

Using *I don't know* for rapport management in informal language learning online¹

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a valuable learning opportunity for foreign or second language (L2) learners to develop their L2 skills by interacting with native speakers and peer learners. To achieve success participation in CMC, interpersonal management is considered to be an important skill for L2 learners. Therefore, this paper examines what linguistic strategies the participants of online language-learning fora use for building and maintaining social relationships with others from a perspective of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The data was collected from text-based comments posted on two online fora between 2011 and 2014 and examined quantitatively and qualitatively applying computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) (Herring, 2004). The result of this study shows that *I don't know* is the most frequent 4-words expression in both fora and this phrase is used not only to declare the participants' lack of knowledge but also to construct their identities and manage rapport for legitimating their participation in the learning communities.

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in learning L2 through CMC. Previous studies have shown the potential and possibilities of using CMC for developing L2 proficiency through engaging in various online activities outside of schools such as participating in fan fiction communities (Black, 2008) or playing online games (Throne, 2008). Through online participation, L2 learners form social networks of learning and develop their learner identities beyond institutional learner's identity (Thorne, Black and Syke, 2009; Blake, 2011), and hence they experience a different learning process from learning at schools.

From a sociocultural perspective, one benefit of using CMC is its collaborative environment, where learners practise their target language through interacting with native speakers and peer learners and doing activities together. However, L2 learners do not necessarily always achieve access to such online learning opportunities (e.g., Hanna and de Nooy, 2003; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012). They also need to learn how to become engaged in the online community that they want to join and legitimate their membership. In the literature, there are inadequate studies on how individual L2 learners are equipped to participate in informal learning environments (Barton and Potts, 2013, p.181). The socialisation process of online learning requires interpersonal communication skills to manage relationships with other participants (e.g., Gonzale 2013a, 2013b). Therefore, further research is necessary in order to study the L2 learners' actual use of language for interpersonal purposes in online informal learning contexts. Theories in the field of im/politeness research can be used for studying L2 interpersonal competence in online, and the present paper aims to demonstrate one

possible approach by applying “rapport management” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rapport management

Rapport management is a politeness theory which considers that people maintain, enhance or threaten harmonious relationship with others by managing three elements: face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals. Face is what people want others to acknowledge in terms of their positive attributes associated with identities. There are at least three dimensions of face, which are associated with self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity). Sociality rights and obligations are “fundamental social *entitlements* that a person effectively claims for him/herself in his/her interactions with others” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.13, emphasis original). This element is particularly related to people’s behavioural expectations for others. Interactional goals are people’s wants to achieve specific goals in interactions and are understood in relation to functions of discourse. They can be distinguished between task-oriented and relationship-oriented goals, but these two types of interactional goals are often not clear-cut in real interactions and they can be “transactional (i.e., task-oriented), relational, or a mixture of the two” (Spencer-Oatey, 2015, p.1289).

Thus, rapport management differs from other politeness theories including the seminal work by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]). Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory draws on Goffman’s (1967) concept of *face* or “an image of self [being]

delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (p.5) to propose two types of face that the interlocutors want to claim in communication, namely positive and negative face. They formulate politeness strategies based on avoiding or mitigating the face-threatening acts. Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) use of face is also based on Goffman’s notion of face, yet as introduced in the above she conceptualises it differently from Brown and Levinson (1987) and rapport management theory concerns not only the management of face but also management of other two elements. In this respect, the framework provides a wider perspective than traditional politeness theories in explaining the factors that can influence our use of language for social relationship.

The three elements are considered to be managed through different levels of non/linguistic strategies, that is the illocutionary domain (speech acts), the discourse domain (discourse content and structure), the participation domain (procedural aspects of interchange), the stylistic domain (stylistic aspects of interchange such as choice of appropriate tone and lexis) and the non-verbal domain (non-verbal aspects of interchange such as gesture, body movement). There are several factors that influence people’s decisions of using rapport management strategies in these domains. They include contextual variables (social relations, social/interactional roles, activity types), pragmatic principles and conventions, and rapport orientations (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Rapport orientation represents people’s desire about positive and negative changes in their relationships and there are four types of rapport orientations:

1. Rapport enhancement orientation: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between the

interlocutors;

2. Rapport maintenance orientation: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors;
3. Rapport neglect orientation: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self);
4. Rapport challenge orientation: a desire to challenge or impair relations between the interlocutors.

(Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.32)

Rapport orientation may be the most influential factor for L2 learners in choosing rapport management strategies in online learning contexts. If they want to become a legitimate member of an online learning community or build a long-term relationship with other participants, they are more likely to hold rapport maintenance/enhancement orientation rather than rapport challenge orientation to build and develop relationships with other participants (although they may choose different rapport orientations in given situations). However, rapport orientation is not often directly researchable. Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that “[u]nless people talk about them explicitly, they can only be inferred from their choice of rapport management strategies. Even so, it may still be difficult to distinguish clearly one orientation from another” (p.33).

For this point, Gonzales (2013b) successfully demonstrates how an L2 learner’s rapport orientations influence his choice of linguistic strategies in CMC. She explored language socialisation of the L2 learner of Spanish in *Livemocha* (an online community of language learning), looking at how his practices of closing in chat interactions with native speakers have changed over the

course of participating on the site. She observed that the participant shifted his rapport orientations from neglect to maintenance/enhancement and his rapport management strategies from short closings to extended closing. She explains this trajectory of the participant's change as a process of language socialisation in the language learning community.

2.2 Legitimizing participation in online learning

L2 learners' motivations for holding a particular rapport orientation can be reflected in terms of their attitude to participation in online activities. The concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* in the theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) can be useful to consider the characteristics of participation. Peripheral participation means participating in a peripheral way. Newcomers participate in some community activities but not all of them, they have full access to community resources and they gradually engage in more activities over time. By 'legitimizing' such a peripheral way of participation, newcomers are accepted as a member of the community and become a full member in the future (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

There are some relevant studies that discuss the process of legitimate peripheral participation in the online forum (Angouri, 2015; Burke, Kraut and Joyce, 2010; Hanna and de Nooy, 2003). For instance, new participants need to make some efforts to be accepted by the existing participants in the online forum; they need to legitimate their participation in a certain way. Burke, Kraut and Joyce (2010) examine three socialisation strategies used by the newcomers in an online group, which include two types of membership claims (demonstrating initial participation and indicating the connection with the group) and information

requests. They show that these strategies can increase the likelihood that the newcomers will be granted membership as provisional members (p.28). Angouri (2015) suggests that one of the specific features in legitimate peripheral participation online can be initial observation or lurking; “norms of participation are learnt before active contribution” (p.328). To this point, Hanna and de Nooy’s (2003) research reports the importance of learning norms of participation. They examine language use by the learners of French in an online forum on the website of the French newspaper *Le Monde* and show that the successful students positioned themselves culturally appropriately in the forum and received informal teacherly support from the moderator and other members.

These studies indicate that L2 learners who want to improve their L2 skills in informal online learning contexts (e.g., online forum) need to acquire the community norms or netiquettes for interactions. In other words, the L2 learners need to be aware of how their language use can violate netiquettes. I would suggest that the notion of “sociality rights and obligations” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) can be helpful to explain how they handle the conflicts that are caused by failing to meet the behavioural expectations in the community.

Based on the previous studies discussed in this section, the present study investigated how L2 learners interact with other participants in CMD contexts from a perspective of rapport management framework (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The analysis focuses on the interactions in two online forums of language learning in Japan Reference (<https://www.jref.com>) and Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com>) and aims to answer the following research question: What linguistic characteristics of the

asynchronous computer-mediated discourse (ACMD)² related to rapport management are observed in the interactions on threads in two online language-learning fora?

3. Method

3.1. Research sites

Japan Reference (JREF) is a website for information and guidance about travelling and studying in Japan and learning Japanese, it was launched in 1999. At the time of starting data collection in December 2014, there were 52,915 registered members. JREF has a discussion forum based on a bulletin board system. It has five sections of different themes and each section has several fora and sub-fora. The present study focused on *Learning Japanese* in the Nihongo section, which is a (sub)forum dedicated to the topics about learning Japanese as L2 and one of the most popular fora in JREF. Although the participants use both Japanese and English in the forum, they mainly use English as their common medium and the use of Japanese is limited to particular occasions (e.g., asking the meaning of Japanese words). The number of participants in Learning Japanese is not known. The forum system in JREF allows the registered members to display their profiles including nickname, country, gender and age, yet not all of the registered members show their personal information on their profiles.

Reddit is an American news sharing website founded in 2005. It consists of topic-based communities or fora called subreddit. Members of Reddit (redditors) share topics and interests by submitting text-based entries or direct links to the web contents (e.g., web article, videos, images) to the relevant subreddit. A bulletin board system allows redditors to submit a

comment to the posts (either text-based or link entries) and reply to others' comments in threads. There are many subreddits about learning a particular language. The present study observes /r/Languagelearning, which is a subreddit for learning a language in general and started in 2010. This subreddit had 39,210 subscribers in December 2014. The main medium is English, but like Learning Japanese, the participants use other languages when necessary. Reddit asks the participants not to post personal-identifiable information and the participants only know each other by nicknames and their language proficiencies (if they want).

3.2 Data collection

Since rapport management can be realised in any aspect of language use, the present study focused on a particular phrase according to the results of quantitative analysis. For this purpose, I built two corpora based on text-based comments posted to the bulletin board systems in Learning Japanese and /r/Languagelearning respectively.

Collecting data, I applied both the time-based sampling and random sampling techniques in selecting threads of messages. For the present study, the time-based technique was important in order to investigate the ACMD in the two fora over the same period. /r/Learninglanguage launched in March 2010. While Learning Japanese had already been an established forum, the subreddit was developing at that time. Therefore, I decided to focus on the threads submitted to both fora from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2014, where possible selecting the same number of threads from each month in order to ensure the sample was representative of the threads over the time period.

In the end, based on the above sampling process, I collected 753 threads from Learning Japanese and 832 threads from /r/Languagelearning (see Table 1). The reason for the different number of these corpora is that Learning Japanese had an encoding problem called mojibake while collecting data. By mojibake, the scripts or symbols of Kanji (one of the Japanese writing systems, which uses adapted logographic Chinese characters) are not encoded properly as they should be and are transformed to a different and illegible writing system. So, I had to exclude the indecipherable threads affected by mojibake.

In the post-processing, I removed irrelevant texts (e.g., URLs) and removed some files (e.g., duplicates) from the preliminary corpora. Consequently, the size of the two corpora are the following; the *Learning Japanese* corpus consists of 327,812 tokens (words) and the */r/Languagelearning* corpus consists of 749,250 tokens (words) in total respectively.

Table 1

Numbers of Threads in the Two Corpora

Year	Learning Japanese (327,812 tokens)	/r/Languagelearning (749,250 tokens)
2011	123	208
2012	186	208
2013	150	208
2014	294	208
Total	753 threads	832 threads

3.3 Procedure of data analysis

I adopted Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse

analysis, which is an approach that “views online behaviour through the lens of language, and its interpretations are grounded in observations about language and language use” (p. 339). In performing CMDA, I first identified the recurrent use of expressions in the two corpora. Then I closely analysed the examples of using the recurrent expressions in context.

For the first process of quantitative analysis, I applied a corpus-assisted analysis in order to identify recurrent linguistic features of ACMD, using *AntConc* (Anthony, 2011). *AntConc* is a set of toolkits for corpus analysis including concordance plot tool, files view tool, word list/key word list tools, and clusters/N-Grams tool and collocates tool. I particularly used the clusters/N-Grams tool to look at 4-word phrases which frequently occurred in the data. In the study of lexical bundles, 4-words can be considered as a more common unit than two or three words (see Greaves and Warren, 2010, pp.214-215). Hence, the present study also follows this practice.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Use of *I don't know*

According to the quantitative analysis, *I don't know* was the most frequent 4-word expression in both fora (Figure 1 and 2) and is far more frequent than the second and third most frequent 4-word expression⁴. This result follows the findings that *I don't know* was the most frequent collocation in the corpus of native speakers of English including the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English (Baumgarten and House, 2010, p.1187). Although *I don't know* has different pragmatic functions in given contexts, the central meaning of the phrase is a declaration of insufficient knowledge (Tsui, 1991).

Total No. of N-Gram Types			301718	Total No. of N-Gram Tokens		325553
Rank	Freq	Range	N-gram			
1	126	97	i don t know			
2	73	68	i m not sure			
3	68	50	thank you very much			
4	66	47	i don t think			
5	64	51	if you don t			
6	55	41	if you want to			
7	55	40	to be able to			
8	51	40	i don t have			
9	50	47	i m trying to			
10	42	31	at the end of			

Figure 1. Top ten 4-word expressions in Learning Japanese corpus

Total No. of N-Gram Types			672452	Total No. of N-Gram Tokens		746754
Rank	Freq	Range	N-gram			
1	341	261	i don t know			
2	154	127	if you want to			
3	152	120	if you don t			
4	148	116	to be able to			
5	147	112	i don t think			
6	143	123	i m not sure			
7	133	82	at the same time			
8	107	86	to learn a language			
9	101	93	but i don t			
10	99	83	i d like to			

Figure 2. Top ten 4-word expressions in /r/Languagelearning corpus

In the learning contexts of the two fora, the original posters (OPs), who began a thread of messages, were often an advice/information seeker and the other participants (or non-OPs) who replied to the OPs often took the role of advice/information giver. Therefore, I assumed that the OPs were more likely to use *I don't know* in their request messages or “problem messages” (Morrow, 2006) to elicit advice/information from other participants who were more advanced learners or

native speakers of the language. However, despite the initial assumption, the other participants also used this phrase remarkably in both fora. Table 2 shows the frequencies of using *I don't know* by OPs and other participants³.

Table 2

Distributions of Using 'I don't know' in the Two fora

	Learning Japanese	/r/Learninglanguage
OPs	86 (262.34)	88 (110.79)
Other participants	40 (122.02)	253 (318.53)
Total	126 (384.36)	341 (429.33)

*Numbers in brackets refer to normalised frequency (frequency per million).

Social relationships and roles are essential contextual factors that influence language use for rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In order to look at how *I don't know* was used as a linguistic strategy in rapport management, I considered the different functions of the phrases used by OPs and non-OPs in the following sections.

4.2 Original posters' use of *I don't know where to start*

In the two online fora, the notable use of *I don't know* appeared in the OPs' original posts; the phrase is an important component of a request message to start a thread. In a request message, the OPs introduce agendas that they would like to discuss in the rest of the thread or specifies what kinds of issues they would like other participants to consider in advice messages. For this, the OPs used an expression of *I don't know + where to*

start to ask specific questions or request general advice about learning the language. The phrase was especially used by the OPs who were beginner learners of the language. (1) and (2) are the examples for this usage by OPs. (1) is an excerpt of the first part of the original post and (2) is the entire original post (all the spellings in the examples are original).

(1) Hi. I am very intrested in learning Japanese. But like many I don't know where to realy start. I have lernt the odd word and some simple sentence structure to the point that I could say “that car is green” “I am an *****” or “I love ramen”. But I feel I'm just waisting my time. So my questions are pretty straight forward. [...]

(Learning Japanese, 13-12-2012)

(2) I don't even know where to begin. I want to learn Armenian as I am Armenian and my entire family knows it except for my mom, sister, and I. Except I don't know anything. At all. I don't even know if books exist for it. I don't know if there are CDs or anything or what. In any case, a penpal would be amazing. As would someone willing to at least help me learn the alphabet.

(/r/Languagelearning, 09-04-2011)

By using the phrase of *I don't know where to start*, the OPs in (1) and (2) position themselves as beginner learners (“I don't know where to realy start” and “I don't even know where to begin”). They present their motivation to learn the target language, showing their current standpoint in a journey of learning the language. Their use of *I don't know where to start* thus can be

seen as claiming membership of or legitimating peripheral participation in the community of learning a language.

From the perspective of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), their use of *I don't know where to start* can also be seen as part of rapport-building strategies for the beginner learners to join the learning community. The OPs hold rapport enhancement/maintenance orientation according to their desire to establish a relationship, which are inferred from their following language use for rapport management. In (1), the OP starts his/her original post with a casual greeting (“Hi”), showing his/her interest in learning Japanese by using an intensifier (“very”) and referring to others (“But like many”) to emphasise the similarity or connection to the forum. These can be seen as linguistic strategies for managing sociality rights in terms of interactional involvement-detachment or “the extent to which we associate with people, or dissociate ourselves from them” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.16). In (2), the OP emphasises his/her insufficient knowledge about studying Armenian; he/she states *I don't know where to begin* with using “even” as an intensifier and repeats *I don't know* with “anything” and “At all”. The series of using *I don't know* can function as an indirect request for help in an emotional manner, which can be linguistic strategies for managing sociality rights in terms of affective involvement-detachment or “the extent to which we share concerns, feelings and interests” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.16).

According to the subsequent interactions after (1) and (2), these linguistic strategies seem appropriate for managing rapport in the online fora. The OPs receive responses from other participants and reply to them, followed by the further responses from the other participants. Having responses means that the

OPs successfully manage rapport with other members through their first post of the thread. During the course of interactions, they have learning opportunities given by peer learners. For example, the OP in (1) learned where he/she should start, which is implied by his/her statements of “I will see what listening material I can dig up.” and “But thanks all for the great advice.” in his/her second post to the thread. Through the interactions with other participants, the OP in (2) also receives the relevant information to fill the OP’s knowledge gap, which can help him/her to explore where to start studying Armenian (e.g., Participant X: “Eastern Armenian, or Western?”, OP: “Truthfully I do not know.”, Participant X: “You can probably guess by where they're from. If they're originally from somewhere in Turkey then it's probably Western”).

4.3 Other posters’ use of *I don’t know* as disclaimer

One crucial use of *I don’t know* by other participants in both fora was *I don’t know* + complement (e.g., WH-word) with a conjunction *but*. The “*not X or anything, but Y*” structure is a formulaic disclaimer (Overstreet and Yule, 2001). Locher (2006) identifies disclaimer in the advice discourse of an online health column: “it is pointed out that the answer will be incomplete or cannot match expectations due to the site’s limitations or to insufficient knowledge of the questioner’s situation” (pp.63-64). In the two fora, the disclaimer about limitation and insufficient knowledge using *I don’t know* softens future face-threatening situations for the advice givers. Kirkham (2011) shows that a student uses the expression of *I don’t know* in the “*not X or anything, but Y*” structure as disclaimer in order to avoid face threat such as correction and negative evaluation and mitigates knowledge display in classroom discussion (p.208). Similar

examples were also found in the other participants' usage in both online fora. The following examples illustrate how *I don't know* as a disclaimer was used in response to the OPs' request.

- (3) I don't know much about Spanish, but one way to refer to the future in French is to use the verb "to go" with an infinitive. If it is similar in Spanish, you're in luck.
(/r/Languagelearning, 22-02-2014)

In (3), the participant indicates a limitation of his/her advice with using *I don't know* in a disclaimer, that is, the participant does not have sufficient knowledge about Spanish and his/her advice message was given based on his/her knowledge about French. Unlike Learning Japanese that focuses on Japanese language, /r/Languagelearning is a subreddit for learning any language and the participants learn different kinds of languages. It is a common case that the participants apply their knowledge of other language into giving the OP general advice for learning the OP's target language. From a different angle, (3) also shows how a participant uses his/her knowledge about L2 for taking part in the learning community. According to the participant's willingness to offer help in (3), it can be said that the participant manages rapport by achieving the OP's interactional goal of requesting for advice and holds rapport maintenance orientation in interactions with the OP.

In the next examples (4) and (5), the participants state a limitation of their advice due to inadequate information about the advice seekers, rather than their knowledge about a language.

(4) I don't know the cost in your country but in Vietnam it is cheap: 40\$/3 month.

(Learning Japanese, 11-07-2012)

(5) I don't know if you live near French-speaking Canada, but Canada is Canada so French might be useful to speak to others. (/r/Languagelearning, 12-04-2012)

These examples highlight that personal information about the OP as advice seeker is in fact necessary to offer satisfactory answers, while these online fora are anonymous to a certain degree. In these examples, the participants are particularly concerned about the OPs' geographical learning environment in order to introduce accessible learning resources for the OPs. Although they do not know the information about the OP's home country, they chose to reply to the OP with partial advice rather than ignoring the OP's request entirely. These examples indicate that the participants achieve the OPs' interactional goals of the thread and consequently manage rapport with them. It can be said that they hold rapport maintenance orientation.

Furthermore, examples (6) to (8) show that the participants take into account various kinds of aspects of learning such as the advice seeker's language proficiency, their mobile device and preference.

(6) I don't know how advanced you are, but the entire basis is in conversation so it seems like it would be useful for you. (/r/Languagelearning, 03-02-2013)

- (7) I don't know if your smartphone would be especially useful for this, but you should spend time listening to native speakers to work on listening comprehension, however you decide to do that. (/r/Languagelearning, 08-12-2013)
- (8) I don't know if you want this link, but this becomes really helpful if you want to learn particles. (Learning Japanese, 18-07-2014)

The participants in these examples express their attempt to relate their advice with the OPs' request as much as possible. In other words, they present their attempt 'to respond' to the OP's question as a member of the forum. Their use of *I don't know* as disclaimer can be seen as a linguistic strategy not only for the management of face (positioning an expert identity) but also management of sociality rights and obligations and interactional goals. The participants consider their obligations and rights in order to achieve the task-based interactional goal of the thread. That is, advice seekers need to provide enough information (obligation), and advice givers need to take this information into account for answering (obligation). The use of *I don't know + complement, but* can also function as hedging to mitigate the force of advice by leaving room for the OPs to assess the usefulness and relevance of their advice. The participants in these examples manage rapport by not only achieving the OP's interactional goals but also fulfilling the OP's sociality rights of not to be imposed to do something (i.e., equity rights in terms of autonomy), and they also hold rapport maintenance orientation.

5. Conclusion

This paper described how the participants in the two online fora used the phrase *I don't know* for rapport management in order to get involved in the learning communities. Based on the result of 4-gram analysis, I focused on the participants' use of *I don't know* as one notable linguistic feature of ACMD. In the two fora, the phrase was commonly used by both the OPs and the other participants (non-OPs). The OPs used the phrase to build and maintain rapport by legitimating their participation as a beginner learner of a language, and the other participants used the phrase as disclaimer to manage knowledge authority and maintain rapport by avoiding a future face threat, fulfilling their sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals. They used the phrase in combination with the *but* conjunction (e.g., "I don't know much about Spanish, but"). Rapport orientation is considered as the key factor that influences the participants' rapport management and is related to their attitude to participation in the learning context.

Although the two online fora are not communities for learning English, the findings of the present study can be applied to examining what process Japanese L2 learners of English engage in when getting involved in an online community for learning English. As well as what linguistic strategies they choose for rapport management with native speakers of English and other learners. Nevertheless, the future research should focus on more specific contexts of CMC learning for Japanese learners of English, investigating what are the particular difficulties for Japanese L2 learners in participating in CMC learning and managing rapport with other learners of English. The findings of this kind of research can be used as the resources

for the L2 learners to improve their language use for CMC in everyday life (e.g., being aware of using L2 grammatically correct is not enough in interpersonal communication) and maximise learning opportunities in informal learning contexts.

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Notes

- 1 This paper is an extension of the presentation made in the first Hokkaido chapter meeting in November 2017.
- 2 Herring (2001) defines CMC as “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers” (p.162). Regarding the mode of communication, a thread (a series of comments) is asynchronous or a delayed interaction. The participants are not necessarily connected, nor present on the website at the same time and there is a time lag between posting and reading messages. Hence, language use on a thread is asynchronous computer-mediated discourse.
- 3 There are ten examples of using *I don't know* as grammatical examples or English translations of sentences in other languages (eight examples in Learning Japanese and two

examples in /r/Languagelearning). These examples are not excluded from the data for analysis of the use of *I don't know*.

4 Although other frequent 4-word expressions are also relevant to rapport management, the present paper focused only on the most frequently used phrase of *I don't know* due to limitations of space. For the same reason, the focus of the analysis was on usage of the phrase in the original posts and subsequent reply messages. Notably, it was identified not only in exchanges in response to the original post, but also in subsequent interchanges as the thread developed. For example, it was used to clarify information and illustrate a particular stance on a topic. These examples were examined in greater detail in Sato (2018).

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