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## *PRAISING AS BOASTING* – ON THE AMBIGUITY OF SPEECH ACTS IN THE DISCOURSE OF ONLINE CUSTOMER TESTIMONIALS

Grounded in the cognitive approach to speech act theory, whereby the boundaries between speech act categories are perceived as *fuzzy*, resulting in their directness/indirectness being viewed as a matter of *degree*, the paper investigates the ambiguity of indirect speech acts found in the discourse of customer testimonials. The analysis is based on a corpus of 150 customer testimonials published on the home pages of 7 retailing companies offering their products online. The study reveals some interesting patterns in the persuasive/promotional use of (often ambiguous) micro speech acts contributing to the realisation of the macro-act of *praising*. It then attempts to rationalise customer testimonials as acts of *boasting* performed by organisations using customer quotes as word-of-mouth tools.

### **1. Introduction: customer testimonials**

Online customer testimonials constitute one of the tools of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), encompassing various forms of communication within the domain of advertising and PR (see e.g. Eastin 2010). A testimonial can be defined as “a written or recorded endorsement from a customer”, describing their satisfaction with a company’s “product or solution”, meant to function as “evidence of proof” that what the company says about their offer is true (Jackson 2007: 208). Since they come from outside the company, these “actual statements made by real life customers” are “viewed as unbiased” (Humphrey 2010: 151). They are regarded as “third-party validation in its purest form” (Potts 2007: 185).

Entrepreneurs and scholars seem to be in agreement about the great persuasive and promotional potential of testimonials; Stephenson and Mintzer view testimonials as “one of the best sales and marketing tools” (2008: 358), whereas Brown refers to them as “an amazingly effective tactic” used to promote not only the quality and reliability of products and services, but also

the corporation itself (2007: 81). In the same vein, Jackson proposes that “[t]estimonials may be the best way to convince a prospect to buy” (2007: 209).

For existing customers, testimonials provide validation that they made the right choice. With regard to potential clients, the primary function of testimonials is to “remove buying anxiety, doubt and fear” (Stephenson and Mintzer 2008: 358); testimonials thus function as proof that the expectations of other customers who have purchased the product or service have been met or exceeded.

Drawing on the cognitive approach to speech act theory, the present paper seeks to investigate the ambiguous illocutionary forces realised in various (mostly indirect) speech acts found in the discourse of online customer testimonials. Interpreting the micro-acts as contributing to the predominant acts of *praising* (the companies being praised by satisfied customers), the study then attempts to rationalise customer testimonials as speech acts of *boasting* (performed by companies placing testimonials on their websites).

## 2. Speech act classification and interpretation

Considered to be based on objective criteria, the widely applied ‘classical’ (and very influential) typology divides speech acts into five categories:<sup>1</sup>

*Representatives (Assertives)* – the point of which is stating what the speaker believes to be the case or not, representing some states of affairs, e.g. statements, affirmations, denials

*Directives* – aimed at directing the addressee towards doing something, e.g. orders, requests, permissions, commands, invitations

*Commissives* – the illocutionary point of which consists in the speaker committing him/herself to perform a certain future action, e.g. promises, commitments, guarantees, pledges

*Expressives* – whose illocutionary point is to express a certain emotional state of the speaker e.g. thanks, congratulations, apologies

*Declaratives* – the point of which is that something is brought about in the world by virtue of someone’s declaring it, e.g. a referee saying “You are out” to a football player during a match, or a priest declaring: “I now pronounce you husband and wife” during a wedding ceremony (Searle 1970; Yule 1996).

*Illocutionary acts* are understood as the acts done *in* speaking (where saying equals doing); the *illocutionary aspect* or *force* of speech acts is related to the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the concept of speech acts was initially developed by Austin (1975) and his followers *in* and *for* the domain of short spoken utterances. Being longer, more complex, providing little or no evidence of the reader’s reaction, written texts are far more difficult to analyse and interpret in terms of the speech act theory than brief spoken utterances. Nevertheless, many written genres are also regarded as speech acts (see e.g. Bazerman 2004; Skowronek 2001), comprising a variety of micro speech acts contributing to the overall message rendered in the macro-act. It seems therefore justified to apply the speech act theory to the present analysis of illocutionary acts in customer testimonials.

intention or communicative purpose of the speaker, to “what is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accord with a conventional procedure” (Levinson 1983: 237).

In line with the premises of micropragmatic approach, the term *speech acts* is used throughout the study with reference to the numerous *micro-acts* (both simple and complex, analysed at the utterance level) contributing to the entire *macro speech act* (or *speech event*) of customer testimonial (cf. Cap 2010).

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that a large proportion of the illocutionary acts are *indirect speech acts*, i.e. acts in which speakers “perform one illocutionary act implicitly by way of performing another illocutionary act explicitly” (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 117).<sup>2</sup> In other words, indirect speech acts demonstrate no “explicit match” “between a sentence type and its corresponding force” (Cap 2010: 218). As Brown argues,

“[i]ndirect speech act forms range from highly conventionalised to apparently free forms. It appears that no single, simple set of generalisations can adequately capture the complexity of indirect speech acts”

(1980: 150).

The question *why* speakers often tend to use indirect rather than direct speech acts is another issue addressed by linguists dealing with the speech act theory. One of the main motivations, as proposed by Searle (1970), Brown (1980), and Yule (1996), is *politeness* which, at least in English, is more effectively expressed through indirect rather than direct speech acts. Notwithstanding, indirectness is also widely recognised as a powerful *persuasive* tool, supporting other mechanisms of (more explicit) persuasion.

## 2.1. The cognitive approach

There is much controversy around the classification of illocutionary speech acts, and the numerous approaches to various degrees follow or oppose the above prototypical taxonomy (see e.g. Hernandez 2001; Levinson 1983).

The methodology adopted for this study is that postulated by the cognitive approach, which offers a concept of speech acts as basic units of communication subject to principles generally underlying human cognitive processes (see e.g. Sokołowska 2001). Without obliterating the ‘classical’ taxonomy, cognitive linguists propose an approach including the following main assumptions:

- There is no clear-cut distinction between ‘utterances’ and ‘sentences’, as all linguistic signs are believed to represent conceptualisations of human cognitive processes.
- The classification is, therefore, to be treated as categorisation of *prototypes* (models conforming to the whole set of felicity conditions), a reference point

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<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, it has been pointed out in several studies that *most* speech act usages are indirect (Cap 2010).

aimed at enhancing the degree of systematicity and organisation of the analysis, rather than drawing strict demarcation lines between certain speech act types.

- Hence, the most reasonable criterion of classification seems to be that of *family resemblance*, i.e. examining whether a speech act bears sufficient resemblance to the prototype to be included in a given category.
- The boundaries between speech act categories are *fuzzy*; consequently, their directness/indirectness, as well as assignment to particular categories, is a matter of *degree*.
- Some speech acts (e.g. Commissives and Directives, Representatives and Expressives) tend to ‘merge’ or ‘fade’ into each other, forming *speech act continua* or giving rise to hybrid acts, such as *Evaluatives* (cf. Kalisz, 1989).
- There are speech acts bearing an ambiguous/double/manifold illocutionary force depending on the *context*, and such whose illocutionary force is vague or indeterminate.<sup>3</sup>
- The illocutionary force is regarded as an aspect of the overall meaning/conceptualisation that an utterance represents, highly context- and speaker-dependent (Asher and Lascarides 2001; Hernandez 2001; Kalisz 1989; Sokołowska 2001).

Following from the above, Searle’s ‘classical’ taxonomy of speech acts is employed in the present study as the *prototypical model*, allowing an attempt at the breakdown of the speech acts into some specific categories.

## 2.2. Persuasive speech acts: praising and boasting

Simons defines *persuasion* as “human communication designed to influence the judgements and actions of others” (2001: 7). Halmari and Virtanen offer a similar definition: *persuasion* is “all linguistic behaviour that attempts to either change the thinking or behaviour of an audience, or to strengthen its beliefs, should the audience already agree” (2005: 3). Thus, at its simplest, *persuasion* involves influencing or inducing others to willingly and knowingly do something, to change their beliefs and, as a consequence, the way they behave.

Drawing on the speech act theory, Tokarz (2006) suggests that the very concept of *perlocutionary force*, i.e. how things are done through language (cf. Austin 1975; Searle 1985), indicates that influencing interlocutors’ attitudes and actions is inherent to linguistic interaction. In a similar vein, O’Keefe proposes that “to persuade is a perlocutionary act”, as compared to e.g. urging, viewed as an illocutionary act (1990: 26).

Persuasive speech acts are widely regarded as *necessarily* indirect (see e.g. Galasiński 1992; Skowronek, 2001). Communicating more than is actually said or written by the addressor, persuasive speech acts (similarly to other indirect

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<sup>3</sup> See Witczak-Plisiecka (2009) for an extensive discussion on the difference between *ambiguity* and *vagueness*.

acts) are often difficult to interpret. Importantly, misinterpretation of a speaker's intention constitutes one of the most important *felicity conditions* of such acts; the persuasive force of the act weakens as soon as the communicator's intention to persuade is recognised by the recipient (Galasiński 1992). Persuasive macro acts (for example advertisements) may be realised through a variety of micro-acts, including the acts of encouraging, asserting, praising, boasting, suggesting, promising, guaranteeing, advising, recommending (Skowronek 2001). All of the micro-acts can in turn be indirectly realised through other micro-acts whose illocutionary forces are also subservient to the predominant persuasive macro-act.

As the title suggests, the acts of *praising* and *boasting* are of key importance for the purposes of the present paper. In simplified terms, *praising* means uttering positive statements about a person, object or idea. According to Searle,

[t]o praise something is often or perhaps even characteristically to offer an assessment of it. But not just any kind of assessment, rather a favorable assessment.

(1962: 431).

Following from the above, praising is an act aimed at increasing the value of the praised person or object (Galasiński 1992). In order to realise its illocutionary force, the act does not necessarily need to be directed at the hearer; the communicator may praise the hearer OR someone else, both privately and in public (Vanderveken 1990).

The act of *boasting* (other notions used in the literature include *self-praise* and *positive self-presentation*) is inextricably connected with persuasion (Galasiński 1992). The two defining characteristics of an act of boasting are the following:

- 1) boasting must be directed at the addressor (communicating something positive about the addressor)
- 2) boasting must involve a component of positive evaluation; importantly, evaluation may merely be *evoked* or *stimulated* by an utterance to ensure that the persuasive goal of boasting is achieved (ibid.).

While praising, as mentioned earlier, is aimed at increasing the value of the praised person or object, boasting is an act aimed at increasing *one's own* value and attractiveness. Similarly to other persuasive speech acts, the act of boasting may in fact be realised by *any* type of speech act; possible misinterpretation of the speaker's intention to boast constitutes one of the most important felicity conditions of boasting, whereas recognition of the speaker's communicative goal may lead to negative evaluation of his/her character and behaviour (ibid.). Boasting not being readily accepted in our culture, and carrying the implication that the propositional content of the act may not be entirely true, the speech act verb *boast* frequently occurs in response-controlling but-prefaces: *I don't want to boast, but ...* The negative evaluation of acts of boasting (perceived as *exaggerated* self-praise) makes the performative use of the speech act verb *boast* impossible (Verschuereen 1980, 1995); to use the verb performatively would amount to committing "illocutionary suicide" (Vendler 1976, quoted in Proost 2007: 25).

It is of high significance for the present analysis that the acts of praising and boasting have *both* an expressive and an assertive use (Searle and Vanderveken 1985; Vanderveken 1990). The double illocutionary point of the two acts is reflected in the following definitions:

To praise someone or something is *to assert* that a state of affairs that concerns him or it is good (propositional content condition) while *expressing approval* of that state of affairs (sincerity condition).

(Vanderveken 1990: 179; *emphasis added*)

The illocutionary force of boasting, which is obtained from that of *assertion* by adding the sincerity condition that the speaker *takes pride* in the existence of the state of affairs which is represented, also has the preparatory condition that that state of affairs is good because the added sincerity condition determines that additional preparatory condition.

(*ibid.*: 128; *emphasis added*)

As can be seen from the above quotations, the acts of praising and boasting combine at least two illocutionary points: that of asserting some positive state of affairs, and that of expressing feelings and/or attitudes related to that state of affairs. Additionally, explicitly communicating or implying that the state of affairs is *positive* from the point of view of the addressor (and the addressee) confirms the existence of what many cognitive linguists refer to as *evaluative* speech acts (see e.g. Kalisz 1989; Sokołowska 2001).

### 3. Speech acts in online customer testimonials

A corpus of 150 online customer testimonials has been analysed for the purposes of this study. To ensure sufficient variety and diversity of the material, the testimonials have been randomly selected from among quotes published on the home pages of 7 retailing companies offering their products online; three of the firms are based in the UK, three operate in the USA, and one is an American/Canadian retailer.<sup>4</sup> The present section accounts for the distribution of micro speech acts in the corpus and their (often manifold/ambiguous) illocutionary forces.

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<sup>4</sup> All the testimonials in the corpus are numbered from 1 to 150; accordingly, CT1 denotes Customer Testimonial number 1. Links to the corporate websites that have been used as sources of the testimonials are provided below:

**CT 1-40 Tough Traveller** (baby carriers, luggage, backpacks, wide range of bags)  
<http://www.toughtraveler.com/customercomments.asp> Accessed 23 February, 2013

**CT 41-80 Drinkstuff** (bar equipment, glassware, cocktail making accessories, catering equipment)  
<http://www.drinkstuff.com/comments/Default.asp> Accessed 23 February, 2013

As mentioned earlier, Searle's 'classical' taxonomy of speech acts is employed in the present study as the *prototypical model*, allowing an attempt at the breakdown of the speech acts into some specific categories. Although the analysis demonstrates that a large proportion of speech acts in customer testimonials are realised indirectly, and in many cases the boundaries between particular categories are blurred, yet for the sake of clarity and organisation the semantic and syntactic structures of utterances have been chosen as the criteria on which the categorisation has been based. Thus the classification into the prototypical types of illocutionary speech acts has determined grouping of the findings into three respective sections: Assertives, Expressives, and Directives (with Commissives and Declaratives virtually absent in the corpus).

### 3.1. Representatives

Following Searle's taxonomy, by far the most frequently occurring category of micro-acts in the corpus are *assertions* (realising, at least on the surface, the representative illocutionary point), present in 84% of the CTs analysed. Table 1 shows the distribution of assertive micro-acts in the sample.

Table 1: Distribution of micro-acts whose surface function is that of asserting

ASSERTIVE micro-acts	% of CTs
acts of asserting/praising	79%
acts of stating/describing/informing	49%
representative >>>> commissive	7%
asserting negative states of affairs – complaints	5%
asserting negative states of affairs – criticising	4%
TOTAL	84%

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**CT 81-90 Sakuma Bros. Farms** (berry plants, preserves, syrups and teas)

<http://shop.sakumabros.com/customer-comments.aspx>

Accessed 24 February, 2013

**CT 91-105 Francis Firth** (nostalgic photos, maps, books, calendars, jigsaws, gifts)

<http://shop.sakumabros.com/customer-comments.aspxwww.francisfrith.com/help/comments/#utmcsr=google.pl&utmcmd=referral&utmccn=google.pl>

Accessed 24 February, 2013

**CT 106-115 Polydron** (educational tools for children)

<http://www.polydron.co.uk/customer-comments.html>

Accessed 25 February, 2013

**CT 115-130 AU Group Electronics** (computer hardware and software products)

<http://www.auelectronics.com/CustomerComments.htm>

Accessed 25 February, 2013

**CT 131-150 We Love Colors** (colored tights, leggings, socks, gloves, laces, dancewear, bodywear)

<http://www.welovecolors.com/Info/CustomerComments.aspx>

Accessed 25 February, 2013



Importantly for the present analysis, a large proportion of the assertions accounted for in Table 1 simultaneously realise other illocutionary points, particularly the *expressive* illocutionary point. In the majority of instances the assertives perform one of the following functions: they either explicitly *praise* the good qualities of the products and customer service, or provide the product characteristics and communicate information related to the products in a seemingly ‘neutral’/‘objective’ way. The former group comprises 118 acts identified in over three quarters of the CTs in the corpus (79%), for instance:

- (1) *Excellent product. Simple, effective solution to a common problem. (CT70).*
- (2) *It is the best way to teach children the beauty of shape and space (CT 110).*
- (3) *Very quick shipping and great website with great variety. (CT 139).*
- (4) *Your generosity and willingness to support our cause mean that our clients’ children will start the new school year with a high quality, rugged, and remarkably cool backpack, ... (CT 9).<sup>5</sup>*
- (5) *Your years of excellence in customer service remains true today with your customer service staff. (CT 15).*

While extracts (1), (2) and (3) clearly constitute examples of favourable assessment and praise, extracts (4) and (5) may plausibly be classified as acts of praising AND *complimenting*; they explicitly attribute credit to the companies for “some good (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer” (Holmes, 1986). In the above extracts the representative illocutionary point blends with the expressive point: beside *asserting* certain states, the communicators *express approval* (favourable assessment) of the products (cf. Vanderveken 1990).

As regards the second group of assertions, 135 acts whose surface function is that of *informing/describing/stating facts* have been identified in 49% of the CTs in the corpus. Examples include the following:

- (6) *These models are essentially 1 archimedean solid embedded inside another connected solely by Polydron framework pieces (no wires, glue or string). (CT106)*
- (7) *Plain, unadorned cocktail stirrers. (CT51)*
- (8) *I supply our wine society members with your glasses for tasting. (CT62)*

Extracts (6) and (7) appear to constitute neutral descriptions: characterising something as *plain, unadorned*, with *no wires, glue or string* does not (at least on the surface) suggest positive evaluation. One can easily imagine contexts in which these utterances may be interpreted as negative (*plain, unadorned*).

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<sup>5</sup> The lexeme *rugged* is most probably used in CT 9 meaning *made of strong material*, and should therefore be interpreted in a positive sense.



However, accompanied by the acts of praising and thanking, as they are in the testimonials whose fragments have been quoted above, they indicate or stimulate positive evaluation and thereby realise the function of praising. The utterance in (8) constitutes the entire text of CT62. On the surface it may pass as a perfectly neutral assertion referring to the author's business activity. Yet, just as the acts of boasting may merely *evoke* evaluation (see section 2.2.), a similar act of evoking positive evaluation without evaluating is performed in extract (8), constituting a good example of persuading (evaluating and praising) through the content of an utterance, i.e. through facts. Such acts require active participation on the part of the recipient who, in the context of the utterance, interprets the facts as favourable assessment.

Seemingly 'neutral' assertions perform another important function: they prepare the ground for other subsequent micro-acts contributing to the predominant act of praising, for instance:

- (9) *My original Tough Traveler camera bag has followed me around the world for over 25 years. I love it, can't get along without it, and would like to have another just like it.... (CT23)*

The testimonial quoted in (9) begins with an act of stating/asserting, 'neutral'/'objective' on the surface, yet as a matter of fact indirectly praising the usefulness and durability of the camera bag (*around the world, for over 25 years*). Apart from implying positive evaluation, the assertion prepares the ground for the subsequent representative/expressive act (*I love it, can't get along without it, and would like to have another just like it....*).

An interesting, albeit rather small, group of the assertions found in the corpus realise the *commissive* illocutionary point, performing the acts of *promising*. Examples include the following:

- (10) *I'll be taking a careful look at your current product line (CT 10).*  
 (11) *I shall certainly be placing future orders with you (CT 103).*  
 (12) *I will keep your contact no. for future reference and will tell others who have the same problem as mine. (CT118).*

Micro-acts of this type have been identified in 7% of the CTs in the corpus. Although the performative verb *promise* has not been used in any of the instances found, the illocutionary force of the above utterances is clearly that of *promising*. The satisfied customers make statements referring to the future, promising to continue buying the company products and recommend them to others, thus contributing to the predominant act of praising the company.

Finally, two small groups of assertions identified in the corpus under study deserve to be discussed as separate sub-categories. The first one comprises acts of *criticising* products and services offered by competitive firms. Such micro-acts appeared in 4% of CTs, for instance:

- (13) *One extraction device from another vendor did not perform correctly in real world testing. (CT 116)*
- (14) *Most other fruit syrup are overly sweet and the berry flavor is lost...not this one! (CT 89)*

The above statements criticise competitive products, simultaneously intensifying the positive evaluation of the products described in the testimonials. This is particularly conspicuous in extract (14), where critical remarks referring to competitors lead to the comparative expression *not this one!*, reinforced by an exclamation mark for stronger persuasive effect. The illocutionary point of asserting seems to be blended with the expressive force.

The last subcategory is that of assertive micro-acts performing the functions of *complaints* concerning the products described in testimonials. Asserting a certain proposition (usually involving negative evaluation), while simultaneously expressing the communicator's discontent, *complaints* constitute another speech act realising at least two illocutionary points: assertive and expressive (Vanderveken 1990). 12 micro-acts of this type have been found in 5% of the CTs in the corpus, including the following examples:

- (15) *The only thing that has happened is the interior pockets are a bit freyed from the washing machine. (CT 29)*
- (16) *Small quibble – they just came in a bag, each one bound and taped in bubble wrap. (CT 51)*
- (17) *But the canister of the mini sparklers is badly dented and the gum balls which go with the machine are discoloured and muted (and look old and unappetising). (CT 77)*

As can be seen from the above extracts, the complaints are rather soft, mitigated by means of hedging structures such as *the only, small, but*. Importantly, the complaining utterances constitute merely fragments of testimonials whose overall tone is clearly *positive*. They may in fact be interpreted as contributing to the predominant act of praise as they enhance the persuasive potential of the testimonials through increasing their objectivity and validity (see section 4).

### 3.2. Expressives

The second largest group of micro-acts, found in 66% of the CTs under study, is that of expressives, i.e. acts whose illocutionary point is to express certain psychological attitudes or emotional states of the speaker (Searle 1970). The distribution of this category of micro-acts is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of micro-acts whose surface function is that of expressing emotions and attitudes

EXPRESSIVE micro-acts		% of CTs
prototypical	thanks	39%
	greetings	6%
	compliments	3%
less prototypical	expressive/representative blends	34%
	exclamatory structures	30%
TOTAL		66%

As regards the ‘paradigmatic cases’ of expressives, the corpus comprises 59 acts of *thanking* found in 39% of the testimonials analysed. The vast majority of the instances are simple and straightforward *thanks*, often intensified by exclamation marks and/or capital letters, as shown in the examples below:

(18) *Many thanks again. (CT 100)*

(19) *THANK YOU!!!! (CT 8, CAPITALS original)*

Almost a half of the micro-acts of thanking realise additionally (or perhaps primarily) the illocutionary forces of *praising* and *evaluating*. The following extracts provide a good illustration of the thanking/praising ‘blend’:

(20) *Thank you for making simple, durable bags. (CT 6)*

(21) *Thank you for your wonderful product! (CT 21)*

As can be seen in extracts (20) and (21), the authors express their gratitude and satisfaction, at the same time providing an extremely positive evaluation of the product, thereby contributing to the overall effect of praise. In (21) the thanks/praise blend is again intensified with an exclamation mark.

Representing less prototypical cases of the expressive illocutionary point, another group of micro-acts comprises expressive/representative blends overtly expressing customers’ satisfaction or delight with the products purchased. 54 acts of this type have been identified in 34% of the CTs in the corpus, for instance:

(22) *We love our Carrier! (CT 40)*

(23) *I love colors. I love sizes. I love inexpensive, effortless gift shopping for all my girls. (CT 148)*

(24) *Very happy with the butter dish and the great service. (CT 71)*

(25) *Those lovely books arrived this afternoon and I am so happy! (CT 98)*

All the examples quoted above express clients' positive attitude/feelings towards the products and the level of customer service offered by the companies. Their syntactic structure is that of representatives, yet their strong emotional impact seems to justify their classification as *expressives* or *evaluatives*, whose degree of strength is increased by the use of exclamation marks in (22) and (25). All of the extracts may plausibly be interpreted as realising (or at least contributing to) the overarching forces of *praise* and *positive evaluation*. Apart from (22), they comprise positively charged lexical items referring to the products and/or services (*inexpensive, effortless, great, lovely*); yet (22) as well, expressing the customer's delight with the carrier bag, at the same time implies extremely positive evaluation and, consequently, praise: if the customer *loves* the carrier bag, the latter must possess positive qualities that render it extremely attractive.

The corpus comprises 65 instances (found in over 30% of CTs) of *exclamatory sentences*. However, assuming the understanding of prototypical exclaimatives as acts communicating "drastic deviations" from the speaker's expectations (Merin and Nikolaeva, 2008: 56), it must be concluded that the exclamatory structures identified do not constitute instances of prototypical exclamations. Given the very nature of exclaimatives, whose "primitive force" of exclamation is just a "theoretical construct", it is not surprising that the exclamatory sentences realise (or increase the degree of strength) of other expressive acts, often determined by the meaning of words (particularly adjectives) used in those structures (Vanderveken 1990: 127). The exclamatory utterances found in the sample under study most probably function as *intensifiers* of other illocutionary forces, particularly those of the above mentioned thanks, praise and positive evaluation, as well as single instances of 'emotionalising' other micro-acts (particularly the 4 acts of *complimenting*). Examples include the following:

- (26) *Excellent customer service! (CT 76)*
- (27) *Best tights!!!! (CT 102)*
- (28) *My compliments to you and your staff!" (CT 86)*
- (29) *This website will definitely be recommended and used again! (CT 69)*

While extracts (26) and (27) above seem to act as intense positive assessment and praise, (28) and (29) exemplify highly emotionalised *compliment* and *promise*, respectively.

Finally, beside the above mentioned categories, the sample comprises 9 instances (identified in 6% of the CTs in the corpus) of micro-acts that may be classified as broadly understood *greetings* (e.g. *Best wishes* in CT 14; *Best regards* in CT 29; *High there* in CT 21). The use of greetings implies the customers' friendly attitude towards the companies; the addressees may easily conclude that the companies clearly *deserve* positive feelings on the part of their customers, and thus the favourable image of the organisations is enhanced.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Single instances of other types of micro-acts have not been taken into account in the analysis.

### 3.3. Directives

Directive speech acts are said to “embody an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something, to ‘direct’ him or her towards some goal (of the speaker, mostly)” (Mey 1994:164). Identified in 10% of the CTs in the corpus, the 16 utterances whose syntactic and semantic structure is that of prototypical directives are distributed as follows: 6 acts that may be interpreted as *encouraging* the companies to continue offering great products and services, and 9 micro-acts of *recommending* (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of micro-acts whose surface function is that of directives

DIRECTIVE micro-acts	% of CTs
recommending	6%
encouraging	4%
TOTAL	10%

The following extracts exemplify the two types of micro-acts accounted for in Table 3:

- (30) *Keep up the great work! (CT 13)*  
 (31) *Keep on making the great long lasting products! (CT 30)*  
 (32) *Do keep up the good work. (CT 101)*

As can be seen in (30) and (31), the degree of strength of the encouragements is increased by the use of exclamation marks.

The extracts below illustrate how the micro-acts of *recommendations* are used in the corpus of customer testimonials:

- (33) *It's fantastic, and I recommend it to everyone. (CT 16)*  
 (34) *I am very satisfied and highly recommend purchasing plants at Sakumabros.com. (CT 82)*  
 (35) *I would recommend this set as a great starter kit to making cocktails and good fun. (CT 69)*

The examples quoted clearly demonstrate that the directive illocutionary point blends with the expressive/representative forces of praising and positive evaluation. The communicators not only recommend that other users purchase the products, but also evaluate/praise the products as *fantastic* or *great*, expressing at the same time positive emotions associated with the companies.

#### 4. Rationalising customer testimonials as acts of boasting

So far the micro-acts identified in the corpus have been interpreted as acts performed by customers (who wrote the testimonials) and directed at the companies (whose products or services the customers bought). It has hopefully been demonstrated that even the most ‘neutral’ assertions may be interpreted as performing (or contributing to) the predominant acts of *praise*, frequently expressing (or at least evoking) *positive evaluation*. The expressive acts of thanking, complimenting, greeting, the numerous representative/expressive blends expressing customers’ positive feelings associated with the products and services in question, as well as the directive acts of encouraging the companies to continue their great work, undoubtedly evoke favourable assessment of the companies. Consequently, they all contribute (in a more or less straightforward way) to the act of *praise*.

Nonetheless, as indicated in section 2, customer testimonials are considered in the present paper as a sales and marketing tool, a word of mouth strategy, an endorsement from satisfied customers, “evidence of proof” that what the company says about their offer is true (Jackson, 2007:208). Accordingly, when published on corporate websites, their primary communicative function becomes that of *persuading* prospective customers to buy, and *convincing* the existing customers that they have made the right decision purchasing the company’s product. The directive acts of *recommending* may quite easily be interpreted as aimed at other customers rather than at the company itself; yet, it appears justified to assume a shift in the perception of the addressors and the addressees with reference to *all* the remaining micro-acts identified in the corpus. With the testimonials acting as promotional tools, the role of the addressor is taken away from the customers and adopted by the organisations; the role of the addressee (so far the company itself) is now performed by the existing and potential customers. Viewed from this perspective, the acts of *praise* and *positive evaluation* become the acts of *self-praise* or *boasting*.

Given that positive self-presentation may be realised in a variety of ways (see e.g. Mulholland 1994), one of them being the use of quotes reflecting positive judgments and opinions of others (Galasiński 1992), customer testimonials appear to be a perfect tool for boasting. As has hopefully been demonstrated, consistent with the defining characteristics of the acts of boasting, customer testimonials placed on corporate websites *communicate something positive* about the companies (satisfied customers praise the organisations), and involve a component of *positive evaluation*, either explicitly expressed or evoked/stimulated by the message communicated (positive opinions ‘of others’ will undoubtedly be interpreted favourably by the addressees) (cf. *ibid.*).

Following from the above, quoting the acts of praise performed by others constitutes an act aimed at *increasing the company’s own* value and attractiveness in the eyes of the addressees (potential and existing customers). Importantly, it is simultaneously a method of *neutralising* the act of boasting; the addressor is

just ‘quoting facts’ and ‘other people’s opinions’, thereby changing the paradigm from boasting to praising. This shift makes the intentions of the communicator more difficult to detect and, consequently, renders the message more objective and credible. The above observation refers to all of the micro-acts found in the sample, but seems particularly true about the last sub-category of assertives discussed in section 3.1., i.e. complaints. A limited amount of soft negative evaluation, always accompanied by acts of praise, adds *validity* to the entire message and thus disguises the act of boasting, simultaneously reinforcing its positive impact.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Grounded in the cognitive approach to speech act theory, the present study has attempted to investigate the ambiguity of speech acts found in the discourse of customer testimonials. The analysis indicates that, in line with Searle’s classical taxonomy, the most frequently occurring micro-acts in the corpus are assertions, followed by expressives and a rather small group of directives, with commissives and declaratives virtually absent in the sample. The categories of assertions and expressives are often difficult to separate as many of the instances found in these two groups both *assert* a certain state of affairs and *express positive attitudes/emotions* associated with the state of affairs. Even the micro-acts prototypically realising the representative illocutionary points (seemingly ‘neutral’ statements/descriptions) as a matter of fact perform other acts (praising, complimenting, promising), or prepare the ground for the subsequent expressive micro-acts. The expressive acts comprise in the first instance thanks, followed by acts expressing satisfaction or delight, exclamatory structures acting as intensifiers of other expressives/evaluatives, as well as friendly greetings and compliments. The rather few directives include the micro-acts of recommendations and encouragements.

As long as the customer testimonials under study are viewed as messages produced by customers and directed at the companies, all the above mentioned micro-acts increase the value of the products or services purchased by customers, contributing to the realisation of the predominant act of *praising*, in itself a ‘blend’ of the representative and expressive illocutionary points realised by a variety of micro-acts. Regarded, however, as a marketing tool, customer testimonials may justifiably be interpreted as acts of *positive self-presentation* or *boasting* communicated by organisations and directed at potential and existing customers. Viewed from this perspective, customer testimonials function primarily as acts aimed at increasing the *company’s own value*, combining (again) the representative and expressive illocutionary points realised through various (sometimes seemingly ‘neutral’) acts. Paradoxically as it may sound, the analysis has hopefully demonstrated that the acts of *boasting* are also indirectly performed (or intensified) through the micro-acts of criticising and complaining which add credibility to the messages and thus reinforce their overall positive appeal.



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