing Experience* postings establish implicit *If-Then-Relations* to extract general conclusions from everyday experience: If Amazon forum users, for instance, react in such an unfriendly way, then it is better to stay away from these forums all together. Sometimes, as in the example of *Always Writing*, these conclusions serve as advice for future actions. The author of *Compassionate Council* aggregates concepts in a complex, coherent and self-referential network.
 - As the comments-feature of *Compassionate Council* is deactivated, neither debate nor falsification can take place.
- I would like to conclude that personal weblogs (or weblog postings) of the dominantly ego-centred type play an important and diachronically increasing role in the production and dissemination of lay theories. Therefore and to a growing extent, the Personal Weblog constitutes a genre serving the basic human need for understanding the world around us and sharing this knowledge with others.