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# Subject Emergence, Self-Presentation, and Epistemic Struggle in French Language Forums

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## 1. Introduction

The initial point of this article is the concept of face work and its compatibility with characteristics of internet communication with special focus on the French forum *Français notre belle langue*. The study is part of a larger research project on online folk linguistics and knowledge exchange in Romance languages where the main concerns are (folk-)linguistic production and transmission. In this article, we focus on the relation between folk linguistics, knowledge transmission, subject emergence, and face work. The study is introduced by theoretical reflections on Goffman's *face* concept in times of computer-mediated communication. Given the characteristics of internet forum communication, we propose alternative notions such as *self-presentation* and *ethos* in order to come to grips with the specific conditions of this type of communication. The focus on self-presentation leads to a wider reflection on *subject* and *subject emergence* in knowledge interchange and, specifically, in assertions as one of the central speech acts we will examine here. The polyphony theory of Ducrot (1984) and related work such as Amossy (2010) will supply the necessary theoretical framework. On the basis of the theoretical assumptions in the first part of the

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article, in its second part we will analyse selected utterances in the above mentioned internet forum. The aim of our analysis is to gain some empirical insight into different strategies of self-presentation in the mentioned communicative medium. Due to the pioneer character of this article, the analysis comprises selected and representative examples and a specific focus on the main problems of self-presentation in knowledge oriented internet forums without the pretension of giving an exhaustive account of the whole spectrum of self-presentation strategies in internet forum discussion.

## **2. Face, face work, and politeness in internet communication**

Social Media communication is a fairly new kind of interaction distinct from direct oral encounters and from (more) traditional forms of written and/or mediated communication. It is mainly determined by the dissociation from face-to-face communication and the construction of media-based social groups (Sutter/Mehler 2010: 7), a concept which substitutes that of speech-community<sup>1</sup> in non-virtual environments. As to the following considerations, one of the crucial internet communication characteristics that challenge politeness-based face-notions and face work theory is the linguistic peculiarity of communication in Social Media paired with the anonymity of the interaction participants and the virtuality of their identity. Communication in internet forums is but one example of distinct discourse traditions that are arising in internet-based com-

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, the concept of speech-community is also falling into disuse because of being incongruent with the new forms of globalised and superdiverse realities out of which new kinds of identity constitution are emerging (cf. Rampton 2006; Blommaert/Rampton 2011). These are in direct relation to language use and identity claims that appear in internet communication.

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munication. The particular properties of forum communication, determined as an internet subgenre (Varga 2011) or, as proposed here, as one of several existing internet communication forms (or even emerging internet discourse traditions), seem to be in opposition to the face concept introduced by Goffman (1967) – needless to say that his insights in the rules of social behaviour originate from pre-internet-based communication forms. It is mainly the absence of face-to-face interaction that distinguishes internet communication from what Goffman was talking about. Within internet communication in general and internet forum interaction in particular, interaction participants don't need to show their face – the meaning of which goes far beyond the mere fact that they do not meet nor see each other: It facilitates constructions of virtual face(s) that may be in contradiction to perceptions which in real, i.e. physical encounters, contribute to face construction like, for example, physical properties and dressing style.

Since Brown's and Levinson's (1987) very controversially discussed theory, face has become one of the central notions related to politeness, politeness theory and research. The main focus of (theoretical) interest has moved from strategies of self-image to an orientation towards strategies directed to the face of ALTER. Quite a large number of studies have been realised since, mainly equating face work with politeness and highlighting intercultural differences between positive and negative face. The more or less implicit focus on the construction of the (cultural) ALTER, contributes to a lack of research focusing on self-face strategies. This is only part of the (recent) criticism of the Brown/Levinson theory on politeness (Frank 2011: 84). The lack of attention to the speaker's self-oriented face work probably is related to concepts and definitions of politeness. As especially the Spanish tradition of its research indicates, politeness is not defined as a self-directed behaviour or, the other way around, what seems to be self-oriented *face work* is not sup-

posed to be politeness and thus is rarely taken into consideration (Abelda 2005: 345); instead, politeness is defined in terms of benefit of face work for ALTER.

As our study deals with a completely different (and new) communicative situation than those explored by Goffman, Brown/Levinson or others, our focus on face work will be mainly on self-oriented face work. This is also due to our hypothesis concerning communication in internet forums, where we observe a priority of self-oriented face work, which might even include spontaneous ALTER-oriented face work strategies in support of the face of EGO (cf. Amossy 2011).

### **3. Self-presentation, *ethos*, and the notion of subject in knowledge transmission in internet forum communication**

#### **3.1. Knowledge production, self-presentation, and ethos**

##### *3.1.1. Folk linguistics and knowledge generation*

As mentioned in our introductory section, the production and transmission of knowledge in the internet forum *Français notre belle langue* will be ascribed to the linguistic research area of folk linguistics (Niedzielski/Preston 2003).<sup>2</sup> The special communicative conditions suggest the denomination as online folk linguistics. As the work of Varga (2011) shows, knowledge is generally an important aspect of internet communication concerning vastly different knowledge domains such as medical knowledge, juridical knowl-

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<sup>2</sup> For a different take on face work in language internet forums cf. Kunkel in this volume.

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edge, technical knowledge, etc. Linguistic knowledge as one of these domains is a diversified and important part of knowledge production and management in internet communication which so far has generated different internet communication forms such as forums, blogs, Youtube videos, translation platforms, and online language courses. Before focusing on folk-linguistic knowledge production and management in internet forums, two fundamental questions remain to be discussed: one refers to the concept of knowledge and its definition, the other one concerns the subject of knowledge production and transmission which in folk linguistics leads to the distinction between novice (layperson) and expert.

Knowledge is a much-discussed concept which lacks a single and unique definition. Our take on the concept is founded in social-cognitive theory: based on recent neurophysiological findings, knowledge has to be thought of as a dynamic memory-based process of the human brain consisting of the continuous interlinking of synapses triggered decisively by social and verbal interaction (cf. Solso 2005). The process of generating knowledge is bound to verbal interaction and the place where it is negotiated is discourse: here it becomes manifest and accessible for verification, diffusion, for others and not least for analysis.

The first instance to generate knowledge is the speaker – be it more or less specialised knowledge or more or less folk knowledge. Following the theoretical assumptions of Achard-Bayle and Paveau (2008), a continuum between the poles of folk linguistics and expert linguistics (proper linguistics in a more narrow sense) can be supposed. This permits gradual speaker classification between the poles of novice (layperson) and expert. The grade of expertise in linguistic knowledge is evaluated not only according to the kind of knowledge and its transmission but also according to the empirical speaker subject. Achard-Bayle/Paveau (2008) discuss this aspect with respect to contextual information available

about the speaker who is claiming expertise: In order to classify the speaker as novice (layperson) or expert, for example, the researcher's knowledge about the speaker's professional background is taken into consideration. There might be, for example, some discussion on the respective classification of a teacher to be situated somewhere in the middle of the continuum with a tendency to the right pole, that means somewhere between novice (layperson) and expert, but closer to the expert than to the novice (layperson). As is obvious, this classification refers to real speaking subjects in a real world.

However, for our purposes a different access to folk-linguistic speaker classification as layperson or expert is necessary and possible. As shown before, we need to dissociate ourselves from the idea of an empirical speaker subject which provides us with implicit information about themselves (such as their professional background) and focus on utterances in texts in order to track the verbal signs that indicate subject emergence and access to subjective self-presentation. What are forms of self-presentation of subjects while communicating about language in an internet forum? Are there differences in presentation of self in the speaker's discourse that can be related to the speaker's properties as expert or novice? Is the speaking subject claiming an expert self and if so, how do they do it?

These questions point to a different access to self-presentation we will use here in order to analyse strategies of self-presentation in folk-linguistic internet forum communication: It is not the question of strategies of face work discussed in politeness theory such as positive face and negative face that are in the focus of the following analysis but the question of how the speaking subject presents his self or her self in order to negotiate knowledge in internet forum discussions.

**3.1.2. Self-presentation, ethos, and subjectivity in forum language**

Even though in the discussions in the internet forum we are examining here, we will find different types of speech acts, our focus is exclusively on assertions. This is due to our subject, the generation and transmission of knowledge, and the supposition that these communicative activities are realised within assertive acts. The general perlocutive aim of assertive acts as they are realised in the internet forum *Français notre belle langue* can be defined as a special kind of persuasion: Virtual speakers seek to persuade their virtual interlocutors of the validity of their (folk-)linguistic knowledge. As Ducrot (1984) works out, generally, persuasion can be based on different argumentative strategies. As our topic is self-presentation within verbal knowledge transmission activities, we will focus on the Aristotelian concept of *ethos*, which is part of the rhetoric of Aristotle and refers to one of the argumentative means of persuasion. Meanwhile *logos* refers to the argument itself, i.e., the influence that a speaker tries to have on their interlocutor by presenting a 'good' argumentation with respect to the content of their arguments and the structure of their argumentation, *ethos* refers to the strengthening of argumentation by presenting the speaker's authority and/or identity as a competent, reliable, and credible interlocutor (cf. Ducrot 1984; Amossy 2010). The principal idea is that *ethos* is an inherent part of any discourse: In any communicative act, speakers realise (implicit or explicit) acts of self-presentation as authentic and trustworthy persons. Amossy (2011) shows by means of literature examples, that even in fictional texts one may observe an author's/speaker's construction of *ethos*.

As discussed before in relation to Goffman's face-theory, one of the features of internet forum discussion is that it is characterised and distinguished by the lack of an empirical speaker subject. *Ethos* thus has to be constructed exclusively by means of language, no contextual devices can be used. Therefore our analysis has to be

focused on verbal expressions of subjectivity in the utterances within the postings that constitute internet forum interaction. The expression of subjectivity in language is a much-discussed topic in cognitive linguistics closely related to linguistic research areas such as that of modality and evidentiality.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of our analysis we will center our interest mainly – though not exclusively – on verbal means of expression of evidentiality and interpret them as manifestations of self-presentation. That means that we will pay special attention to the various ways in which a speaker subject establishes a relation between their self and the transmitted knowledge by marking the source of knowledge in assertive speech acts. By means of expressions of evidentiality, speakers often not only introduce various sources of knowledge they rely on, but thereby indicate various subjects committed to the reliability of the knowledge and thus make their discourse polyphonic. As we intend to show in our analysis, subjectivity emerges, for example, by the use of deictic pronouns but also by the various ways to express different voices in discourse that are related explicitly and implicitly to the source of the transmitted knowledge. We will establish a relation between these expressions of subjectivity and the aspect of self-presentation and *ethos* construction. For that purpose we rely on the polyphony theory of Ducrot (1984) and further work that relates to argumentation theory (cf. Atayan 2006a; 2006b) and self-presentation (Amossy 2011). Our theoretical background has consequences for the terminology to be used in our analysis. According to Ducrot (1984), a distinction will be made between the empirical speaker subject, the *locuteur* and the *énonciateur*.<sup>4</sup> The empirical speaker subject, a notion we already introduced in the preceding sections, refers to the

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<sup>3</sup> For a very recent survey of this topic cf. Narrog 2012.

<sup>4</sup> In order to prevent misunderstandings due to problems of translation into English, we will stick mainly to the French terminology.

speaker as a real physical person in a real physical world. As mentioned before, we part from the supposition that there is hardly access to the empirical speaker subject, neither from a forum discussion participant perspective nor from the vantage point of the analysing linguist. As will be shown in our analysis, this supposition which points to the fundamental question of the relation between internet forum communication and its impact on reality (cf. also Schrader-Kniffki 2012), has restricted validity.

According to Ducrot (1984) we will define as *locuteur* (L) the discursive instance that emerges as committed to and responsible for the utterance and its content. As Ducrot (1984: 193) emphasises, different *locuteurs* may be identifiable in discourse. This is the case, for example, with reported speech. Thus, at this point we can establish the mentioned relation between polyphony and linguistic evidentiality theory. The introduction of different *locuteurs* points to one type of expression of evidentiality, the so called 'quotative' or 'hearsay source', and can be situated at the interface between evidentiality research and polyphony theory. Ducrot (1994) denominates this *locuteur* as *locuteur*  $\lambda$ . In his cognitive-pragmatic approach to subjectivity, Nuyts (2001) determines expressions of evidentiality as markers of an emerging subject in discourse. Thus these expressions of evidentiality can be interpreted as the emergence of a *locuteur*  $\lambda$  and, as mentioned before, may lead us to an understanding of the specific kind of self-presentation of the subject in discourse.

However, discourse consists of different voices, some of which are not identifiable as *locuteurs* but are being ascribed to a more subtle appearance. Ducrot (1984) calls them *énonciateurs*. These are 'discursive beings' (diskursive Wesen, cf. Gévaudan 2008: 4), like background voices which remain implicit in certain types of utterances; the concept of the *énonciateur* may be related to Grice's pre-

supposition concept: a negation, for example, implicitly presupposes an *énonciateur* responsible for the affirmation of its content.

## **4. Self-presentation and ethos in the internet forum *Français notre belle langue***

### **4.1. The internet forum ‘*Français notre belle langue*’ and corpus construction**

As mentioned before, the virtual data basis for our corpus construction is the vast quantity of postings in the internet forum *Français notre belle langue*. Our corpus, however, consists of a selection of assertive utterances which we think to be representative for showing a certain scope of different self-presentation strategies in forum discussion. As it is meant to be an exemplary study, no quantitative specifications will be made. For the purposes of our analysis, thematic aspects of the selected threads are not decisive: notably, there is some thematic eclecticism in our thread selection. This is due to our main concern about variation of self-presentation strategies in the postings’ respective utterances.

### **4.2. Instances of self-presentation: selected examples**

#### **4.2.1. *Implicit subjects, authority-based argumentation, and self-presentation***

As mentioned before, knowledge production (in the forum) is realised by means of assertive speech acts as the following example shows. The posting belongs to the thematic thread “Locution

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adverbiale et adverbés” (‘adverbal locutions and adverbs’) and stands for an example of a statement:

Une locution est un groupe de mots, un adverbe, un simple mot. Il existe des locutions verbales, adverbiales, conjonctives, interjectives, prépositives. (FNBL3)

As there is no expression of a grammatical subject, the posting can be characterised by the absence of an explicit *locuteur*; nor is there an explicit addressee: it is an assertion the *locuteur* identifies their self completely with and which is presented to an implicit and virtual addressee. Going along with Amossy (2010), we suppose that in verbal interaction there is no assertion uttered without committing an act of self-presentation. Thus, even if we don’t find an explicit *locuteur* and even considering the relative anonymity of the participants of internet forum discussions, we have to suppose a *locuteur* which by manifesting their knowledge commits an act of self-presentation. There have to be indications that permit us to identify the self-presentation strategy of this *locuteur*.

At the beginning of the section we introduced this utterance as a ‘statement’: the *locuteur* presents their knowledge within an assertive act not open to scrutiny. This interpretation is based on the observation of the use of the copula *est* and the presentative construction *il existe* which together with the enumeration of items generate a high degree of factuality and point to the validity of the transmitted knowledge. However, the verbal encoding of the knowledge evokes a discourse of normative grammar writing. We suppose that the *locuteur* introduces a normative *énonciateur* and constructs his *ethos* by authority (cf. Ducrot 1984). They present their self as an expert in text type knowledge, an owner of factual linguistic knowledge and with the right to claim the intersubjective validity of linguistic normative knowledge.

This kind of factual utterance can often be found in postings at the beginning of a new thematic thread or as a way to come to an end

with longer internet forum discussions.<sup>5</sup> However, there is gradual variation within this type of utterances as may be shown in the utterance we present next. It is part of a thread called “Les faux amis de la syntaxe française” (‘false friends of French syntax’):

RIEN DE MOINS QUE = pas autre chose que, tout à fait. Ex. “Votre discours n’est rien de moins que de la démagogie”  
Et

RIEN MOINS QUE = pas du tout, nullement. Ex. (sic Klaus) “La vierge n’est rien moins qu’une prostituée” (FNBL2)

As in the example before, in this utterance the *locuteur* remains implicit: there’s no deictic element which would point to an explicit subject. In order to understand the transmitted knowledge, it is necessary to consider the utterance as a response to a preceding hypothesis about the synonymy of the two phraseologisms presented here.<sup>6</sup> Thus the transmitted knowledge can be outlined as ‘there is a meaning difference between *rien de moins que* and *rien moins que*’. The *locuteur* gives a comparison of the two different French phraseologisms. The use of capitals, equal signs, the description of meaning together with an example of use of the ‘entry’ give this utterance a strong intertextual hint: it is the voice of a dictionary entry. As in the first example, the *locuteur* introduces an epistemic authority as *énonciateur* of their utterance and creates an authoritarian self based on an external source of knowledge. However this self-presentation does not bear on authority-based argumentation only; rather, there is a reference to a cognitive process of comparison as a strategy of conclusion-finding which may be identified as a *locuteur’s* claim for expertise. Firstly this is obvious by the elementary comparative act of confrontation

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the limited extent of this article, it is not possible to analyse systematically the position and textual/interactional functions of this kind of factual utterances. This has to be done in further work.

<sup>6</sup> Due to limitations of space, it is not possible to present the whole verbal exchange.

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of the two slightly different forms together with the meaning explanations. By means of the connector *et*, this rather implicit comparison becomes more explicit and a *locuteur*-subject emerges as conceptualiser of the contrast. Thus here we have a self-presentation that not only relies on a (normative) external source of knowledge but on an intellectual operation of the *locuteur*. We interpret this hint to a subjective cognitive process as an expertise claiming *locuteur*.

The following posting is initial to a thread about “Trace des anciennes déclinaisons” (‘tracks of old declinations’), the posted knowledge is centered on the changes from Latin to Old French focusing on Latin declinations which are not conserved in Old French.

L’ancien français n’a conservé *que* deux cas *des* déclinaisons latines, le nominatif (appelé cas sujet) et l’accusatif (cas régime). Trois mots font exception, puisqu’ils représentent le génitif singulier (vendredi, de Veneris dies), le génitif pluriel (la Chandeleur, de dies candelorum) et l’ablatif pluriel (Aix, de Aquis). *Les* déclinaisons, abandonnées vers le quatorzième siècle, ont laissé des traces dans le français moderne: [...]. (FNBL5)

In this text fragment, rather specialised and detailed knowledge is presented. In contrast to the above cited posting, here we are able to recognise the conceptualising subject and the distinction that is made between subject and content of the assertion: The sender uses the French focus particle *ne...que* to restrict the proposition of his utterance: ‘Old French has conserved two cases of Latin declination but these are only part of the whole of Latin declinations’. This restriction is based on knowledge about the whole system of Latin declination, thus with the use of the focus particle *ne...que* the speaker subject refers to a wider knowledge context and at the same time highlights and intensifies the content of their message. Though the definite article *des déclinaisons* is a hint to known information and general knowledge, the reference to a wider knowl-

edge context is also a reference to the *locuteur's* own expertise on the topic. The *locuteur* is constructing a self as a person who is competent in the matter they are talking about, who possesses a 'tacit' competence much more extensive than what is explicitly expressed. This self-presentation as an expert can be interpreted as the underlying social function of their assertive speech act.

#### 4.2.2. *Expression of evidentiality and self-presentation*

As mentioned before, evidentiality is the verbal indication of the source of transmitted knowledge. The following analysis focuses on the expression of evidentiality as one of the manifestations of subject emergence and *ethos* construction in assertive speech acts. For the purpose of our research topic, the expression of evidentiality and self-presentation will be relevant.

Evidentiality can be expressed by various verbal strategies that distinguish different types of evidentiality. It can be expressed, for example, by revealing the *locuteur's* cognitive operations such as inference, or, for example, by indicating external sources as is the case in reported speech. The following example which is the first posting of a thread named "Mots français dans les autres langues" ('French words in other languages') shows both of them. The *locuteur* of the utterance is explicit, as can be seen by the use of the first person pronouns *je*, and *me*:

Je viens de terminer un roman américain: Wake up, Sir! de Jonathan Ames, dans lequel j'ai trouvé une petite vingtaine de mots français, ou d'origine française *il me semble*: route, vigilance, roman à clef, chez, maladies, rôle, motif, carton, commode, sangfroid, porte cochère, plateau, sang, camaraderie, prénom, sans, contretemps, boudoir, coup de foudre, nom de guerre, to play solitaire, in lieu of, crayon boxes, bureaux ! [...] [italics M.S.-K.] (FNBL4)

The knowledge transmitted in this posting can be outlined as 'French decisively influences English language'. The whole utter-

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ance ends with an exclamation mark which points to the *locuteur's* supposition that their information might be new, unexpected, and surprising to his French-speaking interlocutors. The utterance evokes and contests the collective French knowledge and the discourse of language purism, complains about English influence on and loss of French which in this case assumes the part of the *énonciateur* of the utterance: it is the collective 'voice' behind the assertion. As basis for his knowledge the *locuteur* draws on the novel *Wake up Sir!* by Jonathan Ames which in the utterance represents a further *locuteur* ( $\lambda$ ). This *locuteur*  $\lambda$  provides the examples which lead to the above expressed conclusion introduced by the evidential marking of an inference, "il me semble", 'it seems to me'. Within the whole utterance, the evidential expressions operate as text structuring markers and make the *locuteur's* (L) process of coming to a conclusion comprehensive: The lecture of an English novel is presented as a trigger of perception and conclusion: a complex process of cognition which corresponds to the construction of a rational *ethos*. The *locuteur* presents their self as an intellectually competent self that combines the qualities of being a lecturer of English novels, being a speaker of English, knowing French language discourses, being able to come to conclusions and, as such, producing and sharing knowledge.

In evidential research, a – although controversially discussed – relation between the expression of evidentiality and modality is established. Once affirming the relation between both, the evidential marker "il me semble", 'it seems to me', can be interpreted as an expression of the *locuteur's* stance to the transmitted knowledge, attenuating the assertion and the claim of its validity. With this attenuated claim of validity, the *locuteur* makes their assertion open to scrutinisation and, of course, to forum discussion. The position of the posting at the beginning of the thread confirms the

observation. It is probable that the *locuteur* seeks agreement in order to reconfirm his *ethos* and ‘save his face’.

The following example is part of the thread “*En charge de, chargé de*” (‘in charge of’). It consists of the initial posting and two answers which refer to two different parts of the posting. I will mention and analyse them separately; here, the focus is on the initial assertion and the use of further evidentiality markers:

*On remarque* que l’expression “en charge de” est employée de plus en plus fréquemment au détriment de “chargé de” ou “responsable de”. Encore une influence de l’anglais. *On entend* même des ministres employer “en charge de” (Christine Lagarde notamment). [italics M.S.-K.] (FNBL1)

Here, the evidential markers “*on remarque*” (‘one remarks’) and “*on entend*” (‘one hears’) indicate a *locuteur* who verbally makes themselves appear as part of the utterance and thus introduces a distinction between the transmitted knowledge and the knowledge transmitting subject. An examination of the part of the utterance that represents the transmitted knowledge shows a complex multilayered construction of different *locuteurs* and *énonciateurs* the knowledge construction can be ascribed to:

- Highlighted by quotation marks are citations of French phraseologisms. These can be interpreted as discourse traditions anchored in the collective memory of speakers of the French language as knowledge about language use. The use of quotation marks makes them appear as citations of a *locuteur*  $\lambda$ , the *locuteur* L does not identify himself with.
- The *locuteur* creates a contrast between a *locuteur*  $\lambda$  of 1.) the preferred but disadvantaged discourse traditions “chargé de” and “responsable de” and 2.) a further *locuteur*  $\lambda$  of the discourse traditions which are the cause of the disadvantage “en charge de”.

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- Furthermore, the locuteur introduces a *locuteur*  $\lambda$  which can be identified as an empirical speaker subject, Christine Lagarde.
- The *locuteur* introduces an *énonciateur* who can be determined as a medium which transmits the implicit knowledge that authentic French expressions are substituted by English loan translations.

Notably, this is a very complex knowledge construction, the sources of which are distributed to different *locuteurs* and *énonciateurs*. As concerns the *locuteur*, there is no use of deictic personal pronouns. Instead we find the use of the impersonal pronoun “on”, as part of the evidential constructions “on remarque” and “on entend”. They refer to a type of evidentiality usually determined as expressing intersubjective accessible “hearsay knowledge”: everybody notes, everybody hears. As such, it appears like a rule or an unscrutinisable and ‘true’ knowledge; the *locuteur* merely appears as the observing instance. The evidentiality expressions are used in function of the self-presentation of the *locuteur* as the agent of the production of knowledge, which is a collectively accepted knowledge and a normative force that evaluates the reality behind the knowledge as a reality that has to be changed. Their self-presentation as a normative authority becomes even clearer through the use of deontic expressions such as “il faut dire” (‘one must say’) and “il serait souhaitable” (‘it would be preferable’) in the next part of their utterance:

[...] *Il faut dire* “le ministère chargé de l’agriculture”.

J’ai envoyé la remarque par courriel à l’Académie française, mais je n’ai pas eu de réponse. *Il serait souhaitable* qu’ils l’indiquent dans leur site, dans la rubrique “questions de langue”. [italics M.S.-K.] (FNBL1)

As our focus is on the assertive speech acts and the expression of evidentiality as a means of self-presentation, we will not analyse these deontic speech acts further. This will be left for further

analysis. Instead, in the next section, we will examine an example of interactive self-presentation.

#### 4.2.3. *Self-presentation, interactive subjectivation, and epistemic struggle*

In this section we change the focus of analysis from utterances without to utterances with direct addressing. As we observe, one of the characteristics of knowledge-oriented forum communication is the alternation between postings of assertive speech acts without direct addressing in order to ‘solely’ contribute knowledge which, as we have shown, mostly can be interpreted as the construction of an *ethos* defined by authority and normativity, and postings of assertive speech acts with direct addressing, which will be analysed in the following section. The following posting, which is a reaction to the one analysed in the section before, initiates with a question that addresses the *locuteur* of the former utterance directly and roughly can be defined as a further inquiry question on the treated issue.<sup>7</sup>

Avez-vous eu la curiosité de regarder dans son dictionnaire en ligne, en utilisant l’expression “en charge de” ?

Vous arriverez probablement à proscrire et vous verrez ce que l’Académie en dit au travers d’un exemple.

Une recherche rapide avec Google livres semble montrer que l’usage de l’expression n’est ni récent ni rare. (FNBL1)

The posting is a reactive utterance to the preceding one; cohesion between both is reached for example by the use of the French possessive pronoun *son* which refers to the before mentioned *Académie*

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<sup>7</sup> A further analysis of the questions made in the forum is necessary in order to classify their textual positions, their textual and their interactive functions, etc. There are, contrary to the type of question treated in this section, questions that initiate a thread, which are made in order to open up a discussion, and sometimes these are questions for advice or instruction. A further inquiry in this aspect has to be postponed to further research on the topic.

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*Française*. For our research topic a more interesting means of cohesion is the direct addressing of the *locuteur* of the preceding posting (cf. *avez-vous* ['did you'], and *vous arriverez* ['you will reach at']) which has the effect of making the hitherto implicit subject of the preceding utterance emerge as an explicit subject and give it the identity of a *locuteur*.

The entire posting has to be interpreted in relation to the preceding one and can be summed up as a dispute of the validity of the transmitted knowledge. As such, it is an example that stands for a kind of reaction posting that can be observed with high frequency. As a general observation it can be found that folk-linguistic forum discussions frequently seem to end up in conflictive sequences which we denominate, in analogy to the concept of 'semantic struggles' (Felder 2006), as 'epistemic struggles' where different *locuteurs* struggle for the hegemony of possessing the 'right knowledge'. As shown before, they draw on different sources in order to reach that goal. In this posting, the *locuteur* not only draws on different sources but highlights their knowledge of sources. This observation has to be analysed more in detail. As mentioned before, what is disputed in this posting is the knowledge of sources of knowledge, expressed by the interactive sequence which can be singled out as utterance 1:

J'ai envoyé la remarque par courriel à l'Académie française, mais je n'ai pas eu de réponse [...]

contested by the ironic question, utterance 2:

Avez-vous eu la curiosité de regarder dans son dictionnaire en ligne „dictionnaire en ligne” [...]

This ironic question is especially interesting for our research topic. As Dendale (2006) points out, irony is one of the markers of polyphony. In our case, it is directly addressed irony: as a reaction to the information about an e-mail to the *Académie Française*, the *locuteur* of this utterance poses the question whether the addressee

had had the curiosity to consult the online dictionary of the *Académie Française* (in lieu of writing emails that won't be answered) against their own better knowledge that the addressee didn't do so. The irony of his question expresses distance between themselves and the addressee at the same time as it highlights their own knowledge about this particular source of knowledge. This ignorance of the source of knowledge makes the addressee appear incompetent – because of his ineffective act of e-mailing and his complaining about the missing answer.

As has been mentioned at the beginning of this section, the whole posting is a dispute of the validity of the knowledge presented by the former *locuteur*. The present *locuteur* presents themselves as a person who shows his competence not by giving their own arguments on the topic but by knowing where to get the respective knowledge. By this they gain double: not only that they show their own knowledge but also the addressee's ignorance of sources and of knowledge; as a further source of knowledge they introduce *Google livres* where the *locuteur* found out that the point their discursive precedent made is wrong.

#### 4.2.4. *Epistemic struggles and the emergence of the empirical subject*

As has been shown, self-presentation and *ethos* construction are very much connected to the knowledge of and the reference to different sources: the subject presents their self as gaining expertise by referring to and reflecting on various sources of knowledge, be those different *locuteurs* or different *énonciateurs*. Respecting the very nature of internet forum interaction, at the beginning of this work we decided to exclude the (existence of) the empirical speaker subject from our analysis. Up to this point, our analysis directed us towards different moments of subject emergence and self-presentation of the *locuteur*. Our next example shows an instance of emergence of an empirical subject. The posting is part of the

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thread that focuses on the topic of “Mots français dans les autres langues” and is directed to an addressee nicknamed “groseille”:

Je crains, groseille, que vous ne soyez pas de taille à rivaliser avec la culture linguistique de Marco, qui est professeur de langues et notamment de la nôtre, et dont l'érudition en ce domaine dépasse de loin ce que nous en savons, qui que nous soyons. Il me semble que vous recevez de sources douteuses des étymologies à la va-vite dont l'authenticité n'est pas confirmée, et qui relèvent de la fantaisie. Ne prenez pas pour argent comptant les élucubrations des étymologistes à la petite semaine.

Le Dictionnaire historique de la langue française précise que manager a été emprunté par le français en 1785 à l'anglais to manage = diriger un cheval, attesté dans cette langue dès le XVIe s. C'est surtout l'américain qui a contribué à l'introduction de manager en français, avec d'abord le sens de maître de cérémonie. Le mot anglais aurait peut-être été emprunté à l'italien maneggiare, dont le déverbal maneggio a donné manège.

Je résume un article qui est beaucoup plus long. (FNBL4)

As is obvious, this whole posting corroborates the hypothesis that internet forum discussion is mainly about possessing the knowledge of sources on behalf of presenting self and constructing *ethos*. In the utterances that compose the posting, there is a deictic subject, a *je*; beyond this explicit *locuteur* various discursive voices are emerging. However interesting and complex these voices are, we will only focus on the emergence of an empirical subject which we situate right at the beginning of the posting:

Je crains, groseille, que vous ne soyez pas de taille à rivaliser avec la culture linguistique de Marco, qui est professeur de langues et notamment de la nôtre, et dont l'érudition en ce domaine dépasse de loin ce que nous en savons, qui que nous soyons [...].

The utterance addresses directly the *locuteur* of the preceding utterance nicknamed *groseille* and refers to their posting. The *locuteur* is contesting directly the competence of their addressee, which

again is a case of self-presentation by downgrading the knowledge and the knowledge of the sources of knowledge of the interlocutor. One of the sources which this excerpt of the posting points to is a virtual identity nicknamed *Marco* who here emerges as an empirical subject and source of knowledge. The *locuteur* constructs the *ethos* of this third person by emphasising their expertise in 'real life': they present the third person as a *professeur de langues et notamment de la nôtre* ('professor of languages and notably of ours') and thereby portray their own knowledge about the real identity of this forum discussion participant. Due to the principle of anonymity, this is a rather rare strategy of subject emergence in the forum. It establishes an interface between virtual and real life.

#### 4.2.5. *Explicit subjects and self-presentation by expression of politeness*

Along with excluding the empirical subject, at the beginning of this chapter there was a distinction made between face work/self-presentation and the verbal expression of politeness. We supposed self-presentation without explicit politeness behaviour to be one of the main communicative activities in the knowledge transmission-oriented forum; we even observed epistemic struggles as one of the knowledge exchange activities which leads to the hypothesis that conflict-avoidant behaviour does not count as one of the preferred strategies of virtual social behaviour. In this last analysed example of our chapter we will restrict or even contradict this hypothesis by analysing the utterances of three successive postings which show what we think has to be interpreted as a politeness behaviour. The utterances are part of a thread about English influence on French, a topic that leads to quite animated discussions.

Par contre, évidemment, quand on utilise un terme d'une langue étrangère, souvent c'est par snobisme, par effet de mode, etc. Là, je pense que tout le monde est d'accord...

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Je suis en total accord avec les points avancés ici par Marco, mais pas complètement avec votre idée, oliglesias, lorsque vous citez le snobisme comme raison principale d'utilisation de mots étrangers. Ceci me semble des plus réducteurs, si je peux m'exprimer honnêtement...

Ce n'est pas moi qui ait avancé cette idée en premier... je la reprenais. Personnellement, j'utilisais snobisme à la place d'imitation d'une langue "à la mode"... sachant qu'une langue peut être à la mode pour plusieurs raisons: rayonnement culturel, économique, politique, militaire, etc. (FNBL4)

The proposition of the first posting is an interpretation and evaluation of the verbal behaviour of French speakers who use English loans which is considered as a sign of snob behaviour.<sup>8</sup> The use of the adverb *évidemment* ('obviously') as well as the explicit utterance *tout le monde est d'accord* ('everybody agrees') indicate a high degree of evidence and, thus, reliability. At the same time, this can be interpreted as a form of evoking collective knowledge. Translated in terms of politeness theory, this can be interpreted as claiming in-group identity, as affiliation to the own sociocultural group which in this case is the group of the speakers of French.

In the answer to this posting, there is an expression of dissent by which the information is evaluated as a simplified perception of reality. With their expression of dissent, the *locuteur* implicitly refers to their own expertise of the discussed topic. However, this objection to the preceding utterance is attenuated by the use of an evidentiality marker *il me semble*. The function of this attenuation can be interpreted as a politeness strategy to downgrade the face-threatening act and conflictive potential of expressing dissent. Contrary to the face work strategies shown up to this moment, this is not an example of self-oriented face work but rather a redressive

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<sup>8</sup> It is remarkable that the speaker while condemning the use of English loans uses one himself!

action in order to avoid damage to the face of ALTER. As reaction to this contradiction, the *locuteur* of the following posting dissociates themselves from their own statement. The *locuteur* refuses their commitment to the information by an explicit hint to their use of another – not specified – source of information, *ce n'est pas moi qui ait avancé cette idée en premier... je la reprenais* ('it's not me who forwarded this idea as the first... I adopted it'). Here, we can observe a very explicit verbal strategy of self-oriented face work; it seems that the speaker/subject has to restore their own expertise referring to their own knowledge, *sachant que [...]* ('knowing that...').

## 5. Conclusion

Due to the general topic of Social Media communication and our special subject of linguistic knowledge exchange in the internet forum *Français notre belle langue*, in this article we focused on verbal expressions of EGO-oriented face work. According to the distinctive characteristics of internet forum communication as, for example, the lack of face-to-face encounter, we decided to introduce the concepts of self-presentation and ethos construction in lieu of using the terminology that coins the concept of face and face work as originally introduced by Goffman. We took a further step in establishing a relationship between subject in discourse, polyphony, expression of evidentiality, and self-presentation which served as background for our analysis of knowledge transmission in the internet forum and provided us with a useful distinction between empirical speakers, *locuteur* and *énonciateur*.

Our exemplary analysis of utterances as parts of postings shows that self-presentation has to be conceived of within a continuum with gradual emergence of an explicit subject. As the main concern

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of self-presentation, we identified the construction of competence and expertise as features of self which include linguistic knowledge as well as knowledge of sources of knowledge and the command of establishing relations between these sources and own cognitive processes. The focus on self-presentation even leads to epistemic struggles where the *locuteurs* of different postings struggle for epistemic hegemony. We also found an exception to the rule of anonymity of forum participants and concluded our analysis with one example of self-presentation with politeness expression.

As mentioned in the introductory section, our analysis is rather selective. Thus our results have to be supported by analysing more examples which at the same time might broaden the outcomes.

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FNBL3: "Locution adverbiale et adverbe."

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###NICHT AUFFINDBAR###

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