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Not an expert, but not a fan either.

A corpus-based study of negative self-identification in web forum interaction

Abstract: This study examines the linguistic micro-management of identity in and across online contexts, drawing upon corpus-based pragmatic analyses of a structure with a meaning potential to examine wider questions about identity in digitally mediated social life. The structure in focus is negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” used in UK web discussion forums. This structure was chosen because it is the most explicit linguistic realization of non-identification with a nominally expressed conceptual category, which serves to contrast the speaker with explicit or presupposed claims and thus indexes how speakers perceive, and discursively create, the context they are writing into. By means of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the forms and functions of 936 instances of the structure in their co-texts, it was found that negative self-identifiers from the fields of expertise and preferences were salient in the examined corpus. They were frequently used to frame co-texts in which speakers linguistically enacted various forms of expertise, pointing to heightened reflexivity regarding the epistemic status and social impact of their utterances and a reconceptualization of expertise as a transient discourse phenomenon rather than a more permanent identity feature.

Keywords: negation, self-identification, corpus pragmatics, expertise, stance management

1 Introduction: Why study what forum users say they are not

Negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” (henceforth NSIs) are a pragmatically noteworthy linguistic choice. From a formal semantic viewpoint, negation merely reverses the truth-value of statements. However, accounting for the ontological status of negative statements and their meanings in

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social interaction is considerably more complex¹ (Miestamo 2017: 405; Horn and Wansing 2020). Considered in isolation, negatives² are uninformative (Leech 1983: 101); after all, a non-state does not correspond to a reality that could be defined truth-conditionally. Vice versa, it is impossible to set up conditions under which a negative utterance is true, as this would amount to an infinite list of propositions that hold in spite of the asserted state of affairs. From a performance-oriented perspective, the question of what is propositionally expressed by negative utterances is less important than the functions they serve for speakers' identity management in discourse. For example, the 'truth' of the statement *I'm not an expert* depends on what is seen as representing expertise in the particular communicative situation, and it may not (only) serve to provide ideational information about the speaker (except in cases where they are direct responses to questions of the type "Are you an X?"). Negatives of this type are marked linguistic choices that interact with cues to familiar mental models and thereby presuppose and construe irrealis mental spaces, which are defined as background knowledge assumed to be shared among discourse participants. Against this background knowledge, negatives stand out as salient and relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2006; van Dijk 2008). Thus, they serve to "correct[] the hearer's mistaken beliefs" (Givón 1993: 190), either explicitly asserted or implied to be present in the immediate co-text, the situational context or the wider cultural context of the utterance (Givón 1993: 191; Jordan 1998: 706). As such, they are also socially more delicate, which, coupled with their uninformativeness, probably explains why they have been found to be used less frequently than affirmatives (Martínez 1995: 214).

To study how NSIs manage claims and guide meaning in interaction, they can be effectively approached from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective (Gumperz 1996). In this view, NSIs can be seen as discourse markers, which are defined as meaning potentials that, rather than contributing to the propositional content, reflect users' awareness and co-construction of the interactional context. Thus, they serve procedural functions and index aspects such as speaker identity and

1 The question of what negatives mean becomes even more complex when considering their scope and interaction with other logical operators (Horn 2020). While a detailed discussion of the scope and presupposition of negatives is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that negative statements do activate presuppositions. This activation has relevance for this study because the use of negatives indexes orientation toward "mutual contextual beliefs" (Bach and Harnish 1979: 5). These beliefs help make the referent relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1986) and allow us to arrive at the fully fledged, contextually enriched meaning of the indefinite NP.

2 This study is concerned with statements containing *not*- and *no*-negation, but negativity may also be realized through morphological negation (e.g. *possible* vs. *impossible*) and inherent negation (e.g. *lack* as opposite of *have*) (Givón 1993: 202).

stance (Ochs 1996). NSIs relate the speaker to an identifying NP and, due to their negative polarity, activate the noun phrase's conceptual meaning (Aijmer 2015: 89). Unlike typical discourse markers like 'actually,' which have conventionalized meanings (Aijmer 2013: 30), NSIs provide a reflexive comment on the speaker's perception of and stance toward what is being interactionally accomplished. By strategically mobilizing a nominally expressed concept, they provide metadata about the ongoing discourse and function as a multifunctional conversational resource (Ekström and Stevanovic 2023), similarly to a conversational tag (Huang, Hornton, and Ethimiadis 2010).

Because the NSIs examined here are part of the main text of web forum postings, they are neither functionally equivalent to nor searchable like hashtags (Zappavigna 2015). However, they can be studied to see how forum users informally interacting on a shared topic index their non-identification with certain categories in strategic and patterned ways. From a critical talk-in-interaction perspective (Speer 2005; Wilkes and Speer 2021), negative self-identification with nouns and the recurrence of certain nouns across texts are particularly interesting because members' categories may be interactionally significant and ideologically charged (Haugh 2013: 11; Stokoe and Attenborough 2014: 161). Studying the mobilization of referential expressions in web forum discourse can therefore reveal speakers' metapragmatic awareness, i.e., their evaluations of what is pragmatically appropriate or 'sayable', and by whom (Silverstein 2003; Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011), in collapsed online contexts (Marwick and boyd 2011 space missing after). This study thus contributes to research on the performance and conceptualization of the self in contemporary digitally mediated social practices, in which individualization (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) and social affiliation through shared authenticity (Leppänen et al. 2015; Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle 2022) are key paradigms for meaning-making. Social media platforms such as forums are well-suited sites to study the functions of linguistic disalignment, as they bring together users from diverse offline backgrounds around shared interests and are shaped by users' interactions (Androutsopoulos 2014: 63; Tagg et al. 2017: 32). To find how the template "I + copula + not + indefinite NP" is used in authentic interaction on web forums, a corpus of 936 UK web forum discussions in English language was collected based on the occurrence of this structure. The remainder of this article will report and critically discuss the findings of these analyses, which aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What nouns and noun phrases do people use to negatively identify themselves on web forums? To which conceptual categories can these be assigned, and how prominently (in terms of frequency and lexical variation) are the identified categories represented in the data?

RQ 2: What are the formal-functional relationships between NSIs and their immediate co-texts? What ideational and pragmatic functions do these co-texts fulfill, and are there patterned relationships between specific conceptual categories of NSIs and certain co-texts?

RQ 3: What are the implications of potentially patterned functions of NSIs for the reflexive performance of identity in informal interactions on web forums?

2 Study design and data

A corpus of NSIs from web forums was compiled to identify the categories of identification linguistically represented and their functions in relation to their immediate and wider co-texts. The aim was for this corpus to represent variants of the formally defined structure “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” within their utterance-internal and sequential co-texts as used in this type of discourse. Corpus compilation was guided by both linguistic and platform-related criteria. For the linguistic criteria, customized Google searches were employed to identify the formal variants of the matrix clause.

- **Tenses:** present simple, present perfect simple (*I’m/am not, I’ve/have never been*)³
- **Contraction:** *I’m not, I am not*
- **No-negation:** *I am no, I’m no*
- **Constructions with *never*:** *I have never been*⁴
- **Adverbs:** e.g. *I’m not really, I’m definitely not*
- **Indefinite article:** *I’m not a/an*

The data was collected from publicly available English-language UK websites that included the words *forum* or *thread* in their domains.⁵ The data was not controlled for topic, purpose, or user characteristics, thus representing a wide variety of con-

³ NSIs were excluded from the corpus if they appeared in instances of active voicing (e.g., *He said, “I’m no liar”*) or in embedded clauses with subjects other than the first-person singular (e.g., *She can’t argue that I am not an expert*). This is because referring to someone else’s identity ascription is not the same as negatively identifying with a particular NP oneself.

⁴ Constructions with *never* are considered a distinct variant because they occurred significantly more often in the data compared to present perfect tense NSIs without adverbial modifiers (e.g., *I haven’t been a basketball player for two years*).

⁵ Using these two search terms was intended to systematically gather data from at least two (out of many) possible URL formats that discussion threads may take.

texts in which variants of the formally defined structure appeared. Regarding corpus size and balance, data collection was systematically randomized by retrieving an equal number of instances for each formally defined variant from each page of Google search results until a target of 100 occurrences was reached. In cases where a variant occurred fewer than 100 times, all instances were included.

Sampling the corpus to represent all variants of the target structure (Biber 1993: 244) means that the corpus does not accurately reflect the actual proportions of the frequencies of these formal variants. As a result, the quantitative information about the categories identified in the data and their relationships is not statistically significant. This methodological approach was chosen nonetheless for two main reasons. First, proportional sampling was not feasible with the Google searches used. No single search string could capture all formal variants in proportion. Second, the study's focus is on the functions of NSIs, emphasizing the meaning of the identifying NP over the specific form of the structure. Therefore, unless there is a known patterned relationship between the formal variants of the structure and the meanings of identifying NPs (such as expertise disclaimers and present perfect tense forms), which exploratory analyses have shown does not exist, the overrepresentation of a particular form does not affect the overall insights gained.

To capture a sufficiently large sample of the structure in use and considering the potentially asynchronous nature of forum interactions, the data collection period was set from July to September 2019. The only constraint was that postings needed to be published after 2015. As a result, the corpus represents a snapshot of NSIs as they appeared on web forums during this timeframe, while also reflecting interactions where the structure had been present over a longer period. The focus on adequately representing the form while allowing for contextual variation stems from the study's microlinguistic orientation, which involves examining linguistic details to identify patterns that may indicate longer-term, gradual phenomena.

Regarding the co-text included in the corpus, NSIs were collected with both their utterance-internal and sequential, utterance-external co-text. This means each NSI was gathered along with the posting it appeared in and the postings to which it replied. The resulting corpus consists of 936 instances of formal variants of the matrix clause in their contexts of use, totalling 295,164 tokens. Table 1 shows the number of instances of the pre-defined NSI variants collected from the two different types of web domains.

Table 1: Overview of formal variants searched for, and numbers of NSIs included in the corpus.

Data group	Variants searched for	Corpus examples	URL: forum site: .uk	URL: thread Site: .uk	Total
1	<i>I'm not a/n</i>	<i>I'm not a fan of pizza</i>	101	100	201
2	<i>I am not a/n</i>	<i>I am not a person who can advise you on the matter</i>	101	101	202 ⁶
3	Modified variants of 1 & 2: <i>I'm/am not * a/n</i> <i>I'm/am * not a/n</i>	<i>I'm not much of a fan of butly based inhalants</i>	35	14	49
4	<i>I'm/I am no</i>	<i>I'm no thief!!!</i>	101	99	200
5	Modified variants of 4: <i>I'm * no</i> <i>I am * no</i> <i>I * am no</i>	<i>I'm still no expert</i>	7	4	11
6	<i>I've/have never been a/n</i>	<i>I have never been a perfume buyer</i>	100	101	201
7	Modified variants of 6: <i>I've * never been a/n</i> <i>I have never * been a/n</i> <i>I * have never been a/n</i> <i>I have * never been a/n</i>	<i>i've just never been a fan of the kit</i>	6	5	11
8	<i>I've/I have not/ haven't been a/n</i>	<i>I've not been a fan of Gewurtztraminer</i>	47	12	59
9	Modified variants of 8: <i>I've * not been a/n</i> <i>I've not * been a/n</i> <i>I have * not been a/n</i> <i>I * have not been a/n</i>	<i>I have not always been big fan of Phase scanners</i>	2	0	2
Total					936

⁶ During my research, a few instances were deleted as false positives, and additional NSIs were identified. As a result, the size of some data groups changed slightly, and the upper limit of 100 was exceeded in a few cases.

In an iterative process, metadata about textual and contextual aspects was manually added to the data using tags. This metadata included the meaning of the identifying NP, the formal appearance and functions of the immediate and wider co-texts in which the structure appeared, the topic of the thread, and the forum featuring the NSI. Annotation and qualitative analysis began with the conceptually most important and syntactically most narrow level: the semantic meaning of identifying NPs. The analysis then proceeded in structurally ascending steps, involving the formal and functional categorization of the sentence-internal and sentence-external co-texts of NSIs. Frequencies of the identified categories and their relationships were determined using the concordancing function of WordSmith 5.0 (Scott 2008) and Excel's sorting and calculation functions. The corpus-based study was complemented by detailed qualitative analyses of entire post events where NSIs from frequently instantiated conceptual domains were used.

3 The empirical study

3.1 The meanings and co-textual relations of NSIs

The first step in the analysis was to create a conceptual profile of NSIs in the corpus, summarized with examples in Table 2.⁷ Conceptual profiling involves retrieving linguistic realizations of a predefined formal paradigm (in this case, identifying NPs) from the corpus in a vertical format and then conducting a qualitative analysis. The goal is to identify and differentiate groups of formally and semantically related linguistic elements, providing an overview of the conceptual structure of the paradigm (Marko 2015). In this analysis, some categories were identified based on specific lexemes, such as the frequent nouns *expert* and *fan*, which appeared with various modifiers and thus defined certain categories. Other categories were established based on the meanings of head nouns and their modifiers. For example, the NP *hater of CGI* was categorized under “preferences” due to the prepositional phrase specifying a phenomenon of (non-)‘hate,’ whereas the unmodified *hater* was categorized as an evaluative characteristic. The data prominently featured domains of preferences (especially constructions with *fan*) and expertise (especially constructions with *expert*).

⁷ Due to space limitations, only the most prominently represented conceptual categories and up to three examples per category are included.

Table 2: Overview of the most frequently occurring conceptual categories of identifying NPs.

Preference (+*fan*) (200)

- **General/unspecific (15):** *huge fan*
 - **Postmodified (165):**
 - **Products (60):** *ear buds, Hornby decoders, the P20*
 - **Visual features/designs (24):** *magenta, the exhaust tip on the black car, the opacity*
 - **Persons/clubs (20):** *Blake, Cameron, Pitman*
 - **Activities and events (19):** *chasing the dragon, going out, my birthday*
 - **Food/drink/substances (14):** *brown chocolate, garlic, whiskey*
 - **Nature/animals (7):** *gulls, mice, moths*
 - **IT/app-related (7):** *cgV, downloading file, track*
 - **Ideas and ideologies (5):** *ranks, these ‘5 year plan’ type of things, violence for the sake of violence*
 - **Business-related (3):** *guaranteed stops, partnerships, the Scandinavian market*
 - **Entertainment (3):** *Nemesis Sub-Terra, stand-up, “So Broken”*
 - **Body care (3):** *fasting, shaving, the steam method*
 - **Head in compounds (16):**
 - **Commodities (8):** *big e21 fan, big Lambo fan, BMW fan*
 - **Persons/clubs (8):** *Chelsea, Heyman, Leicester*
 - **Prepositional phrase + referring expression (4):** *of these*
-

Preference (-*fan*) (44)

- **Products (13):** *avid collector of TP, Dore enthusiast, great believer in tablets*
 - **Styles (8):** *big dress person, makeup kind of girl, particularly ‘pink’ person*
 - **Ideas/Ideology (5):** *advocate of couples separating, Labour lover, slavish adherent to their politics*
 - **Activity-related (4):** *H/C snob, lover of positions 2/4, lover of the Beagle Point systems*
 - **Sexual (3):** *masturbator, thong man, tit man*
 - **Medical treatment (3):** *advocate of high doses, lover of taking laxatives, serial doctors apt person*
 - **Persons/groups (3):** *Hodgson basher, Radiohead hater, supporter of Jim Price*
 - **IT/app-related (2):** *database guy, piping guy*
 - **Food (2):** *big chocolate lover, cream lover*
 - **Nature:** *dog lover*
-

Expertise (+*expert*) (192)

- **General/unspecific (105):** *expert*
- **Prepositional phrase + referring expression (18):** *at this*
- **Premodified (5):**
 - **Legal (2):** *legal*
 - **Business/services (2):** *financial, postal*
 - **Medical:** *medical*
- **Postmodified (40):**
 - **Nature (12):** *in fish, in mammals, on bees*
 - **Technical appliances and processes (7):** *on metal detecting, on small horticultural engines, on the various types of gas cylinders*
 - **IT (6):** *at drivers/optimization, in this verification lark, with Meshlab*

- **Products (5):** *on military uniforms, on shoes, on the dot product*
- **Arts/sports (4):** *in training techniques, on ski jumping, on the 2 step*
- **Medical:** *on HRT*
- **Science:** *at geology*
- **Business/services:** *on house prices*
- **Language:** *at pronouncing things*
- **Leisure:** *at this game*
- **Ideological:** *on religious matters*
- **Head in compounds (24):**
 - **IT/gaming (8):** *class CPU, Linux server, programming*
 - **Technical (6):** *asbestos, electronics, vehicle electronics*
 - **Nature (5):** *conformation, shark, wood*
 - **Particular products (5):** *Dennis, DICOM, jeans*

Expertise (-expert) (56)

- **General/unspecific (13):** *pro, professional, specialist*
- **Noun (1):**
 - **Technical:** *techie*
- **Adjective + noun (16):**
 - **Language (3):** *eloquent wordsmith, great blogger, particularly lyrical guy*
 - **Medical (3):** *medical person (2), medical professional*
 - **Nature (2):** *big grower of mesembs, good birdwatcher*
 - **Sports (2):** *expert runner, tactical guru*
 - **Technical (2):** *expert builder, technological man*
 - **Legal:** *legal eagle*
 - **Housework:** *very good cook*
 - **Science:** *astronomical type*
 - **Other:** *confident driver*
- **Noun + noun (13):**
 - **IT (7):** *advanced IT person, bash guru, computer boff*
 - **Technical (4):** *electronics guru, fire door specialist, tech geek*
 - **Business:** *VAT specialist*
 - **Science:** *math wiz*
- **Noun + prepositional phrase (9):**
 - **Health (4):** *professional on OCD, stranger to how PD affects people, stranger to injecting*
 - **Housework (2):** *great one for composting, natural in the kitchen*
 - **Nature:** *great one for bird song*
 - **Arts:** *authority on paintwork*
 - **IT/Gaming:** *noob to UAE4ALL*
- **Metonymic proper names (4):** *Mo Farah, Nostradamus, Aladdin's genie*

Professions (142)

- **Medical (41):** *doctor, neurologist, pharmacist*
- **IT (21):** *coder, dev, developer*
- **Technical (21):** *chainsaw technician, electrical engineer, mechanic*
- **Arts/Sports (15):** *cheerleader, designer, dj*
- **Science (14):** *chemist, geologist, historian*

- **Business/Finance (11):** *accountant, experienced investor, financial advisor*
- **Education (7):** *du student, pshe teacher, qualified teacher*
- **Legal (6):** *lawyer (5), solicitor*
- **Nature (4):** *botanist, hymenopterist, zoologist*
- **Other (2):** *butler, fieldtester*

Personal Characteristics (136)

- **Evaluative (44):** *bad person, drama queen, hater*
 - **Health-related (21):** *addict, alcoholic, bedwetter*
 - **Ideological/religious (16):** *agnostic, buddist, communist*
 - **Relational/demographic (10):** *parent, schoolboy, youngster*
 - **Emotional/psychological (10):** *anxious person, happy bunny, masochist*
 - **Physiological/physical (10):** *flexible person, heavy guy, tall or stocky kind of person*
 - **Social (9):** *follower, leader, loner*
 - **Geographic/residential status (8):** *Aberdonian, EU resident, resident*
 - **Linguistic background (5):** *native speaker, native English speaker*
 - **Gender-specific (3):** *girly-girl, one of those girls, sir*
-

The analysis revealed that the nouns *fan* and *expert* not only appear prominently in the corpus overall but also in many compounds and prepositional phrases referring to specific kinds of fandom and expertise. For the category of preferences, the analysis distinguished between constructions with *fan* as the head noun (200 tokens) and other lexemes indicating speakers' relationships with things, people, and activities, such as *avid collector* (44 tokens). Constructions with *fan* can be further divided into several thematic subcategories. The largest subcategory is "products", which includes instances where the focal structure is postmodified by prepositional phrases denoting a wide range of commodities (e.g., *earbuds, exercise bikes, or the old Astra*) and their design features (e.g., *the yellow, it being silver, or the Mac-style icon*). Other semantic domains of non-preference include references to people, food, and activities, as well as detailed aspects relating to specific activities, such as *new menus for selecting vehicles in a game*.

In constructions without *fan*, analyzing the semantic heads of noun phrases shows that speakers often negatively identify with affective categories, such as *lovers* or *enthusiasts*, and combine phenomena of non-preference with general head nouns like *guy, girl, or person*.

The high frequency and specificity of noun phrases in this domain demonstrate that speakers use NSIs to position themselves attitudinally toward a wide range of topics relevant to the immediate interactional context, linguistically expressing their identity through very specific tastes (Liu 2007). One function of emphasizing non-preference is to index expertise, which, as Carr (2010: 20) explains, can be enacted by "establishing a deliberate stance in relation to a set of culturally valued or valuable objects." This is illustrated by Example (1) below. Here, the NSI con-

trasts the speaker's positive evaluation of *the 5010* with their previously low opinion of Phase scanners. It is followed by a detailed description of the scanner's features, which includes numerous indicators of authority, such as references to prior experience with earlier models and metapragmatic reflections on sincerity (e.g., *I must say*) and truth (e.g., *I think I am correct in saying*) (Bublitz and Hübner 2007). Thus, while the speaker does not explicitly highlight the category of expertise, they showcase their experience with the product category in question. By using *us* to refer to the forum community and representing the producer, Z+F, as someone who *demonstrated* their scanner to them, the speaker constructs an in-group of product reviewers to whom novelties are presented. By starting their post with a remark about how some may be aware of their attitude toward Phase scanners, the speaker positions themselves as an established member of the projected community. Their closing statement, *I look forward to seeing more from this scanner*, not only predicts the future of the scanner but also implicitly addresses the producer, who, after presenting their new product to the forum 'jury', may now 'leave the stage'.

- (1) As some of you may know **I have not always been a big fan of Phase scanners** but things change. Z+F demonstrated the 5010 to us recently and I must say that I was really, really impressed. Its a lot smaller than previous models but has a large on board screen which is easy to use. The data looked a lot cleaner than I have seen before with phase scans and the fact that it can scan at similar ranges to TOF is impressive. And I think I am correct in saying that it now has a level compensator. I look forward to seeing more from this scanner

Regarding the second semantic category of NSIs frequently instantiated in the data – expertise – three types of nouns were identified: first, NPs with the head noun *expert*; second, other lexical elements denoting (non-)expertise (e.g., *noob*); and third, references to specific professions and job titles (e.g., *accountant*). As shown in Table 2, the high type/token ratio for the expertise category is largely due to the generic use of *expert*. In contrast, the low lexical variation for professions is mainly attributable to the unspecific noun *doctor*. The recurrence of these unspecific terms in NSIs suggests a formulaic and procedural, rather than conceptual, use of expertise disclaimers. Speakers commonly and generically self-identify as experts without specifying their domain of knowledge. This may indicate a tacit understanding among forum participants that lay expertise is being exchanged, with neither the speakers nor their audience needing to know the precise label, if such a label even exists – for someone with expertise in a particular field. As Rueger, Dolfsma and Aalbers (2021) explain, lay expertise can be understood as peer endorsement, representing a form of discourse where accredited experts – such as cardiologists,

developers, and chemists – are inherently absent. By contrasting themselves with these perceived authorities on the topic, speakers seem to acknowledge their relevance while light-heartedly connecting over their absence. Example (2) below illustrates how an expertise disclaimer mitigates the speaker's diagnosis of a photo shared on the forum. In contrast to Example (1), this post employs several devices that position the speaker as a layperson. For instance, the term *fur balls* is placed in inverted commas and described as *loose*, while the adverbs *a bit* and *possibly*, along with the caveat that they *may be well off the mark*, reduce epistemic certainty.

- (2) Hi [Name]
 Looks like fur from a cat! They sometimes bring up what are loosely called 'fur balls' and they can look a bit like this. Or some other animal possibly.
I'm no expert and may be well off the mark [Name]!

Besides preferences and expertise, the categories of personal characteristics and situational roles and behaviors were also notably present in the data (136 and 83 tokens, respectively). This indicates that the reflexive portrayal of an authentic persona – beyond simply being knowledgeable and opinionated – is crucial for the relationships formed on the examined forums. For instance, NSIs were used to describe speakers in terms of personality traits and social skills (e.g., being a *bad person*), social roles both external and internal to the forum (e.g., a *parent* or a *forum admin*), and characteristics related to gender (e.g., *girlie-girl*), age (e.g., *youngster*), or health (e.g., *sound sleeper*).

To summarize, the semantic profile discussed in this section suggests that negative self-identification is a linguistic strategy allowing speakers to emphasize different aspects of their social persona based on the interactional demands of the conversation. Preference disclaimers position speakers as informed peers by specifying contextually relevant non-preferences. Disclaimers of expertise serve to hedge opinions epistemically, thus highlighting common ground among lay users by emphasizing their shared lack of expert knowledge. A third function of negative self-identifiers (NSIs) identified in the corpus is to reflect speaker individuality by positioning them in relation to locally relevant personality traits and social roles.

3.2 Functionally profiling the co-texts of NSIs

The functions of NSIs, similar to those of discourse markers, depend on their sequential and functional relationships within their immediate co-text and broader co-text (Aijmer 2015: 89). Therefore, the analyses presented in this section examined the forms and functions of NSIs within their textual surroundings at the levels

of phrase, clause, and turn. This approach aimed to identify tendencies for NSIs from specific conceptual categories (as discussed in 3.1) to occur within particular types of co-text. The first step involved qualitatively analyzing and annotating the immediate left (1L) and right (1R) co-texts of all instances of NSIs and determining the frequencies of the identified categories. Next, to identify linguistic patterns in the co-text of NSIs, the clauses formally linked to the matrix clause were functionally profiled using the transitivity framework (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Frequently occurring co-textual categories were then analyzed more holistically in terms of their pragmatic functions. Finally, the broader co-texts of NSIs – specifically, their preceding co-texts beyond the sentence level that lack formal links to the structure – were pragmatically analyzed as well.

3.2.1 NSIs in their sequential co-text

The first step of the functional analysis was to establish the formal-functional relationships of NSIs with their immediate co-texts and their sequential position in the turns, or postings, in which they appeared. It was found that NSIs were predominantly used in response turns, namely in 593 of 936 instances examined; in 230 cases, they appeared turn-initially, and in 87 cases turn-finally. 458 NSIs were followed by independent sentences, mainly declaratives (378 cases), and 138 were preceded, and 535 were followed, by a conjunction. Thus, in the examined corpus, there is a tendency for NSIs to be employed right at the beginning of turns which are intended to provide, rather than ask for, advice. As can be seen from Table 3, NSIs appear as part of a complex clause in 717 of 936 cases, with 76% of NSIs preceding textual material to which they are formally linked. The most frequent type of relationship between NSIs and clauses with which they are formally linked is contrast and concession (42%). This, coupled with the fixed forms of frequent NSIs, often appearing as variants of the forms “I’m not an expert” and “I’m not a fan”, indicates that NSIs serve as framing devices, pre-emptively negating anticipated implications of utterances following them. Judging from these findings, NSIs seem to be utilized to reduce the potential face threat of advice (Goldsmith 2000), thereby ensuring the ‘safe landing’ of opinions they preface.

Table 3: Relationships between NSIs and their immediate co-texts.

Relationship	Example	1L co-text	1R co-text	No. of NSIs	% of all NSIs in the corpus
Contrast and concession					
Contrast	<i>I'm not an expert <u>but</u> [+S]</i>	86	279	365	
NSI = concessional clause	<i>Whilst I'm not a single traveler, [S]</i>	7	16	23	
1R/1L = concessional clause	<i>I am not a forum person myself, <u>although</u> [+S]</i>	4	5	9	
Total				397	42%
Cause and consequence					
NSI as cause	<i>[S], <u>since</u> I am not a technician</i>	41	93	134	
NSI as consequence	<i>I am not a big fan of fasting, <u>as</u> [+S]</i>	4	20	24	
Total				158	17%
Addition					
Coordination	<i>I am not a Dore enthusiast, <u>and</u> [+S]</i>	24	138	162	
Total				162	17%
Total		166	551	717	76%

3.2.2 The meanings of co-texts formally related to NSIs

This analysis employed the transitivity framework to differentiate between ideational meanings in 717 clauses related to NSIs (see Table 2). It found that 443 of these clauses had a first-person participant as thematic subject,⁸ often representing speakers' thoughts and ideas through mental or relational processes. Inanimate⁹ third-person subjects appeared in 170 clauses, mainly in relational processes of

⁸ Because thematic roles do not necessarily coincide with grammatical subjects, the study subsumed participants appearing as actors, experiencers, carriers/tokens, sayers, existents and behavers under the label of "Role 1"-participants, and the corresponding thematic objects, i.e. goals, phenomena/inducers, attributes/values and verbiages under "Role 2"-participants.

⁹ The distinction between animate and inanimate subjects was made in this analysis because it was considered to make a difference for the functions of negative self-identification whether it is used in relation with a claim about someone (another person, or animal) or something (an object or idea of common interest).

attribution and identification, that is, claims about objects and ideas. This shows that NSIs in the examined data frequently occur in co-texts in which speakers state their opinions, either subjectively or impersonally. Notably, in mental process contexts, identifying NPs from the fields of expertise and professionalism were identified in over half the clauses, while preference disclaimers appeared in only 20%. These findings indicate the patterned use of disclaimers of expertise in conjunction with clauses indexing the subjectivity of claims they project, modifying a claim already marked as opinion. Myers (2006) notes that phrases like “in my opinion” signal awareness of the multiple functions and context-specific constraints of opinion statements. Thus, NSIs modifying expressions of opinion highlight aspects of a speaker’s identity, particularly expertise, impacting the appropriateness of their claims. This suggests that epistemic hedging is just one function of NSIs, which also play a role in face management. For instance, *I’m not an expert but I believe I have a good grasp of the laws of the game* shows awareness of potential face threats in claiming expertise.¹⁰

Table 4: Process types represented by co-texts with different formal links to NSIs.

Role-1 participant: 1st person sg.		
Process Type	Examples	Total
Mental	<i>I believe any GAD test over 50 indicates an autoimmune condition</i>	192
Relational	<i>I am confident [confident] the first photo is a common and harmless hover fly</i>	125
Material	<i>when something hurts, I change the way that I run to stop it hurting</i>	84
Verbal	<i>I suggest Lantus alone might not be the best choice</i>	42
Total		443
Role-1 participant: 3rd person sg. & pl. (inanimate)		
Relational	<i>cocaine is the second most addictive and most harmful [sic] drug out there</i>	118
Material	<i>Wouldn’t this bypass AVG [...]?</i>	33
Other	<i>There’s something weird about a person who can take 200mg of trazadone</i>	19
Total		170
Other Role 1 participants		104
Total		717

¹⁰ While the modesty indexed by this specific NSI appears genuine – it precedes an advice-giving response to a question – it could also be an exaggerated understatement meant to mock interlocutors who doubt the expertise of a highly knowledgeable speaker. This underscores, once again, that the functions of negatively identifying as an expert cannot be separated from the interactional context.

In the context of presenting speakers' views, it has been noted that preference disclaimers often appear in textual environments that feature linguistic markers of authority. The self-confidence and 'sassy' rhetoric of Example (3) below, which includes a preference disclaimer, is another case in point. Despite framing their assessment as a personal opinion, the speaker conveys certainty through their (mocking) evaluation of the product's appearance (e.g., *like a fat grey lump [which] certainly does not stand out*) and implicitly addresses the designers with suggestions for improvement (e.g., *Perhaps just a little metallic band across it*). Thus, the speaker presents themselves as openly subjective yet situationally authoritative:

- (3) Yes, I can see that, it certainly does not stand out. [...] Perhaps just a little metallic band across it, in a similar tone to the fabric. [...] To be totally honest, **I'm not a fan of the Home Max Speaker** for the same reason. It's just lacking something, just an element to stop it looking like a fat grey lump :) All personal opinion of course :)

Based on the results of these analyses, the two prominent phrases, "I'm not an expert" and "I'm not a fan", reflect different notions of expertise relevant to the surrounding post. Specifically, "I'm not an expert" indicates a lay (as opposed to formal) expertise, while "I'm not a fan" suggests preference as a marker of experiential expertise.

3.2.3 The pragmatic functions of co-texts formally related to NSIs

To complement the transitivity-informed analysis presented in Table 4, a subset of co-texts preceding NSIs – specifically, mental, relational, and material process clauses with "I" as the Role-1 participant and formally linked to the matrix clause – were analyzed in terms of their overall interactional accomplishment, considering features such as polarity, tense, and aspect. Thus, for example, I distinguished between emotive verbs with a complement referring to the addressee (e.g., *I highly appreciate your reply*), verbs of perception with a complement referring to a contextually relevant object or question (e.g., *I can see small teeth at the front of the lower jaw*), and verbs of perception in the past tense that refer to experiences rather than immediate impressions (e.g., *I have not experienced many changes in medication*).

The results of this analysis, presented in Table 5 below, show that NSIs were characteristically used in textual environments representing speakers' beliefs and opinions (93 instances), reflexive comments on their knowledge (62 instances), and their experiences (62 instances). In these co-texts, NSIs from the conceptual domain

of expertise were frequent linguistic choices, meaning that speakers often stated they were not experts of various kinds just before or after presenting or reflecting on their knowledge and experience with the subject matter. This further supports findings from previous analyses, which indicated that disclaimers of expertise tend to modify speakers' claims or references to different kinds of knowledge.

Table 5: Functional profile of clauses formally related to NSIs.

Functional profile of clauses formally related to NSIs					
Functional category	Examples	Mental	Relational	Material	Total
Representation of knowledge/Opinion	<i>I'm pretty sure you can get the original Grange</i>	72	20	1	93 [61 expertise NSIs]
Reference to knowledge/understanding	<i>I probably had sufficient experience</i>	31	26	5	62 [29 expertise NSIs]
Experience	<i>[O]ver the last 5 years or so I have seen a lot of things said and written about "bioidentical/compounded" hormones.</i>	18	22	22	62 [54 expertise NSIs]
Preferences/Habits/Principles	<i>[I] usually prefer the OEM option</i>	24	10	19	53 [31 preference NSIs]
Others ¹¹		47	47	37	131
Total		192	125	84	401

Qualitative examination of posts from these categories revealed that disclaimers of expertise not only serve to justify potential limitations in expertise but also project epistemic self-confidence. They indicate that speakers, despite not identifying as experts, are well aware of their knowledge and skills. For example, the following expertise disclaimer serves to position the speaker as layperson and highlights

¹¹ For reasons of space, categories with fewer than 30 instances assigned to them were not included in this table.

potential flaws in their map, whilst also setting the stage for describing how they autodidactically acquired the skills to create the map in question:

- (4) **I am not an expert in Normandy maps**, so I based on GJS Close Combat Maps and books I've read about the battle.

Indeed, the rest of their posting suggests that they take pride in what they have created:

To this I add that the battle in BA be attractive and entertaining for both sides. I tried to simulate the map as I know... and can.

3.2.4 Beyond the clause: Moves preceding NSIs

The final analysis aimed to explore the relationships between NSIs and their immediately preceding co-texts beyond the sentence level. It examined the 376 declarative sentences that preceded NSIs, as well as the functional discourse units they were part of. This means that the sentence in the L1 position preceding the NSI was included, and, if it was part of a larger discourse move, the entire move was analyzed. For this study, moves were defined as “contiguous units that are characterized by coherent communicative purposes” (Egbert et al. 2021: 715) and a hypertheme (Forey and Sampson 2017: 134). For example, a product experience story – the most frequent category identified – serves the purpose of narrating a speaker's experience with a particular item they purchased, thereby constituting the overall theme of that stretch of text.¹²

The functions of these co-texts were cross-categorized with conceptual categories of NSIs. The three most prominent categories identified were: (1) discourse units representing users' experiences with products (67 instances), (2) representations of and reflections on knowledge and information (38 instances), and (3) advice (34 instances). Product experience stories were most frequently followed by preference disclaimers (26 out of 67 instances). Factual claims and reflections on speak-

¹² However, it should be noted that while categorization and quantification may give the appearance of systematicity and empirical soundness – and are intended to make the analysis as transparent as possible – functional categorization inherently involves some degree of subjectivity. Thus, the categories identified are somewhat fuzzy, with frequencies indicating tendencies rather than providing definitive accounts of the data.

ers' understanding, as well as instances of advice, predominantly preceded disclaimers of expertise (27 out of 38 and 23 out of 34 instances, respectively).

The product experience story in (5) below – classified as such because of its title, “just a few thoughts from a couple of hundred mixed-use miles” – is a case in point. Incidentally, it features two NSIs from the two most frequent semantic domains, viz. expertise/professionalism and preference. The first NSI positions the speaker as a layperson in motoring journalism, indicating that they do not possess the expertise to write authoritatively about engines. This is coordinated with a contrasting clause that frames their account as subjective (*a few thoughts*). The second NSI, a preference disclaimer, follows their experience story and serves to specify their engine preferences. Again, the posting overall is marked by a high degree of linguistically enacted expertise, featuring technical terms and numbers as well as unmitigated claims (*can't fault*). Thus, it positions the speaker as an opinionated car expert, though not a professional one, as would be the case with a motoring journalist.

- (5) Big thanks again to elmsDirect for the loan of the big 7 over the Gaydon weekend. **I'm no motoring journalist**, but here's a few thoughts from a couple of hundred mixed-use miles....I've never driven the logical competition (Merc S class, Lexus LS, Jag XJ etc) and assuming this niche of car is aimed at big mileage, (mainly) motorway use, the 7 hits the mark. **I'm no fan of diesels**, but can't fault over 300 bhp, loads of torque and still an average of 28 mpg overall and approaching 40 on the motorway

To sum up, this analysis provided additional support for the patterned use of disclaimers of expertise in contexts where knowledge is shared and negotiated. It also revealed a tendency for preference disclaimers to be used in the context of reporting experiences, suggesting that highlighting non-preferences is an effective way to signal awareness of specific choices in peer endorsement contexts.

4 Summary and concluding remarks

This study explored the discursive functions of negative assertions of the type “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” in disembodied social encounters in online contexts defined by topics of shared interest. It examined a corpus of 936 instances of NSIs used in UK web forum discussions to learn what categories speakers contrasted themselves with, in which co-texts NSIs appeared, what they pragmatically

cally accomplished, and the implications for identity work in contemporary digitally mediated interaction.

It was found that two paradigms of identification stand out in the data: expertise and preference. Both types of NSIs serve tightly intertwined epistemic and social functions. The salience of disclaimers of expertise in contexts of exchanging knowledge on areas where expertise is perceived to matter may reflect struggles with certainty and credibility in anonymous lay communities. The formulaic phrase “I’m not an expert” was found to be routinely used to meta-pragmatically frame subjective opinions as non-absolute, allowing speakers to perform their individually accrued expertise while formally canceling the power differential implied by metadiscursive processes of explaining, rationalizing, and assessing information (Silverstein 2003). As Au and Eyal (2022: 34–35) put it, “presenting oneself as ‘not an expert’ is a useful strategy to bypass the crisis of expertise that would shut down lines of communication when the contested identity of the credentialed expert is invoked”. This seems to be the case in Example (6). Here, an NSI follows an otherwise unmitigated piece of advice but precedes an invitation for others to voice their views, illustrating the tension between enacting and disclaiming expertise.

- (6) Whatever oil you use change it at the recommended times and keep the air filter clean. I repeat that **I am not an expert** and welcome other opinions.

Conversely, the second most frequent conceptual category of NSIs, preference disclaimers, was used to represent speakers in terms of subjective but refined tastes by making reference to inherently perspectival identification categories – those of *fans*, *lovers*, and *enthusiasts*.. Given the high risk of emotional disagreement and the importance of appreciation in online contexts (Langlotz and Locher 2012; Petroni 2019), expressing preferences (rather than knowledge) may serve as a socially advantageous, non-confrontational way of enacting expertise. As Page (2019: 191) puts it, this can be seen as an “interactionally ‘safe’ option”.

What counts as expertise and how speakers use NSIs to position themselves in relation to it appear to depend on the speech situation; that is, drawing upon pragmatically appropriate registers is what construes credibility online (Mey 2001: 220). This supports the view of identity as a transient phenomenon (Hoffmann and Bublitz 2017: 17) and suggests that, in the context of forum interaction, where being appreciated or sanctioned depends on successful facework, expertise is an interactional accomplishment rather than something that is permanently ‘held’ by individuals. In this light, NSIs can be seen as part of an array of linguistic strategies by which speakers emphasize commonalities to construct an in-group of peers and create distance from implicitly absent out-groups associated with formal authority.

To conclude, the findings of this study underscore that authority is interactionally accomplished on web forums and hinges on users' ability to mediate relevant information about a situationally relevant cultural good (Carr 2010: 18) in ways that encourage open debate and promote social affiliation. In the local context of web forums – where users are connected through highly specific domains of knowledge and interest – disalignment with expertise and negative identification with particular preferences were found to be interactionally favorable strategies for constructing stance. Considering that small social actions reflect broader systemic trends (Blommaert, Smits, and Yacoubi 2020: 56), the use of NSIs to frame opinions expressed online through the prism of taste, rather than expertise, may relate to the wider context of amplified epistemic uncertainty and distrust. To better understand the semiotic strategies that legitimize certain (post-)expert identities and the realities they endorse, meticulous linguistic analysis of mundane interaction serves as a fruitful starting point.

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