

# **A corpus-based study on the expression of negativity in German online reviews**

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The expression of negativity is a central aspect in complaint contexts. Indeed, there is no shortage of digital media platforms on which individuals can express negative experiences in written form, primarily as a form to communicate previous experiences with a wider audience of readers. At the same time, these online complaints offer a unique and valuable opportunity to draw on a vast body of pre-existing data to examine, through a corpus linguistics lens, authentic written language as used in everyday contexts, and how this linguistic variation is both socially and spatially structured.

While the analysis of online data in linguistic complaint research has increased in recent years (Meinl 2010; Decock and Depraetere 2018; Kunkel 2020), existing studies have predominantly focused on cross-cultural comparisons and/or oral interactions (House and Kasper 1987; Trosborg 1995; Zhang 2001). Studies scrutinizing the linguistic variation in the expression of negative online reviews within a single have received rather little attention.

The aim of this talk is to present a corpus-based investigation of how negativity is expressed in German online reviews. Specifically, we intend to outline the components that constitute a written negative review on the Internet, and how the potential variation therein is structured socially (e.g. in relation to socio-economic contexts of the fitness centers) and spatially.

We examine 1017 one-star reviews of gym chains (e.g. *McFit*, *Fitinn*, *Activ Fitness*) posted on Google Maps between 2021 and 2023 across three German-speaking cities (Berlin (Germany), Zürich (Switzerland) and Vienna (Austria)) to explore both regional variation and pragmatic strategies in complaint formulation. Following the taxonomy laid out by Decock and Depraetere (2018) and Ruytenbeek, Verschraegen, and Decock (2021), the analysis identifies and categorizes strategies of linguistic (in)directness, explicitness and face-threat in the linguistic realization of negativity.

The results reveal various similarities in the formulation of negative online reviews across the analyzed data, for example in the degree of explicitness. However, differences emerge between Zürich, Berlin and Vienna in how the gym is referenced and held responsible within the negative feedback. In addition, the reviews from Zürich display distinctive features in the way negative situations and negative feelings are described.

Our findings contribute substantially to the field of variational pragmatics, addressing outstanding research lacunae such as how pragmatic devices are regionally constrained, and more generally reconciling theoretical perspectives in and methodological approaches to corpus linguistics, digital humanities and pragmatics.

## References

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